

Turkey's Western Balkans Policy

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Together with start of Turkish Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), 2009 attested to Turkey's returning to the Western Balkans as one of the most active external actors. For its contributions to regional cooperation in the Western Balkans Turkey has received praise. Nevertheless Turkey's Balkan policy became a matter of dispute. Ankara's Bosnia and Herzegovina initiative even brought up the question as to whether Turkey is aspiring to restore the power and influence it had over the region at the time of the Ottoman period. Those readily demonstrating their unease over this initiative are accusing Turkey of nurturing inclinations reminiscent of the Ottoman state. On the other hand Turkish officials are using every opportunity to underline that Ankara has no intentions other than to contribute in consolidating peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

There are five key reasons that explain Turkish engagement in the Balkans. The first reason is the longstanding common history of Turks with the Balkan peoples. One might like or dislike this common history; but the fact is that the people of the region and of Turkey are familiar with each other securing a good basis for regional cooperation. Second important reason which draws Turkey into the Balkans is the human factor. According to the official statistics, more than one million of Turkish minorities are living in the Balkan states. Besides, Turkey also attaches importance to other Muslim communities from the region. After centuries of migrations, unbreakable ties have been established between the Turkish society and Muslim communities from the Balkans. For its kindred communities in the Balkans, Turkey only wants conditions for being respected citizens with equal rights, and it does not have ambitions to control them.

The third reason of Turkish engagement in the Balkans is associated to the geography. Any instability that emerges in the region has political, economic or cultural effects on Turkey. That's why having peace and stability in the Balkans is among the priorities of the Turkish foreign policy. Improving economic presence in the region can be considered as the fourth reason of Turkish engagement in Balkans. Last key reason for Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans is to secure allies among these countries for Turkey's EU bid in the future.

Only two months after Davutoğlu was appointed as the Minister of foreign affairs, Turkish Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) has started. During this one year chairmanship, frequency of high level visits between Turkey and the Balkan countries intensified significantly, and Turkey has organized many impressive Balkan events, what had quite positive reflections in the Balkan media. But almost immediately after Chairmanship-in-Office of the SEECP, Turkish Western Balkans policy started to concentrate on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Well aware of the delicacy of the period Bosnia and Herzegovina is going through and of its possible negative regional effects, Turkey has started pursuing an active policy with focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey has expected to become one of the mediators in the Butmir negotiations, headed by EU and US with the aim to contribute in finding a solution to the constitutional changes in

Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, since Turkey wasn't invited as a moderator, Davutoğlu has started to engage with its own diplomacy. Policy of Davutoğlu towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is being conducted at three levels. The first one is the local level where the aim is reinforcing dialogue between constitutional people of the country. The second level is a regional one, where Davutoğlu is trying to push Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbors Serbia and Croatia to become closer to each other and through this way contribute to the resolution of existing problems within them. It is believed that this regional approach of Turkey can also contribute to improve relations based on mutual confidence and respect between different ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The third level of diplomacy of Davutoğlu towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is acting and lobbying for the country at the international level. The main aim of this is preserving territorial integrity and multiethnic character of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and accelerating its Euro-Atlantic integrations.

One of the key results of Turkish active engagement in the Western Balkans is the process of improving bilateral relations between Turkey and Serbia. In recent years, mutual visits at high level between Turkey and Serbia are intensified. Turkish engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the improving relations with Serbia has opened the way for the Balkan Summits held in Istanbul and in Belgrade. With the mediation of Ankara, Serbia has approved the long-disputed ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, Turkey has mediated between conflicting political parties of Bosniaks in Serbian part of the Sandzak region. Turkey also helped Spain - the term president of the EU - to find an acceptable formula for Kosovo's participation to the EU-Western Balkans summit which held in Sarajevo on June 2nd, 2010.

Prejudices inside the region and Turkey's insufficient cooperation with the West are the main obstacles for more successful Turkish role in the Western Balkans. Because these factors are not at least partly controllable by Ankara, Turkish influence in the Western Balkans may remain limited for a longer period.

In order to consolidate the positive trends in the Balkans that were initiated in the last few years, Turkey should collaborate more with the EU, the US, and other important international players. On the other hand, European diplomats should not look to Turkey with suspicions, but should treat as a partner who can make significant contributions for peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Besides, in order to achieve complete success in the region, all the outside parties involved in Western Balkans diplomacy will eventually have to demonstrate greater solidarity. Otherwise, scene will be overcrowded with players who are actually not producing any concrete results.