

EU'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE BALKANS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF TURKEY'S MEMBERSHIP OF EU FOR THE REGION

Göknil ERBAŞ*

Abstract

It is well known that there is a strong historical link between Turkey and the Balkans for centuries. Ottoman past of Turkey has created political and social constructions in the region for many perspectives which are geographical, economic, and social. From the disintegration of Yugoslavia to nowadays, it can easily say that these aspects accumulated at one common value which is named EU membership process. Because of all states in the region declared their prospects of EU membership and some of them reached their aim.

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, all the balances in the Balkans were altered. After many wars and miserable events, Balkans passed a new era with the interest of EU membership process. As Balkans, Turkey aims to be member of EU for gaining more democratic values. Turkey supported NATO, US, and EU policies since 1990 and part took in the peace-making and peace-keeping operations by sending troops into the region. From the point of western oriented view, Turkey has ready for security issues.

After long times, the Turkish policy on the Balkans is different from the past decade. This time is not only with military force, but as the most dynamically growing economy of the region. The European Union can offer accession perspectives that are still very attractive for the Balkan countries and beside this, Turkey's possibilities is also to be attractive for the region.

In the light of information mentioned upper, I aim to analyze the Turkey's foreign policy towards Balkans in the concept of EU membership process in my paper. I will mainly aim that compare Turkey's capabilities and EU's policies in the region. In the last decade Turkey started to define itself as a pivotal regional state. Firstly, I will describe Turkish political priorities from the perspective of pivotal state and then, I will claim that Turkey's geographical position and its dynamic economy give her a distinguished position in the future of the Balkans. From the perspective of EU accession process, it will be opportunity for both parts in the Balkans. Actually, if the relations between the European Union and Turkey develop, it will be beneficial for the all parts in the region.

*Göknil Erbaş works as an assistant professor at Mersin University, department of International relations. She received her BA degrees in IR department at the Gazi University and MA degrees in Ankara University, department of European Union and IR at 2005. She has held her Ph.D. from Ankara University since 2012. Her thesis title is "From Classical to Critical Geopolitics: Transformation of the Black Sea Geopolitics." Her academic interest areas are geopolitics, critical geopolitics and Black Sea region in general.

Phone: (+90) 3243610001/5277; Fax: (+90) 3243610056; E-mail: goknil.eras@mersin.edu.tr, goknile@gmail.com
Address: Mersin University, Department of International Relations Çiftlikköy, Mersin, Turkey

Key Words: Turkey, Balkans, EU, Turkish Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

From past to now Europe has always been inside Turkish foreign policy and by time it has become as can't give up for our policy. For a long time, Turkey is both strategically and also economically associated with the European Union. This association has started with the Ankara Agreement in 1963. Turkey gets the status of a candidate country in 1999 Helsinki Summit and European Union decided to start accession negotiations with Turkey at 2005. There is along story between Turkey and EU. For the Turks who wait in "Europe's door" more than 40 years, EU has become like an unavailable dream. Because of this long period, nowadays there are some hopeless speeches from Turkish side. However, the relationship between Turkey and EU don't cease easily.

In this paper, I have to discuss the issue in two aspects which are the change in the Turkish Foreign Policy to the Balkans and EU's Balkan policy with a link to Turkey.

After 2002 Turkish foreign policy concepts has renewed by the vision of Ahmet Davutoğlu. Mr. Davutoğlu was an academician and he indicated some principles for foreign policy in his book which named *StratejikDerinlik*. (Strategic Depth) Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth argues that a nation's value in world politics is emerged from its geo-strategic location and historical depth. Following the logic of Davutoğlu's proclaimed theory, Turkey is uniquely endowed both because of its location in geopolitical areas of influence, particularly its control of the Bosphorus, and its historical legacy as heir to the Ottoman Empire.

From the Ahmet Davutoğlu's view, Turkey achieved progress in establishing a stable and peaceful domestic order on which it can build a proactive foreign policy.¹ This is the first concept for Balkan policy as well. Second important policy discourse for Balkans is "zero problems with neighbors". In Ahmet Davutoğlu's words, this is shaped below:

"Turkey's foreign-policy agenda is no longer dominated by the chronic disputes with neighbors that used to consume its energy in regional and international affairs.² Once the regional transition is completed, we Turkey continue our work toward regional integration within the spirit of the "zero problems with neighbors" principle.³

This means that Turkey's strategic culture shifted from a military security agenda to a more civilian one. The former is based on a conservative realist approach. However, the zero problem policy is to aim soft policy methods. After first half of 2000's, Turkey has started to use the policies like economic cooperation, cultural projects, NGO's, the presentation of Turkish

¹Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Structuring*, Center For Strategic Research, No.3, April 2012, s. 3.

²Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Zero Problems in a New Era," *Foreign Policy*, March 2013.

³*Idem*.

lifestyle, especially via TV miniseries, and tourism. From these new concepts, Balkan Peninsula has been a good example for implementing these policies. Turkey has also adopted a 'zero problem' policy with its neighbors in order to dissolve regional conflicts. By now, Turkey is improving its relations all over the world, not only Balkans but also the other neighborhood geographies.

If we look at relationship between Turkey and EU, it has never been easy because of some basic obstacles as geography, population and cultural differences. Accession of Turkey to the Union would be challenging both for the EU and Turkey. However, if well managed it would offer important opportunities for both. Turkey's accession would be different from previous enlargements because of the combined impact of Turkey's population, size, geographical location, economic, security and military potential, as well as cultural and religious characteristics.

As December 2004, the time of the decision to start the entry negotiations, the positive arguments towards Turkish membership seem to dominate the others. The membership argument appears to be strongest in the UK, Italy, Spain, and a few other countries in Europe. As stated earlier, it is gaining strength in Germany in recent times.

After 2005, Turkey-EU relations stagnated. The public is losing its enthusiasm to join the EU. Relations with the EU are being changed. I want to give some examples for this change:

“It is not the apocalypse if they do not let us in the EU”⁴ Mr. Erdogan told reporters during a visit to Budapest this year.

“Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan told a group of journalists on his way from Prague to Budapest that to be a member of EU is not a "sine qua non" for Turkey, it is not a must.”⁵

“If not because Turkey is a Muslim populated country Erdoğan asks, they why? Is it because Turkey is too crowded, too dynamic, or simply is it because of Cyprus.”⁶

These speeches are from Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He has known in foreign policy by his hard discourse. However it shows that there is some restlessness and also changes in Turkish foreign policy towards EU.

In meanwhile EU has develop policies in Balkans. 2007 was a crucial year for the Balkans. Ten years after Dayton and with a new generation of political leaders at the helm, the region has made good progress. But there are some obstacles in EU's policy towards Balkans.

⁴ http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/turkey-hints-at-a-breakup-with-europe/?_r=0

⁵ Murat Yetkin < <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-with-or-without-eu.aspx?PageID=238&NID=40560&NewsCatID=409>>

⁶ *Idem.*

The importance of continued EU engagement cannot be over-stated. More than any other region in the world, this is a European responsibility.

If we continue from this point, membership perspective is still important policy tool for EU. Croatia is the last member of EU. Turkey has started to membership process at the same time with Croatia. Last year Croatia completed the process that it was subjected to stricter accession criteria, became the first country to suffer the consequences of European enlargement crisis. Due to the EU has crushed on heavy burden of enlargement. This explains why the accession process took 10 years to complete. If the same criteria had been previously applied, certain member states would have been unable to enter the EU. Turkey also faces to face this strict process besides her natural obstacles to entering EU.

Related to enlargement process, the picture of EU in future will be shaped of how the central features of the European order will change. These features are as follows:

- The capacity of act, efficiency and acceptance of political system of the EU
- The number of the member states and thus the geographical range of the European integration
- The ability, of the EU as a power in world politics, to affect on developments of international policy

These all features related to EU's Turkey policy and Balkan policy. It is generally accepted that the EU wants to have a bigger and stronger say in global affairs. The EU aims to emerge as a global actor. A global-power Europe needs on the one hand an optimal size and location in geography, population and resources, and on the other hand a relatively unified decision-making capacity to arrive at decisions as swiftly as the fast pace of global events require. However If EU wants to be a global power and stability in the European continent enlargement is inevitable.

Balkans which could be seen as a bridge for Turkey to extending into the Europe is a literally strategic region for Turkey to entering EU. Turkey has close historical, cultural, religious and linguistic ties with this region. It gains importance in the Balkans on the grounds of common history, the presence of approximately 1,000,000 people of Turkish origin in these countries, the geographical proximity, and its growing economic presence.

The cornerstone of Turkey's Balkan policy is to secure influence in Bosnia – Herzegovina, which seems to include three levels: at a local level by encouraging dialogue among peoples constitutionally recognized in the country, at a regional level, with pressure on Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia to develop stronger links between them and thus

overcome the conflict, at an international level by undertaking diplomatic initiatives promoting the territorial integrity of the country and its integration to the Euro-Atlantic institutions.⁷

On the regional level, Ahmet Davutoğlu is trying to encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as its neighbors Serbia and Croatia to work more closely together. With regard to the Balkans, the most important goal of Turkish foreign policy in the region is the strengthening of Bosnia and Albania. For this aim, Turkey has been trying to mediate in some of the region's most important bilateral disputes. For example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his country's willingness to mediate in the bilateral talks between Belgrade and Pristina in November 2010. After that time, Ankara's most significant mediation success was the "Istanbul Declaration on Peace and Stability in the Balkans" (SEEC) signed by Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina on April 24, 2010. With the three Balkan countries pledging to improve cooperation and work toward EU integration, Ankara appeared as a key player in the stability of Southeastern Europe.⁸

SEEC has committed some important principles related to EU that listed below:

- “-have underlined the importance of the Peace Implementation Council and the positive role played by the international community, including EU, Russia, Turkey and the USA, and agreed to intensify your cooperation with them,
- have emphasized the importance of pursuing the necessary steps for integration with the European structures in collaboration with other neighboring countries and international actors,
- have Expressed our support for BiH for achieving the necessary reforms during the NATO/MAP process,
- have commended the progress made by BiH in the process of EU visa liberalization and meeting the necessary requirements to this end, while expressing the desire for its early implementation by the EU,
- have expressed our readiness for mutual support of our candidatures in international organizations,”

As we see, there is common policies and intentness of both EU and Turkey in Balkans. Turkey enhances policies about Balkans in the concept of EU.

In the economic sense, what can be achieved through a neo-Ottomanist policy can be important for Turkey, but Turkey is still far from being a dominant economic power in the region. However there are some improvements. Turkey's free trade agreements with the regional countries, the privatization processes in the region, investment incentives, trade possibilities with

⁷Zarko Petrovic & Ducan Reljic, "Turkish interests and Involvement in the Western Balkans: A Score- Card", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2011, pp. 159-172

⁸Loïc Poulain and Akis Sakellariou, *Western Balkans: Is Turkey Back?*, 25 April 2011, <<http://csis.org/blog/western-balkans-turkey-back>>

third countries and easy access to qualified labor force make the Balkans attractive for Turkish businessmen.

According to web site of Turkish Ministry of Economy, Turkey's foreign trade with the Balkan countries experienced a big revival in the post-2000 period. Its trade volume, which is 2.9 billion dollars with Balkan countries in 2000, reached 18.4 billion dollars in 2011. The free trade agreements signed with the Balkan countries contributed to this favorable development. Turkey today has free trade agreements with all Balkan countries except Kosovo, Turkish direct investments in the Balkan countries also being in positive trend. Turkish investments which are just 30 million dollars in 2002 increased 189 million dollars in 2011. Its total investments abroad in 2011 was 1.8 billion dollars, we can say 7 percent of these investments were made in the Balkans. The Turkish investments in the Balkans usually prefer the communications, banking, construction, mining and retail sectors.⁹

With regard to the economic promotion of Turkey in the region, there is investment in strategic sectors such as tele-communications, infrastructure and banking sectors. Regarding trade relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries, a 6.7% of the total export product of the country is directed to them. The further expansion of Turkish exports is stalled by the low quality of its products, the transparency of the trade process and the working conditions.¹⁰

Turkey's growing influence is not limited to economics. Trade and tourism have flourished, Turkish soap operas have become popular TV serials in most Balkan countries, and Turkish universities have become good alternatives for the young, with hundreds of scholarships on offer.¹¹ Moreover, efforts and activities in the field of education and tourism have recently become an effective tool enabling individuals from the Balkan countries to not only learn more about Turkey, but also to question their prejudices against Turks, and change their perceptions.¹² It is the easiest way to understand people of Balkans each other. Due to soft politics tools, Turkey should reshape perceptions of all side in Balkans.

3. CONCLUSION

Both side of Balkans, Turkey and EU shouldn't overlook importance of cooperation in the region. It is a reality that this region has no alternative but the integration into the European Union and Turkish side is aware of her countries importance for the EU. Turkish President

⁹<<http://www.economy.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=countriesandregions®ion=9>>

¹⁰JanuszBugajski, "Turkey's impact in the Western Balkans", Atlantic Council, February 2012.

¹¹<<http://www.dw.de/turkey-in-the-balkans-myths-illusions-and-realities/a-15953307>>

¹² Erhan Türbedar, "Turkey's New Activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and Obstacles," *Insight Turkey*, Vol.13, No.3, 2011, s.149.

Abdullah Gül said Turkey's membership in the EU would help transform the EU in a global player.¹³

In fact, improvement of relations with neighbors is one of the conditions of EU membership. When Turkey put into force new principles into her foreign policy, it contributes relationship with EU. Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website indicated that "Turkey considers the integration of all the countries of the region to the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions necessary and continues to support their efforts in this direction. The commitment to encourage and support each other to integrate with the European Union and to share experience in the accession process was highlighted." From this view, Turkey's Balkan policy hasn't separate from her EU policy. Turkey itself has long aspired to join the EU, developing links to the Balkans so as not to be left behind the EU integration process. On the contrary, Turkey can encourage other states to maintain the process. Moreover, Turkish accession to the EU would enhance co-operation with Balkan states concerning opportunities such as free trade, free movement of people and implementing security policies as a whole.

REFERENCES

- Bugajski J., (2012) "Turkey's impact in the Western Balkans", *Atlantic Council*.
- Davutoğlu A., (2012) *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Structuring*, Center For Strategic Research, No.3.
- Davutoğlu A., (2013) "Zero Problems in a New Era," *Foreign Policy*.
- Petrovic Z., Reljic D., (2011) "Turkish interests and Involvement in the Western Balkans: A Score- Card", *InsightTurkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3.
- Poulain L., Sakellariou A., (2011) Western Balkans: Is Turkey Back? <<http://csis.org/blog/western-balkans-turkey-back>>
- Rüma İ., (2010) "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: New Activism, New Ottomanism or/sowhat?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol 9, No.4.
- Türbedar E., (2011) "Turkey's New Activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and Obstacles," *InsightTurkey*, Vol.13, No.3.
- Yetkin M., <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-with-or-without-eu.aspx?PageID=238&NID=40560&NewsCatID=409>
- <<http://www.dw.de/turkey-in-the-balkans-myths-illusions-and-realities/a-15953307>>
- <<http://www.economy.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=countriesandregions®ion=9>>
- <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/turkey-hints-at-a-breakup-with-europe/?_r=0>

¹³<<http://www.dw.de/eu-hopefuls-say-europe-needs-the-balkans-turkey/a-3308414>>