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Aleksandar Vučić and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Novom Pazaru, 2017.

Foto: Rade Prelić / Tanjug

TURKEY: A REGIONAL POWER IN THE BALKANS

After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, Turkey was looking for greater space for the implementation of its centuries-old ambitious foreign policy. President Turgut Özal already had a vision of Turkey as a regional power perceiving the Western Balkans as an important “geostrategic gateway” to Europe. As an important NATO member, Turkey fit additionally into such a vision. In the meantime, Turkey became the epicentre of a new emerging geopolitical reality, which also shows its global ambitions.

Turkey has already grown into a relevant regional power, which it certainly is if one considers its territorial, demographic, military and economic potentials. Its global strategic aspirations for the 21st century have been defined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his book *Strategic Depth* (Stratejik Derinlik) published in 2000. Davutoğlu has pointed out that Turkey is positioned in the centre of the main “geocultural basins”, the West, the Middle East the Balkans

and Central Asia, and therefore it should create a dynamic and proactive foreign policy in each of these geographies. As Davutoğlu points out, Turkey must first follow global and regional balances, because it has a significant strategic advantage of being also a Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasian country.¹ And the security of the Balkans is increasingly equated with the security parameters of Turkey's western border.²

However, Davutoğlu's vision of creating something similar to a neo-Ottoman space has clashed with reality, not only in the Middle East but also in the wider neighbourhood. In the meantime, even the attractiveness of EU membership faded, despite a decades-long accession process. Europe has turned to itself and is still not prepared to absorb Turkey and Muslim identity. Turkey's Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk once said that millions of Turks wholeheartedly believed in the European Union that he could not imagine Turkey without a European perspective just as he could not imagine Europe without Turkey's candidacy.³

Istanbul's economist and political commentator Attila Jeşilada believes that neo-Ottomanism is an empty dream of the Turkish political elite.⁴ He points out that the Balkans are one of the primary goals of Turkey's expansion in two ways. First, because Turks live in an illusion that their former colonies respect them and that they can expand their business and political influences there and, second, because their economic needs are complementary.⁵

1 Ahmet Davutoglu, "Strategijska dubina", *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2014, p. 295.

2 Ibid., p. 135.

3 Orhan Pamuk, *Kofer mog oca*, Nova knjiga, Montenegro, 2017.

4 <https://www.dw.com/sr/turska-tra%C5%BEi-prodor-na-balkan/a-40857023>.

5 Ibid.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conducts a domestic and foreign policy that is based on so-called Erdoğanism as a political philosophy and leadership style. It is a kind of ideological mixture of Turkish nationalism, political Islam and anti-Westernism. This had a particular impact on foreign policy. Over the past years bilateral relations between Ankara and EU member countries have been marked by turbulence. A number of serious issues have arisen in the relations between Ankara and EU member countries. Meanwhile, Turkey has changed its role of the EU's key political actor to that of a strategic rival, largely due not only to its greater ambitions, but also due to the long-lasting obstruction of its EU membership. This does not mean, however, that numerous common interests do not exist. How these relations will further develop will also depend on the presidential elections next year. Namely, for both the United States and the EU, due to many disagreements (within NATO as well), Turkey has become a country to be treated seriously because, on the one hand, it is an important NATO member (with the largest army) and, on the other hand, because its nonliberal values are distancing it from the liberal world.

Turkey has intensified its activities in the Balkans, among other things, as an alternative to the EU. Some local leaders (Edi Rama, Aleksandar Vučić, Sulejman Ugljanin, Bakir Izetbegović) also use Turkey to counter the EU and its reluctance vis-à-vis enlargement. Politika daily journalist Boško Jakšić points out that the foundation of Ankara's policy towards the region is primarily pragmatism: economic and political interests, plus intermediary services that can contribute to the global credibility of Turkish diplomacy.⁶

6 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/516505/Pogledi/Turska-na-Balkanu-mitovi-i-realnost>.

TURKISH AMBITIONS IN THE BALKANS

Several centuries of Turkish domination in the Balkans have left a deep imprint on the Balkan countries as well as Turkey itself due to mutual influences. In the past, the Balkans did not represent Turkey's main foreign policy interest and priority. It was only after the fall of communism that Turkey began more actively to deal with the Balkan countries, both on the political and economic plane.

The Balkans are a priority for Turkey not only from a political, economic and geographical perspective, but also as part of its historic, cultural and human ties with the region. The Balkans are Turkey's crucial link with Europe, which had an important place in the historic process that shaped the Turkish nation. This is certainly a potential for its role in regional integration and its aspiration to become an EU member.

During the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia and Serbian aggression, Turkey sided with all newly formed countries. Thus, it was among the first to recognize Macedonia, which found itself in very unfavourable surroundings, practically on all sides. As the JNA forces withdrew from Macedonia, leaving it completely disarmed, Turkey offered security guarantees to it. Since the beginning of the new relations in the Balkans, Turkey has also been supporting Albania in its dispute with Greece and Serbia, and has been encouraging good relations with Macedonia as well.

Turkey's relations with Serbia were bad during its aggression against Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and reached the lowest point during NATO intervention in 1999 in which Turkey also participated. Diplomatic relations were practically severed when Turkey, as one of the first countries, recognized Kosovo's independence. Serbia then withdrew its ambassadors from all countries that recognized Kosovo.

Thereafter, the mutual relations kept gradually improving until the official visit of President Abdullah Gül to Belgrade in 2009. It was the first visit of the Turkish President to Belgrade after 23 years. The trilateral meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkey soon followed and, not long afterwards, in 2010, they signed the Declaration on Peace and Stability in the Balkans in Istanbul.

Over the past few years, Turkey's foreign policy approach towards the Balkans has gained momentum, which many experts, such as historian Darko Tanasković, the former Ambassador of Serbia to Turkey, designated as "neo-Ottomanism". Namely, he holds that neo-Ottomanism is more than an ideology; it is a philosophy of history, civilizational paradigm and world view that is characteristic of most members of the modern Turkish nation, especially its intellectual elite. Tanasković points out that neo-Ottomanism is the rationalization of the unconquered imperial nostalgia of a great historic nation that is dissatisfied with its position and role in the world... By itself, Neo-Ottomanism is neither good nor bad. It is even legitimate, so that it is recommended to avoid positive or negative value judgements and, in particular, prejudices when speaking and writing about it.⁷

On the other hand, Milorad Ekmečić views neo-Ottomanism as a means for internal homogenization in Turkey, which will play a similar role like Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.⁸ Dušan Proroković believes that Atlanticism, under the guise of neo-Ottomanism, is pushing out Euroasianism, while continentalism is gaining a reliable ally in the struggle for influence in the Caucasian region. At the same time, the West has fewer problems with the strengthening of secular Turkish Islam among Balkan Mohammedans than the

7 Darko Tanasković, "Neosmanizam, povratak Turske na Balkan", *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2010.

8 Milorad Ekmečić, *Pečat*, 12 May 2011.

strengthening of some other Islamic directions. Due to its historical role and geographical proximity, Turkey imposes itself as their protector and neo-Ottomanism as a geopolitical concept that will be accepted with pleasure.⁹

Neo-Ottomanism was met both with support (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and suspicion, but the role of Turkey as an important regional power without which it is impossible to resolve some issues, primarily security ones, is certainly appreciated. Many perceive neo-Ottomanism as a part of the cultural mosaic of the region rather than as a contemporary ideology. The relations with Serbia are a prerequisite for the stable and lasting results of Balkan relations. Over time, neo-Ottomanism has been suppressed and a pragmatic business relationship in cooperation with the region is becoming increasingly pronounced.

"CONQUERING" THE BALKANS

According to Davutoğlu's vision, the Balkans are singled out as one of the key priorities of Turkey's foreign policy, while the countries with a majority or significant percentage of the Muslim population (Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia) as well as Serbia as the central and largest country in the Balkans are of utmost importance for it.

The geopolitical position of Serbia and the Balkans, as a bridge between East and West, has always been significant throughout history. For Turkey, the Balkans represent Europe's weak link, because it has failed to fully integrate them and because it has not filled the strategic vacuum left after the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia. Turkey perceives the Balkans as an important part of its European identity, which is also confirmed by its

greater presence in the region, which will continue to increase. During one of his visits to the regions, President Erdoğan said: "We have a historical responsibility and obligation here. This is why we continue our visits to the Balkan countries and this is why we will continue them".¹⁰

Starting from the strategic importance of the Balkans, Turkey has also used its soft power potential, primarily using the historical and cultural heritage from the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. In the absence of the EU's clear enlargement policy in the Western Balkans, Turkey has taken advantage of that vacuum and has strengthened its position as a regional leader involved in finding compromise solutions. It has been through soft power that Turkey has managed to "soften" the negative stereotype about Turks and the Ottoman Empire, primarily in Serbia. In this sense, Turkish TV dramas have become the strongest narrative tool of popular culture, which has an unbelievable transformative power. The unexpected success of this cultural export has become a convenient tool for strengthening Turkey's foreign policy ambitions in the region. In the Balkans, Turkish TV series are viewed as domestic productions.

Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans has two goals: economic, primarily through infrastructure investments and security. There is also a special focus on the influence of Fethullah Gülen¹¹ in the region (Turkish language schools and scholarship holders). There is tremendous pressure on regional governments to extradite Gülenists and other dissidents, which is mostly

9 Dušan Prorokovic, "Geopolitika Srbije", *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2018, 208 p.

10 <https://standard.rs/2021/08/29/erdogan-turska-ima-istorijsku-odgovornost-prema-balkanu/>.

11 Fethullah Gülen (75) is a Turkish preacher, former imam and writer, as well as the leader of the Hizmet movement, one of the largest Islamic civil organizations, which promotes religious values. He has not lived in Turkey since 1999, when he had to flee his native country due to the accusations of undermining the secular foundations of the state. He was previously Rejep Tayyip Erdoğan's friend and advisor.

against the laws of their countries. The other goal, although to a lesser extent, is the extradition of Kurds and political dissidents after the coup in 2016. Turkey realizes its goals in the Balkans within a network of institutions and platforms, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Yunus Emre cultural centres, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), media houses (for example, the state-owned TRT and Anadolu Agency) and scholarships for foreign students.

Turkey has also participated and still participates in all multilateral initiatives and processes, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, South-East European Cooperation Process, Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and Regional Cooperation Council. It is emphasized that Turkey's foreign policy is mostly not conducted through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but through the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

SERBIA: A KEY ACTOR IN THE BALKANS

Turkey considers Serbia the key actor in the Balkans. The relations between the two countries, which are constantly on the rise, can also be perceived in that light. Significant changes in the relations between Belgrade and Ankara occurred after the 5 October 2000 changes and, in particular, after 2008, when Boris Tadić was re-elected President of the Republic of Serbia. The highest level of cooperation has been established in recent years with a view to achieving a "strategic partnership". Despite the fact that Turkey and Serbia do not have a common border, both countries consider themselves neighbours.

Some of Erdoğan's statements from the beginning of the process of rapprochement between the two countries have been overcome, such as the one of July 2012, when he stated

that "Bosnia is actually one of 81 Turkish provinces and that his obligation as Prime Minister is to take care of Saajevo as well", while in Prizren in 2013 he said that "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo", which provoked reactions from Belgrade and had President Tomislav Nikolić announce the suspension of trilateral summit meetings of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey.¹²

It is paradoxical that a nation that built a large part of its national identity on a negative stereotype of Turks has become one of Turkey's main allies in the region. Aleksandar Vučić's policy of rapprochement with Turkey made Serbia the largest recipient of Turkish investments in the region in the past year. In May 2018, during his visit to Turkey, Aleksandar Vučić said that "the relations between Serbia and Turkey are the best in modern Serbian history", and in October 2019, during Erdoğan's new visit, he said that "perhaps today they are the best in modern history".¹³

President Erdoğan's visit (September 2022) has been his third official visit to Serbia over the last five years. It is not accidental that this visit comes at a time when the EU and the USA are focused on the regional problems and, in particular, on the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. On that occasion, both presidents stated that cooperation between Serbia and Turkey was never better. President Erdogan came with a story about economic prosperity and, in particular, the Open Balkan Initiative. Vladimir Ajzenhamer, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Security, holds that Turkey will certainly advocate the continuation of the Open Balkan Initiative

12 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/turske-investicije-u-srbiji-rast-u-turbulentnim-vremenima>.

13 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/turske-investicije-u-srbiji-rast-u-turbulentnim-vremenima>.

and will insist on the inclusion of Pristina in order to relax relations.¹⁴

By this visit Erdoğan continued to strengthen his influence within the region, which was weaker in previous years due to the war in Syria, economic crisis and refugees.

At present, there are 705 active companies in Serbia, whose founders are natural and legal persons from Turkey as well as 209 entrepreneurs, Turkish citizens. Only from the beginning of 2022 until the beginning of September, the National Employment Service issued 3,535 work permits to Turkish citizens, of which 72 work permits were issued to women.¹⁵

The largest number of companies are involved in residential and nonresidential construction, nonspecialized wholesale trade, trade in textiles, catering and business and other management consultancy activities. Turkish investors employ more than 10,000 people. Turkish workers are among the most numerous in Serbia. They are mostly engaged in infrastructure projects.¹⁶

Turkey ranks among the countries that can potentially be significant investors. During the last 10 years, Turkey invested 240 million euros, which is far below the total investment of 3.6 billion euros which came to Serbia from all parts of the world, thus being quite a modest balance.¹⁷ In the first quarter of 2022, according to the data of the Chamber of Commerce of Serbia, Turkish investments amounted to 13.9 billion euros. In the first half of 2022, foreign

trade was valued at 1.2 billion euros, thus increasing by 51.4 per cent compared to the same period in 2021.¹⁸ Turkey ranks among the top 10 foreign trade partners of Serbia with an upward tendency.

The protocols of the Serbian and Turkish governments on the amendments to the Agreement on the Mutual Abolition of Visas, agreements on the mutual encouragement and protection of investments, and cooperation in the field of innovations in advanced technologies, memorandums of understanding and cooperation in the fields of forest fire suppression, media and communications, as well as in the field of electronic administration.

During Erdoğan's visit, the two countries also signed the protocol that enabled their citizens to travel only with an identity card. This will certainly exert influence on the number of tourists, which is increasing year by year. From 2008 to 2018, there was a steady increase in the number of tourists from Turkey in Serbia. In 2019, according to the data of the Tourist Organization of Serbia, there was a record number of Turkish tourists – almost 108,000 or 11 per cent more compared to the previous year. After a standstill during the pandemic, Turkish tourists began to return to Serbia. Serbian tourists have been spending their holidays in Turkey for years. They especially visit Istanbul for shopping and entertainment. There are several daily flights from Belgrade to Turkey. Only since the beginning of 2022 there have been 300,000 Serbian tourists in Turkey.¹⁹

The TIKa has a very important role as a channel for Turkish investments, while Serbia is one of the TIKa's most important partners in the Balkans. Since 1992, TIKa has realized 343 projects and activities in Serbia, as was announced on the organization's Twitter account. President

14 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/erdogan-u-poseti-srbiji-turska-ima-dva-izazovana-balkanu-a-nekoliko-je-vaznih-tema-u-r88qscl>.

15 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-62825247>.

16 Ibid.

17 <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/ekonomija/4945246/srbija-turska-ekonomska-saradnja.html>.

18 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-62825247>.

19 Ibid.

Erdoğan has announced that the restoration of the Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade would soon begin through this agency. The already completed projects are in the fields of education, health, social infrastructure and protection of common cultural heritage. The rise of cooperation between the two countries in the field of security and reaching an agreement in the fields of defence, police cooperation and industry were also announced. The TIKa has built, repaired, renovated and equipped schools, hospitals and health clinics (the renovation of the intensive care unit in the Dragiša Mišović Hospital and reconstruction and equipment donation to the Gynecology and Obstetrics Department of the Novi Pazar Hospital, realized in cooperation with the Dragica Nikolić Foundation).²⁰

Agricultural and livestock projects are also significant, since almost 25 percent of the labour force in Serbia is employed in these sectors. About 30 projects have been realized in 28 agriculture-dominated municipalities. Donations have included seedlings and seeds, agricultural equipment, cold storages and driers for agricultural cooperatives, 300 greenhouses for 15 municipalities and bee keeping project.

As a state agency, the TIKa is especially interested in the restoration of cultural monuments such as the Ram Fortress, Mehmed Paša Sokolović's Fountain and Small Staircase in Kalemegdan Park.

20 <https://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/mr-mehmet-bayrak-director-of-tika-turkish-cooperation-and-coordination-agency-in-belgrade-development-cooperation-between-turkey-and-serbia/>.

TURKISH DISSIDENTS IN SERBIA

President Erdoğan transferred his internal conflicts to foreign policy activities as well. Thus, on the occasion of the military coup in 2016 for which Turkey accused Gulen, it issued a series of demands for the extradition of his accomplices. Its request to the United States for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen was not fulfilled, which caused tensions between Ankara and Washington. Special pressure was exerted on the Balkan countries to extradite political dissidents and Gulenists. From 15 July 2016 to January 2021, Turkey submitted 16 requests to the Serbian Ministry of Justice for the extradition of its citizens from Serbia. The Serbian Ministry of Justice approved the extradition of five persons.²¹

The Turkish citizen of Kurdish origin, **Cevdet Ayaz**, was extradited at the request of Turkey on 25 December 2017, despite all arguments presented by his legal representatives and the decision of the United Nations Committee Against Torture, which demanded from the Serbian authorities to refrain from extraditing Ayaz to Turkey as an interim measure because of the real risk that he would be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in that country. Cevdet Ayaz will serve a 15-year prison sentence in Turkey due to his confession made under torture. As the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights has pointed out in its statement, Cevdet Ayaz's extradition is an illustration of the grossest violation of human rights and unlawful practices by Serbia's decision makers, with which Serbia has been burdened since the signing of the Convention Against Torture. It has also been pointed out the Minister of Justice has presented a series of falsehoods aiming at misleading the public. Regardless of the motives behind this tragic case, it is undeniable that the Minister of Justice and the relevant authorities deciding on this case have demonstrated that the separation

21 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-turska-zahtevi-za-ekstradicije/32021092.html>.

of powers, rule of law and human rights of vulnerable individuals in Serbia are subordinated to the interests of authoritarian regimes such as the one in Turkey.²²

Ecevit Piroğlu, a Kurdish politician and activist who is accused by the Turkish authorities of being a member of “armed terrorist organizations”, is awaiting the final decision of the Serbian judicial authorities on his extradition. He was accused of participating in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which was the first national street movement against Erdoğan’s government. The United Nations Committee against Torture has asked Serbia not to extradite him to Turkey. This summer, Ecevit Piroğlu started a hunger strike in extradition custody in Serbia due to “all violations of legal norms and procedures in his case.” The Appellate Court in Belgrade annulled the decision by which it was determined that the legal prerequisites for Ecevit Piroğlu’s extradition to the Turkish judicial authorities for criminal prosecution were not met and returned the decision to the first instance court for a repeated decision-making.²³

After declaring Fethullah Gulen as the mastermind of the failed coup, the Turkish government subsequently arrested tens of thousands of people it believed to be Gulenists, closed his bank in Istanbul and shut down the daily newspaper *Zaman*. It expanded the action against him to all countries where Gulen had a network of his educational institutions. Accordingly, the Turkish government sent an official request to the Serbian Government requesting the closure of all schools under the patronage

22 <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/komitet-protiv-mucenja-i-drugih-svirepih-necovecnih-ili-ponizavajucih-kazni-ili-postupaka-oglasio-srbiju-odgovornom-zbog-ekstradicije-kurdskog-politickog-aktiviste-dzevdeta-ajaza/>.

23 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/apelacioni-sud-ukinuo-resenje-za-izrucenje-piroglua-turski-aktivista-zapoceo-letos/vs4x17z>.

of Fethullah Gulen on the territory of Serbia, which was granted. Kudret Bulbul, President of the Government’s Organization of Turks in the Diaspora, warned Serbia about the threats coming from the institutions controlled by Fethullah Gulen, whom Turkey considers a terrorist. He pointed out that “Fethullah Gulen’s organization operates all over the world and that its people are also in the Balkans. We know of one school in Belgrade, but we suspect that there are more in Serbia. As for the Balkans, most of them are certainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I advise the Government of your country and all other Balkan countries to investigate such institutions and interrogate the people working in them before it is too late. They work under the guise of charity, open schools and universities, and actually work behind the backs of the states. They put their people in influential positions in the judiciary, army, police, ministry.”²⁴

TURKEY’S ATTITUDE TOWARDS KOSOVO

Although Serbia has become an important focus of Turkey’s foreign policy, this does not diminish its interest in Kosovo, which it treats as a majority Muslim country. This is also reflected in the narrative of Turkish politicians, which is a mixture of diplomatic rhetoric, religious sermons and historical folklore, with a great deal of reference to the common historical heritage. Regardless of the fact that Kosovo views Turkey as an important partner, such rhetoric is not approved because it is the only country in the Western Balkans which firmly adheres to the Euro-Atlantic orientation and EU membership.

Turkey devotes special attention to Serbia’s relations with Kosovo. Considering the very tense

24 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zahtev-iz-turske-zatvorite-gulenove-skole-u-srbiji/zrscxrv>.

relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Turkey offers to get involved, while the possibility of an Erdoğan-Kurti-Vučić meeting is not ruled out. Allegedly, Erdoğan is waiting to see the results of the negotiations in Brussels. This was also conveyed to President Vučić²⁵.

Turkey is also lobbying for the recognition of Kosovo's independence and, in that sense, it is associated with the efforts of the United States, which has more influence than Turkey, even in one part of the Muslim world. Darko Tanasković believes that "Turkey can exert influence on three or four countries" and that Greece, under the US influence, could be the first of the five EU countries to recognize Kosovo"²⁶.

During his last visit to Tirana, in his address to the Albanian Parliament, President Erdoğan also dedicated two sentences to "Kosovo", emphasizing that Turkey recognized Kosovo's independence as the second country in the world, right after the United States. On that occasion, Darko Tanasković warned that "the foreign policy of this important and strong country, especially under Erdoğan's ambitious baton, is moving in the same neo-imperial strategic direction, restoring its power on a regional and global level ('great Turkey again!'), while its tactics is variable and multidirectional, depending on a conjunctural assessment"²⁷.

In this sense, it should be recalled that Erdoğan also said that the Dayton Agreement should be revised because it became clear that during the

past period it failed to provide a solution for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At present, according to the official data of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, 725 Turkish companies with the capital of at least 1.2 billion euros operate on the Kosovo market. After Germany and Switzerland, Turkey is Kosovo's biggest trading partner and one of the three countries with the largest direct investment presence in Kosovo. According to the Kosovo-Turkish Chamber of Commerce, Ankara's official investments in Kosovo from 2009 to 2019 amounted to 450 million euros. The energy sector accounts for 31 percent of all investments, which is followed by the financial and transport sectors. In the pre-pandemic year 2019, Turkish exports to Kosovo amounted to 431 million euros, while Kosovo exports amounted to only eight million euros.²⁸

In the meantime, the relations between Kosovo and Turkey seriously deteriorated, as is evidenced by two cases showing a worsening trend. Namely, Kosovo handed over six Turkish citizens to Turkey (29 March 2018), accused by Ankara as being the members of Fethullah Gulen's network. The entire action of deportation of six alleged members of Gulen's movement was shrouded in secrecy and confusion. Due to the reactions that followed in Kosovo, the Kosovo Prime Minister ousted the minister and the head of the intelligence service because they never informed him about this action.

25 <https://www.slobodna-zemlja.rs/story/2022/07/25/d-tanaskovic-turska-povodom-kosova-moze-uticati-samo-na-tri-cetiri-drzave/>.

26 <https://standard.rs/2021/07/25/d-tanaskovic-turska-povodom-kosova-moze-uticati-samo-na-tri-cetiri-drzave/>.

27 <https://standard.rs/2022/01/30/d-tanaskovic-erdoganova-spoljna-politika-ili-jedan-pravac-vise-smerova/>.

28 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/economy/2021/9/28/izmedju-statistike-i-percepcije-investicije-i-trgovinska-razmjena-turske-i-balkana>.

SANDŽAK: A BRIDGE BETWEEN SERBIA AND TURKEY?

Sandžak is getting poorer and isolated from the main social and economic flows. Many people in Sandžak say that “it has never been worse” and that they no longer expect anything from Belgrade because it has forsaken all their expectations. Bosniaks from Sandžak are increasingly distant and ghettoized and what Belgrade says and does is becoming increasingly less important to them. Citizens have begun to distance themselves and self-organize, while politicians follow the line of least resistance.

The basic reason for the stagnation of economic life in Sandžak is the lack of infrastructure, which is why there are almost no investments. The state is building the Novi Pazar-Sjenica highway near Tutin with a Turkish loan repaid by Serbia. The most is expected from the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway, which should be continued up to the Miloš Veliki highway and Montenegro via Pešter. Although it has been announced for a long time, its construction has not yet started.

Turkey is a very present actor in Sandžak. Local political officials often (ab)use it in mutual conflicts. The popularity of Turkey and its President is best evidenced by the welcoming scenes during Erdoğan’s visit to Novi Pazar in 2017. All three political leaders, who are otherwise often in conflict, went to Ankara to support Erdoğan after the coup in 2016.

Due to a large Bosniak diaspora in Turkey, the Turkish Consulate was opened in Novi Pazar on 1 September 2021. The Consular area covers the territory of the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš and Priboj. On that occasion, Foreign Minister Melvüt Çavuşoğlu stated: “Our brothers in Sandžak and Turkish citizens originating from Sandžak are a solid link between our countries. This Consulate

covers a large area, from Pirot to Užice, and I hope that after its opening the investments of our companies in this region will increase, which we encourage, and that it will improve our relations and cooperation”.²⁹

Regardless of the orientation towards Turkey, its attempt to form a Turkish minority in Sandžak a few years ago failed. Turkey’s tendency to treat Bosniaks as a Turkish minority is met with a strong opposition, both in Sandžak and in Sarajevo. The association of Turks in Serbia was formed in Novi Pazar in 2015. It called on citizens to register in order to form the Turkish national minority. Although the invitation was allegedly addressed only to citizens of Turkish origin, Bosniaks perceived it as a provocation aimed at the implosion of Bosniak identity. In order to form a national minority, it is necessary to have 300 registered citizens and there are not so many.³⁰

Despite the huge popularity of Turkey and President Erdoğan in Sandžak, investments in this region are minimal and certainly do not match the expectations of the local population. All three political parties in Sandžak have good relations with Ankara. However, President Erdoğan did not even succeed in mediating the reconciliation of the two Islamic communities in Sandžak. Unlike the Party of Democratic Action (PDA) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Moamer Zukorlić was more critical of Turkey and closer to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

In 2021, a delegation of hafizes came to Sandžak and will stay in it for five years. They will be distributed in all towns in Sandžak in mosques and will be at the service of all believers. They

29 <https://rtvnp.rs/2021/09/01/cavusoglu-turska-nikadane-zaboraviti-podskunaroda-sandzaka-novi-pazar-urcu/111365>.

30 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2015/8/14/poziv-koji-je-uznemirio-sandzak>.

will teach believers the Koran and lead Namaz prayers in mosques.³¹

Bosniaks are also connected to Turkey by a large diaspora. It is estimated that up to five million Bosniaks live in Turkey and most of them originate from Sandžak. Novi Pazar residents say that there is no family in the city which does not have relatives in Turkey. However, according to young director Rifat Rifatović, it is a myth that that Sandžak people have a privileged position when it comes to Turkish capital. "There are no institutional reactions, but only a flair for business – whoever offers something he gets it".³² The residents of Novi Pazar are convinced that Turkish investments in Serbia end up everywhere except with them and that the local economy survives because the diaspora sends money. However, when it comes to donations, the European Union is the most generous

vis-à-vis this city. The Turkish Agency for Development and Coordination (TIKA), founded five years ago, takes only the second place.

Sandžak was in a particularly difficult situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Turkey sent 16 tons of medical equipment to Serbia, that is, everything that doctors needed in their fight against the coronavirus. The aid was intended for Novi Pazar and Tutin, as well as Sjenica.³³

During Erdoğan's visit (September 2022), he also met with a Sandžak delegation in Belgrade. During the meeting, it was pointed to the importance of the reconstruction of the Novi Pazar-Tutin highway, construction of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway and connection of Bosniaks in Serbia and Bosnia. When it comes to foreign investment, two projects can open a perspective for Sandžak

31 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/reis-nasufovi%C4%87-dolazak-hafiza-iz-turske-u-sand%C5%BEak-istorijs>

WHEN IT COMES TRO DOEWIFN
INVEARMki-dan-za-na%C5%A1u-zajednicu-/2180836.

32 <https://www.dw.com/sr/maja-turska-kao-majka-rusija/a-35890521>.

33 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/322817/Objavljeni-preliminarni-rezultati-izbora-za-NacionalneTWO-P-savete.html>.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After the end of the Cold War, Turkey was provided room for an independent formulation of its state interests. During the last three decades, it became a relevant regional power, so that its role in the Balkans is indispensable when it comes to the stability of the region and its economic development.

Turkey's potentials in the Balkans are limited in comparison with those of the West, especially the EU (Germany and France), both because of Kosovo and its attitude towards Russia, which President Erdoğan also uses for the purpose of the presidential elections the outcome of which is very uncertain. The relations with the Balkans will largely depend on the outcome of the 2023 elections. The Turkish government is also preoccupied with its troublesome neighbours in the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasus.

Turkey skillfully calibrates its penetration of the Balkans, especially the countries with the majority Muslim population, relative to its bilateral ties with Belgrade as well as the West and Russia.

Apart from Serbia's objective interest of the state in maintaining constructive and successful relations with Turkey, Belgrade also relies on Turkey as a partner it can rely on in the event of a new economic crisis due to the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Turkey's rivalry with the European Union and United States in the Balkans is certainly in collision with the Balkan countries' Euro-Atlantic agenda. That is why the EU and the USA should be aware that the Balkans are exposed to many influences that can make the Euro-Atlantic agenda meaningless, as it is already the case with Serbia. The Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkans must be tangible and convincing. In addition, it would be desirable that the EU and the USA strengthen their partnership with Turkey (like the one in the 1990s) in order to preserve and strengthen the European future of the region.

Turkey's ambition to gain more influence in the Balkans is legitimate. However, if its influence is used for blackmailing Europe, it can have a negative connotation, bearing in mind the fragility of the Balkan countries. The EU's unclear and insufficiently engaged policy towards the Balkans provides room for Turkey and its potential to stabilize or destabilize the region.