

Turkey and the Balkan States: Justice and Development Party's role in filling the void with Balkans

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Abstract— A century after the collapse of Ottoman empire, Turkey is trying to bridge the gaps again with the Balkans, some calling it a way of reviving the Ottoman empire, while as few see it as a way of making allies in the region to join European Union. There are many such narratives. This paper will try to analyze how Turkey is trying to make its presence strong in Balkans, whether it is investing in their education, building religious monuments, or bringing stability and peace in the region. This paper will also focus on the growing relations between Turkey and Balkans during the ongoing governance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Keywords— Turkey, Balkans, Justice and Development Party (AKP).

I. INTRODUCTION

Ottoman Empire was spread over the majority of the Balkan region. The people of all the religions were acceptable in the Ottoman Empire. But after the fall of Ottoman Empire, the situation changed drastically. With the exception of Albania being a Muslim majority population, the Muslims were left as minorities in other nation states of Balkan region. The internal tension between majority and minority populations triggered in the region. Tensions were particularly evident between new orthodox Christian rulers and their Muslim minority populations, which were seen as undesirable relics from the Ottoman past (Poulton, 2000).

Hundreds of thousands of Turks had settled down in the small Balkan cities. After the empire collapsed, there was a massive migration of ethnic Turks and Muslims to Turkey. Beholding this overwhelming arrival of people of Balkan origin, Turkey started viewing Balkans as a part of their hinterland. But under the single party rule of the Republican Party, the Turkey's relationship with Balkans remained very formal. Turkey was absent in Balkans for almost a century. It was only after the end of cold war that Turkey was forced to change its foreign policy towards the disintegrated Soviet Union and Balkans. International dynamics pressured Turkey to change its

priorities and that was when Balkans became a nucleus of their priorities. The Turkish armed forces have been actively involved in the United Nations Protection Force, Implementation Force, Stabilization Force in Bosnia Herzegovina; Operation Alba in Albania; Essential Harvest, Amber Fox, Concordia, Proxima in Macedonia; and the United Nations, Mission in Kosovo, OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission and Kosovo Force (Demirtaş, 2013).

Turkey's Interest in Balkans

For the past two decades, Turkey has been rediscovering its relationship with Balkans. The end of cold war and the dissolution of former Yugoslavia in the 1990's and the subsequent violence in Bosnia and Kosovo were the decisive points for Turkey to get actively involved in the Balkans. Joining the multilateral forces, Turkey was seen in putting a greater emphasis on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Muslims suffered greatly during the Bosnian war (1992-1995). And when the Kosovo war broke out in 1999, and throughout the long-standing dispute between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece over the name 'Macedonia', Turkey strived for a mediator's role in the region (Vracic, 2016).

There are multiple narratives for Turkey being so interested in Balkans. Starting from creating neo-Ottomanism to using

Balkans as a key to enter the realm of world economy. Since Balkan region bridges Turkey with west, Turkey has started showing a lot of interest. Erhan Türbedar cites five reasons for Turkey being involved in Balkans. The first being the common history of Turks and Balkans. Although there have been conflicts regarding this commonality too, still they have a lot to identify with each other. The second factor is the human factor; the ethnic Turks living in the Balkans. The official statistics say that there are almost one million Turkish minorities living in Balkans. Now that Turkey has been lately called as the Messiah of Muslims in the world, their support goes for the Non-Turkish Muslims living in Balkans as well. The third factor being trade, fourth as geography and last but not the least as to make allies in the region to make it to the membership of the European Union (Türbedar, 2011)

All of these factors can be true as well as debatable at the same time. They are totally interrelated in nature. But Turkey is not seen to be primarily focusing on all the Balkan countries. It is focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. These are the areas that have the Muslim minorities and the ethnic Turks.

Turkey and, Bosnian War of 1995

Bosnia and Herzegovina, witnessed the deadliest massacre in history. On 6th July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces Under General Ratko Mladic began an assault on Srebrenica. The UN report stated that Bosnian Serbs had murdered around 7600 Bosnian Muslim males, but this figure kept changing. More than 200,000 Bosnians were killed including 17000 children. Thousands were injured and millions were left homeless. Turkey couldn't intervene anyway in Bosnian war except through NATO. But NATO had its own way to work and Turkish elites had a grave concern for the Muslims that were becoming the greatest casualty of the war. The Turkish embassy served as a NATO contact for Bosnia while also acting as a mentor in the process. Although this role is normally 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 (Vracic, 2016).

The Turkey's then Minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu called Bosnia the miniature of the Balkans, because of having Islam as its religious heritage, Ottoman influenced art and the common Turkish words. During the Bosnian war of 1992, Turkey was seen quite worried about the Bosnian conflict. President Süleyman Demirel made a powerful speech calling for an action, “*I can say a new wave of bloodshed is*

coming. I stated my worries to world leaders after my return from Bosnia. I continue to voice the drama of our Bosnian brothers at every international forum and bilateral contacts.” Muzafer Çilek, an honorary council of Bosnia to Bursa attended one of the teleconferences with President Recep Tayipp Erdoğan that was for his presidential campaigning, mentioning that if Erdoğan is elected as the president of Turkey, he will be the President of Bosnia as well (Beylur, 2013).

Kosovo and Turkey

Kosovo has been struggling for two things so far, one is independence and second is to be recognized as an independent country internationally. The independence was declared in 2008 so far but the recognition is yet a faraway dream. Turkey has been supporting the Kosovo independence since the beginning for the number of reasons. The Turkish government believed that to achieve the stability and peace in the western Balkans, Kosovo needed to be resolved through independence. When the conflict was going on in Kosovo in the second half of 1990's, Turkish politicians discussed the future of Kosovo and Turkish policies in the region. It should also be noted that Turkey's recognition of Kosovo did not lead to any deterioration in its relations with Serbia; in other words, both countries “agreed to disagree” on the issue of Kosovo (Demirtaş, 2013).

Turkey is having very good economic relations with Kosovo. Of the six countries in the Western Balkans, Kosovo has attracted the highest level of FDI from Turkey over last five years. In terms of investments, and according to the Central Bank of Kosovo, Turkey invested €86.8 million in 2013 alone. From 2004 to 2014 investments amounted to €360 million – 12 percent of total foreign investments.

Areas of Turkish services in Balkans

Turkey has been actively offering services in Balkans, in the form of education, trade and investment, energy sector, construction, communication and mining sectors. Turkey has been highly investing in their education sector through an organization called *Diyanet* that runs the educational institutions in Balkans. Let's detail few major sectors where Turkey invests hugely:

Education

Education has been one of the soft power policies of Turkey in the Balkans. Due to the economic weaknesses the Balkan governments haven't been able to invest much in their education sector that is why they welcome the initiatives of

Turkey in the Balkan's education sector. The Turkish government offers scholarships programs for university education to the western Balkan students, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, one can add the influence of increasing number of Turkish universities in various Balkan countries, such as Epoka University in Albania, the International University of Sarajevo and the International Burch University in Bosnia Herzegovina (Ekinici, 2018).

The Yunus Emre institutes, which has offices in all the western Balkan countries are used to teach Turkish language and culture of Turkey. The recently found Maarif-vakfi foundation that was made as an alternative to US based Fetullah Gülen's international schools in Balkans. The *Diyanet* foundation is used to create religious awareness among the Muslims in the western Balkans. The Imam Hatip schools in Turkey also provide religious education apart from the formal education. A recently established institution called YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related communities) gives thousands of scholarships every year. Considering the holders of Turkish grants from the Balkan countries the number increased from 467 in 1992 to 721 in 2011.

Trade and investment

It was under the Turgut Özal's period that Turkey's foreign policy changed towards Balkans. It was more of Turkey had started remembering Balkans after such a long time. The practice of taking the businessmen along on the foreign trips was started by him but then that was stopped by the coalition governments. And then Justice and development party resumed this practice and it can be seen now that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan usually takes a huge group of Business persons along while going on his trips abroad. Turkey's trade volume with the Balkan countries was just US \$ 2.9 billion in 2000, increasing to US \$ 18.4 billion in 2011, a six-fold increase. There was also a similar increase in Turkish direct investment in the region: In 2002 it totaled about US \$ 30 million; and it increased to US \$ 189 million in 2011.

In terms of Turkey's yearly outward FDI to the Balkans region, Bulgaria and Romania exclusively the recipient countries until 2004. From that year onwards, the rest of the Balkan countries have undertaken important economic reforms in order to attract more FDI to integrate with the global economy. As a result of rapid liberalization process and bilateral agreements signed with Turkey, Turkish investments began to flow in to the Balkans region. Turkey's FDI flow of investment into the Balkan countries has been relatively diversified. For instance, in 2007, Albania alone received

42.2% of total outward FDI from Turkey. This large FDI inflow of investment into the country is a reflection of foreign participation in the partial privatization of Albania's public telecommunication company ALBtelecom, which was acquired by a Turkish consortium in 2007. Moreover, Turkey became the fifth country having the largest share in FDI stocks in Albania in 2011 (Çakir, 2014).

Turkey's presence is felt in sectors such as banking (Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo) and increasingly transport. In late 2008, Turkish Airways acquired a 49% stake in BIH Airlines, the national carrier. It has also been involved in prolonged negotiations over the purchase of a controlling stake in Serbia's JAT. Turkish companies have won contracts to operate the airports in Pristina, Skopje and Ohrid too. In Macedonia, the condition has been investing EUR 200m into the airports' infrastructure (Bechev, 2012).

Media

Another important proof of soft power is the increasing interest in Turkish media in the Balkan countries. The launch of a new channel by the Turkish radio and TV broadcasting organization TRT, called TRT Avaz, is a noteworthy development. It broadcasts some cultural programs as well as daily news in the Balkan languages, and hence has a potential to be a cultural bridge. Another salient recent development has been the opening of the Directorate of the Region of the Balkans in the Anatolian News Agency (Anadolu Ajansı, AA) in Sarajevo last year.

Nonetheless, Turkish mass media, such as soap operas, especially those which portray Turkey as a modern, secular and open country, have found an enthusiastic audience in all Western Balkan countries. And as no citizen of a Western Balkan country needs a visa for Turkey, years of increased people-to-people contact through tourism has boosted Turkey's positive image also among the non-Muslim societies in Western Balkans.

TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency)

Recently, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) has paid much attention to the reconstruction of historic Ottoman monuments throughout the Balkans. Turkey is also building schools and universities in those parts where they are likely to be appreciated, for example in areas with a predominantly Muslim population. As an example, in Montenegro, the smallest of the post-Yugoslav republics, most of the €5 million that has been donated thus

far has focused on projects in the northern parts of the country where there is a significant Muslim population.¹⁵ TIKA has financed the reconstruction of a school in Rožaje, selected because over 200 of its students take Turkish as their elective course. Also, it has financed the building and opening of the madrasa in Tuzi, near Podgorica—the first Muslim religious school in Montenegro since 1918 (Petrovic & Reljic, 2011).

Military and security cooperation

Through bilateral agreements, Turkey provides military training, logistics, and technical support for the modernization of Western Balkan military forces. Turkish and other NATO member's armed forces participate in collective military maneuvers and cooperate in international military missions. Turkey also supports local police forces through the training of officers and the supplying of equipment.

The projection of Turkish “hard power” in the region has been up to recently confined to participation in NATO and EU missions, but Ankara has been strengthening its military and defense links with all countries of the region and every state in the Western Balkans that wants to join NATO enjoys strong Turkish support.

During the past two decades, Turkey has been one of the most fervent supporters of Macedonia's accession to NATO. Turkey has participated in all three NATO operations in Macedonia, Essential Harvest (2001), Amber Fox (2001-2003) and Allied Harmony (2002- 2003) (Petrovic & Reljic, 2011).

Regional peace and Security

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey has tried to play a good role in being a mediator between Serbia and Bosnia to maintain peace. Although Serbia and Turkey had bad relations in the past because of the Turkish intervention in the Cyprus leading to the Turkish Greece conflict. But now the relations are getting better and Turkish foreign policy to maintain peace and stability in the Bosnia and Herzegovina region is to have a good relation with Serbia. Following the recent rapprochement, both countries chose to identify areas of common interest in the fields of economy, trade, tourism, environment, culture, multilateral cooperation and combating crime. They have progressed by signing a series of joint agreements at the governmental level and have also developed civil society links (Anastasakis, 2004).

Turkish Political parties and Balkans

Under the single party governance of Republican Party, Turkey had literally sidelined Balkans, because both Turkey

as well as Balkans were busy creating their own nationalities. Then came the multiparty system, but there were multiple coups and Turkey was quite unstable that way and moreover Turkey had become a member of NATO, so their policies were in linearity with west then. But under the governance of Turgut Özal in 1983, Turkey got in touch with Balkans again. And the legacy of keeping the Balkans was carried by Justice and Development Party (AKP) government under the leadership of President Recep Tayip Erdoğan.

Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Balkans

Since its inception, Justice and Development Party's (AKP) government has adopted Ahmet Davutoğlu's ambitious framework for Turkish foreign policy, which involved an integrative and holistic utilization of the country's geostrategic, social, cultural, and historical resources. Unsurprisingly, the Balkans is among the regions that Davutoğlu placed the greatest importance. In *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), he presents his prescriptions regarding Turkey's Balkans policy mainly along three lines: first, he believes that in order to strengthen its influence over the region and maintain it both during peacetime and in case of tension or conflict, Turkey should primarily strengthen its relations with the elements connected to Turkey “with history and by heart” (read the Muslims) and bring the Ottoman-Turkish cultural heritage to the fore. Second, he regards Turkey's geographical, social and economic resources that can connect the Balkans to other nearby basins as an invaluable asset (Ekinci, 2014). During Erdoğan's 15-year rule, Turkey has invested significant effort and money into gaining an ever greater political, cultural and economic foothold in the western Balkans. It has provided development aid, led major infrastructure projects, opened universities and restored mosques, encouraged Turkish businesses to invest in the region and fostered dialogue between divided communities

II. CONCLUSION

The notion of Turkey creating a new Ottoman empire might not be true because Balkan nation states have their own nationalistic space that they wouldn't want anyone to get invaded. In that case Turkey can only cooperate with them not control them. They identify with the Balkan lands and wouldn't want to be robbed off their identity again. Turkey can invest in their health sector more, rather than making schools in competition with the Gülenist institutions. Moreover, Turkey has to stop playing religious card in Balkans because then it will further fuel the religious divide.

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