

"Ankara is strengthening relations with Belgrade"

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Almost a century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is once again becoming major player on the chessboard of the Western Balkans. The new strategy of the Ahmet Davutoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Erdogan's reformist Islamic government, is dragging the republic out of its historical isolation. In recent years, Ankara has acted as a mediator in several crises in the Mediterranean, serving as a stabilizer in the region. Taking advantage of the privileged links with Bosnia and Herzegovina and of inaugurating a new course in relations with Serbia, Turks are trying to get also a role in the Balkans. We spoke with Erhan Türbedar, Balkans studies coordinator of Ankara based think tank TEPAV (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey).

Türbedar, how can we describe the new Balkan strategy of Minister Davutoglu?

Since the beginning of 1990s, Turkish foreign policy is showing increased efforts for improving its relations with all Balkan countries. In the last two years, Turkey has developed a more active engagement in the region, what has been qualified as the new Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans. While developing bilateral cooperation with all regional countries, Turkey is trying to contribute to the peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

One of the cornerstones of the Turkey's new policy in the region is the relationship with Bosnia. What means this special bond?

Policy of Minister Davutoğlu towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is being conducted at three levels. The first one is the local level where the aim is reinforcing dialogue between constitutional people of the country. The second level is a regional one, where Davutoğlu is trying to push Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbors Serbia and Croatia to become closer to each other and through this way contribute to the resolution of existing problems between them. The third level of diplomacy of Davutoğlu towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is acting and lobbying for the country at the international level. The main aim of this is preserving territorial integrity and multiethnic character of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and accelerating its Euro-Atlantic integrations.

But how important is the religious factor in the relations between the Turks and their Balkan neighbors?

Less than you think. Regional nationalistic circles have developed rhetoric of neo-Ottomanism with the arguments that the Turkish involvement in the Balkans is of ideological nature and that is related to historical and religious dimensions. In its republican history Turkey has never had neo-Ottoman ambitions towards Balkans. Fears of so called Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations in the Balkans are irrational and unjustifiable. But neo-Ottoman rhetoric shows that suspicion against Turks still exists in Balkans. Not only Balkans but also EU itself should not suffer of prejudice, as it only can benefit from dynamic, developed and democratic country such as today's Turkey.

As a member of NATO, Turkey took part in the war in Kosovo in 1999. More than ten years have passed. At what point are the Serbian-Turkish relations?

Improving relations with Serbia is one of the key objectives of Turkey. The 1990 were difficult times and the war in Bosnia and then in Kosovo have damaged the Turkish-Serbian relations. Serbs believe that during 1990s Turkey was on the side of opponents of Serbia.

Bilateral ties between these two countries entered a period of improvement when democratic forces took the office in Serbia in October 2000. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Turkey-Serbia relations soured again as Turkey become one of the first countries that recognized Kosovo's independence. However, Ankara and Belgrade have been taking determined steps since the beginning of 2009 to improve bilateral ties.

President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Erdogan and Minister Davutoglu repeatedly stated that Serbia is a key country for the future prosperity of the Balkans. During his visit to Turkey on March 2011, Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic said that good relations between Serbia and Turkey constitute a critical contribution to stability in the Balkans. Currently Turkey and Serbia are working on improving their economic ties and Turkish businessmen are increasingly interested in Serbia.

Kosovo continues to remain as a major bone of contention between Ankara and Belgrade. Some developments that can take place in the future with regard to Kosovo will be the test of the sincerity of rapprochement between Ankara and Serbia.

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