

The geopolitical influence of Turkey in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

Turkey's role in the Balkan peninsula can be considered age-old since medieval times. The study of the new line of Turkish foreign policy from 2002 to 2021, as well as the doctrine of neo-Ottomanism, mark a great importance in the ideation of the methodology. This need is influenced by a number of factors. Turkey has a historical past in the Balkans; after the coming to power of the AKP in 2002, its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted to reawaken the “unified” relationship of the Balkan states with Turkey at the head. Also, the empowerment that Turkey has received during the last 15 years has strengthened its influence in three different regions. The Balkan region, just like in the period of the Ottoman Empire, is an existential part of the implementation of the doctrine of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy, as well as a connecting bridge that Turkey has with Western Europe. This study aims to offer an approach that seeks to discover the cause of Turkey's relations with the Balkan countries and Turkey's geopolitical influence in this region. This paper suggests that the growth of Turkey's influence in the Balkans has come as a result of Turkey's own reconceptualization of its role in the international arena after 2002. The method selected in this study is the interpretative one, which refers to the secondary data produced by well-known authors of international relations, official documents, institutions, etc.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, influence, neo-Ottomanism, Turkey, Western Balkans.*

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Introduction and some Historical Factors

Turkey's relationship with the Balkans existed long before the Turkish nation became a republic in 1923 by its founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and took the name Turkey. Today's Turkey is the continuation of what remained from the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the empire which ruled the lands of the Balkan Peninsula for almost five centuries.

The settlement of the Ottoman Turks in the Balkans brought about a change in the socio-cultural and political life in the region, where the empire together with its centralized rule brought new culture features to the Balkans, perhaps the most important among which is the spread of Islam in the region. The indoctrination of Ottoman cultural features in the Balkans was actually a well-thought-out process that would provide the Ottoman Empire with continuity in ruling the Balkan territories. However, the Balkans was a heterogeneous territory, with different ethnicities and religions. Precisely for this fact, from what the archives of the time refer us to, the Ottomans played the card of "inclusiveness" of the population, being nominated as "protectors" and "stability maintainers" of these lands.

For the Ottomans, the Balkans, along with Anatolia, was conceived as a single body and the only territories where the empire saw as unthinkable to lose, because it would bring about its disintegration. For the Ottomans, the Balkans were seen as a connecting bridge with Europe and in relation to their ambitions to be dominant in the international arena. "In the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire, whose successor is Turkey, had a key role in the world political scene, depending on the territories it possessed" (Tahirovic, 2014: 61). From this statement we can understand that the Balkans, in addition to being a strategic territory for the Ottomans and bringing them significant incomes, was also a tool to elevate the role that the empire had in the international arena thanks to the control of these strategic territories.

With the capitulation of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic; Turkey managed to maintain its existential territories in Anatolia and at the same time it continued to be part of the Balkans and thus of Europe. Turkey was heading towards the West and its internal stability. Thus, Turkish foreign policy and its relationship with the Balkan countries has been dictated by two factors: *the status quo* and the so called '*westernization*'. The tendency of the Turkish foreign policy has been to maintain the established order within the existing borders and balances" and "implement a western-oriented foreign policy" (Evendeci, 2013). The fall of the eastern/communist bloc also helped initiate the process of strengthening Turkey in the international arena. This because, the end



of the Cold War erased the obligations of its positioning alongside the Western powers as a strategic balance in the face of the Soviet threat and made it possible to end the isolation within its borders. “No doubt, the collapse of the Soviet system dissolved pseudo-identities as well as the pseudo-political front of the bipolar system (Davutoğlu, 1994: 110).

This whole process of reorganization of Turkish foreign policy was named by former President Turgut Özal as “active foreign policy”. This marks the beginning of the process of changing Turkish foreign policy and what will later take the form of the doctrine of neo-Ottomanism. Precisely in this context, Turkey begins to exercise its influence in the Balkan region. After decades of separating the Balkans from Turkey with an iron curtain, policymakers in Ankara saw the need to develop a new approach to rapprochement in the region, where the meltdown of the communist bloc and the emergence of new states brought about a rapid and radical change in international and regional system, creating new opportunities and challenges for Turkey (Sayarı, 2000: 170).

The Balkans presented itself as a new challenge for Turkey, which would open old scenarios and create new opportunities for the latter in the international system. Opportunities that would increase Turkey’s value vis-à-vis other actors and open the way to its factorization as a regional power, capable of maintaining balances and influencing “on the right path” countries that still suffer nowadays the reminiscences of old enmities. The Balkans had a geopolitical vacuum after the Cold War. The place left vacant by the Soviet-communist influence turned into a free space for various actors who wanted to increase their presence in the region in order to influence it. Among them was Turkey, which with its new line of “active foreign policy” sought to restore ties with the Balkans. “Since the breakup of Yugoslavia and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Europe, the process of Balkanization appeared once again on the scene after seventy years” (Yetkin, 1992:192). This process presented opportunities for Turkey to both increase its presence and become a powerful regional actor.

With the intervention in the Kosovo War, the aid given to the newly created states in the Balkans such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia as well as the economic aid and military agreements with Albania, Turkey saw itself advancing in its presence in the Balkan countries by having an acceptance of its role in these countries. It is precisely in these countries that the traces left by the Ottoman Empire continue to be present, albeit with fainter shades. However, the presence of Turkey in these lands, starting from a socio-cultural and geographical proximity, present the latter as a reliable ally also for some common values that they share. “Although Ottoman nostalgia is not what drives this policy, the goal is clearly pragmatic” (Bechev, 2011:175).

Turkey's factorization in the Balkans is a tool in the reconceptualization of its foreign policy. The continuous growth of its presence and influence in a region that is coveted by various international actors turns Turkey into a factor state and above all increases its opportunities to change the role it has in the international arena.

New Turkey under AKP leadership

The change brought by the end of the Cold War in the Republic of Turkey and the use of "active foreign policy" are reinforced and take the form of a genuine doctrine with the coming to power of the AKP, headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The non-resolution of internal crises in Turkey, such as the Kurdish issue, by the Kemalists which were against giving concessions to them, created space in the political arena for new political movements that could guarantee a compromise. "At the same time, the iron-handed repression of religious practice was not appreciated by many Muslim Turks and this facilitated the rise to power of Islamic parties, then and now, which favored more freedom in religious expression" (Sambur, 2009: 120). It was precisely such movements that brought together a group of veterans from banned parties with an Islamic background, led by the former mayor of Istanbul Erdoğan, who was known for his tendency to use political Islam and for the charisma he evoked in the "discriminated" parts of society; from which the AKP² was created.

Although with a political-religious elite and with the tendency to use political Islam, "AKP does not call itself an Islamic party, but a democratic conservative party which supports traditional perspectives on social and moral issues" (Boland, 2004). However, the trend of using religion in Turkey's domestic politics is felt from the beginning when the AKP came to power. "Many criticisms of AKP argue that the party is Islamizing Turkey and trying to undo the Kemalist reforms" (Kumar, 2014: 210). Thus, (Islam) religion has a significant impact on Turkish politics under the leadership of the AKP. The same line was reflected in the Turkish foreign policy in the geostrategic re-interpretation of Turkey.

"The architect of AKP's foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, although appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs at the end of May 2009, has been the hidden architect of Turkish foreign policy since his appointment as the chief policy advisor of of Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2003" (Aras, 2009:127).

The main principles of Davutoğlu's doctrine were "strategic depth" and "zero problems with neighbors", which made possible the reconceptualization of Turkey's

² Party for Justice and Development



foreign policy under the leadership of the AKP. The essence of Davutoğlu's concepts was the use of "strategic depth" in what would enable Turkey to extend its influence in a region like the Middle East "using the soft power and historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire" (Meral & Paris, 2010 :80). Thus, the interaction of Turkey would be the same with the other two regions which it borders: that of the Balkans and the Caucasus. In this context, "strategic depth" went parallel to the concept of "zero problems with neighbors" as it offered "a vision minimizing problems with neighboring regions ... avoiding involvement in international confrontations" (Aras, 2009: 130). For Davutoğlu, Turkey has the possibility of using this line in its foreign policy, transforming it into the *geographical center* through three areas of geopolitical importance that can be used in the future to gradually open up in the international environment:

- I. Near land basin: Balkans – Middle East – Caucasus
- II. Near sea basin: Black Sea - Adriatic - Eastern Mediterranean - Red Sea - Caspian Sea
- III. Near continental basin: Europe – North Africa – Southeast Asia – Central and East Asia (Davutoğlu, 2010: 155).

Through this, it is possible to see the line of interaction of Turkey in its foreign policy by exploiting its geographical and geopolitical importance. In addition to the geographical proximity, the way of increasing the presence of Turkey in the regions that surrounded it, or otherwise 'the nearby land basin'; it became even simpler thanks to the historical and cultural features that, through *strategic depth*, gave Turkey advantages in its area. In this way, the new initiatives that the Turkish state was undertaking are analyzed as a new vision of its foreign policy, would exceed the frameworks of "maintaining balances" and "status quo", which according to Davutoğlu had turned Turkey into a peripheral power, impossible to be a relevant factor in the international arena, in contrast to the historical power that the Ottoman state had before. So this vision was in the frame to re-extend Turkey in the sphere of its natural influence, from an unnatural process of previous dissociation.

With the Balkans, Turkey's new approach in the new millennium, under the leadership of Erdoğan, was among the continuation of Turkish foreign policy after the Cold War, the Davutoğlu's concepts of "strategic depth" and "zero problems with neighbors", up to the "harassment" of the historical identity of the Balkan peoples (mainly the part that belonged to the Islamic religion), to the use of neo-Ottomanism.

"Turkey has been linked to the Balkans: in its security strategy and diplomacy, geography (the route to Western European markets), demography (thanks to the presence of large Turkish and Muslim communities with direct links to Turkey) and imaginary politics" (Bechev, 2012: 132).

Finding many connecting components in the Balkans, the re-inspired Turkey under the leadership of the AKP projected its new vision in the region with the two basic concepts of its foreign policy. First, by calming relations with Greece by using the thesis of zero problems with neighbors, and secondly through strategic depth, from where with the increase of its presence it would be able to turn into an influencing factor in the Balkans. According to Davutoğlu “the strategic depth of geocultural, geoeconomic and geopolitical aspects should be treated as a single unity and this will identify the characteristics necessary to influence strategic directions” (Davutoğlu, 2001: 21) .

As the Ottoman heritage continues to be present in many parts of the region, albeit with fainter shades, the new line of Turkish foreign policy under the leadership of Erdoğan, highlights the fact of the reawakening of these “values” in that, it will bring the use of Political Islam in Turkey’s foreign policy under the leadership of the AKP, which will be labeled as neo-Ottomanism.

In this context, Turkey’s interaction with the Balkan countries would go from ‘active diplomacy’ to the use of soft power, which would enable the extension of the use of cultural, economic, and good neighborly assets. Thus, extending the presence in countries with a Muslim population in the Balkans, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania, would find new paths through the geocultural depth that would give Turkey an increased presence and a legitimizing role in social and institutional forms of these countries. The increase in investments and the use of the geo-economic depth would transform Turkey into an even closer ally with the Balkan countries where economic cooperation was extended; and in parallel Turkey would be offered more opportunities to act directly or indirectly with the countries of the region. The essence of Davutoğlu’s positions, as argued in “Strategic Depth”, is directly related to the aggressive economic role that Turkey should undertake in the Balkan region (Mitrovic, 2014: 30).

Thus, the parallel interaction of economic assets and soft power would enable a repositioning of Turkey in the geopolitics of the Balkans and create opportunities for its transformation into a hegemonic regional power. “While strategic depth is a geopolitical concept rooted in realism, hegemonic depth is a socio-political concept rooted in historical materialism” (Yalvaç, 2012: 171). Using history by materializing it became a vital process in the Turkish state’s vision to dominate the Balkans. This is because the Balkans, in addition to Turkey’s demand for economic expansion to turn into an economic superpower of the region, in the Erdoğanist mindset remained as a denied identity, from where the historical ties between Anatolia and “Rumelia” had to be recreated and that had to be dominated in the face of a “long-term global agenda with the aim of turning Turkey into a great power in 2023” (Murinson, 2012: 13).



The economic crisis that gripped Greece at the end of 2009 significantly increased Turkey's position in the region, which enabled the deepening of economic relations and the use of soft power even in countries with cultural/religious differences. However, even though Turkey's regional dominance in the Balkans was already existing, the increase of its presence and influence still made the Turkish agenda insufficient for becoming a hegemonic factor in the Balkans in the face of great powers. This is because even though Turkey's relationship with the EU had its ups and downs, Turkey remained in favor of its possible membership in the European Union. In this way, the interaction in the Balkans took place in the framework of a country aspirant for EU membership, where the aspirations of region's countries remained in the majority positioned pro-European.

“The fact that Turkey's geographic position is one where the interests of several great powers intersect has also given its foreign policymakers a degree of flexibility not open to states likely to be dominated by a single great power... While this means that Turkey can extract a 'strategic rent' from a great power ally, it also means that it cannot usually opt out of great power conflicts, especially if they are centered on Southeast Europe or the Middle East” (Hale, 2000: 7).

In this context, Turkey is exercising a more active role in the Balkans and beyond, where between the confrontation with the European Union and the challenges for dominance in the region, through the application of multidimensional diplomacy, it witnesses progress in its agenda.

“Turkey has the status of having multiple regional identities and thus has the capacity, as well as the responsibility, to pursue an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy. To actively contribute to conflict resolution and international peace and security in all these areas is a duty of Turkey to rise from the depths of its history” (Davutoğlu, 2010: 11).

In this way, the use of historical depth on the part of Turkey will create for it the conformity of interaction in a region ruled by it in the historical context, to bring it back in the form of an imaginary rule. Thus in a historical reshaping, the balances in the Balkans are displaced through a re-imagining of the artificial domination of Turkey, raised between the nostalgia of the Ottoman Empire and the closely related economic interests between it and the countries of the peninsula. The doctrine of neo-Ottomanism will serve as an opportunity to implement the new vision of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans.

Neo-Ottomanism

The use of the term “neo-Ottomanism” has become inevitable for many international relations scholars who have written and studied Turkey’s foreign policy. The formation and giving of a meaningful identity to this term, now turned into a doctrine, came with the seizure of power by the AKP, although its beginnings could be dated back to the end of the Cold War. “The end of the Cold War was a wake-up call for Turkey to revive its long-held dream of reimagining its neighbors’ borders under the banner of neo-Ottomanism” (Moisi, 2013).

It was precisely former President Turgut Özal who, in the early 1990s initiated the idea that later took the name of neo-Ottomanism. Özal’s concept was mainly in taking new initiatives in Turkish foreign policy, with the establishment of intensive relations with the Balkans and Middle East countries, as well as with the union of the Turkic countries (out of the former Soviet Union) with Turkey. The coming to power of the AKP and the agenda of using political Islam, was also reflected in foreign policy, given that the elite of this party had long-standing ties to political parties with an Islamic background in Turkey. The charm of the glorious historical past and Islamic religious interaction made the use of neo-Ottomanism by Erdoğan’s Turkey preferable.

The discussion on the issue of neo-Ottomanism during the leadership of the AKP can be roughly divided into two. The first discussion stems from claims that neo-Ottomanism is a state identity versus social identity issue and thus emphasizes its internal roots. Adhering to these ideas, neo-Ottomanism is believed to have arisen as a response to the dysfunction of the Kemalist ideology and Turkish identity created by the founders of the Turkish Republic. Therefore, the idea of rediscovering Turkey’s ties with the Ottoman past, even though these ties were never severed and similar policies existed long before the term, was embodied in the idea of neo-Ottomanism (Albayrak & Turan, 2016: 135).

The interaction of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy turned into efforts to increase the presence and influence of Turkey in those countries where the Ottoman Empire had previously ruled. From this was implemented the use of a historical depth coupled with cultural lessons emanating from Turkey, mainly through the use of soft power. Neo-Ottomanism was conceived as an continuation and revival of Ottoman culture and traditions, where the territories of the empire were and where the Turkish minority is today. “Different versions of neo-Ottomanism, on the other hand, have not targeted the population of the Republic of Turkey, but countries that at one point were part of the Ottoman empire” (Albayrak & Turan, 2016: 141).



In Erdoğan's worldview, pursuing and implementing a foreign policy led by neo-Ottomanism would be the best way of schematizing the growth of Turkey's power to an important geopolitical country and a regional power in the new perspective to change the balance in the international arena. The advantage offered by the religious aspect greatly facilitated the way of interaction of Turkey in the Middle East; for Davutoğlu, the best element to break Russian and Slavic influence in the Balkans and the Caucasus is the power of counter-cultural resistance enabled by Islam (Davutoğlu, 2010).

The use of Islam as an empathic factor transformed its political use into a situation to emotionally influence different societies, and to change the perception of Turkey and those societies into a neo-Ottoman identity. The approach of this "new identity" originated from the government elite in Turkey. "Muslim intellectuals have suddenly turned into bureaucrats and everyone has started to worry about Turkey's regional leadership ... [They] lost their autonomy and civil character and turned into a figure of the Ottoman clergy" (Bulaç, 2010, p. 24, 450).

Thus, the identification of neo-Ottomanism with the historical and religious aspects has led to a partial separation of the Turkish foreign policy line, giving importance to new collaborations that originate from the religious context, especially in the re-awakened historical framework. However, neo-Ottomanism with Erdoğan as its leader, despite its illustrative form as a new conceptual form of foreign policy which will enable the interaction of countries that share the same socio-cultural views, remained primarily a tool in the pragmatic framework for renegotiating Turkey's role in the international arena.

The Geopolitical Implementation of the Doctrine of Neo-ottomanism and the Influence of Turkey in the Western Balkans

The Balkans remained one of the regions with the highest interest in the reconceptualization of Turkey's role in the international arena, from where the implementation of the doctrine of neo-Ottomanism assumed increased importance in achieving the objectives that Turkey aims through the policy of its external priority is the use of soft power in the region.

Thus the historical factor was superimposed on the way neo-Ottomanism would be conducted and conceived in the Balkans, as the policies emanating from Turkey would guide this process– alongside social operation on the peninsula. Davutoğlu himself, who was considered a neo-Ottoman, always referred to the Ottoman Empire in the reconceptualized role that Turkey should have in the Balkans and beyond. In a speech in Sarajevo, he stated that "the time had come to rediscover the true spirit of the Balkans" (Bechev, 2012: 138). As with the "true

spirit of the Balkans”, he refers to a process of re-Balkanization of Turkey, where this time, unlike the Ottoman predecessors, the strategy followed will no longer be achieved between campaigns and battles but through a cultural lesson that would reawaken the “Ottoman identity” among the peoples of the Balkans.

The fact that the Balkans contained various ethnicities with different cultural/religious affiliations would restore Erdoğan’s reshaped Turkey to the model followed by the Ottoman Empire, from which its interaction in a ruling form in the region has served as a catalyst to avoid conflicts and where today it would be placed as a “balancing” and “stabilizing” country between the changes that characterize the countries of the region from each other, and at the same time highlighting the similarities between the peoples of the Balkans and Turkey.

The role of religion is attributed a lot of importance in the implementation of neo-Ottomanism in the region. Thus, in Muslim-majority countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania, the increased presence on the part of Turkey against the social sensitivity on the role of Islam and the close cooperation between the Diyanet³ and the Muslim Communities, transformed it into a legitimate one, in the framework of the “divine” Turkish presence in these countries. On the other hand, in the countries where the Muslim communities were in the minority, the role of the Diyanet and Turkey assumed the symbolism of the protector of the Muslim community in the Balkans and, at the same time, as the former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller would say, in the role of a leader to the correct model of Islam - “in the Islamic world, we have a Turkish model and a radical Islamic model. The Islamic world and the Balkans must adopt the Turkish model” (Korkut, 2010:117).

The Diyanet was founded with the creation of the Republic, as an institution that would replace the Caliphate and keep under control the moderate Islam of a now secularist Republic. But with the coming to power of the AKP and the tendency to concentrate all power in the hands of its leader, the Diyanet changed its approach from an institution overseeing the state in religious matters and ensuring that religion did not challenge the “facade of secularist identity” of Turkey, to a promoter of Turkish Islam abroad and a conservative lifestyle at home (Lepeska, 2015).

If the region was under the rule of the Ottomans, they were the ones who brought Islam to these lands. The Ottomans did not remain in the Balkan countries, but Islam did. From this perspective, today’s Turkey of Erdoğan, which has a new approach to the relationship with religion, tries to establish a operation path of Islam in the Balkans guided by itself. Although this attempt gives the impression of a “Caliphate with imaginary borders”, this is the most pragmatic way followed to strengthen its positions, in a region remaining in identity transition. This approach

³ Turkish Presidency for Religious Affairs



is strengthened even more when the Muslim communities do not simply welcome this role of Turkey in the religious guidance of their countries, but demand it even more, as confirmed by the mufti of Sanjak in a statement in 1996.

“The Ottomans brought us Islam to the Balkans, but then the Muslims in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia and Sanjak were left as orphans. Their mother left them alone. We are returning to Turkey, not only in emotional prayer, but with the rights of the child for its mother. We want to express that the time has come for Turkey to take care of its children” (Korkut, 2010: 117).

The recognized religious policies, despite the changes in tradition, are a sign of how Turkey and the Diyanet manage to influence the society of these countries. At the same time, in an agreement between the Muslim Community of Albania and the Diyanet, the construction of the “Prayer Mosque” was completed. This will be the largest mosque in the Balkans, the construction of which was financed entirely by the Diyanet and whose value reaches over 30 million dollars.

Parallel to the bureaucratic political leadership, another way of implementing neo-Ottomanism in the Balkans came in also the social framework. The Gülen movement⁴ has been the most active and efficient in the Balkans in successfully spreading the new spirit of Turkish Islam that it represents, in the framework of an intercultural interaction. Considered a cult, this movement has invested and operates in the Balkan countries through a good network of education, media, clinics and the financial market, where it has succeeded to have followers and attract people to its cause. What the movement teaches most, however, is the role of religion and the promotion of interfaith dialogue. “Interreligious dialogue today is a necessity and the first step in its institutionalization is to forget about the past, ignoring controversial elements and prioritizing common points, which will throw away countless controversies” (Gülen, 2007: 17).

The Gülen movement has been one of the biggest supporters of the coming to power of the AKP, as through its well-organized network in Turkey it has served in the seizure of power by Erdoğan. Despite the angry rhetoric used these days by Erdoğan on Gülen, accusing him of the failed coup of July 2016 and the counter-responses of the controversial cleric, it is hard to deny the impact of this movement on the leadership of Turkey by the AKP. Both sides were guided by the same concept on the Turkish foreign policy agenda in the Balkans: influence through the religious role.

The sector where the Gülen Movement operates better in the region, as well as in other countries around the world, is education. The opening of Turkish

⁴ The Gülen movement is an Islamic brotherhood movement led by cleric Fetullah Gülen. This movement has its beginnings since the early 70s in Turkey. The movement is also known as Hizmet or FETÖ

Colleges in the Balkan countries, attached to the direction of Madrasahs and to the opening of universities, transformed the Gülen Movement into an academy where the younger generations would receive a way of thinking, indoctrinated by this movement. The formation of new generations from an early age and until the end of academic studies, would transform them into a contingent indoctrinated by Gülenist and neo-Ottoman concepts and at the same time potential indoctrinators in the societies of the countries of the region. “This policy seeks and succeeds in seducing the majority of people by making this space more and more dependent on Turkey” (Lika, 2015: 65). After the breakdown of Gülen’s relations with Erdoğan, the Turkish government has exerted pressure to close these schools, calling them “terrorist”, but in the inability to achieve concrete results, Turkey through the “Maarif” foundation has opened parallel schools, where the focus in the Balkan countries one of the most important.

One of the main points, which has increased Turkey’s popularity and its influence, are the Turkish soap operas. Despite the fact that today’s Turkish soap operas are appreciated and displayed (almost) in all countries of the world, their impact in the Balkans varies. This is because the historical past of the Balkans with the Ottoman Empire is portrayed today in a cinematic form guided by a propaganda method. The fact that Erdoğanist Turkey is conceptually closer to the Ottoman Empire than to the Republic of Turkey itself naturally brings skepticism and a sense of “dangerousness”. In the Balkan countries, the entire media market is occupied by Turkish productions. The fact that these countries have welcomed these products means that the Balkan societies, without any exception, are closer to the culture that is exported from Turkey.

The economic aspect also remains important in the implementation of neo-Ottomanism and influence in the Balkan lands. Davutoğlu states in the “Strategic Depth” that economic, cultural, and political issues must operate and function as a single body, in the framework of maximizing the influential result of Turkey. This body in the Turkish agenda for influence in the region through soft power is called TIKA⁵. In the Balkans, especially after the coming to power of the AKP, the interaction of TIKA was in increasing the realization of projects for development with a socio-economic character and an advertisement of Turkish culture. “According to experts, Turkey’s presence in each country of the Balkans, as it has restored historical monuments and other objects, shows once again the deep-rooted ties of Turkey and the Balkan geography, as well as a common historical revival (Schwartz, 2010). Thus TIKA’s approach to cultural diplomacy was comprehensive and could be conducted not only by the Turkish minorities in the Balkan countries. “Turkish ethnic minorities have long been exposed to their popular culture, but now even the majority follows in their footsteps” (Bechev, 2012: 144).

⁵ Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Development



On the other hand, the continuous economic growth of Turkey and its transformation into a more than regional economic power, created enough facilities to increase its presence and create stronger ties with the Balkan countries. The increase of Turkish investments affects every sector in the countries of the region, creating a closer connection, which was not only limited to the cultural context, but also to the economic one. This economic empowerment was also reflected in the growth of large Turkish businesses, which had an extension of their capital in the Balkan countries. In this way, the expansion of Turkish businesses is perceptible as a presence, which turns into an acceptance not only institutional but primarily social, creating the conditions of direct contact with the societies of Balkan countries and conveying and pointing out the characteristic features that relate the form of doing business with the political agenda.

“According to the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Turkey, the cumulative amount of Turkey’s direct investments in the Balkan countries in 2007 was 3.5 billion dollars. Whereas by the end of 2016, the cumulative value of Turkey’s foreign direct investments in the countries of the Western Balkans reached 10 billion dollars” (Türbedar, 2017).

In the process of economic recovery of the Balkan countries, Turkey emerges as a supporter of this process by assisting in the further development of them. At the same time, the growth of Turkish businesses and the expansion of their capital in the Balkans has been and remains one of the forms of inclusiveness of Turkey’s economic importance in the region. This strategy mostly came from the reconceptualization and cooperation of Turkish state policies with important Turkish firms.

Turkey has signed free trade agreements with all the countries of the Western Balkans and since the first years in power of the AKP has been very aggressive not only in increasing its economic presence in the Balkan countries, but above all by investing in the strategic sectors of every state in the region, from banks, to telecommunications, infrastructure, etc.

All these investments of Turkey in the countries of the region, show the clear ambition of the project of President Erdoğan to have a new approach to the countries of the region and creating a relationship of economic dependence to factor its influence in the region, even in the face of other powers that operate in the Balkans and whose foundations are (still) very strong.

Turkey as an alternative to the EU

Turkey is a country that has opened membership negotiations with the European Union for more than a decade. As such, its interaction in the Balkans has also begun. The fact that Turkey stood as a state with concrete aspirations on the path

to membership in European institutions, created enough ease for its operation and extension in the region, whose countries are (almost) all oriented in this direction.

However, after the coming to power of the AKP, Turkey's distance from the EU has progressively increased. This is due to the centralization of power in Erdoğan's hands, distrust of law-enforcement institutions, the fading of democratic values and human rights issues associated with the Kurdish issue. However, many analysts argue this as a cause-and-effect effect. The prolonged non-acceptance of Turkey by the European institutions was the cause of the "Turkish revolt" in the overlap of new policy-making approaches, which led to the formation of an authoritarian leadership.

"This form of relations, which follows an ups and downs process between this historical-psychological background, the current geography and the contradictions of the diplomatic position, contains risks as far as Turkey is concerned in the framework of the EU's expansion plans. ... The EU, with an extremely cold-blooded preference since Turkey's request for membership until today, has continued its position to keep Turkey in the waiting process without taking Turkey into its composition, but without completely rejecting it. The EU, extending this process of waiting for the longest time, is oriented towards the formulation of a specific status that keeps relations dependent, as an actor of rational diplomacy, without taking on the risks that will follow full membership. of Turkey, tries to eliminate the dangers that will follow its exclusion" (Davutoğlu, 2010: 646).

On the other hand, after the end of the Cold War, in the new conjuncture of the international system, the Balkan countries were oriented towards the west and the process of Europeanization. This process would eventually end with the integration of these countries into the EU. However, the conflicts of countries with each other, the slow pace of their democratization, and delays in the implementation of the rule of law have served to prolong this progress and to increase skepticism from the EU institutions.

This reluctance from the EU has enabled the advancement of the interaction of other actors in the region, offering concrete parallel opportunities. The growth of Turkey's power in the international arena and the strengthening of its positions in the Balkans has turned Turkey into an overlapping regional actor. The increase of Turkish investments in the region is the projection of how Turkey, together with other actors of the international arena, is managing to operate in the Balkans as a parallel option to the EU. Simultaneously with the economic factor, the "cultural similarity" between the countries of the region and the Turkish state, is valid in the reinforcement of this thesis. In addition to its economic importance, the EU is important above all as a unification of the common identity that European

countries share with each other. Turkey in the Balkans is trying to do the same. Showing that the EU's reluctance to join shows how it itself, but also a part of the Balkan countries, do not belong to that identity.

“The intensity of Turkish actors’ influence, however, has been mediated by the political, legal and social structures of the countries in which they operate: the Western Balkans, with its relatively weak states and large Muslim populations, has become a center for the new politics of engagement of Turkey” (Öktem, 2010: 43).

Despite the fact that for countries in the region, EU membership remains their primary option, the completion of geo-economic and geo-cultural aspects by Turkey and not only, has led to the identification of parallel alternatives possessed by the non-member countries of the region, from the long wait to be integrated in EU. The longer the process of joining the European Union lasts, the greater will be the power of authoritarian leaders while public opinion will turn in other directions - towards Russia, Turkey and the USA, which are the alternatives to the EU (Jovic, 2018). Such leaders, who are easy to find in the Balkans, are likely to be influenced by Erdoğan’s autocratic charm and see him as a model for their own country’s line of government, further cementing relations with Turkey.

The EU’s further reluctance to accept the integration of the Balkan countries in it, could cost it a loss in front of other actors. Just as Prime Minister Rama said in an interview in “France 24” that “if the EU leaves, we will look at other alternatives”, they are a clear sign of how the Balkan countries are feeling the fatigue of this stalemate in the membership process and where today, in addition to the Russian alternative, in the Balkans a Turkey ready to benefit and offer itself is seen as a better alternative.

Conclusions

Turkey is in the process of its re-identification. The end of the Cold War brought the end of its balancing role and threw the first concepts of new initiatives in its foreign policy. A combination between “pan-Turkism” and neo-Ottomanism, also drawn up in the government program during the Turgut Özal period, under the name of “active foreign policy”. In this way, Turkey’s first contact with the Balkan countries began, starting a process of its re-Balkanization. The Balkans, apart from being a region of high strategic importance, remained extremely important for Turkey because of the common historical past, portrayed even today through cultural features, and on the other hand, it provokes the forgotten identity of Turkey in the face of the glorious historical past.

This form of interaction that confronts modern Turkey with the past of the Ottoman Empire, takes a concrete form after the coming to power of the AKP, bringing with it the reconceptualization of Turkey's role in the international arena and the way of its interaction in the Balkans through a neo-Ottomanism based mainly on Davutoğlu's doctrine: the "Strategic Depth". What Davutoğlu offers, to increase Turkey's importance and influence in the Balkans and beyond, is the use of a historical depth in a geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural interaction, which, when put into action, offer Turkey concrete opportunities to influence certain policies of countries in the region.

Today, in the 21st century, two main elements enable to influence different countries: the economic factor, which Turkey, through its empowerment, is making the best use of through an application as efficient as possible in the region, by creating a relationship of dependence between it and the Balkan states; and the cultural factor which is directly related to the identity of these countries. Although Turkey is also experiencing a metamorphosis of its identity, the end of this re-identification process will bring something not unknown to itself; the one raised based on a religious affiliation realized the similarity that post-2002 Turkey will attribute to itself with the importance of the Ottoman empire. In the same form, it seeks to convey this identity to the Balkans, whose countries have experienced it for almost 500 years of Ottoman rule, and where also nowadays, traces of that Ottoman rule are still found. This is the way how Turkey "plays" the implementation of neo-Ottomanism, to reawaken from the lethargic sleep of more than a century, those "values" that the Ottomans forgot in the Balkans when they left. One of the main features of this line is the instrumentalization in the use of political Islam. However, the means and the end often do not correspond to each other. This is the most pragmatic way for Turkey's interaction in the region to increase its position not only in the Balkans but also in the international arena.

Such an agenda is what has been often proclaimed by Erdoğan, about turning Turkey into a great power in 2023. Erdoğan's twenty years as leader of the country have greatly influenced what Turkey looks like today and hypothetically could be tomorrow. The distancing from Kemalist politics, often attacking the secularist identity of Turkey, is also reflected in the line of its foreign policy. Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic form of government is becoming an increasingly widespread pattern among the leaders of the Western Balkan countries, thus creating a closeness of the identifying traits of leadership. This whole process, as even though the region is oriented towards a request for membership in the European Union, the prolongation of this process has created concrete opportunities for Turkey to operate as an alternative and increase the degree of its influence widely in the region.



Through its geo-cultural and geo-economic features, Turkey has managed to create a wide presence both on a social scale and in interstate relations. From this cultural teaching and financial support, it is positioned as an actor with a high degree of influence, where the interaction comes differently from other powers that are capable of influencing; and if the status quo will remain the same in the region, then the Turkish influence in the countries of the Western Balkans will be a fact, and Turkey through the Balkans will be closer and closer to the objectives set since 2002 and vitalized by Erdoğan.

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