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## Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Future Reflecting on the Past

Doğa Ulaş Eralp

## ABSTRACT

Bosnia-Herzegovina remains as divided as ever. In the past year Turkish foreign policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina has become more assertive and outcome-oriented. The successes of the new Turkish assertiveness have helped to initiate a much-needed reconciliation process between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Turkey derives its assertiveness not only from Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's vision of sustainable peace but also from its shared history and cultural practices throughout the region. Turkey's efforts could strengthen the efforts of the international community to integrate BiH into European and trans-Atlantic bodies.



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# TURKEY AND BOSNIA- HERZEGOVINA: A FUTURE REFLECTING ON THE PAST

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## Introduction

In the past year Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has introduced a new-found dynamism and assertiveness in Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) in particular, without changing its main orientation. This new policy has already produced concrete results between Bosnia and Serbia. Turkey is not new to the region and has shared history and cultural practices. The efforts of Turkey come in a very timely manner as ethnic tensions are running high before the general elections in October 2010 and the road to EU membership seems as elusive as ever.

## Historical Background

Bosnia-Herzegovina had been one of the most important strongholds of the Ottoman Empire against Austria-Hungary for more than 400 years. Cities like Sarajevo and Mostar grew into regional urban centers of culture and trade during this period. Some Bosnians played critical roles in the Ottoman Empire's political history during this time, with administrators, such as Ferhat-paša Sokolović and Osman Gradaščević, and grand viziers, such as the influential Mehmed Paša Sokolović, coming from that region.

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During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992. The Turkish president at the time, Turgut Özal, saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for Turkey to follow its own independent foreign policy built on shared culture and history in the larger Eurasian region, in which the Western Balkans held a unique place.

However, the 18th and 19th centuries were plagued by military defeats and several revolts within Bosnia by Christian groups and local aristocrats who were the losers in the modernization reforms of Istanbul. The chaos spread rapidly and absorbed all the Balkan states and the Great Powers, and ultimately forced the Ottomans to surrender administration of Bosnia to Austria-Hungary with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878.

The Republic of Turkey tried to maintain cordial relations with Yugoslavia. The Balkan Entente of 1934, signed during the presidency of Kemal Atatürk, included Yugoslavia as one of the main pillars of a security framework among the Balkan states in an era of rising militarism and authoritarianism in Europe. In the 1950s the Menderes government in Turkey agreed to accept Muslim citizens from Yugoslavia (mainly Albanians and Bosniaks from the Sanjak region) as Turkish immigrants to close the technical know-how gap of the young Republic. In return Tito agreed to open Turkology departments in a number of universities across Yugoslavia and provide positive discrimination towards Yugoslav citizens of Turkish origin. In 1954 Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia signed a tripartite military alliance whereby the parties promised immediate military assistance in case of an intervention against any of these countries. This was a very strategic move on the side of Yugoslavia as it feared an imminent intervention from the Soviet Union after having decided to pursue independent policies from the eastern bloc. During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992. The Turkish president at the time, Turgut Özal, saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for Turkey to follow its own independent foreign policy built on shared culture and history in the larger Eurasian region, in which the Western Balkans held a unique place. Unfortunately, the war in the former Yugoslavia forced Turkey to adapt a more passive approach. During the Bosnian war Turkey called for NATO intervention to end the bloodshed while some Turkish civic initiatives provided financial assistance to Bosnians fighting against the Serbian paramilitaries. During the war in 1994 Turkey helped broker an alliance between the Croats and the Bosniaks against the Serbian offensive by offering to build Zagreb-Rijeka highway in partnership with the joint consortium of Turkish ENKA and the American Bechtel.

In the post-conflict period, Turkey has remained one of the most ardent supporters of Bosnian unity and independence. As a permanent member of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) Turkey represents the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The PIC is the international body tasked with overseeing the full implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement before the Office of the High Representative (OHR) shuts down. In the PIC, Turkey advocates the re-establishment

of the multi-ethnic and multicultural status of BiH.<sup>1</sup> Such reconstruction is not possible without respect to the independence, sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the country. Official Turkish foreign policy also voices full support for the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina into NATO and the EU.

## Need for a New Approach in the Western Balkans: The Turkish Peace

In the face of a deteriorating political situation in Bosnia after the failure of the constitutional reform package in April 2006, Turkey sees the re-emphasis of confidence-building measures between the countries of the region as key for stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The confidence-building measures have two main pillars: the promotion of regional ownership and inclusiveness. Turkish foreign policy supports NATO membership and EU integration for Bosnia not as ends in itself but rather as means to create sustainable relations in the Western Balkans. Getting too focused on these processes as ends rather than the means has already led to instability in the past four years. The EU member states and bodies have inadvertently turned the EU integration process as an end-goal rather than a process, which has fueled animosity between the constituent nations of Bosnia and the international community. The international community, and the Europeans in particular, have lost influence as a result of such miscalculations. Encouraging Bosnian politicians who are caught up in ethno-nationalist politics and patron-client relationships to reform did not succeed. Without showing the sincerity and clarity needed to convince the local politicians for political reforms the Office of High Representative (OHR) and the EU bodies lost credibility. Turkey's new assertiveness served to close this gap and provided a new momentum in the region.

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## Turkey Expects Clear Policies from the EU

Since the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed in June 2008 there has not been any substantial progress on Bosnia's EU membership application. The EU reforms need a strong state to implement the promises made. Yet strengthening the state institutions requires a joint agreement among the constituent nations which creates further political friction in the country. The visa liberalization that was supposed

1. The General Framework Agreement for Peace (GfAP) in Bosnia-Herzegovina (initialed in Dayton, Ohio on 21 November 1995 and signed in Paris on 14 December 1995) put an end to the Bosnian War that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Bosnians from different ethnic groups. The Dayton Constitution, drafted in 17 days aimed to create a form of consociational arrangement for power sharing between the three constituent nations, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, in two political entities with four different government levels. For this very complicated system to function the international community had to invent executive powers for its High Representative to pass laws in line with the Dayton Agreement.

Ankara supports regional integration of the Western Balkans as a whole and thus supports the idea that Brussels should announce clear dates for the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the EU that could motivate the reform-minded politicians in Bosnia.

to come into effect in summer of 2010 was once again postponed to an indefinite date in the fall. Lack of clear and solid results in the EU integration process limits the leverage of EU institutions and EU member states over the local politicians. The much-awaited EU-Western Balkans summit organized by the Spanish presidency of the EU on June 2 in Sarajevo ended with the usual declaration of support for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and encouraging reforms needed in the areas of regional cooperation, trade, and good neighborly relations. Turkey also attended the summit and voiced its support for the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the EU as soon as possible. Ankara supports regional integration of the Western Balkans as a whole and thus supports the idea that Brussels should announce clear dates for entry that could motivate the reform-minded politicians in Bosnia.

### **Turkey Encourages NATO Membership**

In April 2010 NATO member countries invited BiH to sign the Membership Action Plan (MAP). This decision came as a result of Turkey's call to NATO members not to exclude an increasingly unstable Bosnia. According to Turkey an invitation to sign the MAP by NATO would serve as a clear indication of the international community's support for BiH's unity and independence. For many, eventual NATO membership would put an end to discussions on Bosnia's future once and for all. Indeed, with clearly set benchmarks and guidelines, NATO membership seems more attainable than the ambiguous EU membership. Even unpopular reforms such as the state property law can be passed if an exact date for NATO membership can be provided. The state property law presupposes the transfer of the possession of former Yugoslav defense properties from the entities<sup>2</sup> to the state. The fierce opposition by the Republika Srpska (RS) leadership and its populist Prime Minister Dodik to the reforms can be softened if the Serbian leadership in Belgrade manages to convince Banja Luka of the long-term benefits of the NATO membership. Turkey's recent efforts in facilitating dialogue between BiH and Serbia can bear its fruits on that area soon.

### **Turkey Recognizes the Role of Serbia as the Kingmaker of Western Balkan Politics**

The most important turning point in Turkey's foreign policy toward the Western Balkans was the recognition of Serbia as the kingmaker of the Western Balkans. The progressive Serbian leadership under President Boris Tadić and the Foreign Minister

2. Dayton Agreement divided the domestic political sovereignty between the entities of Republika Srpska-RS (Serbian Republic) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (fBiH) and among the three constituent nations of Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks.



Vuk Jeremić clearly support a European vision for Serbia's future. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu saw this change in the mindset of Serbian politics as an opportunity to step up confidence-building measures in the region. By working a flexible yet effective foreign policy tool that could be summed up as a *tri-partite consultation mechanism* between the foreign ministers and presidents of Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Turkey, Davutoğlu helped to facilitate a growth in warmer relations between the two neighbors that gave immediate results. Turkey also made effective use of its one-year chairmanship of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) and used it as a regional framework for its tri-partite consultation mechanism processes. One of the most visible results of these meetings was the Serbian parliament's decision to apologize for the crimes committed in Srebrenica during the Bosnian war in July 1995. Another important outcome of Turkish policies was the mutual declaration to open embassies in Sarajevo and Belgrade. Turkey in return is eyeing investment opportunities in Serbia on a number of infrastructure and construction projects such as the new highway between Belgrade and Novi Pazar. Turkish investments in Serbia could serve as the guarantor of reconciliation efforts between Bosnia and Serbia.

Turkey similarly makes use of a parallel tri-partite consultation mechanism process between Croatia, Bosnia and Turkey. Relations between BiH and Croatia have been warm since the end of the Bosnian war, but ethnic tensions around the city of Mostar between Croats and Bosniaks still run high. The joint intent of investments by the Croatian and Turkish business associations on development projects around Mostar has the potential to sooth the tensions in that region.

## Challenges and Reactions

*Republika Srpska leadership:* The populist leadership in the *Republika Srpska* is not happy with the change in the mindset in Belgrade. Having benefited from Serbia's unconditional support against the pressures of the international community for strengthening the capacity of the state-level institutions in Sarajevo for a long time, the RS leadership is fearful of getting isolated. The call for the recognition of the 'Armenian Genocide' in the RS parliament at a time when the Serbian parliament apologized for Srebrenica is an indication of the distaste RS politicians feel against the Turkish assertiveness in the region.

*Bosniak leadership:* Bosniak politicians in Sarajevo are happy with the thawing relations with Belgrade. At the same time there is an anxiety among Bosniak politicians that Turkey is about to choose Serbia over BiH as its main partner. A number of Bosnian policy analysts interviewed in Sarajevo warn Turkey that Tadić might not be a reliable partner and might actually undermine the Turkish efforts and warn caution for Turkish foreign policy makers.

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Turkey should start using its new assertive presence in the Western Balkans in its accession negotiations with the EU. The EU lacks a clear strategy in the Western Balkans, as the June 2, 2010 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sarajevo proved once again.

*The EU and the international community:* The international community in Sarajevo has been taken by surprise with the new assertiveness of Turkish foreign policy. Yet there is not a clear decision among the PIC members to see this change as a positive one that complements the efforts of the international community or as negative, perhaps thinking that Turkish prominence could further undermine the credibility of the EU policies in the long run. One official from the European Commission's delegation in Sarajevo indicated that the EU so far appreciates the Turkish efforts and has chosen to wait and see what is next to come.

### **Recommendations for Turkish Foreign Policy**

1. For the sustainability of its assertive foreign policy, Turkey needs to step up its investments in the country. Although the trade volume exceeded US\$ 600 million in 2009, compared to US\$ 370 million in 2007 and US\$ 165 million in 2006, Turkish investments in 2007 accounted for a mere 1.4% of the total foreign direct investment in Bosnia, which was KM 57 million (US\$ 38.5 million). The amount of red tape asked from investors and the slow and political privatization policies stand out as the main problems for Turkish investors in BiH. Lack of a stronger economic engagement could hinder the institutionalization of political initiatives.
2. The MAP for NATO membership is the most substantial plan for Bosnia at the moment and Turkey as a NATO member has pushed for this. Turkey should continue to support the MAP reforms and facilitate dialogue between the RS and the Federation officials on the future of state assets.
3. Turkey should build stronger ties with RS politicians in Banja Luka to encourage political stability in BiH. The polls indicate that Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) will lose power in the coming elections in October 2010. It is time Turkey starts investigating investment opportunities in RS that could create a more positive image of Turkey and build closer relations with centrist politicians.
4. Turkey's chairmanship of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in the past year can be considered a success story. Turkey should initiate the institutionalization of that organization, such as the creation of a permanent secretariat and parliament assembly, one of which would preferably be located in Istanbul.
5. Turkey should be careful not to associate its political agenda in the Middle East with its policy in the Balkans. Turkey aims to use every possible international



platform to condemn the violent intervention of Israel on the peace flotilla for Gaza that caused the death of nine Turkish citizens and has every right to do so. Yet this might contradict with the policy choices of the Western Balkan countries and undermine Turkey's efforts both in the Western Balkans and the Middle East. For example, as a temporary member of the UN Security Council, BiH did vote in favor of the sanctions on Iran although Turkey brokered an agreement with Brazil. Similarly, in the concluding summit of the Turkish chairmanship of the SEECP held on June 23, 2010 in Istanbul, the member countries failed to openly condemn Israeli action against the Turkish aid flotilla.

6. Turkey should start using its new assertive presence in the Western Balkans in its accession negotiations with the EU. The EU lacks a clear strategy in the Western Balkans, as the June 2, 2010 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sarajevo proved once again. If Turkey could portray its recent efforts as a constructive component to the overall EU intentions of stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans, its bargaining powers could considerably increase.





Bosnia-Herzegovina remains as divided as ever. In the past year Turkish foreign policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina has become more assertive and outcome-oriented. The successes of the new Turkish assertiveness have helped to initiate a much-needed reconciliation process between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Turkey derives its assertiveness not only from Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's vision of sustainable peace but also from its shared history and cultural practices throughout the region. Turkey's efforts could strengthen the efforts of the international community to integrate BiH into European and trans-Atlantic bodies.

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