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Turkey: Returning to the Balkans

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During the last decade it has become clear that the "Eastern Issue" is specifically an internal European problem. The European Union has managed with relative success the transformation of the eastern part of the region and its inclusion in its ranks. However, the Western Balkans still remain a serious challenge for both integration and security in this part of the continent.

We should consider that the leader of the integration process in the region at one point in time, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which in the late 1980s to early 1990s was central to the disintegration of the then-bipolar world order, has become not only an outsider of the European integration project, but also essentially something of a *yoke* for the entire global community. A major difficulty for success in the region has been its period of stagnation for more than ten years, which has been marred by civil wars, political instability and subsequent economic devastation.

Southeastern Europe still remains an area of overlapping interests and competition among the various major global and regional players. Today, in addition to the European Union, these include Russia, the United States, China and Turkey. All of these countries have long recognized that the Balkans is an area falling under the responsibility of the European Union (EU), but they are also ready to deploy large-scale projects in this post-Yugoslavian region, perceiving it only becoming part of the EU and its market in the mid-term. However, the current economic interests of Russia, China and Turkey often run counter to EU policy in the region and its demands for transformation. The EU itself perceives any players in this region to be competitors based on traditional geopolitical categorization, who can only be dealt with by means of open confrontation. This creates an internal contradiction in the countries of the Western Balkans, slowing down the process of integration with the EU and exacerbating the differences in foreign policies in this part of the continent.

For centuries Turkey has been one of the key players in the region of the Western Balkans influencing the development strategy of the territory, which is

absolutely natural. Firstly, Turkey is geographically a part of the region being the largest country in Southeastern Europe in terms of territory. Historically, Turkey has always been one of the most influential countries in the region, and for centuries the Balkan region was under the control and domination of the Ottoman Empire. This had a large number of consequences. It created an unquestioned authority among the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina ("BiH"), Albania and Macedonia. The Bosnian language was one of the official languages of the court of the Ottoman Empire. Today Turkey is home to about ten million ethnic Bosnians who moved to the country in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the population of those of Bosnian and Albanian descent living in Turkey exceeds the current combined population of Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo. They represent a significant force within Turkey, influencing Turkish policy in the region. For the same reason any Turkish successes and failures in the Balkans automatically result in gains or losses on the domestic political scene. However, the period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans also lies at the basis of the struggles for independence of the non-Muslim population of the region. This also highlights the difficulties that the Turks face with their active involvement and presence in the region. Thus there is the need to achieve a balance that forces Turkey at least to attempt to conduct very careful policy in Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and other non-Muslim regions of the former Yugoslavia, consistent with the policy of the European partners.

In addition to the historical importance of Turkey, it is worth noting that Turkey is a country with a strategically important position. It is an essential strategic element in the structure of NATO. Its geographical position as the gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East and its huge population (over 75 million people) automatically make it a significant player in both regional and international relations. Turkey can carry out independent actions and become a serious destabilizing factor for its European and American partners, should it choose to take this course. However, with regard to the Balkan region, Turkey today perceives itself more as a zone of cooperation than competition, which is totally different from the power exercised a century ago. This is connected with the historical conditions mentioned above and with the specific interests of Turkey in the EU today. Being formally a candidate for joining the EU, Turkey is interested in building a common strategic policy in the Balkans in conjunction with the EU. It may be partly a representative of EU interests in the region, but it can also represent the interests of the region in discussions with the EU. From this

perspective, its relationship with the EU can prove beneficial to all parties in the region.

In general, Turkey's interest in the Western Balkans is clearly not a phenomenon and in recent years the change of direction in Turkish policy in the Balkans has been clearly well thought through and coordinated. Turkey aims to achieve a number of interrelated and interdependent goals: development of bilateral relations with the countries of the region; establishment of multilateral mechanisms for regional dialogue; and development of regional cooperation schemes.¹ Turkey implements this strategy through various diplomatic mechanisms, including its "soft power" and establishing regional interdependencies in the economic sphere.

Turkey and Its Soft Power Experience in the Region

The wish of Turkey to strengthen its soft power in the region could be explained by the words of its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu: "Turkey's geopolitical situation would always dictate the country's foreign policy ... the country has more Azeris than Azerbaijan, more people of Albanian origin than live in Albania, more people of Bosnian origin than live in Bosnia, and more Kurds than in Iraqi Kurdistan." This reality, Davutoglu maintained, means that violence and instability in Turkey's immediate neighborhood threaten to spill into Turkey itself, and regional external conflicts can easily become internally disruptive.²

The position of Turkey in the Balkan region was first expressed by Davutoğlu in 2009 as part of its foreign policy of "zero problems" in relation to neighboring states. In his famous speech in Sarajevo in 2009, he stated that Turkey "had to restore the golden age of its presence in the Balkans."³ This speech received mixed reactions in the Balkan and European media, as well as the academic literature, but we should probably look past the emotional component of the wording, as this was provided in quite a specific context.

As already mentioned above, Turkey's policy in the region and the perception of the Turks and of Turkish influences varies considerably from country to country. Recently, *Gallup Balkan Monitor Survey* confirmed that Turkey is considered a friendly nation among all countries in the region with a sizeable Muslim population. In 2010, 75.1% of the population of Albania, 60.2% of BiH, 93.2% of Kosovo⁴ and 76.6% of Macedonia considered Turkey to be a friendly country. Among the non-Muslim majority countries of the Western Balkans, the

picture was, however, quite different. In Croatia, only 26.7% of the population considered Turkey a friendly country, while in Montenegro the figure was 33.5% and in Serbia, predictably, only 18.2% (Gallup 2010). However, it is important to note that in recent years Turkey's drive for preeminence in the region has pushed these figures higher. Thus, according to the same *Gallup Survey* (2011), the average age of population that considered Turkey a friendly nation rose to 33.5% in Croatia, while only 19% of the population in Serbia considered Turkey a hostile country. Hostility toward Turkey was almost negligible in other countries in the region: 9.6% in Montenegro, 3.4% in Croatia, 1% in Kosovo, 8.6% in Bosnia and Herzegovina."⁵

As for the soft power of Turkey in the region, this has been growing every year and on the one hand, it is crucial to take this factor into consideration. The difficulty is that it always faces multi-religious states in the Balkans and for Turkey it is much more difficult to maintain a stable line in this sense. The best example of this is Bosnia. "A contemporary Bosnian burden of dividing everything by three (*constituent peoples*, E.E.) is inevitably obvious in foreign policy, too, and relations with Turkey are no exception." While the majority of Bosnians support the ever-growing Turkish influence in the country, Serbians and Croatians are not at ease with it. While Bosnians see this as friendly rhetoric, proof of friendship and brotherhood, or investments being based on pure emotions, Serbian and Croatian representatives in BiH feel uncomfortable. As a consequence, according to some, for example Milorad Dodik, the President of Republika Srpska, the Turkish presence creates more internal divisions. "Turkey is causing a lot of problems in BiH. It does not have an absolute right to meddle into regional issues."⁶

The fact that the two entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of BiH, have had strong disagreements for many years now, is not helped by Turkey's presence, apparently favoring one ethnic group and thus creating further animosity. "At the same time, Turkey finds this to be a real issue, as their stated policy is to support the whole country and not only one of the parts. This trend also frustrates Turkish diplomats working in Sarajevo. First Counsellor at the Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo, Yasemin Eralp, explains: "This is the major problem we Turks have in Bosnia: our image. We support the country, not any entity specifically, and we are working on changing this perception."⁷

While Turkish officials might present efforts to beat this image as topping their agenda in BiH, the situation on the ground is somewhat different. To illustrate, the Yunus Emre Cultural Center has opened three offices in BiH, none of *Balkanistica* 29 (2016)

which is located in Republika Srpska. Of 25 branch offices of the Turkish Ziraat Bank in BiH, only one is located in Republika Srpska, in Banja Luka. Of large-scale manufacturing investments, none has been made in Republika Srpska.

In general, Turkey achieves its soft power toward the Balkans through the activity of several agencies acting in spheres of cultural heritage and education. These are the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency ("TIKA"), the Presidency for Turks Abroad, the Yunus Emre Institute and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). The most influential are TIKA and the Yunus Emre Institute. Fifty to seventy percent of TIKA's budget goes to restoration projects. As a result, it has rebuilt or participated in the rebuilding of numerous monuments of Ottoman cultural and historical significance in the Balkans, including bridges, fountains, residences and mosques, over a period of 18 years. "It is also noteworthy that while most other national development agencies have either left BiH or extremely reduced their activities and funds in BiH, TIKA's presence and budget are continuing to increase. Looking at the entire official development assistance (ODA) disbursements, the U.S.A. for example has lowered its donations drastically from almost 186 million Euros in 1998 to around 29 million Euros in 2012, a decrease to a sixth of the value of the 1998 payments. During the same period Turkish ODA increased its contribution by more than five times, from 3.5 million Euros to around 16 million."⁸

According to the statistical data of TIKA, in 2012, it contributed \$21.3 million for BiH, \$20 million for Kosovo, \$12.8 million for Macedonia, \$7.89 million for Albania, \$6.03 million for Serbia and \$2.75 million for Montenegro.⁹ During the past few years, TIKA contributed to the reconstruction of the Mostar Bridge in BiH, which was entirely destroyed during the war (1992 to 1995), and renovations of the Konjic Bridge in 2009 and the Maglaj Pasha Mosque also in BiH. The restoration project of the Drina Bridge in Visegrad (BiH), which was built by Mimar Sinan for Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, has a huge budget. In Macedonia, in the village of Kocacik, the house of Ali Riza Efendi, who was the father of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was renovated by TIKA. In Albania, several mosques have been renovated, among them the famous Parruce Mosque. Several schools and libraries in Serbia and Montenegro have also been renovated with TIKA participation during the last five years.

The presence of Turks in the educational system of the Balkan countries should be understood with reference to the period of the 1990s. The tragic events connected with the breakup of Yugoslavia are naturally reflected in Turkey's desire

primarily to support Bosnians. The most powerful Turkish organizations in the sphere of education are the Yunus Emre Institute, which was established in 2007 for the promotion of Turkish language and culture, and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, which provides scholarships for international students. Today, the Turkish government annually allocates 167 scholarships for higher education to the citizens of Bosnia. These scholarships cover a variety of programs, mainly in the humanities, from political science and international relations to linguistics. There are seven private Turkish schools located in Tuzla, Bihac, Zenica and Sarajevo. They operate as part of a network of schools called "Bosna Sema Educational Institutions," established by the Turks in 1998. As part of its work, Bosna Sema has opened 15 schools and colleges.¹⁰ The International Burch University in Sarajevo was founded with the help of the government of Turkey in 2008.¹¹

In Albania, Turkish schools are considered to be among the best and at this point in time there are around 3,000 students attending them. In addition, Turkish universities are open to citizens of Albania, and around 100 students from Kosovo receive Turkish state scholarships to attend their universities'.¹²

The most significant educational project of Turkey in Serbia is the establishment of a secondary school in Novi Pazar, designed for 1,000 students. In addition, there are a number of scholarships to learn Turkish available to the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro. The largest Turkish school in the Balkans was opened in Macedonia in Gornja Banjica with the assistance of TIKA, the union of Turkish communities and the community of Gostivar. It was designed for 1,400 students of Turkish, Albanian and Macedonian origin.

All of these actions in the field of education within the Balkan states represent a clear state policy of Turkey, which is intelligently and methodically carrying out similar activities in all regions of the world where it has interests. However, in recent years, Turkey has moved gradually but irrevocably toward greater Islamization. Taking the complexities of the Middle East and Northern Africa into account, even Turkey might experience significant radicalization toward more fundamentalist Islamic thinking. In the Balkan states, where the age of the Muslim population is relatively advanced, Islam has historically never been radical and has also never seriously affected the lifestyle. The potential influence of Turkey on social and religious life could, however, prove to be very undesirable and even dangerous.

Moreover, Turkey's European partners should not forget the fact that Turkey historically has had a huge impact on the culture, traditions and mentality of the Balkan peoples, in both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Very often this common past, which has given rise to similar views on the world and traditional perceptions, is closer to the Western values of individualism and liberalism.

The Turks are also working diligently on their image in the media. At first glance, this may appear ridiculous to mention, but today Turkish TV series are broadcast in all the Balkan states. The most popular TV series in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013 was the "Magnificent Century." According to AGB Nielsen in Macedonia, of nine Turkish TV series broadcast on national TV, five entered the Top 15 as of January 2013. "As Time Goes By" and "Asi" came in first and second place. "Pledge," "Mother" and "Memories Still Hurt" also entered the Top 15. Three Turkish series are currently broadcast in Kosovo. The most popular are "What Is Fatmagül's Fault" (this is tops among all the TV series according to Index Kosova) and "Love and Punishment" (third place among all programs and series). Four Turkish TV series are currently broadcast in Serbia. "The Magnificent Century" is in fourth place, and "As Time Goes By" is seventh (January 2013). Turkish soap operas in Bosnia cover 2,235 minutes of program a week on just one TV channel (TV station "OBN"), which is exactly a day and a half a week of soap operas.¹³ They portray an image of Turkish society: modern, religious and educated. Given the high unemployment rate among the population of the former Yugoslavian states and the traditional lifestyle of their families, it can be assumed that the citizens of the Balkan countries are active consumers of mass culture, which undoubtedly creates a positive image for an average citizen.¹⁴

Tourism is an example that illustrates how the Turks have been flocking to Balkan cities over the last few years. In the past four years, Turkish visitors to BiH increased more than four times, from around 13,000 in 2009 to more than 55,000 in 2013. This increase in the number of Turkish tourists visiting BiH has also been followed by an increase in the proportion of Turkish visitors relative to other foreign tourists, which more than doubled in the same time period. In 2009, Turks represented 4.39% of foreigners visiting BiH, while in 2013 they made up more than 10.5%.¹⁵ One can easily see that in 2014 the number of flights from the republics of the former Yugoslavia to Istanbul was very high; there were 25 flights a week from Belgrade,¹⁶ 19 from Skopje,¹⁷ 15 from Zagreb¹⁸ and Tirana,¹⁹ seven from Montenegro,²⁰ 18 from Pristina²¹ and more than 30 from Sarajevo.²² Moreover, there has been no visa regime for Turkey with the western Balkan

countries for many years.²³ This is a significant advantage in comparison with the countries of the EU, China and Russia, which have visa restrictions for some of the republics of the former Yugoslavia.²⁴

As a result it should be noted that Turkish soft power policies in the Balkan region are effective and all-inclusive at present. In the long term, Turkey's position in the Western Balkans will depend very much on the degree of trust and credibility it will earn. Based on public polls, the increase in cultural, educational and tourist activities indicates that the Turkish image in the Western Balkans is improving, but it is after all up to the Turkish state and non-state actors to maintain this positive trend. The mistrust and suspicions toward Turkey will continue, especially among non-Muslims. That is why the Turks should take into account that in a highly complex political and social system like the Balkans, establishing good interstate relations is not sufficient to maintain peace and stability. Especially in BiH, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, certain ethnic and religious groups aspire for self-determination or independence, and as such they often act autonomously from their kin states, anticipating that their actions are not always possible. Therefore, regardless of their size and the resources they possess, these groups have the potential to disrupt regional stability and even create serious tensions. To prevent such results, Turkey should engage in regular dialogue with these groups and entities, observe their grievances, offer mediation with their adversaries and develop projects to alleviate their economic and social conditions. Such activities will contribute not only to regional peace and stability, but also to Turkey's image, prestige and political standing in the region."²⁵

From a strategic perspective, it should be noted that claims the Turks are a model for a modern organization of society for the Middle East, Northern Africa and the Balkans are now much less convincing. Year after year, Ankara has argued that moderate Islam could help to consolidate the country and that it has contributed to the rapid economic development and redistribution of wealth gained from such development among its citizens. Others could only dream of such a model. However, the waves of protest against the policies of President Erdoğan, riots in 2013 and 2014 and their violent suppression, in addition to certain economic difficulties, have shown that things are not so simple. Orientation to Turkey or the Turkish model could also have negative consequences, and the Turkish experience therefore requires reevaluation. In fact, it turns out that Turkey has itself given to its detractors powerful critical arguments that have been used against the influence of Ankara. These disturbances were largely associated with *Balkanistica* 29 (2016)

the dissatisfaction of a large part of the population with the creeping Islamization of the country. The lesson for all the Balkan countries with substantial Muslim populations is more than evident and, of course, this should also be a cause for concern for other international players operating in the region.

Turkey and Economic Development of the Region

In the economic sphere, the position of Turkey in the Balkans is quite strong. Over the past ten years the amount of trade with the countries of the former Yugoslavia has increased more than six times.²⁶ Many expert economists believe that the investments made by Turkish companies can turn the Balkans into a huge part of the Turkish domestic market, together with the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East.

Turkish economic interests in the entire region are evidenced by its investments. Despite the number of investments, the balance of trade and financial cooperation in general and in comparison with other states is not great, and it is important to note that the majority are aimed at the real economic sector, projects and construction of infrastructure, thus establishing genuine work opportunities. With such a strategy, real cooperation and actual interdependence among the states can be created. We shall now examine this in more detail.

Turkey is the second most important trade partner of Albania. The total value of investments in the Albanian economy at the end of 2012 amounted to one billion Euros. In the construction sector, Turkey is represented in the Albanian market by several large companies, including ENKA, Gintaş, Armada, Metal Yapı, Aldemir and Servomatik. Two major Turkish telecom operators, Çalık Holding/Türk Telekom and Makro-Tel/Hes Kablo, operate in Albania. In 2009, 93% of the shares in Albanian Airlines were sold to a Turkish corporation, Evsen Group.²⁷ In March 2012, the 93% shareholding in Albanian Airlines was returned following a court decision to an Albanian company, Advanced Construction Group (ACG).²⁸ Turkish FDI stock in Albania was \$6 million in 2012. Between 2002 and 2012, Turkish FDI stock in Albania amounted to \$45 million.²⁹

With regard to economic relations with Bosnia, it is clear that trade relations with this republic are not so stable, contrary to the popular belief that Bosnia is the most stable trading partner of Turkey in the Balkans. Bilateral trade between Turkey and BiH was 596.6 million dollars in 2008. However, it declined to 278 million dollars in 2009 due to the global economic crisis. Since 2010, bilateral

trade has increased again and exceeded 363 million dollars in 2012.³⁰ Turkey mainly exports mineral fuels and oils to BiH. In BiH, the total cost of realized investments by Turkish contractors, ranging from telecommunication infrastructure to the construction of hydroelectric power plants, bridges, hospitals and housing projects, was approximately 81 million dollars in 2012.³¹ Turkey ranks ninth in the value of direct foreign investment. These investments are primarily in the banking sector, airlines and education. Turkish FDI stock in BiH was \$145 million between 2002 and 2012.³²

In addition, a Trilateral Trade Committee among Turkey, Serbia and BiH was established by the Declaration on Economic and Commercial Cooperation among the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Serbia and BiH in May 2013. Its main function is to exchange information and to promote foreign investment and cooperation possibilities among the three countries.

With regard to Macedonian-Turkish economic relations, it is worth noting that, despite its small value, Macedonia is an important player for Turkey in the region. Turks constitute the third largest ethnic minority in Macedonia. They were officially recognized as a minority under the Ohrid Framework Agreement and have the right to be fairly represented in both central and local government. The trade value between Turkey and Macedonia was \$378 million in 2012. Turkish investments in Macedonia have exceeded \$500 million with significant Turkish investments in banking (Ziraat Banka AD Skopje, İK Banka), construction (TAV, Cevahir Holding, Pera Construction, Novatek, Tokar, Prodar) and mining (Kürüm Holding).³³ Macedonia is considered a promising market for Turkish investors and to date Turkish firms have held and continue to hold interests in 21 projects in Macedonia with a total value of \$832 million.

Turkish FDI stock in Macedonia was \$12 million in 2012. Between 2002 and 2012, Turkish FDI stock in Macedonia was \$105 million.³⁴ Kosovo is also one of the most promising markets in the region as it is still open to opportunities and the country is rich in natural resources. Turkey, unlike for example, Russia, actively engages with Kosovo. In recent years, contacts between Turkey and Kosovo among businessmen, universities, municipalities, governors and non-governmental organizations have been developing at an increasing pace. For example, the consulates issuing visas to citizens of countries that have not recognized the Republic of Kosovo are located in Istanbul (a good example is the Consulate of the Republic of Kosovo in Istanbul – the only place where Russian citizens can get an entry visa for Kosovo). Approximately 19,000 ethnic Turks live

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in Kosovo, and Turkish companies actively invest in infrastructure, banking and insurance in Kosovo. The trade value between Turkey and Kosovo was 206.5 million Euros in 2012.³⁵ Turkish firms are implementing four projects in Kosovo with a total value of 502 million dollars. From 2002 to 2012, Turkish FDI stock in Kosovo exceeded \$1 billion.³⁶

Meanwhile, bilateral trade relations with Croatia and Montenegro are developing more slowly. Nevertheless, the volume of bilateral trade with Croatia was \$553 million in 2011.³⁷ Turkish firms have undertaken four projects in Croatia with a total value of \$811.9 million to date. Turkish FDI stock in Croatia was \$168 million from 2002 to 2012.³⁷ As for Turkish-Montenegrin relations, they are at a relatively low level. This is primarily due to the small size of the domestic market in Montenegro and because of intensive trading relations with Russian and European partners, which have historically been a priority for Montenegro. Turkish FDI stock in Montenegro (mostly in construction) was \$11 million between 2002 and 2012.³⁸

Contrary to the common view that Serbia is the most difficult spot in the Balkans for Turkey, the value of economic relations between the two countries has grown in recent years. In order to attract Turkish investments, an "Agreement on Cooperation on Infrastructure Projects between Turkey and Serbia" was signed in 2009. The total investment by Turkey in the Serbian economy is about 100 million Euros, which is not comparable in size to its investments in other countries in the region. Turkish FDI stock in Serbia was \$49 million between 2002 and 2012. However, the value of Serbian investments in the Turkish economy is comparable, about \$35 million.³⁹ One of the major Turkish investments was the acquisition of two Serbian breweries, Zaječar and Pančevačko, by the Turkish company "Efes." A Turkish textile plant, "Jeanci," specializing in the production of denim and denim garments for many leading brands, was opened in Leskovac.

In addition to the textile industry, the Turks have expressed a clear interest in a strategic partnership for the implementation of various infrastructure projects in construction, energy, agriculture and the opening of outdoor recreational zones. In 2012, Turkish companies announced their intention to invest a total of approximately 64 million Euros in various sectors of the Serbian economy. In January 2012, representatives of the Turkish company "Boral Aluminium," the Serbian Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SIEPA) and the Doljevac municipality signed a memorandum for the construction of a factory specializing in the construction of aluminium profiles. Turkey's "Arda Burak" company

announced its intention to open a factory for producing paper goods in Brodarevo. The Turkish company "Erste" intends to invest in a wood-processing factory, "Savremeni dom," in Kruševac.

In 2011, Turkey allocated one third of the total amount (10 of 32 million Euros) required for the implementation of an important project for the reconstruction of the Serbian military airfield "Lađevci" in Kraljevo and its transformation to a civilian airport. TIKA allocated 30 million euros for building the infrastructure in the industrial area near the Serbian village of Leskovo in 2010 and 2011.⁴⁰ In 2012, Serbia's exports to Turkey were approximately \$186.8 million and imports exceeded \$429 million. According to recent statistics, Turkey is the nineteenth largest country for importing Serbian goods; it is in tenth place for exports to Serbia.⁴¹ Generally, it is clear that a positive trend can be acknowledged as trade between the Balkan countries and Turkey over the last ten years has constantly been growing. Moreover, it can be seen that during the last two years (2013 and 2014) total export and import growth has been good.⁴²

Turkey is a growing economy with an enormous potential; it is the 15th largest in terms of GDP-PPP and the 17th largest by reference to nominal GDP. As a result it presents great opportunities for those who have close relations with the country and also for the states of the Balkan region. However, notwithstanding the recent growth of Turkish economic and commercial activities in the region, Turkey is still far behind many EU countries despite the financial crisis in Europe.

As far as Balkan countries are concerned, with their current level of unemployment, the most important thing is to attract long-term investments to the real sector, which will lead to the creation of jobs and projects that will in turn boost development. There is a high level of unemployment everywhere including sectors such as tourism, estates, transportation and food production, in which Turkish companies are strong. The conditions in the Balkans therefore create excellent opportunities for Turkish businessmen to invest and operate in the region. Of course it is important not to forget that the market is very fluid, and if Turkey wants to attain a real influence in the region it should invest much more and now. If it fails to capitalize on opportunities now, its place will likely be taken soon by the United Arab Emirates and China, as well as other traditional players like the EU, Russia and the United States.

Finally, the energy sector has become an important component of Turkish economic influence in the Balkans after the failure of the Russian "South Stream" project. Reorientation of the Russian side making Turkey a key partner in the *Balkanistica* 29 (2016)

alternative gas project significantly increases the weight of Turkey in the energy sector.⁴³ This gives it additional trump cards in its relations with the EU as a whole and further strengthens its position in the Balkans. Due to the poorly thought-through and discriminatory position of Brussels, Gazprom and the Russian authorities had to abandon the South Stream, but Moscow did not abandon its policy of diversification for the transit of energy resources to the EU. It thus decided to implement a policy in close cooperation with and to the benefit of Ankara, which will result in significant amounts of natural gas from Russia and other countries in the EU transiting through Turkey in the near future. Turkey is turning into an energy hub, obtaining economic benefits and political dividends, and it will also become, inevitably, a partner of the Balkan states and the EU in the energy sector.

The Political and Diplomatic Level of Turkish Strategy

Even if Turkish soft power and economic influence show positive results, the political sphere still remains a great difficulty for Turkey. Turkish foreign policy has recently been confronted with a number of challenges in the Middle East, and it has allowed its leading critics to claim that the AK Party government's "zero problems with neighbors" vision has failed. In the meantime, however, relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans have displayed a completely different picture. During the last decade, Turkey has not only maintained but also advanced good neighborly relations with the countries in this region."⁴⁴

This means that, in general, the political position of Turkey in the region is getting stronger. Why and how is it achieving this? Objectively, Turkey has made a significant effort to promote the positive development in relations with Serbia. To improve security, political stability and economic prosperity of the region, Turkey has keenly encouraged and supported deeper integration of the Western Balkans with the international community. Expressing a desire to see the Balkans as "an integral part" of Europe rather than part of its periphery, the Turkish government has offered the Western Balkan states support and technical assistance to fulfill EU criteria. Turkey has supported the accession of BiH as well as Montenegro and Macedonia into NATO. It conducted intensive lobbying in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), encouraging a number of Muslim countries to recognize Kosovo.⁴⁵ "Turkish diplomacy helped Spain, which held the EU presidency at that time, to find a suitable 'neutral status' formula for the Kosovo

representation at the meeting of the Western Balkan Ministers of Foreign affairs on June 2, 2010 in Sarajevo. Largely as a result of the rapprochement between Turkey and Serbia, relations between Sarajevo and Belgrade have somewhat thawed. Following Ankara's involvement, a BiH ambassador returned to Belgrade after a long absence. Approximately one month before, the Serbian parliament adopted a declaration condemning the genocide in Srebrenica and in the first half of 2010 the new multilateral initiative between Serbia, BiH and Turkey was launched, resulting in the signing of the Istanbul Declaration on April 26 2010.⁴⁶ "The Istanbul Declaration is considered an important document, since it includes the statement of Serbia's respect for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Following more than two decades of virtually no high-level visits, leading politicians from both sides now meet on a regular basis. In addition to the visit of the Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, Turkish President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Serbia in 2009 and 2010, respectively. The 2010 visit was an especially cordial one, as Erdoğan and Boris Tadić first met in Srebrenica for a ceremony marking the anniversary of the genocide, where Erdoğan publicly proclaimed the Serbian President his friend. Tadić himself visited Turkey twice, in 2007 and 2010. Former Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković visited Turkey in 2011. In November 2012, new Prime Minister Iвица Dačić was received in Ankara, while in February 2013, new Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić met with President Gül, on which occasion Gül forecast an "economic boom" in Serbia.⁴⁷

Nevertheless there are two regional factors that affect the relations between Serbia and Turkey: the Kosovo issue and the problem of the constitutional structure of BiH. Generally, Serbia has assumed the position as Turkish economic partner in the region and is not ready to slow down the economic cooperation or flow of investment into the economy, exacerbating the Kosovo issue. And at the same time, Turkey, having accepted the unilateral declaration of Kosovar independence as exceptionally positive, now on a diplomatic level takes a much more cautious approach, preferring to say that Turkey, "has other partners in the Balkans, with whom it is ready to go hand-in-hand in the direction of European Union."⁴⁸ But initially, this state was one of the first to recognize the independence of the self-declared republic. And since 2008, it openly supported all the initiatives of the Kosovo authorities aimed at strengthening their status. Turkey was also one of the first countries to open its diplomatic mission in Prishtina. The first Turkish ambassador started his assignment in Prishtina on April 21, 2009.⁴⁹ Such a position *Balkanistica* 29 (2016)

on Kosovo is predictable and logical for Turkey, despite the unresolved issue of Northern Cyprus. It increases the credibility of the country for the entire Muslim population of the Western Balkans. However, it also negatively affects the image of Turkey among the non-Muslim peoples of the region and inevitably toughens political relations with Serbia and Serbian autonomy in Bosnia.

Despite its efforts to achieve a mainstream position, from time to time Turkey makes diplomatic errors. It organized a trilateral commission with Serbia-Turkey-BiH, but now the activity of this organization is frozen due to the inappropriate rhetoric used by Turkish officials in the region. "In October 2013, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić cancelled the announced trilateral meeting as a response to Erdoğan's statement made in Prizren (Kosovo), in which he stated: 'Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo.'" Having in mind how fragile and sensitive the question of Kosovo still is, Nikolić strongly stated this to be "an aggression without arms," and froze his country's participation in the trilateral meetings.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Serbia is a clear achievement for Turkey's Balkan policy at the moment and the challenge is to make this rapprochement sustainable.

With regard to Bosnia, Turkey, unlike other foreign players on the Balkan scene, has an entirely consistent position. It immediately and openly advocated for recognition of the independence of BiH during the civil wars in the post-Yugoslav disintegration. Today it is obvious that the lack of viability of the Bosnian state was the result of interference by the international community in the 1990s in which Turkey played a role. However, it is also clear that without Turkey's involvement it would be impossible to solve the most acute and complex current issue in the Balkans, the future of the Bosnian conglomerate.

However, one should also not lose sight of the limits of Turkish mediation in Bosnia. Turkey has also made several mistakes here. During the elections in October of 2010, it placed all its bets on Haris Silajdžić, who lost the race for the Bosnian seat in the tripartite state presidency to Bakir Izetbegović, the son of war-time leader Alija Izetbegović. Turkey took a very risky approach, as Silajdžić is highly unpopular among Bosnian Serbs thanks to his repeated calls for the dissolution of the Serbian entity Republika Srpska or, to use his own words, the "genocidal creation." While Izetbegović reached out to Ankara after his election, the Bosnian Serb leadership has remained sceptical if not outright hostile. It is patently true that any progress on constitutional reform or on making central state institutions functional cannot be achieved without Banja Luka and that Belgrade cannot speak on behalf of Serbians in Bosnia. Yet, building bridges has proven

difficult. On January 29, 2011, Nebojša Radmanović, the Serbian representative in the state presidency and a close ally of Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik, cancelled a meeting with Davutoğlu, when the foreign minister allegedly insisted that the Serb entity's flag ought not to be in the room.⁵¹

All these things indicate that if Turkey wants to exert a real influence in the entire region, it should be more sophisticated in its rhetoric and behavior. Otherwise, non-Muslim people of the Balkans will consider its policy hostile, despite the fact that in a reality it is not at all. Ultimately, we should not forget that since the declaration of its independence, Macedonia has been actively supported by Turkey in the international arena. For instance, it took a clear position on the dispute between Greece and Macedonia regarding the name of the latter. Turkey's support was vital for Macedonia in 1995, when Greece announced an economic blockade in response to the use of the name *Macedonia* by an official in Skopje. At the time Greece closed her border with Macedonia, Skopje was in a stalemated situation due to its inability to import resources and products. Its main partner, Serbia, was also under United Nations sanctions at that time. Then Turkey began to supply oil to Macedonia via Bulgaria, and this support turned out to be crucial for Macedonia. "When Macedonia was supposed to be accepted as a member of UNESCO, the Macedonian delegation of five people was scheduled to speak on the sixteenth day of the conference. That was impossible for us, because it was too expensive at that time to stay for three weeks in Paris. But then the chief of the Turkish delegation, who was supposed to talk on the fourth day, stepped back and freed the place for Macedonia, recalled Guner Ismail, former Minister of Culture of Macedonia, adding that many Macedonian diplomatic battles were won with the direct participation of the Turks.⁵² It is of course an ongoing problem that Macedonia still has with Greece concerning its official name, and Turkey, due to its difficult relations with Greece, is not in a position to help the Macedonians in solving this vital issue.

Finally, while the economic interactions, socio-cultural connections and mutual perceptions between Turkey and the Balkans have improved significantly over the last few years and the Turkish government has also undertaken political initiatives, it would still be somewhat premature to claim that Turkey has become a major actor who can shape regional politics alone. This is demonstrable in the mixed results that its "regional ownership" strategy has produced. While Turkey's mediation between Serbia and BiH has contributed to visible, yet slow, progress in the political and economic relations of these countries, its mediation between *Balkanistica* 29 (2016)

Croatia and BiH has fallen short in achieving tangible improvement because of the accession of this country to the European Union. Nor did Turkey's offer for mediation between Serbia and Kosovo materialize, as the parties accepted what was offered by the European Union. Turkey's efforts to promote the political role and influence of the SEECP, which is composed only of Balkan governments, in regional politics has yet to yield any significant result.⁵³

Conclusion

In conclusion we can summarize by saying that Turkey has implemented a significant part of its goals by actively engaging in the Balkans through various mechanisms. In recent years the number of meetings at the highest level of state with all countries in the region has significantly increased. Turkey's soft power in bilateral relations is growing as evidenced by the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency for Development Cooperation and the Yunus Emre Foundation, which promotes the Turkish language and culture.

The mechanisms of multilateral cooperation have been created, such as the tripartite mechanism among Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia, as well as the joint commission of Turkey, Bosnia and Croatia, which deals with issues with national reconciliation. Turkey has commenced participation in working of various regional organizations; it has also started the process of creating new ones. Good examples of active Turkish policy are the cooperative efforts of the South East Europe Cooperation Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, in which Turkey's mediatory mission is especially notable.⁵⁴

It should be noted that such regional strategy is being implemented in Turkey in accordance with interests of other regional and extra-regional parties. It is quite obvious that in the long run, Turkey considers the Balkans a part of Europe and a part of the EU. The problems that exist for Turkey in connection with its own process of joining the EU are not reflected in its position toward the European integration of the Balkans. Moreover, by showing its mediatory powers in the Balkans, Turkey demonstrates to Europe that it is not only an economic and military power, but also a stabilizing force, capable of introducing values. At this moment in time, these values are incredibly close to European values, and they include stability, cooperation and tolerance. However, as has been mentioned above, a dangerous trend in the soft power of Turkey is being created by its gradual but steady Islamization. Although the Balkans are not a major problem

today, if we take into account the international situation, they could easily become another catalyst for instability.

Another important component of Turkish policy in the Balkans is its position with respect to Russian policy in the region. In general, it is pragmatic. The Turks accept that Russia is interested both in equality and stability in the Balkans and constructive relations with Turkey. This it has proven with the new joint gas project of Turkey and Russia which is intended to replace the "South Stream." Another example is Turkey's constructive position on Russia's participation in the solution of the Balkan question. In this sense, Turkish policy in the Balkans comes from much more balanced ideas than the current political position of the European partners.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the benefits of the Balkans joining the European family are obvious for Turkey, it is worth emphasizing once again that in the long run this country has a competitive advantage compared to the pan-European project. This assertion is built on the fact that Turkey perceives the Western Balkans as it is. It is seeking to build smooth strategic and economically beneficial relationships with everyone. It does not divide the Western Balkan countries on the basis of "successful" and "lagging behind" or "Muslim" and "non-Muslim." That is why Turkey is positively different from the European Union. For the EU, apparently there are some countries in the region which may become its members fairly quickly and those that cannot join the project in the foreseeable future. According to the EU, there are countries that correspond to "European" values and others that share them with difficulty. Such a position objectively creates friction between the countries of the region, turning the process of transformation into a competition. Turkey throughout its history knows how dangerous this competition might be and that it might result in increased nationalism and other traditional Balkan problems.

"Through diplomatic initiative and mediation, hard and soft power, economic appeal and its orientalist fascination, Turkey, the door to the Orient, has already become an essential interlocutor for the regional equilibrium and development. If Erdoğan's foreign policy will keep on exploiting its cultural assets as a regional passepartout, Turkey may soon acquire a dominant position for the future of the Balkans."⁵⁵ In this case, the question of whether the influence of today's Turkey with its internal and foreign policy issues could be positive will be extremely acute for Europeans. In order to preserve regional security, peace and stability, and the development of genuine humanistic values, Europe needs to

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openly allow other regional and extra-regional players in the Balkans to have some influence and to undertake jointly coordinated policies with regard to these historically, ethnically and religiously challenging countries.

Therefore, Turkey obviously is not strong enough yet to become the regional hegemon. Its progress is being hampered by a combination of American military power, the soft power of the EU, Russia's historical ties with a number of countries in the region and its investments in energy and transport infrastructure and the lack of trust of the Christian population of the Balkans. It will take independent actions, balanced among the interests of the great powers and cooperating with each of them when it is expedient for its own gain. Additionally, the increase in Turkey's prestige accompanying this process and its realistic approach to building relationships with regional players contribute to strengthening its role as a diplomatic force, as well as becoming a key economic partner.

Notes

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Table 1:
Turkish-Balkan Relations:
Total Export and Import (2013)

Country	Total Export (Thousands of U.S. Dollars)	Total Import (Thousands of U.S. Dollars)
Albania	266,544	82,390
Croatia	201,597	193,262
Bosnia and Herzegovina	274,086	124,330
Kosovo	278,998	9,951
Macedonia	293,976	81,518
Montenegro	29,140	11,515
Serbia	440,650	251,957

Table 2:
Turkish-Balkan Relations:
Total Export and Import (2014)

country	Total Export (Thousands of U.S. Dollars)	Total Import (Thousands of U.S. Dollars)
Albania	318,567	96,281
Croatia	287,401	136,889
Bosnia and Herzegovina	322,450	171,424
Kosovo	275,666	12,783
Macedonia	348,066	79,194
Montenegro	35,040	7,373
Serbia	506,557	273,901

Source: Foreign Trade Statistics, Turkish Statistical Institute
[http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=104] (31 March 2015).