

ASPECTS OF TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS

Spyridon Sfetas

Associate Professor for Balkan History –Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

“There are three identifiable characteristics of the Balkans. One is that the region is a geopolitical buffer zone, a crossing between Europe and Asia, the Baltic and the Mediterranean. Why is this important? The other characteristic is geo-economic. The Balkans are a region of commerce, since the ancient times. The Balkans are a region of cultural interaction as well. Several cultures intermingle and influence each other in the Balkans. Many people migrate and encounter others and mingle with them. If you have a region with these three characteristics – geopolitical buffer, economic and cultural interaction - you have two possible destinies in history. One is to be the centre of world history and the other is to be a victim of global conflict and controlled by alien powers. Because of this, when we speak of the Balkans, we say it is the periphery of Europe. But are the Balkans really a periphery? No, they are the heartland of Africa-Euroasia. Where does the perception of periphery come from? If you asked Mehmed-Pasha Sokolović, he would not have said that Sarajevo or Salonica were the periphery, whether of Europe or of the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman times, in the 16th century, the Balkans were at the centre of world politics. That was the golden age of the Balkans. This is a historical fact.

“Who created world policy in the 16th century? Your ancestors! They were not all Turks. Some were of Albanian origin, others were Greek converts. Mehmed-pasha Sokolović is a good example. Were it not for the Ottoman Empire he would have been poor Serb peasant with a small farm or what ever, because they did not have developed farming in this part of the world then. Thanks to the Ottoman state, he became a leader in world politics. Ottoman history is Balkan history, in which the Balkans held special importance in the history of the world.....

“Now is the time for reunification. Then we will rediscover the spirit of the Balkans. We need to create a new feeling of unity in the region. We need to strengthen regional ownership, a common regional conscience. We are not angels, but we are not beasts either. It is up to us to do something. It all depends on which part of history you look to. From the 15th to the 20th century, the history of the Balkans was a history of success. We can have this success again... We desire a new Balkans, based on political values, economic interdependence and cultural harmony. That was the Ottoman Balkans. We will restore the Balkans. People call this ‘Neo-Ottomanism’. I don’t point to the Ottoman state as foreign policy issue. I emphasize the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman era in the Balkans is a success story. Now it needs to come back...We have a common history, a common destiny, a common future. Like in the 16th century, when the Ottoman Balkans were rising, we will once again make the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East-together with Turkey-the centre of world politics in the future. That is the goal of Turkish foreign policy, and we will achieve it. We will reintegrate the Balkans, we will reintegrate the

Middle East, and we will reintegrate the Caucasus on these principles of regional and world peace, not just for us, but all of humanity... For diplomats from elsewhere in the world, Bosnia is a technical matter. To us it is a matter of life and death. That is how important it is. For us the integrity of Bosnia is just as important as the integrity of Turkey. For Turkey the integrity of Sarajevo is equal important as the security and the prosperity of Istanbul... Sarajevo is a miniature of Ottoman heritage. If you don't understand Sarajevo, you cannot understand Ottoman history. Sarajevo is the prototype of Ottoman civilization, the template for Balkan ascendant".

By delivering this stirring, sophisticated speech in Sarajevo, in October 2009, some months after having taken office as Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmed Davutoglu carved out the principles underpinning Turkey's Balkan policy. He molded a glorious past of the Ottoman Balkans to fit into the political requirements of the current Turkish foreign policy. He pointed out to his audience the living Ottoman legacy in the Balkans which is the linchpin of Turkish policy towards the Western Balkans. According to his shrewd strategy, as it had been elaborated in his book Strategic Depth (2001), economic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy are the keystones underlying Turkish policy in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus.

In fact, Turkey never abandoned the Balkans. In the interwar-period Kemalist Turkey acted as a mediator in inter-Balkan politics, trying to infiltrate the Muslim minorities with Turkish nationalism and secularism in the Balkans. She did not pursue an active Balkan policy, as Turkey's main goal was the consolidation of the Turkish nation on the basis of Kemalism after the abolition of the Haliphah. But Kemalism was one "Revolution from above" which did not affect the soul of the conservative peasants who continued to live up to the principles of the traditional Ottoman way of life. Kemalist Turkey turned into one superficially "westernized" country with a state-run economy and a bureaucratic state-apparatus. No agrarian reform was carried out to alleviate the peasants, no political parties were founded. The social gap between the very rich and the very poor segments of population, the lack of a middle class and of a representative parliamentary system characterised Turkey's economic and political life. In fact, Ataturk's "Turkish Republic" was a dictatorship with the permeating influence of the privileged Turkish Army as the symbol of the secular character of the state. After the Second World War, when political parties were allowed, Kemalism was called into question. Prime Minister Menderes in the 50's and Demirel in the 60's took a condescending attitude towards Islam, took measures to boost a market economy, favoured the peasants and challenged the power of the Army. However, they did not manage to cope with the soaring economic recession of the country which caused social discontent. The Army, not tolerating the challenge of its power, toppled Menderes in 1960 and Demirel in 1971. But Turkey's parliamentarianism proved to be stillborn and dysfunctional. In the second half of the 70's Turkey was in economic and political chaos: unstable governments, high inflation, unemployment, terrorism of the left, Islamic fundamentalism, Kurdish separatism, marked Turkish economic and political life. The Army intervened again in September 1980 to save the country.

When Turgut Ozal took office as Prime Minister in 1983, he embarked on a foreign policy that anticipated the current Turkish foreign policy. Ozal understood that Turkey could not cut off the umbilical cord with the Ottoman tradition and Islam. He combined Turkish nationalism with Ottomanism, capitalism with Islam. Without challenging the Army, he went on a pilgrimage to Mekka. The lingering Greek-Turkish dispute on Cyprus and the Aegean issues (continental shelf, territorial waters, air space) and the burning question of the maltreatment of the Turks in Bulgaria urged Turkey to apply a more dynamic Balkan policy. Gorbachov's "Perestrojka and Glasnost" was perceived by Turkey as an opportunity to boost economic ties with the Turkophone republics of the Soviet Union. In fact, Ozal was Erdogan's precursor.

Erdogan and Davutoglu believed that they continued Ozal's policy with greater intensity and under more favourable circumstances for Turkey. But Turkey needed to solve its identity crisis in order to be a regional power and to claim Ottomanism. As Davutoglu said, with the predominance of Kemalism Turkey was "a torn personality". Turkey's identity required a combination of Turkish nationalism with a moderate Islam, a return to the Ottoman tradition, a reconciliation of capitalism and western democracy with Islam and last, but not least, the curtailment of the power of the Army. This large scale operation is still evolving within Turkey.

What are the incentives that prompted Turkey to aspire to be a regional power and to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic in 2023 as a Super Power? Apart from Turkey's demographic explosion, there are new factors which Ankara could not ignore:

- 1) After the collapse of the Soviet Union Turkophone republics emerged in Central Asia (the cradle of the Turkish tribes which invaded Asia Minor in the 12th-13th century) and in the Caucasus. Turkey believed that it had the historic right to penetrate into Russia's soft belly to make business and to promote its model of democracy, to counterbalance the dominant Russian and potential Iranian influence and to thwart the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia.
- 2) America's intervention in Iraq and the partition of this country convulsed Turkish society. Turkey lost Iraq as a trade partner. The Kurds in North Iraq created the core of a state. From there they continue to launch safe military operations against the Turkish Army. Anti americanism is growing in Turkey. Turkey wants to play a role in the Middle Eastern affairs, to participate in the process of political transformation of that region, according to her interests.
- 3) After the break-up of Yugoslavia, independent states with a Muslim majority (Bosnia, Kosovo) or with large minorities (F.Y.R.O.M, Serbia) emerged. The creation of the so-called Islamic Arc from Bosnia to Western Thrace became Turkey's strategic objective.
- 4) Ankara is aware of the fact that the European Union does not want Turkey as a full member, and thus Turkey's European prospects are gloomy. It forced Turkey to look to other directions, to Russia and to Arab countries. By applying a multi dimensional foreign policy and boosting economic ties with Russia, the Turkophone republics of the former Soviet Union and mainly with

Arab states Erdogan succeeded in improving Turkey's ailing economy. From this success emanated Turkey's ambition to play a role in the Western Balkan capitalizing on the economic crisis and the growing euro scepticism in that region.

According to Davutoglu, who during his stay in Malaysia as a professor realized that capitalism is compatible with Islam, Turkey should apply a strategy of cultural diplomacy (restoration of the old Ottoman monuments) and economic diplomacy. Bosnia is of paramount importance for Turkey. Turkey's aim is to ensure the territorial integrity of this fragile Republic as a bastion of Islam. Under Turkey's prodding the Serbian parliament passed a resolution in April 2010 condemning the massacre in Srebrenica, and Serbian President Boris Tadić committed himself not to encourage the Bosnian Serbs to secede from the dysfunctional state. Turkey is the fourth largest investor in Bosnia, after Austria, Slovenia and Germany. In late 2008, Turkey bought 49 percent of Bosnia's national carrier, BiH Airlines. Turkey and Bosnia have also signed some bilateral agreements. Ankara and Belgrade signed a free trade agreement in 2010. Three major Turkish construction firms will build part of the planned 445 km highway stretching from Belgrade to Bar in Montenegro. Turkish companies have expressed interest in the debt-ridden national carrier – JAT Airways. Turkey offered her mediation in the dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade to find a compromise solution on the Kosovo issue, provided that the Serbs respect Bosnia's territorial integrity.

The Turkish company TAV has already invested 200m euros in rebuilding FYROM's airport. Starting March 1, the airports of Skopje and Ohrid will be under TAV control for the next 20 years. TAV's executives view FYROM as a Southeast European hub and have announced that they will build another airport in the eastern part of the country. Politically, Turkey will continue to be FYROM's steadfast supporter in Euro-Atlantic integration, advocating membership under the name "Republic of Macedonia" despite the longstanding dispute with Greece. Trade between Ankara and Prishtina has almost doubled in the last years. Key investments include the contract to run their capital's international airport for 20 years, the building of the key highway linking Kosovo with Serbia and Albania and various interests in the banking, insurance and educational sectors. In Albania, Turkey is the third largest investor, after Italy and Greece. Turkey's Calik has made the most significant investments, including interests in Albtelecom, the nation's telephone and internet provider, Eagle Mobile, and the country's second biggest bank, BKT.

Turkey's cultural diplomacy is evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Sandzak region, Kosovo and FYROM. The International University in Sarajevo was founded by a Turkish and Bosnian board of trustees. The majority of the students attending the University are Turkish citizens. Students of Bosnian national background are favoured with reduced fees and scholarship. Kosovo and Turkey have developed a strong relationship in the educational sector. Not only is Turkey involved in building Kosovo's educational infrastructure, but also many young people from Kosovo are going to Turkey for their university education. During his trip to Kosovo in July 2010, Erdogan was awarded an

honorary doctorate by Prishtina University. For Turkish historians the fact that Sultan Murad I was killed during the Battle of Kosovo (1389) is of political significance. A tombstone was erected there. In the Sandzak region, a Muslim dominated part of South Serbia, Turkey foments the creation of Bosnian identity among the Muslims and interferes in the political strife among the local leaders as mediator. When Erdogan visited Novi Pazar last year, the foundation of a Turkish Cultural Centre in the name of Ataturk was announced. Obviously, Turkey tries to counterweight the potential influence of the Wahhabis who entered Bosnia and the Sandzak region in the recent past. Between FYROM and Turkey the relations have a deeper cultural and historical context in Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, who was educated at an Ottoman military school in Monastir (Bitola). A joint celebration of Ataturk's life and achievements is now held every year in Monastir. Such events contribute to increased tourism in both directions. Resna and Monastir are also mentioned by Turkey in the context of the Revolution of the Young Turks in 1908. Erdogan's Turkey sees no contradiction in "destroying" the spirit of Kemalism inside and extolling Ataturk outside.

The success of the Turkish ambitious plans regarding the Western Balkans depends on some important factors:

- 1) To what extent is Turkey in a position to dislodge other countries which have commercial transactions with the Western Balkans or are investing there? How long will the Turkish economy be insulated against the world economic recession, and to what extent does the Arab Spring affect Turkey?
- 2) To what extent is Turkey's economic penetration and cultural policy welcomed by politicians or the public opinion in the Western Balkans? Would economics override history?

It seems that Turkey achieved success by investing in areas with high density Muslim population but cannot compete in the Western Balkans with other major international actors like the European Union, despite its crisis. In Serbia, 80% of the investments come from the EU countries. Serbia is suspicious of Turkey's interference in the political affairs of Sandzak, where some religious leaders demand autonomy. The announced creation of an Islamic Cultural Centre in South Serbia and a Turkish Cultural Centre in Novi Pazar was not well received in Serbia and until now no relative steps have been undertaken. Despite Greece's economic slump, Turkey is lagging behind Greece in both trade and investments in FYROM. While Bosniak authorities in Sarajevo see a positive effect from Turkey's role in BiH, Serbian and Croatian politicians are reserved and do not accept any political role by Ankara in the Balkans. Erdogan's open ambitions to spread the so-called "Green Diagonal" (spread of Islamic influence through a set of connected regions with Muslim populations, like Bosnia-Sandzak-Kosovo-FYROM-Southeastern Bulgaria-Western Thrace) have their own limits.

The Arab Spring has affected Turkey's economy which was based on Turkey's cooperation with Arab countries. Turkey has to get accustomed to the new situation in the Middle East. It will be more immersed in the Middle Eastern affairs than in the Balkans. The Kurdish issue is becoming acute and Turkey

will probably face the Kurds' demand for territorial autonomy. The internal strife between Kemalists and Islamists in Turkey is not over. For the time being Erdogan seems to have the upper hand, but the future is unpredictable.

Nevertheless, Turkey is a regional power in the Middle East, where its destiny lies. Neo-Ottomanism is an obsolete ideology. Davuloglu said in Sarajevo that the Balkans were the centre of Europe in the 16th century and became peripheral due to the western imperialism of the 19th century. After the end of the 16th century the Ottoman Empire could not compete with the European Powers and turned into the periphery of Europe, it could not keep pace with the developments in Europe. The destabilization and decline of the Ottoman Empire came as a result of its marginalization. The Balkan national states were created in regions that had already become the periphery of Europe. Balkan peoples are entitled to blame the Ottomans for their backwardness, the Ottoman Empire was a negative factor in world history. Davutoglu mentioned Mehmed Sokolović. Greek, Serbian and Albanian minds worked for the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Through the institution of Devşirme, young Christians converted into Islam and took high positions in the administration, according to their merits. There was a social mobility (horizontal and vertical as well) that explained the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, they were slaves of the Sultan. The Greek Ibrahim Paşa and the Serb Mehmed Sokolović became Grand Vezirs in the 16th century and contributed to the success of the Empire in its Golden Age. But both fell victims of the Sultan's arbitrariness and to Ottoman intrigues. They were killed by organs of the Ottoman Empire to which they rendered their services.

Erdogan, who controls the mass media, seems to be a new Sultan. He has no chances to be a new caliph.