

Two views on... The Balkans: Alida Vracic and Kerem Öktem

01 September 2013, Sunday / YONCA POYRAZ DOĞAN,

Recommend 6

Tweet 0



The Balkans is a priority area for Turkey based on political, economic and geographical perspectives. But how have Turkey's policies been shaped in the region? Two experts from the region discuss the issue: Alida Vracic, director and founder of the Sarajevo think tank Populari, and Kerem Öktem, research fellow at the European Studies Centre, St. Antony's College, and an associate of Southeast European studies at the University of Oxford

Turkish Review: Why does your recent research focus on the ties between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Turkey? What are the connections between these nations?

Alida Vracic: Think tank Populari is currently undertaking extensive research on relations between BiH and Turkey that will be completed in mid-2014. We aim to focus on economic --

and increasing political and civic -- involvement. We also aim to explain the economic relations, which seem to be scattered and not yet at their full potential.

Due to the profound historical and cultural ties dating back to the period of the Ottoman Empire, BiH and Turkey are deeply connected countries. Turkish citizens consider BiH one of their closest allies, and vice versa. Judging by at least 20 high-level and political-dialogue oriented visits in the period of 2009-to date between leading Bosnian and Turkish politicians, relations between the two countries seem to be at their peak.

The latest visits by [Recep] Tayyip Erdoğan, prime minister of Turkey, and his deputies, made it clear that BiH holds a special place in Turkey's foreign policy, while at the same time, the Bosniak member of the BiH presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, when referring to relations with Turkey, has claimed, "As we had common past, so we shall have a joint future." However, all the rhetoric appears to be individual-oriented rather than fully institutionalized. Also, the high-level dialogue's results remain ambiguous in terms of long-term impact.

Bosnians perceive Turkey as an influential country and politically and economically deeply involved in BiH affairs, and at the same time Turkey often suffers from the image of being supportive of one nation (Bosniak) only.

TR: Would you acquaint us with the views of BiH politicians regarding Turkey? How do they emphasize the importance of relations?

AV: BiH politics suffers from a lack of hard data in all aspects. This approach is also reflected in foreign policy. Although BiH politicians (namely Bosniaks) often use Turkey in the context of a very important partner in the [sectors of] economy, culture, education, there are few concrete examples of where relations really stand and what the next steps are. From the 1990s until now, investment was not the focus of relations, although politicians are constantly pledging that they will increase investment, not only cultural-religious and education activities. The two universities, namely the International University of Sarajevo and

education activities. The two universities, namely the International University of Sarajevo and International Burch University, along with Turkish elementary and high schools, are well-known examples of educational activities. Furthermore, Turkey played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, as well as dozens of other Ottoman era cultural and historical monuments. Finally, the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) has good relations with the Bosniak Muslim community, as witnessed by their mediatory role in the reconciliation of two Bosniak muftis in Serbia.

TR: Turkey is listed among the top investors in Bosnia, but is there the will to establish solid economic and political ties between the nations?

AV: Investments are also part of the research [topics] we aim to elaborate, as there is a long-lasting misconception regarding what they really are and what is the amount/significance of these investments. Economically, for Turkey, the western Balkans is insignificant. Within the region, high-profile investments in certain roads and airports give the impression of a huge amount of Turkish investment. In fact, with the exception of Albania and Kosovo, there has been much talk but far less cash. In spite of lots of sentimental rhetoric between the countries in the region, especially Bosnia and Turkey, Turkey doesn't rank in the top 10 countries when it comes to investment. The link that exists is totally unexploited. I am afraid that Bosniaks think it is enough to "share" Muslim brotherhood and the cash will flow into the country, having no serious offers on the table, while Turks invest in other places. BiH's cumulative trade deficit with Turkey for the period of 2007-2011 rose to 1.1 billion euros. During the period 1995-2011, Turkish investment in BiH amounted to approximately 141 million euros. Most of this money was invested in the following companies and institutions: Turkish Ziraat Bank, Natron Hayat, Şişecam Soda Lukavac, Turkish Airlines, International University of Sarajevo, International Burch University and Sarajevo College. This 141 million euros of Turkish investment was merely 2.6 percent of all foreign direct investment (FDI) in BiH during that period.

TR: What are Turkey's investments by sector in BiH?

AV: Turkish companies made only few investments in BiH, some of which were successful. One of the most prominent investments is what is today known as the Natron Hayat company, operating in the field of various types of paper and paper packaging. It was founded on April 15, 2005, by Natron d.d. Maglaj and the reputable company Kastamonu Entegre, which is a member of the internationally known Hayat Holding Group from Turkey. The other example is a soda production facility, or what is now known as Şişecam Soda Lukavac Ltd.

Turkish Airlines bought 49 percent of the shares of B&H Airlines back in 2008 with big plans for a Bosnian company. However, the disputes between the Bosnian government, which is a majority shareholder of B&H Airlines, and Turkish Airlines resulted in the contract breakup.

Education, media and cultural activities are not directly tied to investment policies, but their presence is visible and more prominent every year.

TR: How did the abolition of trade tariffs in 2007 help relations?

AV: The free trade agreement (FTA) between Turkey and BiH was signed on July 3, 2002, in Ankara and entered into force on July 1, 2003. The FTA was amended through a protocol in 2010 and the Protocol on Rules of Origin was amended in 2011. Turkey eliminated customs duties on imports for all products originating in BiH upon the entry into force of this agreement, except for some meat and meat products, which are listed in Annex II of the agreement. Customs duties on all products imported into BiH originating in Turkey were abolished as of Jan. 1, 2007.

The free trade between two countries was welcomed by the companies, and we are witnessing an increase in trade volume each year, although BiH has a significant trade deficit. The abolition of trade tariffs was met with a sharp increase in trade volume in 2007 and 2008 -- \$590 million. However, the global economic downturn proved to be disastrous for BiH-Turkey relations, reducing trade -- although there are promising signs that things are improving.

TR: Has Turkey's engagement been welcomed by the people? And considering that the majority population of the Western Balkans is of Christian heritage, how has this engagement been seen by that part of the Balkans?

AV: Attracting investments in the Western Balkans goes beyond religion, and the general rule is that good investments in the Western Balkans brings positive dynamics among different nationalities/religions. Traditionally the Muslim community has been more inclined toward Turkey, but it still has to put forward serious and well-designed projects for future funds.

TR: How has Turkey's engagement been received by the national governments in Bosnia?

AV: Turkish engagement in Bosnia has been and is rather scattered and difficult to put together, along with political efforts, which seem to be short-term and without particular goals. Economic aspects of relations still have to see their full exploitation. Bosnia, as a county with very polarized views between the two entities, has not consolidated itself

regarding relations with Turkey, and any particular matter coming up is being addressed separately and on a case-by-case basis.

TR: How are the June protests in Turkey influencing perceptions in Bosnia regarding Turkey?

AV: The protests in June displayed an enormous amount of ignorance between the two cultures. Most people in Bosnia did not understand the merits of the protest until the very last stage, and did not necessarily have an opinion.

TR: In what way is Turkey's visibility most obvious in the eyes of the Balkan people?

AV: The visibility of Turkish influence is unfortunately not as well connected with investments as it is with cultural and religious heritage. The remnants of the Ottoman architecture in the Balkans are remainder of the past with *çarşı* (bazaars), mosques and bridges as key elements in that regard.

TR: There seem to be specific stages in Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans, as you have pointed out in your studies. First of all, could you tell us about the dynamics of the period prior to the rule of Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party)?

Kerem Öktem: Ferhat Kentel described Turkish engagement with the Balkans in the 1990s through the prism of a national identity crisis. The Foreign Ministry, together with the military, was the most Kemalist of state institutions, and any reference to Ottoman nostalgia was considered beyond the pale. At the same time, there was also a notion of Muslim solidarity for the besieged Bosniaks and later Kosovars, and the Welfare Party (RP), a predecessor of the AK Party, was building up increasing public support for their Muslim brothers and sisters in the Balkans. Yet, Turkish support was feeble, as the country acted as part of the Western security community in the region, and support for the fighting Bosniaks went only through the formal structures of NATO. Also back then Turkey did build local networks of support, but these were based on ethnic Turkish networks, and hence more accentuated in countries and regions with Turkish communities, such as Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Greece.

We should also not forget, however, that it was before the AK Party's rise to power and under Foreign Minister İsmail Cem that the idea of Turkey's responsibility for the Muslim communities of the Balkans emerged.

TR: How this policy has evolved or altered in the period of AK Party rule?

KÖ: AK Party foreign policy has gone through at least three phases, which I would describe in succession as "Europeanization," "Autonomization and Overstretch," and "Americanization and Confusion." In the years roughly until 2005, the government engaged sensibly in the Balkans, trying to act as mediator here and there, slowly opening the way for institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA) and Diyanet to engage in development work and the support of Muslim communities. This approach was also welcomed by the US and most national governments, who were happy to see Turkey act as a "Muslim patron state," rather than [that role being played by] Iran, Saudi Arabia or the Gulf countries.

TR: At what stage did Turkey's activities become more visible in the Balkans?

KÖ: It is in the second phase that Turkey became much more visible on the ground through religious and educational networks, and Turkish politicians began to touch on to the Balkans in several keynote speeches. In particular with the tenure of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, civilizationist references become quite pronounced. But it is also in these years that Turkey facilitated modest breakthroughs in the relations of BiH, Serbia and Croatia. The pro-activism of Davutoğlu was impressive indeed, yet many observers believe that Turkish foreign policy, especially since 2011, became extremely thinly spread, and capabilities were far from matching aspirations. With the Syrian crisis and Turkey's early side-taking, both the "zero problems with neighbors policy" and the notion of "strategic depth" are off the table and the autonomous intermezzo is over.

Now, with Turkey's reluctant return to a more multi-lateral and pro-American politics, and with the government's image tarnished by the June protests in Turkey, it has lost leverage not only in the Middle East but also in the Balkans.

TR: What specific countries has this policy been directed at and why?

KÖ: The Balkan policy, whether as strategic depth, pragmatic state building or civilizational dialogue, was directed at all countries, but its effects are seen much more strongly in the weak new states of the Western Balkans, whereas the relatively more effective states of Greece and Bulgaria have been able to keep Turkish influence at bay. In the western Balkans, Turkey is most present in Macedonia, in Kosovo, as well as in Bosnia and Albania, i.e., everywhere there are Muslim communities. But also in all other countries, there are the schools of the [Fethullah Gülen affiliated] Hizmet movement, which in Sarajevo, Skopje and Pristina are among the best; there are universities, Turkish religious foundations and businessmen. I believe that it is their engagement that will continue, even if the government may be less involved in the Balkans now.

TR: You underline in some of your studies that the lecture Davutoğlu delivered at the Sarajevo Center for Advanced Studies in October 2009 demonstrated a clear vision for a 'Pax Ottomanica' in the Balkans. Would you tell us about his argument for a need to establish a new Ottoman commonwealth?

KÖ: Well, for Davutoğlu, and also for Prime Minister Erdoğan, the Ottoman Empire is a very important symbolic reference, which is exclusively positive. For both, the Ottoman Empire amounts to sort of golden age, in which Islam prospered and expanded under the leadership of the Turks. There is a lot of fantasy in this worldview, which basically ignores pretty much the last 200 years of the empire, its violent demise as well as the independence movements of its Christian subjects. Davutoğlu's vision for the Balkans as a central area in a new space of political, economic and cultural integration under Turkish leadership owes much to this understanding of the Ottomans. Considering that the majority population of the Western Balkans is of Christian heritage, however, his vision's appeal does not speak to most people and remains limited to the Muslim communities.

TR: You identify TİKA, the Foreign Ministry, Diyanet and Gülen as major carriers of this policy? Would you elaborate briefly on each of these actors and how they contribute to the policy? What specific projects do they continue to carry out?

KÖ: We have to distinguish here in that TİKA, the Foreign Ministry and Diyanet are state actors, while the Hizmet movement is a non-state actor, with its own goals and principles that differ from those of the state. TİKA and Diyanet are service agencies directly answerable to the Prime Ministry, and hence execute the prime minister's policies. Diyanet has supported formal structures of religious communities in the Western Balkans and engages in the teaching of students and religious personnel according to the Sunni Hanafi school, which is also the predominant one on the Balkans. Together with TİKA, it is also involved in the restoration of Ottoman mosques and religious buildings, while TİKA's reach goes beyond that of religious communities. TİKA is a development agency akin to the German Technical Cooperation or (GTZ) or the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and they reach out to all communities. The Foreign Ministry is responsible for the formal side of international relations through its embassies and consulates, so this pertains more to the high politics level. Having said that, the consulates have developed strong relations with Islamic networks and actors, which they now favor over the ethnic Turkish networks, which used to dominate the scene.

The Hizmet network is operating independently from the state, even though there are of course overlaps. Hizmet is present in the Western Balkans above all as provider of educational services and in Albania as operator of all madrasas, i.e., religious schools.

TR: Have these actors been in full cooperation with each other or are there areas of disagreement?

KÖ: It depends on the specific case and country, but there are visible tensions even within the state actors. Diyanet is considered by the other actors as being too parochial in its outlook. There is tension between the merit-based older generations in the foreign service and both the more recent AK Party appointments, as well as with the AK Party-dominated TİKA. Many of the government actors come from Turkey's Islamist mainstream tradition, Milli Görüş (national view) and encounter the Hizmet movement with suspicion. And this sometimes results in almost comical situations. Take Sarajevo's two Turkish universities for instance. They are both located in the suburb of Ilidža, they literally face each other, but one belongs to the Hizmet (Burch) and one to a pro-AK Party foundation (International University of Sarajevo). When the latter was launched to great public acclaim, the rector of Burch was not invited.

TR: How has this 'liberal-Islamist project' been received by both decision makers of the region and the public, considering that the Balkans have Muslim and non-Muslim

populations? Have these policies had a major impact on public debates, which as you indicated remain dominated by fiercely secular elites in most countries?

KÖ: There is a lot of wariness of this project, and of the rhetoric of Turkish foreign policy actors, which has repeatedly referred to the Balkans as a peripheral space, civilized and launched into world history by the Ottoman Turks. The majority of Balkan publics, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, see their future in the EU and not in an ill-defined post-Ottoman space. For most people in the Balkans, the Ottoman era is not a positive reference, even though perceptions have changed gradually. And even for people with a Muslim heritage, it is not straightforward. Bosniaks have a very complex relation to the Ottoman heritage; for most Albanians in Albania proper, Islam is a very distant point of history and the preference for Europe deeply embedded. Turkey has given the fierce secularists every reason to worry and rally against Turkish influence. This is a pity, as Turkey's presence in the region has been overall benign. But as within Turkey, the actors of the AK Party will have to revisit their use of religion in foreign policy and probably use a more inclusive language that extends to all people in the region.