

Socio-Cultural Influence of Turkey and its Relations with the Western Balkans

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Abstract

There are many significant changes in the Western Balkans since 1991. Even after 24 years of democracy, the Balkans has not yet provided sustainable economic and political development. A lot of external factors are affecting the socio-cultural life of the Balkans. Besides pluralism, changes in the last decades appear as a result of Euro-Atlantic integrative processes. Nowadays, there are influences which are results of Turkey's policy towards its former colonies. There are many debates and polemics among scholars, politicians and journalists related to Turkish present and future influence on the Balkans' historical context. Some call it neo-Ottomanism, but not all agree with it. There are many significant indicators of its influence in education and culture. This paper will deal with the issues of social change in the Western Balkans and Turkey's influence through economic, cultural and political collaboration. For data collection, the research will use different techniques in order to gather quantitative data of the citizens' perceptions related to the socio-cultural impact. The questions elicited will be: how much the Turkish influence increases the economical development and decrease poverty? How much is invested in mosques and schools? Does the Western Balkans represent a bridge between Occident and Orient? Integration of Balkan countries into the EU has stagnated and the East expands its influence through movies, books, products, visits of politicians, etc. The last Erdogan's conflict and hard words against European Union and especially to Germany is the intention to hide his dictatorships.

Key words: Socio-Cultural, Influence, Neo-Ottomanism, Turkey, Western Balkans.

Introduction

In the last two decades, there were many publications written for Turkey and the Western Balkans. Turkey has shown great interest in many economic political and cultural happenings in the Western Balkans, especially the war in Bosnia and Kosovo, and those themes were carefully discussed by politicians, journalists and researchers. There were many governmental and non-governmental activities that link these places with Turkey and its former colonies.

The religious factor is the key element for establishing communication among these states and this is supported by the statement of Samuel Huntington (1993), where he precisely points out that in the future conflicts and religious issues will be the starting point of all other economical and political occurrences. The question that arises is whether Turkey, as an Asian-European place, showed such an interest in the past? Or is this influence increased with the ascendancy of Tayip Erdogan's party?

The connection between Turkey and the Balkans has been present for centuries. The Ottoman Empire resulted with many common values in history and tradition.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the withdrawal of Turkish people, not all connections were cut. A huge number of landowners, industrialists, representatives of military and police went into Turkey immediately or several years later. A considerable number of Turkish people stayed in the Balkans as well.

According to historical documents and statistical data (Eliss, 2000: 102-114), the migration in the former states of Yugoslavia increased with agrarian reforms of the Serbian Government between the two World Wars. These were semi-violent migrations, which culminated with the agreement among Turkey and Yugoslavia in 1938, and with the evacuation of 200,000 Albanians from the territory of Yugoslavia.

After World War II, this agreement was renewed in 1953 with signing a new contract by Tito and Kopruly in Split (Pezo, 2013:97).

These migrations intensified the connection among Turkish people and those living in the Balkans, even though there were also many external factors, such as blood and emotional connections, which made these relations with the Balkans even stronger.

New Movements in Foreign Policies

Turkey's interest for the Western Balkans was constantly on the agenda of the Turkish diplomacy. For Balkan rulers, Ankara was a commonly visited place used for strengthening economical, political and military cooperation.

After Erdogan took over the government these interests became even more convincing, concrete and frequent. Also very significant is the involvement of the Turkish film industry in many Western Balkan states, not only in places where the population is mainly from an Islamic affiliation, but also in Croatia and Serbia.

Ahmet Davutoglu in his book states that Turkey's influence on Balkans is not neo-Ottomanism (2012). On the other hand, Edward Said (2008) declares that Turkey's impact is not well accepted by Europe. He points out that these relations are considered as difficult academic issues. Many authors in the past have discussed these issues, and nowadays many of them are doing research related to Turkey's influence in many fields, Ottomanism and Western Balkans.

Methodology

This paper will use an interdisciplinary approach and it will be based on the interviews done with people from academia and researchers, who by formal and informal meeting will give their perspectives for Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans, Neo-Ottomanism, Secularism and Islamic radicalism in Erdogan's Turkey. The data will be interpreted through tables and average percentages.

Literature Review

Many authors think that Davutoglu's book, 'Strategic Depth,' represents a starting point of neo-Osmanism by presenting many strategies for improving relationships with the Balkans and the Middle East.

Ahmed Davutoglu is a person, who visits the Balkans very often, and in his books, which are translated in many world and Balkan languages, many issues related to these geographical places are treated.

According to Grigoriadis (2010:4a), "Davutoğlu belongs to the very privileged group of academics who were given the opportunity to put their theory into practice". While his doctrine is often dubbed as "neo-Ottomanism", the use of this term is rather misleading. Ottomanism was a nineteenth-century liberal political movement aiming to the formation of a civic Ottoman national identity overarching ethnic,

linguistic and religious identities. This term describes the foreign policy of Turgut Ozal from 1980 and it is now present in the foreign policies of Turkish practices.

Davutoglu in his book on September 11th and global crisis asks how many people in Turkey knew something about Bosnia, Sarajevo or Skopje in 1992. Then he continues "...But today Sarajevo and Skopje are almost each day present at our medias, even if a leaf moves there..." (2002: 210).

He seeks for dynamic interpretation of history by asking for re-interpretation that will suit the conjectures which will be built after 20 or 30 years.

On the other hand, the Policy Advisory Group (2014) declares some pessimistic assumptions by isolating Turkey from some of the Western Balkan states and not allowing its integration into the EU. The same scenario is now showed not only in Turkey, but in Macedonia and Serbia as well. Bosnia and Albania are also facing the same situation. The logic of these developments lead towards the conclusion that the one who is weaker will always follow the rules of those more powerful (Policy Paper : 2014).

At the beginning of the 90's of last century, some authors such as Fuller et al. (1993a) have predicted some issues related to Turkey's development, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the division of the Soviet Union.

Referring to these authors, we can conclude that: "For the first time since the beginning of the century, a Turkish world has blossomed, giving Turkey potential for new foreign policy clout from the Balkans across the Caucasus and into Central Asia and Western China" (Fuller et al : 1993b).

Many authors claim that Turkey went through rapid international evolution and it became an attractive role model in the free market. We have to deal here with Turkey, which has a new character and image, with new international and public policies, not only towards Europe, but also toward the Middle East, Central Asia, America, etc.

Economical and Political Influences

There is no doubt that Turkey, especially Istanbul, is frequently visited by traders and tourists from the Balkans. Also, many Turkish tourists and traders are visitors from the Balkan states. The question is whether Turkey as viewed from the economic aspect is influencing the Balkans and whether this influence is increasing, staying static or decreasing.

All statistical and psychological indicators show that this influence is increasing, especially after Erdogan's ascendancy. In his last elections, at the beginning of his speech addressing his supporters, among other things he mentioned, "We celebrate the victory together with Sarajevo and Skopje".

Later in his speech, he threatens his political opponents by saying that some of them already left and some of them are preparing to leave. He was addressing this message to the followers of his opponent Fetullah Gulen, who at the same time, tracked carefully all movements that are made by Erdogan's party. Some characteristics which make Turkey an economic powerful force are the "facts that it is one of the world leaders in producing agricultural products, textiles, construction materials, motor vehicles, ships and other transportation equipment, consumer electronics and home appliances". As for its economy, Turkey has the world's 15th largest GDP and 17th largest Nominal GDP (WB, 2010, Economist: 2006).

According to the journalist Erhan Türbedar (Zaman: 2012), there are two perceptions for Turkey in this region. Some observers define Turkey as a regional supremacy that is constantly increasing its economical power, while the others believe that Turkey follows foreign neo-Ottoman politics. Fear of neo-Ottomanism is presented through many Turkish intellectuals. Many university professors and politicians from the opposition define this phenomenon as a weak point, including here religious orientation as well, and they use it as an attack against its external and public politics. They think that Turkey should insist in protecting his politics for modernism and secularism. Türbedar states that putting journalists in prison and eliminating newspapers which are "unreliable" is a reflection of increased authoritarianism by Erdogan. He thinks that the Balkans has no importance for Turkey's external political success. Therefore, it is more important for Turkey to promote closer relationships with the Middle East, more concretely Bashar Asad and his intention to reconstruct the government. Meanwhile, Toni Alaranta (2014: 150) describes Kemalists as "anti-Westernism, anti-globalization (and) a recurrent emphasis on the nationalist aspects of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's ideas: "For many, it often seems that anti-imperialism, ethno-nationalism, and national isolation (dressed up as "complete independence") have become even more important than the principle of secularism".

How are Perceived Turkish External Politics in the Balkans?

There are many different views regarding the perception of the external politics in Balkans. Not all of them in general are positive.

Table 1. Public Attitude Towards Turkey (%)

	2008		2011	
	<i>Friendly</i>	<i>Hostile</i>	<i>Friendly</i>	<i>Hostile</i>
Albania	80.0	0.5	89.2	0.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	41.0	20.8	51.6	8.6
Croatia	23.4	9.1	33.5	3.4
Kosovo	79.3	3.3	92.7	1.0
Macedonia	77.9	1.5	70.3	1.0
Montenegro	22.2	9.2	30.4	9.6
Serbia	12.9	22.8	17.4	19.0

Source: Eskinçi U.M., (2014-p. 116) Balkan Gallup Monitor.

It is clearly shown from Table 1 that this perception is mainly positive and it is represented through high percentages for friendly acceptance. Compared to the year 2008, there is an increase in Albania from 80% to 89.2%, in Bosnia from 41% to 51.6%, and in Croatia from 23.4% to 33.4%. The highest increase is presented in Kosovo, from 79.3% to 92.7%.

As far as the hostility is concerned, it is very low and present at only 1% in Kosovo and Macedonia, which shows a decrease from 2008, where Kosovo had 3.3% and Macedonia showed 1.5% of hostility. In Serbia, it is higher in 2008, and a bit lower 19% in 2011, whereas in Montenegro and Bosnia the hostility rate is presented with 10% (Ekinçi, Source: Gallup Balkan Monitor, 2008).

Cultural Influences

All analysis and research observations show that the Ottoman Empire has left many traces in these regions, which have had an impact on language, lifestyle, tradition, meals, monuments, proverbs etc. The author Burcu Akan Ellis, in her book *Shadow Genealogies* (Logos, A 2013), describes the oriental heritage of several cities, such as Skopje, Tetova and Gostivar in neighborhoods and old bazaars. They have many things in common like: craftsman, baths, mosques, stone bridges, etc. The same description and heritage can be found in Elbasan, Sarajevo, Ulqin, Mostar, Novi Pazar, Prishtina, Prizren, etc. Even nowadays in Albanian weddings dominate clothes with Turkish style; for example the *kaftan*, which is characteristic for Turkish female

style and tradition. Drinking Turkish coffee also remains an old tradition, which resists postmodernism and the technological developments (Barabarasoglu, 2013:70-80).

From 2001, eighty Turkish soap operas have been sold in forty countries, and now their targets are countries from the Far East. These soap operas make a yearly income of 60 million dollars. The most preferred actor in the Balkans are Kenan Imirzaoglu, Hurrem Meryem Uzerly, whereas in the East it is Kivanc Tatlitug.

In Macedonia, there is also an invasion of Turkish movies. They have many things in common with people from these regions including expressions, food, and clothes, especially with those with an Islamic background.

Watching these opera soaps, combined with drinking Turkish coffee, creates a specific socio-cultural setting, where communication and interpersonal relations among different generations are developed; in other words, it promotes multiculturalism, which is in accordance with the sociology of spare time.

Conclusions

From all that is written above, we can conclude these things:

1. There are many present Turkish elements in the Balkans as a result of the Turkish empire which has been here for centuries, especially in the Western part where the majority of the population are Muslims.
2. Turkish economical, cultural and political influence is constantly growing.
3. Turkish foreign policy is promoting neo-Ottomanism, and many researchers link this phenomenon with religious extremism in the Balkans.
4. Erdogan's struggle with the Gulenists tends to be carried to the Western Balkan countries, namely to shut down private schools established by him, to stop the work of nongovernmental organizations, foundations funded by him etc. If this order is implemented by these countries, it would prove neocolonial constraints that the Turkish leader tends to do to the Western Balkan countries.
5. Turkish movies have great popularity in Balkans, and these represent new forms of business and cultural influence.
6. Turkey's membership in the EU is questionable because of the fact that both sides are not showing enough interest in participating in this project.

7. Promoters of the growing interest of Turkey in the Western Balkans are Recep Tayip Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoglu.
8. TV channels and the broadcasting of Turkish soap operas in the mostly viewed programs in Macedonia have increased in 2015.
9. The last Erdogan's conflict with EU and especially with Holland and Germany is the intention to hide his dictatorships..

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