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TURKEY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS
A VIEW FROM POLAND

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During the past few years, experts and the media have often spoken about “the return of Turkey to the Western Balkans”, i.e. about the growth of the economic and political influence of Turkey in this region. Turkey is undoubtedly quite an important country for the Western Balkans, whose influence is constantly on the rise. What is more, the Balkans is important for Turkey as a region where it has the greatest influence in Europe and which plays a role as a sort of a bridge towards the West. However, Turkey does not have a decisive influence on the foreign policy orientation of the countries in the region. The influence is more visible in the countries with a higher percentage of Muslim population: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, and as well in Kosovo. Therefore, the position of Turkey could be compared with the one of Russia, which holds a similar influence over the Orthodox population in the region.

In Serbia, this new role of Turkey in the Western Balkans is often exaggerated. The Western Balkans are naturally important for the Turkish interests, but to much lesser extent than it is speculated in the public. For Turkey itself, much more important are the Middle East, the Black Sea basin and the former USSR republics. The single biggest foreign policy challenge for Turkey is the future of Iraq, because of the Kurdish issue. Although Turkey has the potential to play a much more significant part in the Western Balkans, its leadership is aware of the relatively small chances of challenging the predominant influence of the European Union (EU) in the region.

THE NEW TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Turkey is an emerging power, which could be compared to other mid-size regional powers with growing importance in international relations, such as South Africa, Indonesia, etc. One of its major characteristics is its demographic potential. Although its population growth is in decline compared to previous decades, it is still much higher than the European average. According to UN estimates, in the year 2050 there will be around 95 million citizens in Turkey. Turkish economic growth is very high and also far above the European average. In the period 2002-2010, the average annual growth of the Turkish economy was around 7%. Compared by purchasing power parity, Turkey holds 16th place in the world. Its GDP per capita is higher than the ones of poorer EU member states, such as Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia. In the long run, Turkey has the potential to become the 10th largest economy in the world and its GDP could reach the European average. This economic growth contributed to the rise in self-confidence of the Turkish elite. Turkey is also an important military power, holding the 7th place in the world (according to the capacities of conventional armed forces). Its armed forces are among the best equipped in NATO. In effect, Turkey has a much greater potential than most countries in its neighbourhood.

Furthermore, Turkey possesses also a very favourable geopolitical position, between Asia and Europe and its proximity to Africa, The concept of Strategic Depth is the foundation of the new Turkish Foreign Policy. It was created by Ahmet Davutoglu, a university professor and the current Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs. According to this concept, Turkey’s wish is to create a zone of influence in its neighbourhood, where it can play the role of the stabilizer and key regional power. Soft power, in the form of trade, education, foreign investments, construction, tourism, development aid, etc., is foreseen as the most important instrument of Turkish influence in its neighbourhood. The conservative Party of Justice and Development (AKP), whose political program has its roots in Islam, has, to a great extent, applied this concept in practice since taking power in 2002.

One of the essential ideas of this strategy is a policy, symbolically titled zero problems with neighbours, which presumes resolving open questions and misunderstanding with neighbouring states. Although Turkey has significantly improved its relations with some countries, such as Serbia and Greece, it has managed to even deteriorate relations with some other countries. In each of the regions that surround it, there is one state with which Turkish leadership can not find common ground with: in Central Asia Uzbekistan, in Middle East Israel, in South Caucasus Armenia, in the Western Balkans Republika Srpska in BiH. These examples clearly demonstrate the shortcomings of the concept.
The concept of Strategic Depth is tightly connected to question of the relationship between Turkey and the EU. It is clear that for its conception, Ahmet Davutoglu used EU Neighborhood Policy as his inspiration. By implementing this concept in practice, Turkey is attempting to show the EU how its accession to the Union would be a substantial asset for the EU, increasing its capacity and the leverage on the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. On the other hand, creating a zone of influence represents a back up plan for Turkey should its negotiations with the EU fail to bring the expected results. This reasoning, among Turkish elites, can be summarized with the following sentence: “If the EU does not want us, we shall have our zone of influence and good relations with China, Russia and Iran”. In this way Turkey is indirectly blackmailing the EU.

However, the chances of some sort of a mini-cold war between Turkey and the EU are rather slim. Turkey is not in a position to completely transform its policy into an anti-Western one, first and foremost, because of the economic and military ties. EU is the most important economic partner of Turkey, and in military terms the cooperation with the USA and the EU is much more important than cooperation with Russia or China. Nevertheless, Turkey which feels rejected by the EU can act unpredictably, and let it’s decision-making be guided by emotions.

TURKEY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Turkey is an important country in the Balkans, which has a significant influence over the Muslims in the region and wishes to play a role of their protector. This influence is based on the Ottoman heritage and tight social connection between the Turks and Balkan Muslims. According to opinion polls, the Muslims from the Balkans have the closest relationship towards Turkey, and vice versa the citizens of Turkey are favourable towards the Muslims citizens from the Balkan countries (more favourable than to the Arabs).

In addition, according to the data of Gallup Balkan Monitor, most of the citizens of the Western Balkans states do not have a negative opinion about Turkey. Their attitude inclines towards neutral. This data is really important for Turkey, if we take in consideration the attitude of the EU citizens regarding the potential membership of Turkey in the EU. Turkey is a quite positive actor in the eyes of the most of Bosniaks and Albanians (from both Kosovo and Albania), but also Macedonians due to the Macedonia/Greece name dispute. Since these states became independent, Turkey played a role of their protector on the international scene. Only Serbs from Republika Srpska do not consider Turkey as a positive actor but as an enemy.

The improvement of relations with Serbia represents the most important successes of the Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans. The ultimate goal of Ankara is to play the role of arbiter on the Western Balkans. However, very close bonds with the Balkan Muslims significantly decrease the Turkish capacity to be an impartial mediator.

However, the importance of Turkey for the region is incomparable with the importance of the EU. Turkey is one of the major foreign actors in the economies of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Turkey has an important share in the investment balance of these countries (from 4% to 15%), and foreign trade (from 4%-8%). Turkey has participated in realization of important construction projects in these countries/regions, with a total amount of around 2 billion dollars. On the other hand, the position of Turkey is weak within the economies of Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Republika Srpska (within Bosnia and Herzegovina). In total, Turkish economic influence in the region is much weaker than the influence of Austria or even Slovenia. There is a perception in Turkey that the region of the Western Balkans is too small, and therefore not very interesting for the investments and trade. Also, the EU is much more significant because of the number of gastarbeiters that are working in its member states, and the EU development aid and numerous scholarships for the students in the region. Turkey doesn’t have the power to change this situation due to much smaller economic potential in comparison with the EU. Still,
around 2,000 students, mostly Muslims, from the Western Balkans attending the Turkish universities. In addition, Turkey has established several universities and high schools in the region. On the other hand, Muslim Albanians generally prefer to study in Italy and Greece, and very few go to Turkey. The same goes for Bosniaks, who mostly choose Croatia, Austria, and Germany over Turkey.

Turkey does not have a significant number of visiting tourists from the Western Balkans except from Macedonia and from Kosovo (proportional numbers). When speaking about the development aid, 10-15% of total Turkish aid goes to the Western Balkans. For each of the states (except Albania) Turkey represents one of the most important donors (Turkey holds 8th-10th place by the amount of donations, and the total aid share averages 3-4%). Nevertheless, this aid is considerably smaller than the aid coming from the EU.

The importance of Turkey for the region is most visible in combating trafficking of Afghanistan heroin, and as a participant within the missions of the EU and NATO in the region. Turkey has participated in almost all of the missions of the EU and NATO in the Balkans, hence it represents one of the most important states that are involved in the stabilization of the Western Balkans (in this moment Turkey participates with 15% of total personnel in the Mission Althea in Bosnia, with 7% in KFOR and with around 4% in EULEX). Also, Turkish army has an important role in training of the armies of Bosnia, Albania and Macedonia. Turkey is over 5 times more successful in cutting off Afghanistan heroin smuggling channels than all of the Balkan countries together. Also, Turkey plays an important role in preventing further expansion of Wahhabism through the support of the religious communities and traditional “Ottoman”, mainstream, Islam.

Turkey desires to prove that it is a credible partner to the West in the Western Balkans, as a proof that it is not an anti-Western Country. Turkey could also use its engagement in the Western Balkans as an “alibi” to the West for the occasional different positions towards Israel, Iran and Russia. Although there are several problems in regards of Western Balkans between Turkey and the EU, this region is still the area of overlapping interests of Ankara and Brussels (particularly in stabilization of the region through Euro-Atlantic integration). This situation could be changed if Turkey’s integration process to the EU is halted or postponed. Turkey cannot prevent the EU enlargement on the Western Balkans, but it can slow it down in the case of problems of the countries of the region with the EU (stalemate of their accession process). On the other hand, in the case of crisis in relation between Turkey and the EU, the Western Balkans could be the area where their relations might improve first.