

Chapter Twelve

Turkey in the Western Balkans: A Waning Interest

Alida Vračić, Edward P. Joseph, and Tea Ivanovic

The Turkish agenda in the Balkans has changed over time, both in terms of intensity and content. The end of the Cold War and the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s were crucial for Turkey to position itself strongly in the region, and to remain involved, primarily in Muslim-populated areas. Turkey's focus was on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where Muslims were suffering under mostly Bosnian-Serb bombardment along with an internationally imposed arms embargo. Later on, during the Kosovo War in 1999 and the continuing dispute between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece over the name "Macedonia," Turkey continued to take a strong political stance. Ankara backed the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo's conflict with Belgrade, and recognized Macedonia by its constitutional name.¹

Experiencing strong economic growth in the early 2000s, and with the rise of the newly formed Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the Balkans were at the center of Turkey's attention. By seemingly abandoning traditional *realpolitik* and applying new "win-win" approaches under Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey was able to carve out a meaningful role on the world stage. With fragments of Ottoman legacy, strong cultural relations that existed in the region, and the identification of "kin" communities, Turks abroad were seen as a genuine asset that would create a favorable milieu for renewed close relations with communities in the Balkans.

As Heinz Kramer stated, "Turkey is very much in favor of a lasting negotiated settlement of all Balkan issues that could become the source of future instability. To prevent such a possibility, the government seeks to establish cooperative relations with all Balkan states and promote multi-

¹ Turkey insists on an asterisk accompanying any mention of "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"; the asterisk noted that "Turkey recognizes FYROM by its constitutional name."

national regional plans that will further stability.”²As an outcome of this approach, Turkish interests in the Balkans, largely driven by Davutoğlu—who perceived it as his private project—gave priority to bringing and maintaining peace and stability in the region. In this respect, for the AK Party, resolving disputes with neighbors was vital. That, in return, required having more solid leverage, which meant the entering of a stage of activism and the promotion of trade and investment.³

Apart from becoming a member of regional initiatives, Turkey’s position as a strategic country was enhanced by the establishing of trilateral consultation mechanisms—Turkey-BiH-Croatia, and Turkey-BiH-Serbia—which meant that Turkey was assuming a key role as a mediator in the region. Initially envisaged to reassert Turkey’s influence in the Balkans—and, in particular, contribute toward creating bonds among the countries in the region—these trilateral meetings were in fact never designed to last.⁴The foreign ministers of Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia have come together nine times; the foreign ministers of Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia have gathered four times since 2009.⁵The highlight of these meetings was a first-ever meeting between Serbian President Boris Tadić and then-BiH President Haris Silajdžić in 2010. As a result, BiH sent an ambassador to Belgrade following a three-year absence. During the same year, the Serbian Parliament adopted a declaration condemning the crimes in Srebrenica. Following the Trilateral Balkan Summit held in Istanbul in April 2010, an Istanbul Declaration was adopted guaranteeing the territorial integrity of BiH.

The European Commission took note of Turkey’s activism in the Balkans in its 2010 Progress Report. “Turkey has taken many 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.” That same year, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu held talks with the NATO and EU leaders, and with then-member of the Bosnian Presidency Silajdžić to advance

² Kramer, Heinz. *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001, p. 154.

³ Kemal Kirişçi, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State,” *New Perspectives of Turkey*, no. 40 (2009), pp.29-57. http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/news_id_412_5%20-%20Article%20Kemal%20Kirisci.pdf

⁴ “A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina.” *Populari*, May 2014. <http://populari.org/index.php?bGFuZz1lbiZyPTQmbD0mZT0xOTM=..>

⁵ *Ibid.*

Bosnia's NATO prospects through a hoped-for Membership Action Plan (MAP).

However, despite its more broadminded approach to the region, when Turkey's kin faced serious concerns, Ankara reverted to partisan form. In the polarized 2009 debate over the future of the Office of the High Representative, Turkey blocked any move by the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) to advance debate on the issue. Bosnian Serbs assessed this as a protective gesture towards the country's Bosniaks.

With the departure of Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu in 2016—the architect of Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans—as well as the ongoing domestic crises after the July 2016 military coup attempt, a new course in Turkish foreign policy for the region remains to be seen. Since July 2016, Turkey has exercised pressure on Western Balkan governments to shut down Gülen-related structures (i.e., schools, universities, cultural institutions), but so-far without much success. Although Turkey enjoys some influence, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo, these institutions did not comply with Turkish requests. Given that domestic regional school curricula and the education system are not ranking well in terms of quality, Turkish structures still offer much better prospects for students and youth in the region, so the government did not respond to demands to shut down these educational structures. Disappointed with this development, Turkey recently scrapped a bilateral diploma acceptance deal with Macedonia after the authorities in Skopje failed to close schools and organizations suspected of links to Fethullah Gülen.⁶ Similar patterns can be seen elsewhere. Thus, if the events of July 15 were to evaluate the depth of influence Turkey can project over the region, it proved to have much less authority than it claims. Having said that, Turkey continues to use established relations by sending ministers to the region, playing a rational role, promising new economic investments, trade deals, and announcing more bilateral projects in the near future. With the refugee flows from Syria, tense relations with the EU and Germany, and terrorism at home, Turkey has not been active in the Balkans, or at least less so compared to previous years.

⁶ Marušić, Sinisa Jakov. "Turkey Scraps Diploma Deal with Macedonia." *Balkan Insight*. January 24, 2017. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/students-shocked-over-scrapping-of-macedonia-turkey-diploma-deal-01-23-2017>.

Economic Influence

For Turkey, the Western Balkan markets are not particularly attractive; the population is small, and the purchasing power is generally low. In areas of external trade—around 60 percent of which is with the EU—capital investment, and banking, the Western Balkans mainly depend on Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, France, and Hungary. Banks in the Western Balkans are mainly controlled by Italy, Austria, Greece, and France.⁷

The dynamics of economic relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries have remained largely unchanged over the last decade, despite promises in political speeches across the Western Balkans. Although Turkey has played an important political role in the region, its economic performance has not outperformed EU countries such as Italy and Germany. In economic terms, Turkey shows (to a certain extent) that it supports only Muslims in the region. Rhetorically, the aim is to work holistically with everyone, but in reality, Muslim groups receive special attention and benefits. The Yunus Emre Cultural Center⁸ has opened three offices in BiH, none of which are located in Republika Srpska.⁹ Out of 25 branch offices of the Turkish Ziraat Bank in BiH, only one is located in Republika Srpska (in Banja Luka)¹⁰ and out of all the investments in large-scale production, none have been made in Republika Srpska. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has program coordination offices in almost all parts of the region. However, it is mostly active in areas typically populated by Muslims. TIKA's activity fund concentrates 50 to 70 percent of its resources to restoration. "As a result, it has rebuilt or participated in the rebuilding of numerous monuments of Ottoman cultural and historical significance in BiH—bridges, fountains, residences, and mosques—over a period of two decades. Yet, exact numbers that systematically testify to their activities are almost impossible to come

⁷ Reljić, Dušan. "The Western Balkans: Accessing the Union," *SWP-Point of View* (Berlin: SWP), August 28, 2012.

⁸ The Yunus Emre Foundation is a public foundation founded under the law dated May 5, 2007. The Foundation had 5,653 establishments to promote Turkey and its language, history, culture, and art. It makes related information and documents available for users across the world, provides services to educators in the Turkish language, culture, and art, improves relations between Turkey and other countries, and increases cultural exchange. For more information, see: <http://www.yee.org.tr>.

⁹ Bosnia and Herzegovina has two entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.

¹⁰ "A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Populari*, May 2014.

by, as even TIKA itself does not keep track of significant cultural and historical monuments they assist in rebuilding.”¹¹ Unlike the other 22 major international donors in BiH, TIKA has not yet joined the Donor Coordination Forum (DCF), established in 2005 with the intention of increasing aid-efficiency in BiH and strengthening BiH’s leadership in its own development.

The Turkish Cultural Yunus Emre Centers have offices in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Romania. These centers have been active in spreading the teachings of the Turkish language in public schools. As a result, during the 2012-2013 academic year, numerous primary and secondary schools in Sarajevo began offering Turkish as an elective course—so far, 4,863 students have participated in these courses. The *Diyanet* (Turkey’s “Presidency for Religious Affairs” which nourishes religious relations), plays a major role in relations between Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition, the Gülen movement has been very active in the Balkans¹² but has come under investigation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, in 2016, public action has led to investigations in the schools’ operational structures, which are claimed to be ignoring domestic education rules and procedures. Thus far, no evidence of a breach has been found.

Turkish media are also attempting to establish themselves in the Western Balkans. Turkey’s state-run broadcaster TRT now offers internet news and radio programs in the Balkans, and the Anadolu Agency news service in BiH has gained popularity. However, the Turkish entertainment industry has had the most success. Turkish soap operas have developed enthusiastic fan bases throughout Eastern Europe.¹³ According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, when the soap operas first entered the world market, they were valued at 25,000–35,000 euros per episode. “Today, the programs sell for 145,000–360,000 euros an episode. Turkish soap operas broadcast daily are very popular in BiH, with 47 covering 2,235 minutes of programming on only one TV channel a week (which is exactly a day

¹¹ “A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina.” *Populari*, May 2014.

¹² The Gülen movement also runs a number of schools in Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo.

¹³ Mehmet Huseyin Bilgin, Ender Demir, and Davor Labas. “The Impact of Turkish TV Series on Turkey’s Image: Evidence from Eastern Europe,” in *Entrepreneurship, Business and Economics*, Mehmet Huseyin Bilgin and Hakan Danis (eds.). (Volume 1, Cham: Springer, 2016): pp. 565–578.

and a half every week of soap operas), enhancing Turkey's soft power on the international stage by popularizing Turkish culture."¹⁴

Turkey's Cooperation with its Transatlantic Partners in the Region

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The legacy of Ottoman rule profoundly marked BiH's society and some of its most prominent features. Islam as a religious heritage, Ottoman-influenced art, and 6,878 common Turkish words are just a few of the reasons why Bosnia is seen by many as the "miniature of the Balkans," and why Sarajevo especially holds a very special place in the hearts of Turks.^{15,16} According to polls, a majority of BiH citizens—as much as 60.2 percent—see Turkey as a friendly country.¹⁷ At the same time, this fondness is, according to statistics, more pronounced among Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), as 72.5 percent of them like Turkey the most out of all foreign countries and would want to live there in a hypothetical case of having to live abroad.¹⁸

In the 1990s, Turkey's interest was directed in particular toward BiH, and a number of parliamentary sessions were dedicated to the 1992–1995 war. The opposition parties criticized Turkey's "inaction" during the war, advocating for a unilateral intervention in BiH¹⁹ and for Turkey to position itself as an ally of the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks).²⁰ Even though Ankara was adamant about who the aggressor was and who the victims were, the

¹⁴ "A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Populari*, May 2014.

¹⁵ Škaljić, Abdulah. *Turcizmi u srpsko-hrvatskom jeziku* [Turkish expressions in the Serbo-Croatian language], 6th issue (Sarajevo, 1989).

¹⁶ "A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Populari*, May 2014, p 5.

¹⁷ A survey conducted by the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) on how Turkey and Turkish people are perceived in the Balkans. The survey was carried out at different universities in the countries, with respondents including both students and academics, and involved 2,127 face-to-face interviews (June, 2012).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ekinci, Didem. "The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkish Parliamentary Debates (1992–1995): A Constructivist Approach," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 6, no. 22 (Summer 2009): pp. 37–60.

²⁰ The term "Bosniak" replaced "Muslim" in the 1990s as the name the Bosnian Muslims used for themselves. See: Lampe, John R. "Bosnian conflict." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, May 9, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bosnian-conflict>.

Turkish government followed the line of action that was in line with the NATO framework.²¹ It offered diplomatic and public support to the authorities in Sarajevo, but it was reluctant to completely sever relations with Serbia.²² However, Turkey's political elites acknowledged that it was the Muslims who were being killed on European soil, and there was a call for Turkey to defend its kin community. In 1992, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel made a powerful speech calling for more assertive action, "I can say a new wave of bloodshed is coming. I stated my worries to world leaders after my return from BiH. I continue to voice the drama of our Bosnian brothers at every international forum and bilateral contacts."²³

Turkey actively participated in United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) activities. After the Dayton Agreement was signed in 1995, Turkey increased its military presence to brigade levels for the transformed NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR), which would become the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in 1996.²⁴ That same year, Turkey and BiH signed two bilateral agreements that established the cooperation between the two countries in the fields of military training, defense industry infrastructure, military technology, scientific research and development, and military medicine.²⁵ The second agreement had two objectives: First, to bring the Muslim-Croat forces up to equivalence with the Bosnian Serb Forces by the time IFOR leaves the country, and second, to bring the Bosnian army closer to NATO standards. The agreement implied regular visits by high-level officials and delegations, participation in exercises as observers, the training of military personnel, and contributions to the "Train and Equip Program."²⁶ Efforts to train the Bosnian army went hand-in-hand with security concerns brought up by the United States

²¹ "A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Populari*, May 2014. *Populari* interviewed Kemal Hakkı Kılıç, Head of the Balkans Department within Diyanet in Ankara, Turkey, on October 21, 2013.

²² Ekinci, Didem. "The War in Bosnia- Herzegovina and Turkish Parliamentary Debates (1992-1995): A Constructivist Approach," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Volume 6, No 22 (Summer 2009): pp. 37-60.

²³ Sami Süleyman Gündoğdu Demirel was a Turkish politician and statesman who served as the ninth president of Turkey from 1993 to 2000. He previously served as the Turkish prime minister five times between 1965 and 1993. He was the leader of the Justice Party (AP) from 1964 to 1980 and the leader of the True Path Party (DYP) from 1987 to 1993.

²⁴ Demir, Metehan. "Turkey's Training of Bosnian Continues as Fate of the Federation Remains Hazy," *Turkish Daily News*, August 30, 1996, cited in Ekinci, *Turkey and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era*, p.254.

²⁵ "Turkey, Bosnia Sign Military Cooperation Accord." *Turkish Daily News*, August 12, 1995, cited in Ekinci, *Turkey and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era*, p. 252.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 252.

regarding the presence of foreign fighters in BiH. Having the image of an unpredictable country with a weak state apparatus, Bosnia and Herzegovina was considered fertile soil for Islamic extremists.²⁷ BiH troops were trained by the Turks with American M60 tanks—part of the 98.4 million dollars-worth of U.S. military hardware that was supposed to be shipped to BiH under the condition that all Iranian fighters would leave the country.²⁸

Turkey considered itself a bridge between BiH and the international community. Its lobbying for BiH to gain membership in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was one way to demonstrate that.²⁹ Turkey's efforts to bring BiH closer to NATO culminated in 2010, when Foreign Minister Davutoğlu held talks with Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Secretary-General of NATO and EU term president; Spanish Foreign Minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos; and then-President of BiH, Haris Silajdžić to help Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in MAP.³⁰ The Turkish embassy served as a NATO contact for BiH while also acting as a mentor in the process. "Although this role is usually assumed by a NATO member for a duration of one year, Turkey has—based on its explicit expression of strong interest—been able to keep it for two consecutive years. NATO foreign ministers had assured BiH that the country would be included in MAP if they made the necessary reforms. Having no influence over Republika Srpska—a Serb-majority populated area and an entity within BiH—Turkey was left with no leverage in further negotiations between the two entities to deliver reforms. A compromise has not been reached, and to date BiH has not participated in MAP.³¹

²⁷ Ibid, p. 253.

²⁸ Akıncı, Uğur. "General Bir: Turkey Won't Allow Bosnia Follow Fanatics," *Turkish Daily News*, June 8, 1996, cited in Ekinci, *Turkey and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era*, p. 253.

²⁹ Kut, Sule. "Turkish Diplomatic Initiatives for Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Balkans: A Mirror of the New International Order*, ed. Günay Göksu Özdoğan and Kemali Saybaşılı (Istanbul: Eren, 1995), cited in Dilek Barlas, "Turkey and the Balkans: Cooperation in the Interwar and Post-Cold War Periods," *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies*, Foundation for Middle East and Balkan Studies, (Volume 4, Annual 1989/99): pp. 65–80.

³⁰ The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a NATO program of advice, assistance, and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. Participation in MAP does not prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership.

³¹ İnan Rüma, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: Overestimated Change within Underestimated Continuity?" in *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy*, ed. Özden Zeynep Oktav (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 135–157.

Turkey believes that the integration of BiH into Euro-Atlantic structures is vital for sustainable stability, not only in BiH, but in Southeast Europe as a whole. The decision taken at the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Tallinn in 2010 to invite BiH to join MAP is an important step in this direction. Turkey points to the urgency of initiating the MAP process for BiH, along with a strong engagement from the international community to help solve the registration of the military property issue during the MAP cycle. As a reflection of its support, the Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo assumed the responsibility of being the NATO Contact Point Embassy for the period 2011-2012.³²

More recently, reflecting the religious-political leadership of President Erdoğan, Turkey has intensified the Islamic “kin” orientation of its Balkan policy, damaging its bid for a regional mediator role. In July 2014, the Turkey and BiH defense ministries planned a naval military exercise in Neum, the lone BiH sea exit. The visit of two Turkish military vessels had only been arranged with representatives of the Bosniak side; Croat and Serb representatives in the BiH presidency objected to this and refused entry to the Turkish naval ships, raising tensions in domestic political discourse. One of the two ships was named after the famous Turkish Grand Vizier, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, which for the Serbian and Croatian politicians in BiH represented a hint at neo-Ottomanism.³³

Ankara has cultivated particularly close relations with the Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, who hews towards Erdoğan’s AK Party Islamist orientation. Izetbegović took part in a teleconference with then-Presidential candidate Erdoğan, during which he stated that, if Erdoğan is elected president, he would not only act as president of Turkey but also as president of BiH, a president of all Muslims. “You have restored the pride, the dignity of the Islamic nation. Therefore, here we all stand before you, out of respect for the first-class Muslim leader. Therefore, raise the flag high for our leader, for our Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan.

³² “Turkey’s and NATO’s views on current issues of the Alliance.” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Accessed September 9, 2017. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/ii---turkey_s-contributions-to-international-peace-keeping-activities.en.mfa.

³³ Pavlović, Djordje. “The Future of the Trilateral Cooperation among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, and Serbia.” *SAM Report, Center for Strategic Research, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*: p. 28. <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SAM-Report.pdf>.

He carries our flag, he carries our pride, [and] he carries the flag the late Izetbegovic carried in the Bosnian bloody war,”³⁴ Izetbegović exulted.

Reciprocity came shortly afterwards, when the AK Party and Erdoğan himself threw full support behind Izetbegović’s second-term run for the Bosniak seat of BiH Presidency, a gesture that provided a significant boost to his campaign, and the Balkan service of Turkey’s state-owned Anadolu Agency promoted Izetbegović during his campaign. In addition, on the eve of the 2014 BiH general elections, the Bosnian branch of Turkey’s state-owned Ziraat Bank granted the state of BiH a loan of 50 million dollars—Izetbegović was there to publicly receive the new line of credit. While Bosniak officials have embraced Turkey as a role model and enjoy direct access to Ankara, their Croat and Serb counterparts are increasingly put-off by Turkey’s bias.

Kosovo

Following the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, and Kosovo’s unilaterally declaring of its independence from Serbia in February 2008, Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan stated that Turkey welcomed the independence of Kosovo,³⁵ supports the EU’s mediation in the conflict, and has invested in Kosovo’s stability and economy.³⁶

However, in October 2013, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić cancelled an announced trilateral meeting in response to then-Prime Minister Erdoğan’s statement in Kosovo: “Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo.” Nikolić called it “an aggression without arms.”^{37,38}

Turkey currently takes part in the NATO operation KFOR in Kosovo with 350 military personnel, and it took over the leadership of the Multi-national Task Force South (MNTF(S)).³⁹

³⁴ “Izetbegovic Calls for Turkish Involvement.” Srna, August 10, 2014. <http://www.srna.rs/novosti/228799/izetbegovic-calls-for-turkish-involvement-.htm>.

³⁵ “Statement of H. E. Ali Babacan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, regarding the Recognition of Kosovo by Turkey,” February 18, 2008.

³⁶ “Turkey’s influence in the Western Balkans.” European Parliament. July 2017. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/607300/EPRS_ATA\(2017\)607300_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/607300/EPRS_ATA(2017)607300_EN.pdf).

³⁷ “Serbia accuses Turkish PM of meddling in country’s affairs.” *Middle East Online*, October 25, 2013. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=62178>.

³⁸ “Serb president wants apology from Turkey over Kosovo.” MINA, October 26, 2013. <http://macedoniaonline.eu/content/view/24154/46/>.

³⁹ “Turkey’s International Security Initiatives and Contributions to NATO and EU Operations.” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/iv_-euro

Macedonia

In the 1990s, when Macedonia declared independence from the former Yugoslav republic in 1991, the two nations embarked on much closer relations. Joint animosity toward Greece made this cooperation even stronger. “With a provisional name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in order to become a member of the UN, Macedonia tightened relations with Turkey, which earned the unwavering loyalty of many Macedonians after Ankara became the second country—Bulgaria was first—to publicly support Skopje’s declaration of independence and use the name “Macedonia” in 1991.”⁴⁰

Following its declaration of independence in September 1991, Macedonia faced an amalgam of economic, political, and military weakness. It could not receive aid or borrow on the financial markets, as it was not officially recognized. Turkey’s provision of oil and humanitarian aid in this period proved vital for Macedonia. Former Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin’s landmark visit to Macedonia in late 1993 brought certain projects to life, such as the East-West Motorway passing through Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey. By 1995, approximately 30 agreements were signed between the two states, an indication of growing relations.⁴¹

Culturally, relations were strong. The second-largest city in Macedonia, Bitola, a place where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk⁴²—the founding father of modern Turkey—lived and studied, is an almost inevitable stop on the journey for many Turks.⁴³ An estimated six million people living in Turkey today have ancestors who live in Macedonia.

Unlike the 1990s, when Macedonia managed to avoid an armed conflict, 2001 was a time of insurgency. Ethnic Albanian rebels calling themselves the National Liberation Army launched attacks on Macedonian security

pean-security-and-defence-identity_policy-_esdi_p_.en.mfa.

⁴⁰ “Statement of H. E. Ali Babacan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, regarding the Recognition of Kosovo by Turkey,” February 18, 2008.

⁴¹ Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation (1995), Agreement on the Prevention of Double Taxation (1995), Agreement on Mutual Promotion and Protection of Investments (1995), Agreement on Mutual Promotion and Protection of Investments (1995), Free Trade Agreement (1999), and Memorandum of Understanding (2003).

⁴² Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was born in Thessaloniki (now Greece) in 1881 and attended military school in Bitola from 1896 to 1899. His father was born in the village of Kodzadzik in western Macedonia. He went on to become an army officer during the First World War and president of the newly founded Republic of Turkey in 1923.

⁴³ Duridanski, Darko. “Macedonia-Turkey: The Ties That Bind,” *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, February 14, 2011.

forces, which in turn started a counter-insurgency campaign. “With U.S. and European diplomatic intervention, the parties signed a framework agreement on August 13 amidst the deadliest violence to date.”⁴⁴ Turkey played an important role by providing military aid to Macedonia. “Macedonian officials said they did not want military support from Turkey, yet added that they would like Turkey to assume a more effective role in NATO.”⁴⁵

In general, Turkey supports the idea that NATO’s door should remain open to European democracies willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership. In this notion, Turkey welcomed the accession of Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia to NATO as of March 29, 2004, which constitutes the largest-ever enlargement of the NATO alliance with the belief that it will further contribute to the consolidation of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. Albania and Croatia were invited to join NATO at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, and formally became members when the accession process was completed on April 1, 2009.

Macedonia has, like Albania and Croatia, been participating in MAP in preparation for its possible NATO membership. Turkey believes that NATO membership for Macedonia is of great importance for the maintenance of peace and stability in the Balkans. Turkey also welcomed the decision taken at Foreign Ministers Meeting on December 3-4, 2009 to invite Montenegro to join MAP, and in July 2017 Montenegro became the alliance’s 29th member.

“In March 2010, Davutoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister, met his Macedonian counterpart, Antonio Milososki, in Skopje and fully expressed his nations support in one sentence: ‘The citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, wherever they are in the world can, if they need help, call the embassies of Turkey. They will get help, as they are Turkish citizens.’”⁴⁶ Davutoğlu did not fail to convey a message of support on similar occasions,

⁴⁴ Kim, Julie. “Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division WikiLeaks Document Release.” *Congressional Research Service Report RL30900 Macedonia: Country Background and Recent Conflict*, p.3. <http://www.mit.edu/afs.new/sipb/contrib/wikileaks-crs/wikileaks-crs-reports/RL30900.pdf>

⁴⁵ “Üsküp’e Savunma Yardımı” [Skopje Defense Help], *Cumhuriyet*, March 18, 2001, and “Turkey Condemns Violence, Refugee Inflow Continues”, *Turkish Daily News*, March 22, 2001, in İkinci, *Turkey and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era*.

⁴⁶ “Üsküp’e Savunma Yardımı” [Skopje Defense Help], *Cumhuriyet*, March 18, 2001, and “Turkey Condemns Violence, Refugee Inflow Continues,” *Turkish Daily News*, March 22, 2001, cited in İkinci, *Turkey and the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era*.

“Turkey gives great attention to the political stability and prosperity of Macedonia because it is the heart of the Balkans. That is why Ankara was one of the first countries that recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name. I believe that the path of Macedonia towards the EU should be opened and the Turkish support for NATO membership for Macedonia will continue.”⁴⁷ During the past two decades, Turkey has been one of the most fervent supporters of Macedonia’s accession to NATO. Over the years, Turkey has donated military equipment and provided Macedonia with numerous trainings and courses for officers and non-commissioned officers. On December 24, 2010, the ministers of defense of Turkey and Macedonia signed an agreement on military-financial cooperation. Reportedly, more Macedonian generals from the Macedonian army speak Turkish than English.⁴⁸

Turkey’s Activism as Seen from the Balkans

Major drivers of Turkey’s new foreign policy have been centered on the nation’s history, culture, and geopolitical position. Politically, Turkey puts the Balkans at the center of five intersecting regions, including the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Providing more access to the region is seen as a matter of domestic national priority, as Turkey is considered by many Turks to be a partially Balkan country—not solely by virtue of location, but also for its well-preserved culture, cuisine, and customs in terms of food and social life.

However, a clear separation of sentiments toward Turkey is visible in the Western Balkans. Whereas the political elites in the Western Balkans unanimously display almost divine devotion to the Turkish political establishment and nurture good relations, citizens with more liberal views dread the possibility of Turkey becoming more influential in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the popularity of Turkey—driven through political speeches and campaigns—has become a tenet of Bosniak politics, and stories of the good life under the Turks are overwhelmingly a part of the state politics. Alija Izetbegović talks about leaving BiH on a deathbed to President Erdoğan as an *emanet*—an inheritance to be taken care of. It has become a mainstream anecdote that Bosniak political elites have empow-

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Žarko Petrović and Dušan Reljić, “Turkish Interests and Involvement in Western Balkans: A Score-Card,” *Insight Turkey*, Volume 13, no. 3 (2011): pp. 159-172.

ered Turkey and given them unprecedented opportunities for realizing their foreign policy ambitions. The demand for a greater Turkish presence—not only economically but also in everyday life—by the establishments in parts of BiH similarly shapes the perception that Turkey offers an alternative for the Balkans, one that is different from the European Union.

Even among Muslims in the Balkans, Kosovo, Albania, BiH, and Macedonia there is no unified approach toward Turkey, and even more so to its policies and open interference in the region. Concessions given to Turkey in exchange for the desperately needed economic projects are not welcomed by all. In 2015, Turkey demanded the closure of *Hizmet* schools in Albania, which sparked a fierce reaction from the Albanian chief of the socialist ruling party in Albania, “The Turkish president visited us and wanted us to close schools. How did he say that? As a brother? As a friend? No. He said that as if he is our father. If we Albanians have our father, it should be Skender-beg, Ismail Kemal. We [Albanians], have no father outside of Albania. This request put before us is unacceptable, we [Albanians], are not a Turkish colony.”⁴⁹ The vassal-based⁵⁰ relationship is still problematic for many Muslims in the region, and the scholarly elite throughout the region rejects this notion strongly. Although a significant number of ethnic Turks living in the Balkans undeniably feel a strong religious and cultural affinity with Turkey, the citizens of the Western Balkan region are more likely to see themselves as part of the larger European Union. A large majority still considers membership within the European Union to be “a good thing”⁵¹ and views EU membership as the paramount goal of their domestic transformation.

The European Union Question

Turkey’s domestic conflicts and its tarnished record regarding human rights and the rule of law have diminished its image internationally. In

⁴⁹ “Albanski parlament Erdoanu: ‘Mi nismo turska kolonija i nemamo oca izvan zemlje!’” [Albanian Parliament to Erdoğan: “We are not a Turkish colony and we have no father outside Albania.”] *Dnevni Avaz newspapers*, May 19, 2015. <https://goo.gl/ND7ONE>.

⁵⁰ Definition of “vassal” (in the feudal system): a person granted the use of land, in return for rendering homage, fealty, and usually military service or its equivalent to a lord or other superior; feudal tenant”; source: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/vassal>.

⁵¹ Regional Cooperation Council. Public opinion survey, *Balkan Barometer*, 2016, p. 51, http://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2016.pdf.

July 2016, forces within the Turkish military attempted a coup, which has since dramatically changed the domestic political scene. Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric who lives in self-exile in Pennsylvania, has been accused by Turkey of orchestrating the failed *coup d'état* attempt. Erdoğan accused Gülen and his supporters of creating “a state within a state” and announced that educational centers run by the Gülen movement⁵² would be shut down. After July 15, 2016, the purge against Gülen sympathizers continued, and hundreds of thousands of people are being fired, jailed, and prosecuted. Many intellectuals and scholars have been prohibited from leaving the country, and many of them still face uncertainties. Liberal, pluralist democracy, which had been the flagship of the AK Party only a decade ago, has profoundly changed, and so did its image. The EU now seems like an overstretched goal.

Knowing the conditionality limitations in the Balkans, applying only EU solutions to specific national issues does not always bear results. Instead of looking at Turkey as a competitor, the EU should include Turkey into multilateral activities in the Western Balkans (e.g., through the Berlin Process). An alienated and authoritarian Turkey could bring increasing levels of uncertainty to the region. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey proved to be a trustworthy partner in multilateral activities, and its participation in military and civilian missions contributed to fostering stability in the region. In the last decade, Turkey has shown a noteworthy level of political pragmatism, and it may well be a valuable partner in the process. If the EU and Turkey share interests in the Western Balkans, there should be a way to accommodate different approaches. The point would be to seek dialogue and initiate cooperation in fields where shared interests exist.

The promise from the June 2003 EU-Western Balkans summit, which resulted in the Thessaloniki Declaration affirming explicitly that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union,” is long overdue. The European Union conditionality toolbox that worked well in previous enlargements has lost its power. With the exception of Croatia, all of the countries that began the process of joining in 2013—after 10 years of negotiations—are far from full EU membership. A series of demands from the European side toward the Western Balkan countries were often lacking in consistency. The credibility of the EU was further eroded by arbitrarily

⁵² The Gülen movement (*Hizmet* in Turkish) is a worldwide civic initiative rooted in the spiritual and humanistic tradition of Islam and inspired by the ideas and activism of Fethullah Gülen. See: <http://bit.ly/2azrj1e>.

applying conditions to the Western Balkans. Croatia, for example, signed its Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) as early as 2001 and became a candidate for EU membership in June 2004. At that time, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia gave its opinion that Zagreb's cooperation was a positive element, despite the fact that indicted Croatian General, Ante Gotovina, had not been handed over. In BiH, the SAA negotiating process largely depended on compliance with the police reform conditions set by the Office of the High Representative—conditions that had never existed for any other country.

The change of leadership in the European Commission in 2014, the “five-year freeze”⁵³ on enlargement, the rise of “illiberal democracies” in the EU, and the EU's inability to counterbalance negative views on enlargement in the member states resulted in an almost complete power vacuum in the Western Balkan countries. To counter negative trends and launch more durable prospects for the region, the German government launched the Berlin Process in 2014 following a series of high-level visits to the region,⁵⁴ restating the importance of supporting the region's bid for membership in the EU. Forgotten commitments have been reinvigorated by a new roadmap, whose main focus is on the economy, connectivity, civil society, and youth. A target date for the accession of Serbia is 2022–2025, provided that other bilateral issues do not create more stumbling blocks. Lasting stability and economic development serve as the major rationale for providing support, but a weak state of democracy in the region plays a significant role, too. In a best-case scenario, no country in the Western Balkans will join the EU before 2020, and with Turkey's waning interest in Balkan politics, much of the progress to be made will take place in the Western Balkans itself.

⁵³ “When it comes to enlargement, [...] this has been an historic success [...]. However, the Union and our citizens now need to digest the addition of 13 member states in the past ten years. The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years.” Accessed August 31, 2017. <https://goo.gl/jnnmRf>

⁵⁴ The Berlin Process, a five-year timetable launched by Germany in order to underline the commitment to EU-enlargement towards the Western Balkans region. The focus of the initiative is on countries in the Western Balkans that are not yet EU members: Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

Conclusion

Turkey has participated in all operations led by NATO in the Balkans since 1995. It has contributed to IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, KFOR in Kosovo, and Operations Essential Harvest, Amber Fox, and Allied Harmony in Macedonia.⁵⁵ However, the threat of terrorism—domestic and regional—have turned Turkey's attention to its national security, and to its neighbors to the south, Syria, and Iraq, first and foremost. Even though the presence of foreign development agency TIKA testifies to the continued commitment to the Balkans, the region generates no vital security threats or relative economic interdependence that would draw Turkey in. Seemingly, the Western Balkans are no longer a priority for Ankara. As a result of Turkey's decline in interest in Balkan politics and its increased domestic and Middle Eastern focus, the diplomatic initiatives that Turkey had launched a few years before did not progress as expected.

The strong EU anchor that is missing in the Western Balkans and the uncertain future of Turkey's foreign policy direction will progressively deepen the necessity to synchronize approaches in the Western Balkans. The region's economic prospects are rather bleak due to high unemployment and social discontent. Although the EU holds instruments to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU and ultimately improve the situation on the ground, a number of pressing issues—such as the prevailing financial crisis in the EU, the refugee inflow, terrorism, the Middle East crisis, and, finally, Brexit—have shifted the EU's priorities away from the Western Balkans. On the other hand, Turkey's current domestic political dynamics will complicate relations with the region later. If Turkey only plays its religious card as a foreign policy-making tool and verges toward more authoritarian rule and anti-Western feelings, it will asymmetrically improve its standing only with certain politicians from the region, who regard the present form of rule in Turkey to be adequate. On the contrary, if Turkey returns to economic growth, pluralism, democracy, and closer ties with the EU, its influence in the region can be as broad as it was at the beginning of the 2000s.

⁵⁵ "Turkey's International Security Initiatives and Contributions to NATO and EU Operations." *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Accessed September 10, 2017. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/iv_-european-security-and-defence-identity-policy-_esdi_p_.en.mfa

