

Turkish Interests and Involvement in the Western Balkans: A Score-Card

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ABSTRACT

The vigor which has characterized the Turkish approach to the Western Balkans since the end of the Cold War has transformed the country into an important regional actor from its previous position as a distant neighbor that showed little interest. Although Turkey and the Western Balkan countries have in the meanwhile achieved the most intensive relationship since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has not yet displayed the economic capacity and political weight that could make it compete with the magnetism of the European Union for Western Balkan countries. Turkish cultural influence, although significantly widened in the last few years, particularly through investments in educational institutions, is mostly limited to the Muslim population in the region. While potential EU membership remains the most important driver for the political elites in the region, the stalled EU membership prospects of both Turkey and the countries of the region might change this in the future.

Turkey's increasingly assertive engagement in the Western Balkans leaves many people wondering about the purpose of such activism. Javier Solana, the former EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (1999–2009), emphasized in a recent article for the Serbian daily *Danas* the need for cooperation between the EU and Turkey in order to achieve a permanent solution in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ It is telling that he considered it necessary to state the obvious—that Turkey has leverage and increasingly has capacities in the Western Balkans and that the EU has to recognize this. Some participants at a conference devoted to Turkey's Western Balkan policies, organized by the International Security Affairs Centre (ISAC Fund) on April 8, 2011 in Belgrade, insisted that Turkey understands far better the intricacies of the region's problems than the

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West and is thus better qualified to act as an “honest broker”. Turkish diplomats argue in private that contrary to the traditional Western “win-lose” thinking, Ankara is seeking a “win-win” solution for everyone. As a result, according to a Turkish political analyst, Turkey can play “a complimentary and even crucial role that could actually ease the task for the EU” in solving some of the region’s most serious problems.² On the other side, the distinguished Albanian scholar and human rights activist Piro Misha has disapproved of the new Turkish “geo-political vision”, suspecting that it considers “increased European presence ...to be unwanted competition.”³

Turkey has received both excessive praise and criticism for its new role in the Western Balkans. The perception of Turkey’s actions is habitually emotional and hardly ever pragmatic. This paper attempts to provide a non-exhaustive fact-based assessment of the various aspects of the new Turkish approach to the region. It aims to show that while relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans countries have never been more intensive in the history of the Turkish Republic, Ankara cannot aspire for regional hegemony and it has not yet established permanent economic strongholds in the Western Balkans. Its cultural influence remains limited to the Muslims in the Western Balkans, with non-Muslims still in need of a lot of convincing to trust a country with a partly Islamic identity that is arguably growing stronger. Finally, this paper gives both a reality check by looking for evidence to gauge the potential and the limits of Turkey’s enhanced role in the Western Balkans, and affirms that EU membership prospects of the Western Balkan countries remain the most significant check on further Turkish influence in the region.

Turkish Involvement in the Western Balkans: Bosnia and Beyond

The list of Turkish diplomatic and other undertakings in the region is impressive. After Ahmet Davutoğlu became foreign minister in the spring of 2009, he launched a number of initiatives in the Western Balkans, some of them going far beyond Turkey’s previous approach of bandwagoning with the US efforts in the region.

Ankara’s mediation between Serbia and parts of the Bosniak (Muslim) political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, previously hostile to any signs of reconciliation with Belgrade, captured the attention of the international public. Similarly, mediation between the conflicting Bosniak political and religious factions in Serbia’s Sandžak area gave Turkey additional prominence. Largely as a result of the rapprochement between Turkey and Serbia, relations between Sarajevo and

Belgrade have somewhat thawed. Following Ankara's involvement, the ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina could return to Belgrade after a long delay. On April 24, 2010, the Turkish and Serbian presidents and the then Bosnian Presidency Chairman Haris Silajdžić signed the "Istanbul Declaration," which, among other things, reaffirms the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. About a month before, the Serbian parliament adopted a declaration condemning the genocide in Srebrenica.⁴ On April 26, 2011, Serbian President Boris Tadić hosted his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gül, and all three members of the collective presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Turkey helped Spain broker a formula for Kosovo's participation in the June 2, 2010 meeting of foreign ministers in Sarajevo.⁵ This set the precedent for similar high-level encounters and has enabled both Belgrade and Priština to take part.

However, Turkish efforts have been met in some corners of the region with considerable mistrust. In particular, Turkish involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina's affairs is a contentious point in that divided country. While most Bosniaks see the Turkish presence as guaranteeing their interests in a future unified state, Bosnian Serbs see it as an obstacle to the preservation of the Dayton-Paris system, which they so unyieldingly defend. Bosnian Croats see it as undermining the prospects of securing a "third entity" for themselves in that country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniaks have always had a privileged place on the Turkish foreign policy agenda. During the 1990s, Turkey was a staunch supporter of the NATO intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina and has been a major contributor to international the military and policing operations in the country. In 2010, Turkey was the sixth largest contributor to the EUFOR-Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and has personnel in the multinational battalion, the Integrated Police Unit (IPU), and the Liaison and Observation Teams, which are currently stationed in seven cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Turkey supports Bosnia and Herzegovina's NATO membership as a way to guarantee its territorial integrity and also represents the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), which is tasked with supervising the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord.

Turkish Interests in the Western Balkans

Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has paid special attention to explaining the rationale for the new Turkish vigor in the region. In a landmark address in Sarajevo on October 16, 2009, on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the "Ottoman legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today" conference, Davutoğlu spoke

about the Balkans as a “geo-political buffer zone,” which overcame this position to become the centre of world politics during Ottoman rule in the 16th century.⁶ He promised that Turkey would “reinvent” and “re-establish” this “golden age of the Balkans”. He emphasized: “Our foreign policy aims to establish order in... the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East... we will make these areas with Turkey as the centre of world politics in the future.”

However, there are not only historical memories which tie Turkey and south-east Europe but also current political issues. Turkish leaders say that up to 10 million Turkish citizens can trace their ancestry to the Western Balkans.⁷ Several waves of migration during the 20th century of both Turks and Slavic Muslims brought hundreds of thousands of Balkan migrants to Turkey and reinforced the cultural and familial ties with the region. Consequently, the turmoil in Yugoslavia in the 1990s generated significant popular pressure in Turkey to react and protect its kin-peoples, the Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak, and the Albanians in Kosovo.

Davutoğlu often underlines that there are more people of Bosnian origin and people of Albanian origin in Turkey than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo or Albania. Thus, conflicts in the region of former Yugoslavia have a direct impact on domestic politics in Turkey.⁸ In Davutoğlu’s words, “We are paying the bill for our Ottoman history because whenever there is a crisis in the Balkans (Bosnians, Albanians, Turks in Bulgaria...) they look to Istanbul.”⁹

Nonetheless, the Western Balkan diaspora in Turkey is evidently not unique in its pressure on Ankara to pursue specific policy goals according to the diaspora’s requests. The pressure of the Bosniak diaspora in the 1990s and of the Albanian diaspora for the recognition of Kosovo mirrors examples of similar pressures from the Abkhaz and the Chechen communities in Turkey on behalf of the recognition of Abkhazia and advocating strong reactions to the Russian crackdowns in the northern Caucasus. Ankara has usually chosen to ignore such pressures, leaving no doubt that it is capable of resisting popular pressures when they contradict what the authorities believe to be rational policy choices.

When looking for unambiguous motifs for Ankara to engage more in Western Balkan affairs than before, analysts, both abroad and in Turkey, have suggested that several other Turkish interests have been at stake.¹⁰ First, Turkey’s engagement in the 1990s partially came as a result of attempts to formulate a coherent response to Greece’s increased influence in the region, especially through EU development assistance. Second, by being a pro-active participant in the creation

of a new European security architecture after the collapse of the Soviet empire, Turkey could liberate itself from the mostly passive position of being a “NATO wing-state” under the US’s tutelage. One important area for this exercise was the region of the former Yugoslavia. Third, Turkey has managed to sustain a special relationship with the US through intensive bilateral consultation and support throughout post-Yugoslav crises. Up to today, Washington and Ankara are close allies in the Peace Implementation Council for Bosnia-Herzegovina, often arguing in this body against the EU and Russia.

Fourth, the stalled EU negotiations process has compelled the Turkish leadership to reconsider their commitment to membership. Increased engagement with its neighborhood and with peoples with whom it has historical relationships is a logical alternative. Insisting throughout the process that Turkey is not diverting from EU values and interests, Ankara has increased its own position in important regions such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, the broader Middle East, and, indeed, the Balkans. The last area is obviously especially important for Turkey’s relations with the EU. Simply, there is no point further west in Europe to which Turkish diplomatic influence reaches than Bosnia and Herzegovina. An improvement of the situation in the Western Balkans induced through Turkish activism is likely to help Turkey secure more allies for its EU bid in the future, notably if the Western Balkan countries join before Turkey does.

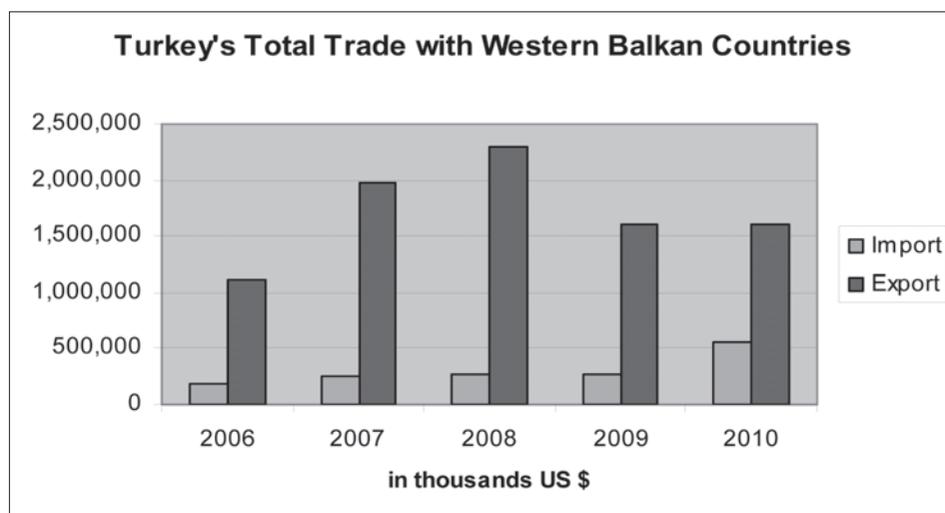
Fifth, Turkey needs a success story that can reassure the West of Turkey’s Western credentials amidst growing concerns over its increasingly strong ties with Iran and its frosty relations with Israel. Turkey is aware that mediating in the Western Balkans broadly along the lines of the EU/US agenda keeps it close to both sides of the Atlantic. Sixth, the Ottomans brought Islam to the Balkans. For centuries, the Hanafi school of Islam, dominant in Turkey, had prevailed in the Balkans.¹¹ The advancement of non-traditional forms of Islam in the Balkans, such as neo-Salafism, together with the increased influence of the Gulf states’ version of Islam in the region, cannot be in Turkey’s interests. Last but not the least, the success of Turkey’s Balkan vector is beneficial also for the internal dynamics in Turkey and the everlasting struggle between the Kemalists and the AKP. Foreign policy is important for Turkish voters. A recent poll by TESEV, a Turkish think tank, showed that 51 percent of voters are interested in foreign policy and that 65 percent of them think highly of the current foreign policy by the AK Party.¹² Turkey’s Balkan foreign policy mobilizes emotions and stretches the sense of kinfolk beyond the borders of the Turkish state. Davutoğlu underlined in Sarajevo that Turkey is a safe haven for all Muslim nationalities from

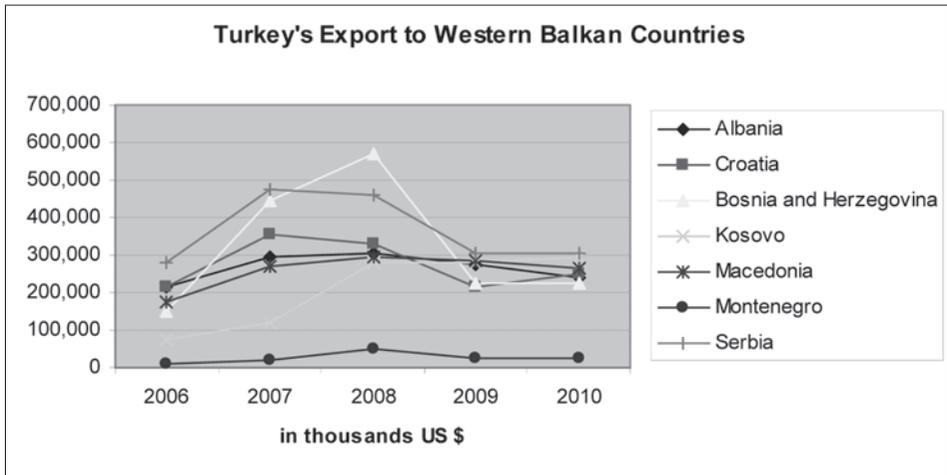
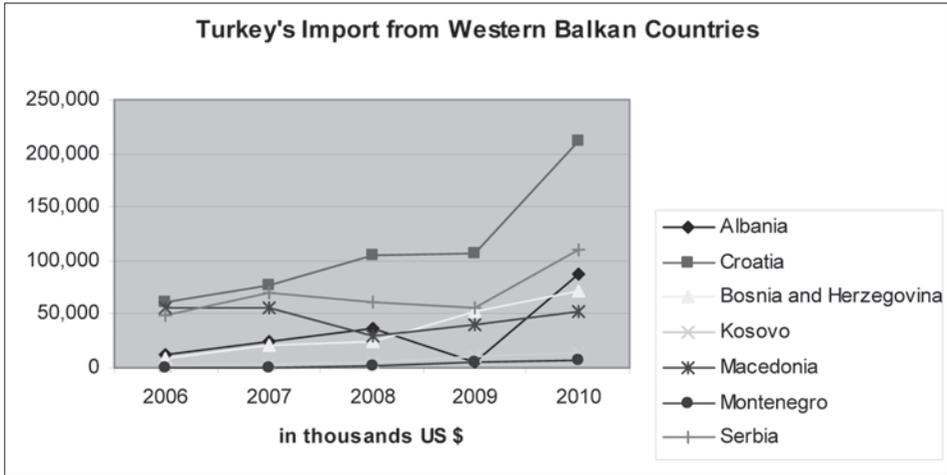
adjacent regions: “Anatolia belongs to you, our Bosnian brothers and sisters. And be sure that Sarajevo is ours.”¹³ Considering the strong emphasis Turkish diplomats put on the role of the Balkan diaspora in Turkish foreign policy making, strong engagement in the Balkans might politically attract this diaspora in Turkey.

Turkish Economic, Soft and Hard Power in the Western Balkans

Turkey’s recent economic success and social progress has enabled the country to use some of these advancements as political influence in its broader neighborhood, including the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, there is still an evident disparity between political ambitions and the modest raise in trade and overall economic cooperation with the region. In this regard, the economic cooperation has not reached the dimensions that could match the statements of those politically involved. The Western Balkan countries have a well-established history of cooperation with the EU so that the involvement of other actors depends on whether they can offer products at a substantively lower price than the EU, or offer preferential credit conditions or foreign direct investment, which, thus far, does not seem to be the case.

While the imports from the Western Balkan countries show some growth, the exports to these countries are uneven and in absolute figures far from the turnover which these countries have with principal EU countries and the EU as a whole.





Source: Turkish Statistical Institute Turkstat. Retrieved from http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?tb_id=12&ust_id=4

Turkish investments in telecommunications, transport, banking, construction, mining and the retail sector, as well as the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprises, is welcomed by the governments of the Western Balkans countries, regardless of the intensity of political cooperation. The region is badly short of capital and eager for foreign investors, especially if they can point to such a successful record as the Turkish business community can. Turkish companies, more often than not prodded by politicians both at home and in the region, have engaged in several “strategic projects” in the region, such the construction of the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway and the Dures-Kukes-Priština highway.¹⁴ Turkey’s free-trade agreements with all Western Balkan countries have opened new

opportunities. Yet, trade with Turkey and investment from that country constitute only a fraction of what the region has achieved in comparison with economic relations with Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary and some other EU countries as well as with oil and gas from Russia. Also, for Turkey itself, the Western Balkan markets are not particularly attractive—the population is mostly poor and not numerous. At this moment, it cannot be said with certainty that Turkish economic ties with the Western Balkans will outlast the political impetus which the incumbent government in Ankara has given them.

In parallel, Turkey is increasingly present in education as well as in the popular culture of all Western Balkan states. A large proportion of the activities of both Turkish state and non-state actors have focused on regions in the Western Balkans with a predominantly Muslim population. It is difficult to assess how much of this focus is rooted in simple opportunism and how much is actually strategically pursued state policy.

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.

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 medresa in Tuzi, near Podgorica—the first Muslim religious school in Montenegro since 1918.

In Albania, Turkish schools enjoy the reputation of being among the best and are attended by approximately 3,000 students per year. In addition, Turkish universities receive Albanian students, according to some unofficial estimates up to 1,500, and, similarly, 100 students per year from Kosovo receive state scholarships from Turkey to attend Turkish universities.¹⁶

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the private Bosnia-Sema Educational Institution–International Burch University (IBU) was established in Sarajevo in 2008 with the support of Turkey, becoming the second Turkish institution of higher learning in that country. In Serbia, Turkey offered scholarships to undergraduate and postgraduate students and language study courses in 2010.¹⁷ The Turkish government promotes the Turkish language and culture in Montenegro by offering scholarships to undergraduate and postgraduate students who wish to continue their education in Turkey, and also to those who want to learn the Turkish language.¹⁸

Military Matters

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.

For instance, the Turkish government is training young Bosnia and Herzegovina military professionals in various military occupations, as well as in providing officer basic courses for non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The Turkish government also gives yearly grants to Bosnia and Herzegovina nationals to attend the military high school or military academy in Turkey for a period of two to four years. The Turkish armed forces have provided assistance for the education and training of a large number of Albanian military officers in Turkish universities and military academies. These students are, reportedly, almost exclusively of Bosniak ethnicity. Naval military aid has been provided to Albania and Montenegro.

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). When the NATO mission was substituted with the *Concordia* crisis management operation under EU authority, Turkey also contributed with personnel, and members of the gendarme units which also participated in the EU’s Proxima Police Force mission in Macedonia. In addition, for several years, the Turkish government has donated military equipment and provided Macedonia with training and courses for officers and NCOs (more than 600 by the end of 2010). On December 24, 2010, the ministers of defense of Turkey and Macedonia signed an agreement on military-financial cooperation. Reportedly, more Macedonian generals speak Turkish than English.

Military cooperation between Turkey and Serbia, and between Turkey and Montenegro, has also seen improvements in recent years. Since 2008, Turkey has expressed interest in the refurbishment of Ladjevci airport, near Kraljevo in central Serbia, and in its transformation into a dual-purpose airport. Recently, a Turkish officer enrolled at the military academy in Belgrade.¹⁹ The military cooperation between Turkey and Montenegro focuses on activities involving NATO's Membership Action Plan and the cooperation of their respective navies. Negotiations are currently under way for concluding a defense cooperation agreement between the two states, which would regulate and enable cooperation and exchange in training and other areas.²⁰

Ambiguities in Turkey's Engagement in the Western Balkans

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in comparison to the rest of the region, Turkey has managed to achieve its greatest political and cultural influence. Yet, it is also the country in which the contradictions and intrinsic limitations of the Turkish approach are clearly visible. For instance, for a long time, and in spite of clear warnings by the US not to rely solely on the radical Bosniak politician Haris Silajdžić, Ankara neglected to develop relationships with moderate Bosniak politicians. Silajdžić did not shy away from referring to Turkey as a “brotherly” country—and this could only provoke suspicion and aversion from the non-Bosniak citizens of that country. Also, his successor in the position of the Bosniak representative in the country's presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, also insisted in one of his first interviews to Turkish media in his new capacity that the Bosniaks “consider Turkey to be a big brother, who is strong and wise.”²¹

Reciprocally, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has repeatedly emphasized that Bosnia's security matters to him as much as Turkey's security. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proclaimed in his first speech after scoring his recent victory in the parliamentary elections that this means that “Sarajevo won... as much as Istanbul.”²² Such emotional outbursts by Turkish leaders positively influence a small part of Western Balkans audiences while larger segments, including pro-European Muslim secular elites, have grown more and more alienated. Essentially, those who want to give the benefit of doubt to AKP policy in the Western Balkans risk being ridiculed by nationalists and xenophobes in the region who find evidence for Turkey's “real ambitions” precisely in such statements.

Emotional discourses about Turkey coming from Turkish representatives perpetuate emotional responses by important sections of Western Balkan po-

litical players and the public in general. Accusations, mostly in Serbia but also in Albania, that Turkey is pursuing a “neo-Ottoman agenda” in the region are abundant.²³ Professor Darko Tanasković, a leading Serbian scholar of oriental history and culture and former ambassador to the Vatican and Ankara, argues that Davutoğlu’s ideological concept is an amalgam of Islamism, Turkish nationalism and neo-Ottoman imperialism.²⁴ He does not consider this to be good or bad by itself, but he insists that Turkey’s incursions in the region have to be observed closely.

For critics of Turkish activism in the Western Balkans, one of the most evident contradictions in Ankara’s policy is the support for the secession of Kosovo Albanians. Ankara has indeed been Priština’s staunch promoter (and an enthusiastic participant in NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999) despite being plagued by a similar secessionist problem with its Kurdish minority. Many other Muslim states with secession problems chose to prioritize the principle over kinfolk solidarity and refused to acknowledge Kosovo’s statehood. Turkey, however, intervened with a number of states, including, unsuccessfully, with Azerbaijan, in spite of this country’s own trauma because of the loss of part of its territory in post-Soviet times, to secure the recognition of the secession of Kosovo Albanians from Serbia. For many Western Balkan observers, such contradictions diminish the credibility of the zero-problem with neighbors policy that has been the rhetoric “trade-mark” of the incumbent Turkish foreign minister. Nonetheless, Serbia “agreed to disagree” with Turkey about Kosovo, calculating that for the fulfillment of its top priority—joining the EU as soon as possible—it is conducive to engage with Turkey and thus pacify some of Serbia’s most vocal opponents among Balkan Muslims. Both Ankara and Belgrade certainly expect to be lauded by the US and the EU for their “constructive approach.” Yet, it would be unrealistic to expect that the EU would bestow particular favors to Turkey in the context of its bid to join the bloc because of Ankara’s diplomatic cunning in the Western Balkans. Turkish mediation successes, described in this section, are only helpful to the EU as long as the countries in question are on the EU path.

A “Little America” or “Imperial Overstretch”?

Indisputably, relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans have never been more intensive since the foundation of the Turkish republic. Almost a century after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has again become an important regional actor but with manifest tendencies to overestimate its capabilities. It risks a kind of “imperial overstretch” because there are insurmountable limitations in the region to its ambitions.

Turkey cannot realistically aspire for regional hegemony to pursue the notion of “a little America”, i.e. attempting to project regionally the kind of power wielded by the United States at global level, as one Middle Eastern scholar recently wrote.²⁵ It cannot project military power in the Western Balkans outside NATO channels which are controlled by the real hegemonic power—the US. Neither has it yet established permanent economic strongholds in the Western Balkans. Its cultural influence remains up to now quite limited: the non-Muslims in the Western Balkans still need a lot of convincing to trust a country with a partly Islamic identity, which arguably is growing stronger. A positive image of Turkey is not omnipresent in the Western Balkans, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the Gallup Balkan 2010 Monitor, just about 40 percent of the population of this state considers Turkey to be a “friendly country.” This figure corresponds more or less to the number of Bosniaks (in comparison, corresponding figure in other countries are: in Serbia 15 percent, Croatia 24 percent, Albania 73 percent, Kosovo 85 percent, Republic of Macedonia 80 percent—this is mainly because of Turkish support for Skopje in the “name dispute” with Athens).

The EU is still favored over other external actors by most of the population in the Western Balkans. The EU offers structural integration through the assimilation of the *acquis communautaire* in future member states which all of the post-Yugoslav states and Albania aspire to become. This is far more “strategic” than any other partnership offers from Russia, Turkey, China, or even the US via NATO (which is limited to military and security affairs). However, if the region remains in front of the EU gates, to some leaders of ethnic groups in the region with historic, cultural and religious affiliations with Turkey, an alliance with Ankara may become more attractive than waiting indefinitely to become part of the EU. If the EU stops its enlargement in the Western Balkans, other options will materialize. If Turkey’s accession to the EU remains deadlocked, Ankara might be tempted to split with the EU in the Western Balkans and try to increase its own position further in the region. At the end of the day, the scorecard of Turkey’s policies towards the Western Balkans will ultimately depend on the credibility of the region’s EU membership prospects.

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