

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN TURKISH (NEO)-OTTOMANISM CHALLENGE THE EU IN THE BALKANS?¹⁵

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Abstract

In the light of diminished interests and the lack of political will from the side of Brussels, governments of the Western Balkans are being tempted by other actors to restore their foreign policy strategies. It comes as no surprise that the states including China, Turkey, or Russia endeavour to refute or at least question the common conviction of European inevitability scenario. In this article, I would like to draw particular attention to Turkey which during the recent years decided to shift its traditional focus, limited to the support of Muslim communities and protection of the Ottoman heritage to the entire region of the Western Balkans. Whereas some of the scholars tend to define the art of Erdoğan's foreign policy in terms of the Neo-Ottomanism, I am going to analyse its origins, portray its economic, political and identity dimensions, explain how some of its facets pursued a path from being unimaginable to becoming natural and essential (such as the thaw in relations between Belgrade and Ankara) and finally evaluate whether it can serve as a real threat towards ongoing EU-integration.



¹⁵ Recent political events that occurred after writing this article shed some positive light on the EU integration discourse. They include the final decision of the EU Council and the EU Commission to commence accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania as well as parliamentary elections in Montenegro won by the pro-EU opposition bloc.

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Introduction

The Berlin Process is currently one of the main diplomatic tools strengthening regional cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans. Simultaneously, it serves as a key mechanism of ongoing integration, delivering strategies and concepts for policies underpinned by annual summits (Marciacq, 2017). This year's conference of the Berlin Process, organised online in the light of unprecedented circumstances of the global pandemic, announced the Zagreb Declaration. The statement, firstly, emphasized the strategic importance of stabilised and democratised Western Balkans in the eyes of the EU, secondly, acknowledged that Western Balkan states have strong European aspirations and will continue their efforts to reform and adapt to the EU norms and standards (Zagreb Declaration, 2020). Interestingly enough, the same tone of narrative has been already pronounced in 2003 in the Thessaloniki Declaration that approved *European future* of the Western Balkans (Kosticova, 2013). Another common element of both declarations is the lack of clearly determined and ended strategy that would be expressed in a particular reward such as a concrete day of the EU accession. Instead, the leaders of the Western Balkan governments since 17 years have to follow a policy of cooperation coined in a generalised *European perspective* term. Does it mean that the EU conditionality does not work in the context of the Western Balkans? The Thessaloniki Declaration assumed such challenges to face and overcome as: state-building of Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), overall democratisation of the region or introduction of transparent and liberal market economy. Empirically speaking, these aims after 17 years definitely have not been realised. The status of sovereign Kosovo is still contested, BiH cannot profoundly reform its constitutional Dayton order, Serbia and Montenegro note democratic backsliding as their autocratic presidents consolidate power, corruption, nepotism and cronyism are widespread everywhere in the area. Even some positive exceptions such as the Greek-Macedonian reconciliation from Prespa have not been appreciated enough to open accession negotiations with Skopje. Does clinging to the conditionality policy despite clear failures mean that the EU lost both the political will and the idea of how to integrate the Western Balkans within its structures? Brussels seems to be in an absolute conviction that the *European fate* of the Balkan Peninsula is irreversible and forever granted, therefore the question of negotiations and enlargement can wait for its turn. One can notice that the mutual fatigue over eternal Europeanisation leads towards rising scepticism and decline of legitimacy of the EU conditionality policy (Džankić, Keil & Kmezić, 2018). In this light, current literature on Europeanisation is growingly preoccupied with a dilemma whether the ongoing stalemate can serve as an opportunity for other world powers including Russia, China or Turkey to enter the region and offer an alternative for the Western Balkan governments and their societies? For the scope of this paper, I will focus on Turkey as one of the potential actors increasing its leverages in the Western Balkans and attempt to answer whether it can undermine the *European inevitability* of the region. For the sake of clarity of my analysis, I would like to question some hovering myths such as the common conviction of the sultanistic and Neo-Ottoman ambitions of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the role of Turkish soft power, and the significance of national and religious identity in the prism of the foreign policy pragmatism.

How Ottoman is the Neo-Ottomanism?

The nature of social sciences tends to label the *neo-* prefixes for the theories and ideologies being reproduced and readjusted to the new political contexts. The true art of *neo-ing* any thought or concept stems from an accurate reintroduction of once outdated explanations while keeping the essence as original as possible. This cannot, however, be said about the Neo-Ottomanism as it has almost nothing to do with its alleged predecessor. Long story short, Ottomanism was a concept introduced in the end of the 19th century for the sake of rescuing the last scraps of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Hence, it was a defensive policy focused on domestic issues as it attempted to grant equality and emancipation for all of its millets (religious communities) in order to prevent rampant nationalisms inciting independent movements, especially at its western (Balkan) edges (Çolak,

2006). Kemalism introduced in 1923 by the owner of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal, can be determined as the contradiction of Ottomanism, as it focused on the nation state-building concept and followed an array of top-down liberalisation and secularisation reforms. Mustafa Kemal and his proponents perceived Ottomanism as the primordial, conservative and religious state idea that would not find any place in the modern 20th century Europe (Sahin, 2011). In the sphere of foreign policy, Kemalists, sensing a palpable breath of the Soviet hegemon at their own frontiers, decided to unite with the *western world*. This later conferred them the NATO membership and close economic cooperation with the European communities. In such a context, Turkey proceeded with a neutral policy towards its former territories in the Balkans and the Middle East due to at least three reasons. First, the memory of the Ottomans resembling invaders was still widespread among these societies, hence any close cooperation would not be warmly welcomed. Second, the military and economic potential of Turkey was not sufficient to undermine the Cold War bipolarity, therefore, due to security threats from the socialist bloc Ankara was doomed to comply with the US guidelines. Third, Turkish liberalism and democratisation contradicted the ideological fundamentals of both the non-aligned Titoist Yugoslavia and Soviet-leaning Baathist Middle East that ultimately ruined any opportunity for close cooperation (Yavuz, 2020).

The end of the Cold War compelled Turkey to readjust its policy and security interests. Initial hopes of becoming a *full* member of the western world proved fruitless as Turkey lost its strategic priority in the NATO structures and was declined from participating in the venture of the new *Maastricht-written* Europe. This encouraged the Prime Minister and then-President, Turgut Özal, to invent a new policy, maintained until today by Erdoğan, which was later coined in academia as Neo-Ottomanism (Laçiner, 2003). Let us see how little Ottoman the Neo-Ottomanism is and how inaccurate it is to call Erdoğan the Sultan of the contemporary Turkish republic, at least from the scientific perspective. The nature of Ottoman ideology was primarily defensive and domestic (Taglia, 2016). Neo-Ottomanism on the other hand usually denotes the return of Turkish interests to its original Ottoman or Turkic territories where the post-Cold War vacuums emerged, as in the Balkans, Middle East and Central Asia. This return is obviously restrained to the potential of Turkish political power and most often evinces with narrowing economic ties, spreading education of the Turkish language and culture, and re-writing Ottoman history. In more radical examples, one can notice a direct political pressure on Turkish speaking minorities, construction of another dam on Tigris and Euphrates, and foreign military intervention against Kurds. The Neo-Ottomanism therefore does not have much in common with the original Ottoman ideology as it follows a model of an offensive expansionism focused on external affairs. It is obviously the topic of debate to what extent Erdoğan's patrimonial autocracy imitates a sultanistic reign. One can definitely trace plenty of derivatives that consolidation of the central government, defying generational liberalisation, or the Islamisation of public and political spheres are the elements that bring Erdoğan and the last Ottoman sultans together (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). I would however risk a claim saying that Erdoğan's populism, demolition of the checks and balances system, and monopolisation of narratives around Islamic and conservative thought is rather another manifestation of a global anti-liberal phenomenon, reverberating between Budapest, Brasilia and Washington. *Dünya Lideri* (World Leader) as Erdoğan is often portrayed in his own state media definitely longs for the sultanistic robustness and authority. Nevertheless, the extent of original *Ottomanization* of his Neo-Ottomanism, especially when it comes to the foreign policy, is highly questionable.

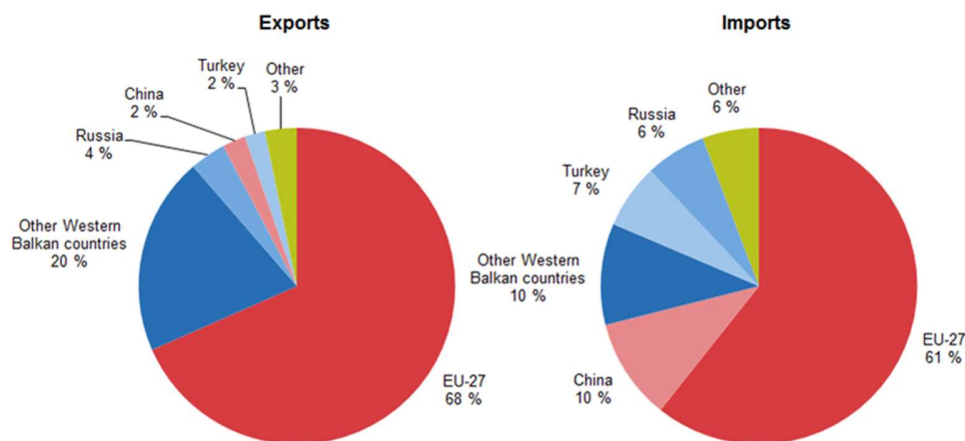
Balkan vacuum

In order to understand the actual sense of the *Balkan vacuum* idea let us embark on a short journey with Robert Kaplan, who went through the area of Southeastern Europe at the turn of the century. Romanian and Bulgarian journalists that he encountered expressed a deep doubt about whether their corrupted homelands, riddled with corruption, organised crime and post-communist political culture, could have any chance to enter the gates of

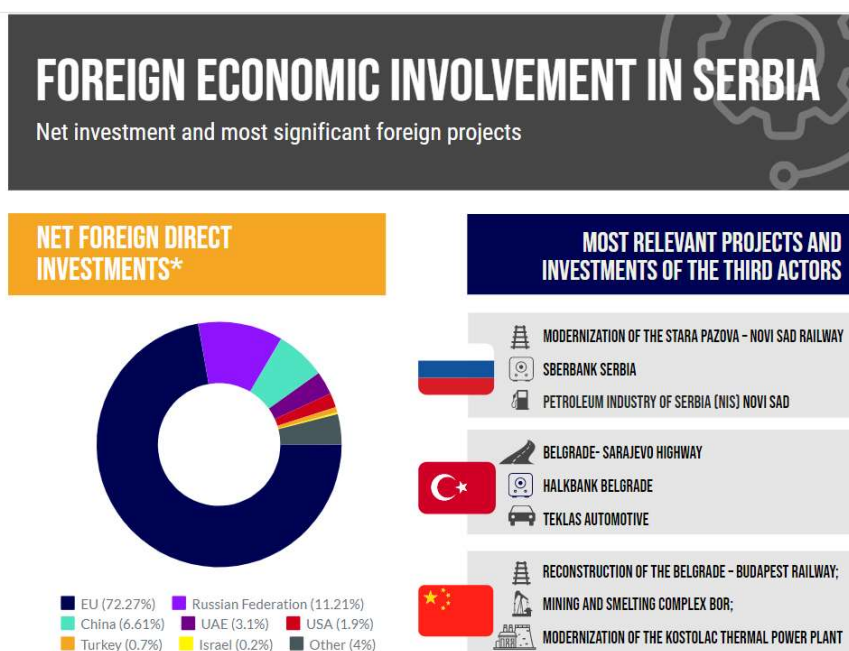
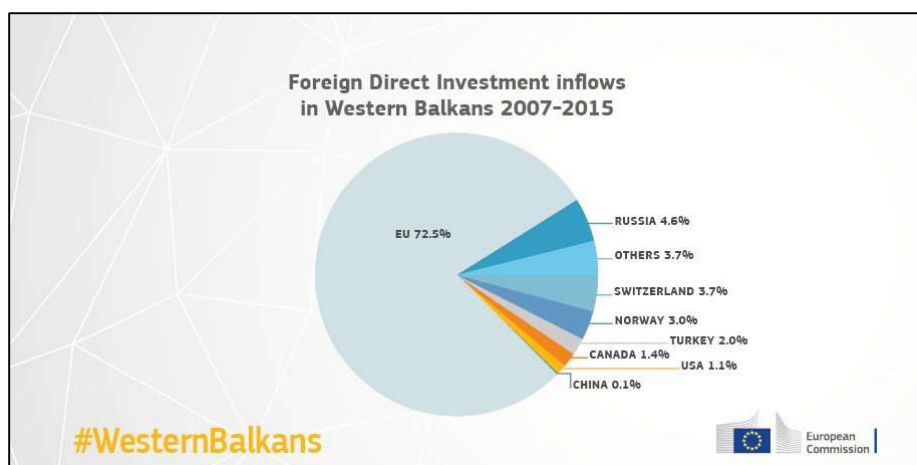
the European Union (Kaplan, 2001). Nevertheless, looking at the unenviable plight of neighbouring inflamed ex-Yugoslavia, or the Albania that's torn by internal chaos of 1997 economic crisis, Sofia and Bucharest could breathe a sigh of relief in hopes that the *European fate* is relatively not that far as someone would imagine. For the time being, it can be argued that the EU ensured regional stability and security with the lowest possible cost from its own side by surrounding the Western Balkan area with the EU members (Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria) so that the leverage of Europeanisation can be exerted by geographical proximity without the immediate need of admitting the rest as the EU members.

One can say that the EU after the NATO-led intervention in Kosovo and consequent fall of Milošević regime almost monopolised its influence on the Balkan Peninsula. By investing through sacks of money, binding the markets, and supporting the transition with qualified lawyers and diplomats, ultimately promising a success story adorned with the EU membership perspective, this would suggest that the *European fate* was nothing other than absolutely certain (Judah, 2006). The prevalence and conviction of the European scenario swept out any other alternatives (Capussela, 2015) so that neither the pro-Russian sympathy of Serbian nationalists nor the Arab- and Turkish-funded mosques and religious schools in Sarajevo could undermine it. Twenty years of an endless transition, drifting away the prospect of the pinnacle of negotiations (or even their beginning), massive brain drain of Balkan youth and consolidation of leading regimes (fully legitimised by being pro-European, thus affording ever bolder state capture attempts without the fear of consequences (Richter & Wunsch, 2020)) ultimately led to the *Western Balkan stalemate*. While thinking about a possible new opening in the EU-Western Balkan relations, it comes without a surprise that the *alternatives* for the region have finally emerged and entered the discussion on the Balkan future. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the EU remains the indisputable leader in the competition, at least in the sphere of economic interests:

Main trade in goods partners of the Western Balkans, 2019
(%)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: Comext data code : DS-056697)



*Net Foreign Direct Investment is calculated as the difference between assets (investments of Serbian residents abroad) and liabilities (investments of non-residents in Serbia). The information displayed in the infographic is for the period from January 2010 to September 2019.

This infographic has been made within the scope of the project *Serbia on the crossroads between West and East*, within which the European Policy Centre (CEP) is researching the presence of actors that are not members of the European Union, such as China, Russia, Israel, Turkey, Azerbaijan and the United Arab Emirates, from an economic, as well as political and social aspect. The project is financially supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS).

Authors: Strahinja Subotić and Miloš Janjić, designer: Anesa Omeragić



Despite the above figures, the battlefield on which the EU is lagging regards soft power, or, to be more precise, the way the other states are perceived by the Western Balkan societies (Jović, 2018). Whereas the common reception of the EU most often resembles a grumbling old parent demanding the impossible and not being worth the sacrifice, people will find out about another generous Chinese loan, another mosque founded by Turkey, another renovation of medieval monastery by Russian roubles. This is mainly the result of the perception of the EU in terms of an elitist camp that by legitimising and supporting local elites of the Western Balkan governments does not represent the interests of civil society (Frckoski, 2018). For the time being the perspective of Beijing, Ankara and Moscow plucking up the role and position of the EU should be treated

rather as the popular myth and product of media propaganda, however, the EU should redefine its soft power approach and the way how it addresses the civil society in order to maintain its own legitimacy.

Turkish position in the competition with the EU (and others)

The first issue to think of regards whether any competition between Turkey and the EU over the Western Balkans is even taking place. Officially, Turkey supports the efforts of the Western Balkan countries in the EU integration process and expects a time when the entire region of Southeastern Europe will become a structural part of the community, for the sake of mutual interests and stability. Nonetheless, this sort of a narrative was simultaneously expressed with Ahmet Davutoğlu's idea of the *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth) that develops the Neo-Ottoman concepts of Özal and suggests the ways of their enforcement in the Turkish foreign policy (Mitrovic, 2014). According to his vision, Turkey should *find a place* in the multi-polar world and conduct a multidimensional and zero-conflict policy with the other states (Lami, 2018). A special focus should be devoted to the ex-Ottoman and Turkic areas so that Ankara could make the use of its historical argument in establishing new close ties. As announced in Sarajevo in 2009 by Davutoğlu, who became the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, all Turks and Muslims look primarily towards Istanbul when any Balkan crisis takes place. This is why they deserve a particular attention from the side of their Turkish allies. The presence of minor Turkish speaking communities in Bulgarian Kardzhali, Serbian Sandžak or elsewhere in Macedonia, Kosovo or Bosnia enabled Ankara to increase the economic exchange and spread its soft power on the state level, not limited to Muslims or Turks only (Koppa, 2020). Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) started investing a huge amount of money in mosque renovations and Ottoman sites and opened cultural institutes and Turkish language schools, while Turkish state media emerged on screens and the markets were flooded by Turkish products and brands.

Shift from ideological to pragmatic Neo-Ottomanism

The Davutoğlu-Erdoğan rift and the coup from 2016 transferred the responsibility for foreign policy creation to the personal surveillance of the *Dünya Lideri*. Most likely, he noticed that the identity factor contributes to a considerable limitation of Turkish economic and political potential that consequently curbs the relations with non-Muslim politicians. In order to compete with China and Russia, or even the whole EU, Ankara has to make its multidimensionality of foreign policy even more multidimensional and open to the new visions and partners (Oğuzlu, 2018). Erdoğan decided to benefit off of the populist and state-capture waves, hoping that complementary styles of reign might help him to overcome historical animosities and nationalist resentments. The fruits of this pragmatic approach came sooner than anyone in Ankara would assume. Serbia is presumably the best example to portray the recent diplomatic successes, where Erdoğan was greeted in Belgrade in 2017 as the great friend of the Serbian nation. The positive overtones were emphasised by the emotional speech of Aleksandar Vučić, saying that *today the Kosovo Battle is only the past*, or by Ivica Dačić's old Ottoman serenade, sung in Turkish during the official dinner. Someone in Belgrade can already sense a full day of the *Turkish life* by having a bagel in one of the Simit Sarayı bakeries, taking a loan from Halk Bank or watching the TRT Serbia edition news. The role of Turkey (and its friendly reception) is definitely on the rise, and provides mutual benefits for Ankara and Western Balkan states. The unanswered question that remains regards the actual aims that Ankara wishes to reach. If it really thinks of a competition with the other players it has to remain cautious and seriously take into consideration the fact that in the rivalry against Chinese investments, Russian Orthodox and nationalist sympathy or the political, social and economic resources of the EU it will always land in an unprivileged position.

Conclusion

Due to the fact that the paper has dealt with the magnitude of different aspects, I will attempt to present my key findings in the following three points:

- Political science should be careful with determining the current Turkish foreign policy as the Neo-Ottoman one due to the lack of clarity of this term, demonstrated by inconsistencies between Erdoğan, Davutoğlu and Özal policies. Unclear remains also the question in what way the current Neo-Ottomanism derives from the original Ottomanism;
- Despite the common perception of the EU losing its influences in Western Balkans it still remains the unquestionable leader in terms of the market cooperation. Rising positive perception of soft power directed from Turkey, China or Russia should encourage the EU to redefine its elitist agenda towards a more societal and outcome focused approach in order to maintain legitimacy of own position and conditionality mechanisms;
- Turkish multidimensionality might improve relations between Ankara and the Western Balkan states, however in the further perspective it lacks sufficient economic and political resources in order to step up to the challenge against the EU, Russia and China.

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