



AN OVERVIEW OF TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARDS THE BALKANS

The Balkans, which were first used by the Ottomans as a geographical and political concept, are defined as the steep land consisting of forests and mountains. Despite different views on the borders of the Balkans, according to the generally accepted approach, the peninsula, which consists of an area of 1 million km², covers Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Turkey's Thrace region.

The Balkans, the cradle and border region of four great empires and civilizations such as Ancient Greece, Rome, Byzantine and the Ottoman Empire, is still an important crossroads of all continents today. This historical past has enabled the emergence of a multi-layered structure in terms of social, cultural and architectural aspects in the Balkans today. The existence of the Ottomans in the Balkans, which corresponded to the second half of the 14th century, continued to expand until the end of the 17th century. The Ottoman Empire, which was the dominant power in the region until the beginning of the 20th century, with implemented settlement and conciliatory policies, gave special importance to the establishment and development of peace in the region.

The Balkans, which has a priority in Turkish foreign policy in political and geographical terms, has been a historically and culturally important region for Turkey. Although this article focuses on the post-Cold War period, post-Ottoman Turkey's Balkan policy has mainly been studied in three periods. The first of these is the interwar period covering 1923-1947 which could be defined as proactive in some aspects, although when the possibilities and capabilities of solving the problems remaining from the Treaty of Lausanne were limited. The second of these is the Cold War period in which Turkey, as a loyal NATO member, failed to display an independent policy toward the Balkans and the Turkish and Muslim minorities in the region. The third period can be defined as the post-Cold War period. Considering the political and economic environment, and new paradigms by means of new instruments in foreign policy, the post-Cold War period can also be handled in two separate periods as before 2000 and after 2000.

Following a century-long gap, the first period of the early 1990s, Turkey again returned to the Balkans, politically, economically and strategically unprepared. This period, when the 8th President of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, was the forerunner under the conditions of the civil war in Bosnia, was the beginning of a period in which, despite all its shortcomings, Turkey felt its presence in the Balkans politically, militarily and economically. In the following years, there has been a palpable increase in Turkey's humanitarian and development assistance, high-level visits and political discourse for the region, especially regarding developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In parallel, economic and trade relations with the countries of the region increased. However, Turkey's Balkan policy lost interest after the Dayton Treaty

(1995) reached a consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO intervention during the resolution of the Kosovo crisis (1999).

The second term is the post-2002 period in which the AK Party was in power in form of a single-party government, under the presidency of the current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, after the political and economic crises that marked the 1990s. This period, in which the "entrepreneurial and humanitarian" foreign policy approach was brought to the fore, as a new turning point in relations with the Balkans.

Compared to the pre-2000 period, we can say that the Balkans policy, which includes all actors and parties throughout the region during this period, is shaped within the framework of basic principles such as uninterrupted high-level political dialogue, ensuring regional peace and stability, economic integration and preservation of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural structure in the region. In addition to these principles, it should be mentioned that there are some indispensable factors that Turkey should take into account in its regional policy. The first of these is the common history of six centuries. The second is the human factor in relation to the first. As a result of the fact that the region remained under Ottoman rule for a long time, there are descendant and relative communities in all Balkan countries, and similarly, there are a large number of Turkish citizens of Balkan origin in Turkey as a result of migrations from the region at different times. Another factor is the geographical importance of the region to Turkey. All these factors have the capacity to influence Turkey's relations with the Balkan countries.

Turkey, which has long and deep historical and cultural ties with the region, has felt the Bosnia and Herzegovina civil war and the Kosovo crisis closely in terms of human factor. For this reason, Turkey has taken its place in international peacekeeping missions such as the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the European Union Force (EUFOR) and the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) in the process of achieving regional peace and stability. In addition, in order to develop regional cooperation, Turkey promotes the integration process of the countries in the region to Euro-Atlantic structures, while actively contributing to the South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP), as a founding member. Moreover, in addition to bilateral relations for lasting peace and stability with the initiative of Turkey, the Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia Tripartite Advisory Council was formed in 2009.

If we look at the commercial and economic relations with the Balkan countries, the basis of commercial and economic cooperation, especially the free trade agreements and visa exemption practices with the Balkan countries, have been strengthened since the second half of the 2000s. In addition to these regulations, the process of bilateral cooperation councils initiated with Bulgaria, Romania and North Macedonia in the 1990s was completed with other

countries in the region. The foreign trade volume, which was 3.6 billion dollars in 2002, exceeded 19 billion dollars in 2019. Similarly, Turkey's direct investments in the region have increased in areas such as transportation, energy, telecommunications and infrastructure. With the exception of EU investments, Turkey is the second most invested country in Albania and Northern Macedonia.

Turkey's Balkans policy also have a special place in public diplomacy activities, where institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), the Yunus Emre Institute and the Maarif Foundation come to the fore. TIKA, which opened its first office in the region in Tirana in 1996, has opened coordination offices in all Balkan countries, except Greece and Bulgaria. In 2019, Turkey provided support to many projects including the development of technical infrastructure, increasing institutional capacity and humanitarian aid and transferred funds to Balkan countries in the amount of 100 million liras (12.8 million dollar). The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, established in 2010, also operates in areas such as education, culture and public diplomacy in the geographies where friendly and brotherhood countries and communities live. YTB, with its human oriented programs such as Turkey Scholarship, academic and scientific research programs, and cultural mobility programs makes a valuable contribution to Turkey's Balkan policy.

Within the scope of cultural diplomacy, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) is one of the institutions that fills an important gap in Turkey's Balkans policy. The Yunus Emre Institute, which was founded in 2007, opened offices in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Romania in a short period of time. YEE contributes to the promotion of Turkey's foreign policy in the fields of culture and arts as well as the Turkish Language. The Maarif Foundation of Turkey founded in 2016 and with institutions ranging from preschool to university in 42 countries, has been Turkey's gateway to the Balkans in international education in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Romania.

As a result, the Balkans, with long historical and cultural ties, has always been a priority region for Turkish foreign policy in terms of geographical, political, economic and human factors. In the early 1990s, Turkey, which was rapidly involved in regional politics under the conditions of regional turmoil, civil war and crises, has played an active role in the process of achieving regional peace and stability. Although the region lost position in Turkish foreign policy towards the end of the 1990s due to the internal political environment, Turkey's bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation process with Balkan countries increased with the articulation of new organizations in the post-2000 period.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayramov, met in a video conference with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif. Parties discussed bilateral economic cooperation, the Araz River and joint projects on the North-South International Transport Corridor. The minister Bayramov thanked the Iranian side for their support of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan, while Javad Zarif noted that Iran was always ready to assist in making progress in resolving the conflict (News.az, 25.11.2020).
- The Presidents of Russia and Turkey, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had a phone conversation. The parties discussed establishment of a ceasefire control center in Nagorno-Karabakh and issues related to the implementation of agreements committed in the joint statement of the Russian and Azerbaijani presidents and the Armenian Prime Minister. Turkey expects that the joint center will start operations within the shortest possible time frame to ensure stability in the region on a permanent basis (TASS, 25.11.2020).
- Foreign Ministers of the Central Asian states and South Korea took part in the Cooperation Forum "Central Asia - Republic of Korea". During the forum, Foreign Ministers discussed issues of cooperation in the fields of health care, distance learning, standardization and environment. On the sidelines of the forum, the first meeting of the Business Council with the participation of the chambers of commerce and industry of Central Asia and the Korea International Trade Association (KITA) was held online (Kazinform, 25.11.2020).
- Deputy Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, Vepa Khadzhiyev, had an online meeting with the special representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, to discuss the process of peace negotiations to establish peace and stability in neighboring Afghanistan. During the meeting, the sides exchanged views on rendering assistance to Afghanistan and expressed the commitment of their governments to assist the socio-economic development of the country. The interlocutors also expressed interest in continuing cooperation aimed at maintaining security and stability in the region (Centralasia.news, 28.11.2020).
- Turkey granted 12 units of multifunctional armored backhoe loaders and 35 BMC Neocity type buses to the Georgian Defense Forces in order to develop the military-engineering and logistics directions. The official ceremony for the transfer of material-technical means was attended by the Minister of Defense of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, and the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, H.E. Fatma Ceren Yazgan. The procurement of the armored tractors and vehicles was carried out in the framework of bilateral cooperation between Georgia and the Republic of Turkey (27.11.2020).
- Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Yerzhan Ashikbayev, took part in the high-level virtual meeting on the results of the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) violent extremism prevention project in Central Asia. The Deputy Foreign Minister reiterated Kazakhstan's commitment to support the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia, stressing the importance of promotion of the Code of Conduct to achieve a world free of terrorism. The Deputy Minister Ashikbayev also called for strengthening cooperation with UN agencies and other international partners in this sphere (Astanatimes.com, 27.11.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Due to negative economic consequences of the pandemic, the government of Kazakhstan will borrow €1.5 billion (\$1.78 billion) to maintain a sustainable economy. According to the country's Minister of Finance, Yerulan Zhamaubayev, two loans will be attracted from international financial institutions. The Asian Development Bank will provide the loan worth €908 million (\$1.07 billion), while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank will allocate more than €660 million (\$784 million) (Kazakh TV, 24.11.2020).
- According to the head of the Russian Accounts Chamber, Alexei Kudrin, Russia's economy may decrease by 4.5% in 2020, even though official sources expect a 3.9% decline. Kudrin noted that European economies, in turn, would shrink by 8-9%, while the UK's economy might drop by 11%. He mentioned that living standards, which had already fallen by 10% in the last five years, had continued their decline in the second and third quarters by 8% and 4.5%, respectively (TASS, 28.11.2020).
- Business Councils of Belarus and Kazakhstan held an online session with participation of the countries' Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Pavel Utyupin and Askar Beisenbayev. According to Utyupin, during nine months of 2020, total trade between the countries amounted to \$666 million, accounting for 98% of trade in the same period last year. Beisenbayev in turn, noted that the pandemic affected trade, which in 2019 equaled \$1 billion (BelTA, 24.11.2020).
- The acting Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, Artem Novikov, visited a parliament meeting and noted that the government discussed introduction of state regulations on prices of goods in ministries and departments in order to restrict their growth. He also mentioned that the government has already imposed export bans on 14 types of goods. According to Novikov, the government will not introduce the regulation if businesses and large importers can keep prices on their own (24.kg, 25.11.2020).
- Uzbekistan has started the implementation of the project "Development of Rural Infrastructure" for 2020-2024, through which more than 300 villages in different regions will receive financing to improve the quality of basic social infrastructure. International development and financial institutions assist the country to implement the project. In particular, the World Bank provided \$100 million, while the loan from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank equaled \$82 million. The government, in turn, allocated \$1.6 million (UzDaily, 25.11.2020).
- During nine months of 2020, Ukraine exported products worth \$327 million to South Korea, while its imports equaled \$342 million. However, the Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Korea forecasts a 20% increase in Ukrainian exports, which will equalize negative trade balance. Ukraine is one of the main suppliers of grain to the Korean market, with its shares in total exports increasing from 53.6% to 85.9% over the past three years (Ukrinform, 25.11.2020).

Society and Culture

- Turkey's TRT Avaz TV channel prepared a documentary on 1,300-year-old Bilge Tonyukuk inscriptions in present-day Mongolia. The inscriptions give valuable information on historical events that occurred during the Gokturk era in Central Asia, such as the war strategies of the Turks and Tonyukuk's struggles for the Turkic state. The 1,300th anniversary of the construction of the Tonyukuk Monument was included in UNESCO's recommendations list for 2020-2021 upon Turkey's proposal (Aa.com.tr, 25.11.2020).
- As part of a joint action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Kazakhstan sent a cargo with 16 tons of humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan. The assistance was initiated by the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The humanitarian assistance to brotherly Kyrgyz people included 400 medical ventilators and 2 million medical masks produced in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has also provided humanitarian assistance to Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan since the beginning of the epidemic (Astanatimes.com, 27.11.2020).
- Turkish city of Trabzon held the inauguration of the Photography Exhibition of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) featuring "Cultural Capitals of the Turkic World.". The opening of the exhibition was attended by the TURKSOY Secretary General, Dusen Kasseinov, the Governor of Trabzon, Ismail Ustaoglu, and the Mayor of Trabzon, Murat Zorluoglu. The exhibition featuring photos of Cultural Capitals of the Turkic World was first launched in 2012 (Turksoy.org, 24.11.2020).
- Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Georgia, Faig Guliyev, met with the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, Mikheil Chkhenkeli. The sides discussed the expansion of humanitarian cooperation between the two Caucasian states, emphasizing the importance of strengthening cooperation in the fields of culture and sports. Minister Chkhenkeli praised the joint projects implemented by Georgia and Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan24.com, 27.11.2020).
- According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report, Central Asia is among the regions with very high water shortages in the world. Nearly one of every five people in Central Asia live in agricultural areas with very high water scarcity. Turkmenistan tops the list in Central Asia with 5,333 m³ per person in terms of annual water withdrawals, followed by Kazakhstan – 2,345 m³, Uzbekistan – 2,295 m³, Kyrgyzstan – 1,989 m³ and Tajikistan – 1,895 m³ (Asiaplustj.info, 27.04.2020).
- A solemn ceremony of passing the baton of the cultural capital of the CIS from Shymkent to the city of Dushanbe was held online. The event was attended by the Mayor of Shymkent, Murat Aytenov, and the Consul General of Tajikistan, Bahodur Nazir. The new status of the city entails a series of events to be held in 2021 within the framework of the program "Dushanbe – the cultural capital of the Commonwealth" (Centralasia.news, 25.11.2020).