

# A POLITICAL ROMANCE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOSNIA AND TURKEY

*Turkish influence over deeply fragmented Bosnia has been omnipresent in recent years. This article explains the foundations and dynamics of this relationship, both historically and in contemporary Bosnia, examining how Bosnia–Turkey relations affect political elites, business, and the two countries’ general populations. Specifically, the article elaborates on Turkish foreign policy in Bosnia, and Bosnia’s response in turn. In analyzing this relationship, while recognizing that Turkey is an important player in the Balkans by virtue of its geography and history, the article suggests that Turkey should employ a more transparent and effective approach.*

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**I** wholeheartedly greet our 81 provinces as well as sister and friendly capitals and cities of the world (...). I thank my brothers in Egypt who are struggling for democracy and who understand our struggle very well. I thank my brothers in the Balkans, in Bosnia, in Macedonia, in Kosovo and in all cities in Europe who celebrate our victory with the same joy we have here.

These were the opening lines of the victory speech Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, delivered on the night of 30 March 2014, following his party's victory at local elections. To and at no one's surprise, Bosnia was mentioned again. Back in 2011, in his victory speech, Mr. Erdoğan alluded to Turkey's aspiration to be a voice in the West for the Middle Eastern region and Muslims, saying Bosnians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians also benefited from his victory: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as İzmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakır."<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to analyze the depth and the extent of the relationship between Bosnia and Turkey by focusing on political, cultural, and economic activities shared between the two countries in recent years.

### *Historical Overview of Relations*

The relationship between the Republic of Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) dates back to 15th century – long before these two current entities existed. In 1463 Bosnia became the westernmost Ottoman province, named Bosnian Krajište. The province was given the full status of an *eyalet* –meaning constituent province of the Empire– until the Berlin Congress in 1878 when it was handed over to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From that time until the end of the Cold War in 1989, there were no real possibilities for Turkey and BiH to establish significant ties. Following the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and Turkey's recognition of BiH as an independent state in the 1990s, however, relations began developing intensely.

Mostly due to the conflict that Bosnia experienced in early 1990s, the suffering of Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) evoked strong sympathies among Turks. As Orhan Dede explained, "Turks developed an emotional approach towards Bosnia. Different ideological circles were aware of problems in Bosnia and paid attention to it. Since then, Bosnia has occupied a large portion of Turkish attention."<sup>2</sup>

1 "Turkey election: Victorious Erdogan pledges 'consensus'," *BBC News*, 13 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13744972>

2 Populari's interview with Orhan Dede, International Relations Coordinator in the Wise Men Centre for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM), Istanbul, Turkey, 24 October 2013

Turkey played a humanitarian role at the beginning of this relationship that also included reconstruction of the war-torn infrastructure. Through one such program, for instance, Turkey committed 46.5 million dollars –or about a tenth of the amount committed by the European Community– for economic reconstruction and development of governmental structures after the war.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) allocated around 10.7 million euros, out of which 50-70 percent went to restoration projects. Today, TIKa is one of the biggest actors in the cultural revival in BiH; its Sarajevo office has the third largest budget worldwide. In the words of Zülküf Oruç, TIKa’s coordinator for its BiH office, their mission is “building a future through rebuilding history and past.”

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### ***Bosnia: Turkish Outpost?***

Along with post-war reconstruction efforts, Turkish diplomatic efforts in Bosnia became more focused. When Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu took office in 2009, the foundations of emotional and heartfelt relations between BiH and Turkey had already been laid. His most important theoretical analysis of Turkey’s foreign policy outlook, published in 2001 under the title *Strategic Depth*, proposed a new relationship with Turkey’s immediate neighbors that corresponded to the historical and geopolitical dimensions of modern Turkey while building on its Ottoman past. Davutoğlu devotes special attention to BiH, citing the country as “a political, economic, and cultural advanced outpost of Turkey reaching into Central Europe.”<sup>4</sup>

In his work, Davutoğlu refers to the connecting links for Turkey’s Balkan policy, the main focus of which is local Muslim communities: “The basis of Turkey’s political influence in the Balkans is the Ottoman remnants, the Muslim communities. (...) At first Turkey’s natural allies are the two countries with a Muslim majority [BiH and Albania].<sup>5</sup> The will to turn this common historic accumulation into a natural alliance has now emerged.”<sup>6</sup>

3 “Bosnia Peace Operation: Progress Toward Achieving the Dayton Agreement’s Goals,” *US Government Accountability Office*, 1997.

4 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position] (Istanbul: Kültür Yayınları, 2001), p. 317.

5 Contrary to Davutoğlu’s statement, Muslims in BiH are only a simple majority with roughly 40 %. Taken together, there are more Christians in BiH with 46 % (31 % Serbian-Orthodox, and 15 % Catholics).

6 Davutoğlu (2001), p. 123.

The actions and projects Turkey is implementing under this cultural umbrella are used as a very powerful instrument.<sup>7</sup> Davutoğlu's foreign policy strategy in BiH goes by the book, fundamentally aimed at winning the "hearts and minds"<sup>8</sup> not only of BiH politicians, but also the public in general.<sup>9</sup>

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At the same time, Bosnian foreign policy is based on a single document dating back to 2003, titled "General Directions and Priorities for Implementing the Foreign Policy of BiH." This merely four-page document, developed by the tripartite Presidency of BiH more than a decade ago, serves as the key framework for BiH's relations with the rest of the world today. It is clear that it

does not serve as an adequate base for the country to proactively shape its relations with other countries.

### *Perceptions of Turkey in Bosnia*

Bosnia is a deeply fragmented country that contains several levels of political structure. The entities were formally established by the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, based largely on the territories held by the two warring sides at the time. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina covers 51 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's total area, while Republika Srpska covers 49 percent. The Federation consists of ten cantons, and Bosniaks make up the majority of its population.

In the words of BiH Presidency member Bakir Izetbegovic, Turkey is of utmost importance for Bosnia: "We consider Turkey as a big brother who is strong and wise."<sup>10</sup> This sentiment goes even further: "The achievement of one brother is also the success of the other [brother]. Thus, we are proud of our brother Turkey."<sup>11</sup>

7 Populari's interview with Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) representatives, Mehmet Ozkan and Mehmet Uğur Ekinci both Researchers in the SETA's Foreign Policy Research Department, Ankara, Turkey, 21 October 2013.

8 For more on soft power see: Joseph Nye "Smart Power: In search of the balance between hard and soft power," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (Fall 2006).

9 Today, TIKA is one of the biggest actors in the cultural revival in BiH. Even though identifying the full scope of their activities in BiH has not been possible, some of the greatest cultural sites in BiH, such as the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge in Višegrad, or the Old Bridge over river Neretva have been restored with support from TIKA.

10 Bakir Izetbegović, Bosniak member of the BiH's tripartite presidency, in an interview for the Anadolu Agency after winning the 2010 presidential election, 5 October 2010.

11 "Izetbegovic praises Turkish schools and universities abroad," *Today's Zaman*, 25 September 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-293392-izetbegovic-praises-turkish-schools-and-universities-abroad.html>

A contemporary Bosnian burden of dividing everything by three (according to the Constitution of BiH, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, have been defined as constituent peoples, along with Others) is inevitably manifested in domestic politics as well as foreign policy; relations with Turkey are no exception. A profound difference in both the visibility and the perception of Turkey's influence in contemporary BiH is very apparent among its three constituent peoples. Historically, Bosniaks consider the Ottoman era of their history as the “Golden Age” of BiH, and see it as the birth of their religious identity. BiH's Christian populations of Serbs and Croats, in contrast, deem the Ottoman period as a time of enslavement and tragedy that lasted for more than four centuries.

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Today, the majority of Bosniaks support Turkey's ever-growing influence in the country. However, what Bosniaks view as friendly rhetoric and proof of brotherhood, BiH's Serb and Croat populations find uncomfortable. As a consequence, according to some, Turkey's increasing presence in BiH exacerbates already existing internal divisions.

In words of Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska (RS): “Turkey is causing a lot of problems in BiH. It does not have absolute right to meddle into regional issues.”<sup>12</sup> Veso Vegar, a public relations officer of second-largest Croatian political party known as the Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ 1990), is of the same opinion. He points to the lack of a warm welcome for Erdoğan's overtures (cited above) by many citizens in BiH, particularly by Croats and Serbs. Vegar concludes: “I do not believe that someone likes to hear that BiH is an Ottoman legacy.”

At the same time, Turkey also finds this to be a real issue that must be addressed, as its stated policy is to support the whole country rather than just one of the entities. The former First Counselor at the Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo, Yasemin Eralp, explains: “This is the major problem we Turks have in Bosnia – the image. We support the country, not any entity specifically, and we are working on changing this perception.”<sup>13</sup>

12 “Predsednici: Srbija i RS nikad bliže,” [President: Serbia and the RS close as ever], *Vesti Online*, 31 October 2013, <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/356386/Predsednici-Srbija-i-RS-nikad-bliže>

13 Populari's interview with the former First Counselor at the Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo, Yasemin Eralp, June 2013

*“BiH’s Christian populations of Serbs and Croats, in contrast, deem the Ottoman period as a time of enslavement and tragedy that lasted for more than four centuries.”*

Turkish.<sup>14</sup> The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Kin Communities (YTB) experienced reluctance by students from the Republika Srpska (RS) to learn about scholarship opportunities in Turkey: “At the University of Sarajevo, we had some one hundred students attending the presentation, while in the RS, only one student in Istočno Sarajevo and some 15 to 20 students in Banja Luka.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, no large-scale production investment has been made in Republika Srpska. To date, majority of the activities organized by Turkey have been taking place in Federation BiH and are generally more welcomed in this Bosnian entity.

At the diplomatic level, yields are similarly meager. To-date, Turkish politicians have visited Republika Srpska only on one occasion – in 2011, when Davutoğlu met with RS President Dodik. Over a period of more than three years, Nebojša Radmanović, the member of the Presidency from Republika Srpska, attended three formal meetings; Željko Komšić, the Croat member of the Presidency, held four official meetings with its Turkish counterparts. In contrast, Bakir Izetbegović, the Bosniak member of the Presidency maintained by far the most intensive contacts with the Turkish side. These resulted in no less than 25 formal meetings with Turkish government officials.

### *Counting Every Penny?*

Clearly positive sentiments towards Turkey among the Bosniak community cannot be overlooked. The impact is visible in all political and social walks of life. The ultimate question is whether this fraternal sentiment matches economic gains

<sup>14</sup> Populari’s interview with Rahman Ademi, Balkan Countries Coordinator of Culture Centers, Ankara, Turkey, 21 October 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Populari’s interview with Ramazan Çokçevik, Head of the BiH Desk within the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Kin Communities, Ankara, Turkey, 21 October 2013.

as well. Focusing only on the bilateral aid flow from Turkey to BiH, approximately 10.7 million euros from TİKA's budget was allocated to BiH – its total budget in 2012 was 135.05 million euros.<sup>16</sup> Turkey's Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) contributed to the construction of mosques in Bosnia, modernized the Travnik madrasa, and constructed a mosque within the International University of Sarajevo campus. The list continues, likely meaning that millions are being invested; the total budget in the country remains unknown. The logic behind this investment is explained by Kemal Hakkı Kılıç, Head of the Balkans Department in the *Diyanet*: “You don't count every penny when you're helping a friend, you know. We don't know how much money we spent on building and rebuilding mosques in BiH. It is not our tradition to tell the figures as we build everywhere and we don't count.”<sup>17</sup>

*“So far, BiH's attempt to rely on friendly relations with Turkey to prosper economically is clearly not working.”*

While Turks claim not to count every penny for charity projects in Bosnia, businesses operate differently. Given the comparison of volumes of trade between BiH and its top trade partners, it is evident that there is a large potential for strengthening this aspect of cooperation between Turkey and BiH.

In 2013, the total trade value between BiH and Turkey was 307 million Euros.<sup>18</sup> Out of that, BiH exports to Turkey totaled 88 million euros, while imports from Turkey to BiH amounted to 218 million Euros.<sup>19</sup> This represents only 2.9 percent of total imports to BiH. At the same time, Turkey ranks eighth among export destinations of BiH. While BiH exported 88 million Euros to Turkey in 2013 (two percent of BiH's total exports), it managed to export six to eight times that value to Italy and Germany. At the same time, out of 44 Turkish companies in BiH, only two invested in production: SiseCam Soda Lukavac, and Natron Hayat Maglaj, although the official statistics in BiH show that unemployment is the top priority to be addressed in BiH, and jobs created in the real sector are the necessity.<sup>20</sup> Considering the substance of the historic, cultural ties between Turkey and BiH, as well as recently

16 This is an exponential rise from 2008, where BiH had a total of 1.64 % of TİKA's budget, 11th in place, and only 757,808 euro in 2005.

17 Populari's interview with Kemal Hakkı Kılıç, Head of the Balkans Department within Diyanet, Ankara, Turkey, 21 October 2013.

18 “Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *komorabih.ba*, 2014.

19 Ibid.

20 “Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız's speech at University of Sarajevo,” *Turkish Embassy in Sarajevo*, <http://sarajevo.emb.mfa.gov.tr/ShowSpeech.aspx?ID=3661>

strengthened political relations between the two countries, the economic results of this relationship are well below the expected.

### *Conclusions*

BiH's relations with Turkey are complex, but also vital as Turkey is becoming an increasingly important regional and global player. In Bosnia, however, Turkey still has lots to do. Differing views about perceptions of its influence based upon the historical heritage within the country present a real challenge for Turkey. Equally, Bosnian foreign policy toward Turkey must take a position on its own priorities and future aspirations in bilateral relations.

Even though cultural investments are most visible and are certainly welcomed by all, what Bosnia needs most at this stage are actions that can help improve its economy and further its EU integration.<sup>21</sup> So far, BiH's attempt to rely on friendly relations with Turkey to prosper economically is clearly not working. Expecting sentiment to prevail and bring prosperity to the country has become a Bosnian tradition –one of victimization and charity– stemming largely from the war and post-war reconstruction efforts in BiH.

At the current juncture, however, BiH remains mostly passive and maintains its role of a “special case” country, nurturing this image within its borders and internationally. Given the context in which the BiH and Turkey countries currently are building on their ties, there is much space for improvement.

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21 Although Bosnian political elites nominally support the EU accession process, very little has been done since the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed in 2008.