

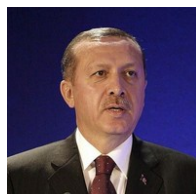


# Turkey's Diplomatic Advances in Balkans Stalled by Domestic Difficulties

By *Matteo Tacconi*, on 25 Sep 2013, *Briefing*



Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002, Turkey has been reorienting its foreign policy toward increasing Ankara's weight within the perimeter of the former Ottoman Empire through a combination of economic policy, diplomacy and an emphasis on historical and cultural ties. Dubbed neo-Ottomanism, this approach represents a departure from the strictly NATO-oriented vision Turkey followed in the 20th century, and Turkey has pursued it even more actively since Ahmet Davutoglu, the academic who elaborated the concept, was appointed foreign minister in 2009.



In addition to Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, the Balkans are a key laboratory for neo-Ottomanism. Turkey's surging influence in the Balkans is visible in several areas. First, Ankara has enhanced its existing commitment to brokering stability in the Western Balkans, where Ankara was already contributing to peacekeeping operations and taking part in democracy promotion and regional cooperation organizations such as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR). What has changed during Davutoglu's tenure is that Turkish diplomacy has become more directly involved in mediating local disputes, which Ankara sometimes does without coordinating efforts with international partners.

The most successful such initiative, launched in 2009, led to a breakthrough in Serbia-Bosnia relations, which at the time were at the lowest point since the end of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. Their dialogue had collapsed, and the post of Bosnia's ambassador to Serbia had been vacant since 2007. Ankara promoted a series of trilateral consultations, ultimately ending the impasse in February 2010. A month later Turkey's shuttle diplomacy produced another valuable result when the Serbian parliament adopted a resolution apologizing for the killing of more than 8,000 Muslims in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in July 1995. Although Serbian members of parliament used the word "crime" instead of "genocide" to describe the massacre, the document contributed to mending ties between the two countries. The same year, Serbia and Bosnia also signed a joint declaration, under Turkey's aegis, focusing on mutual trust.

Economics is the other major instrument of Ankara's surging influence in the Balkans. Turkey has experienced impressive growth since the AKP rose to power, with per capita GDP three times higher today than it was 10 years ago. Turkish companies have gotten involved in several infrastructure projects in the Balkans; Turkish firms have been awarded

20-year contracts to run the Pristina and Skopje airports, while a Turkish-American joint venture is building a new, 63-mile highway connecting Pristina to the Albanian border. Commercial ties between Turkey and the Balkans have received a great deal of attention as well. The volume of trade between Turkey and the Balkans is now around \$20 billion a year, compared to a level of only \$3 billion in 2000.

Banking and tourism are other components of Turkey's push in the Balkans. Two Turkish state-owned lenders, Ziraat and Eximbank, have opened branches and are exploring new business opportunities in the region. As for tourism, Turkish Airlines, the national carrier, has inaugurated new routes between Istanbul and the Balkans, while all Balkan countries except Croatia have lifted visa restrictions for Turkish citizens.

The outcome of this diplomatic and economic dynamism is rather encouraging. Today Turkey plays a bigger role in the Balkans than in recent memory, and its image in the region has improved remarkably. Turkey's influence should not be overestimated however. Oya Dursun-Ozkanca, a London School of Economics visiting fellow, recently [highlighted some of the limits](#) (.pdf) to Ankara's proactive foreign policy, including the fact that Turkey is sometimes seen as biased in favor of Muslim countries—such as Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo—and has not fully reached its trade potential.

Christophe Solioz, secretary-general of the Center for European Integration Strategies (CEIS), a Geneva based think tank, also argues that the impact of Turkish trade should not be overemphasized. The European Union remains the key player, in trade as well as investments in the Balkans.

Another controversial aspect of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans stems from the fact that Ankara has at times appeared to exploit Europe's temporary disengagement from the region, basically using the EU's debt crisis to strengthen its position in the Balkans. This fueled the impression that Turkey wanted to present itself as an alternative to NATO and the EU, instead of fostering initiatives that would complement those carried out by the West.

Indeed, Solioz argues that Turkey achieved the best results in its Balkans policy during a period when the euro crisis affected Brussels' commitment to the region. This fed frustration and even envy among European officials, though Solioz adds that the situation has changed in the past year: European activity in the Balkans was significantly enhanced by Croatia's accession to the European Community, and by the recent EU-mediated compromise aimed at normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo. That agreement boosted Belgrade's chances of joining the EU and gave Pristina the opportunity to benefit from a Stabilization and Association Agreement.

Meanwhile, Turkey suffered its own setbacks. Large anti-government protests in Istanbul and the derailment of the Egyptian revolution, which Turkey had strongly supported, hurt Turkey's international prestige. Furthermore, Ankara's ongoing dialogue with Kurdish rebels has sparked tensions between hawks and doves in the military and security forces. These factors, alongside economic and financial difficulties—including a weak currency, a current account deficit and an increasing number of citizens moving their money into foreign accounts—as well as the upcoming 2014 general elections that are already absorbing politicians' attention, have slowed Turkey's projection of influence in the Balkans as well as other areas. Thus, while Brussels is back in the game, Ankara's room for maneuver in the region has narrowed.

Paradoxically, Turkey is now in the same situation the EU was in before Brussels retook the lead in the Balkans: It must direct its attention closer to home. Ankara must now cool down its initiatives in the Balkans. Whether the influence it has gained there will be lasting remains to be seen.

*Matteo Tacconi is an independent journalist and analyst. He covers Central Europe, the Balkans and the post-Soviet states for several media. He also contributes to NATO Defense College Foundation, a newly created think tank based in Rome. He has participated in OSCE/ODIHR electoral observation missions in Albania,*