

THE CONTRIBUTION OF TURKISH-SERBIAN RELATIONS TOWARDS IMPROVING SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Türkiye-Sırbistan İlişkilerinin Batı Balkanların Güvenliğine Olumlu Etkileri

Athina TESFA–YOHANNES*

Abstract:

In recent years, economic relations between the two countries have been on the rise with renewed Turkish investment in Serbia, free trade agreement, and a visa-free regime. Turkey's relations with Serbia have gained momentum and will have likely positive effects on three particular integration issues that pose significant security risks within the Western Balkans, given the fragility of the region. These issues are the integration of ethnic Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska, the integration of ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo, and integration of ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians in southwestern Serbia. Turkey and Serbia's strengthening relations will mitigate security risks which may arise as a result of these integration-related issues.

Keywords: *Western Balkans, Turkey-Serbia Relations, Security, Integration.*

Özet:

Son yıllarda Türkiye'nin Sırbistan'da artan yatırımları, yürürlüğe giren serbest ticaret anlaşması ve karşılıklı vize muafiyeti ile iki ülke arasındaki ticari ilişkiler güçlenme eğilimine girmiştir. Türkiye-Sırbistan yakınlaşması Batı Balkanlardaki üç önemli entegrasyon sorununun çözümüne olumlu katkı sağlayabilir. Bölge güvenliğini etkileyebilecek riskleri barındıran bahse konu entegrasyon sorunları; Bosna-Hersek'teki Sırların, Kosova'nın kuzeyindeki Sırların ve güneybatı Sırbistan'daki Boşnak ve Arnavutların entegrasyon sorunlarıdır. Türkiye-Sırbistan arasında güçlenen ilişkiler, bu üç entegrasyon sorunundan kaynaklanabilecek risklerin asgari seviyeye indirilmesine hizmet edebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Batı Balkanlar, Türkiye-Sırbistan İlişkileri, Güvenlik, Entegrasyon.*

* Wise Men Center For Strategic Studies (BILGESAM), The Balkan Research Institute Adjunct Research Fellow.

INTRODUCTION

Despite Turkey's recognition of Kosovo's independence, both Serbia and Turkey have recently taken important steps towards improving their political bilateral relations. The steady progress of inter-governmental relations has also been mirrored at the societal level, where mutual perceptions in both countries are gradually changing in a positive way. These aspects within bilateral relations have fostered trust and have helped launch cooperation at the defense level as well. For example, Turkish entrepreneurship in Serbia has dramatically increased over the past years, coming at a poignant time, as Serbia's economic strength has wavered in recent times.

Advancing bilateral relations will further the institutionalization of basic tenets of ethnic harmony towards peaceful coexistence, contributing to confidence-building among relevant parties. The political climate in Western Balkans, with increasingly extensive cooperation between Turkey and Serbia, will assist in quelling separatist tendencies and alleviating unbalanced economic conditions across ethnic lines.

Turkey will need to utilize its newfound relationship with Serbia to push the aspiring EU country to follow through with the necessary reforms needed for accession. These reforms are not only critical in helping the country realize its' EU goals, but vital to maintaining the stability with the region. These regional integration issues must not be neglected in the quest for greater cross-border cooperation and development.

- The integration of ethnic Serbs from Bosnia-Herzegovina's *Republika Srpska*

The growing autonomy of the Serbian entity of Bosnia/Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, remains a source of contention within the failing federal state. Serbia's unique dealings with this entity, and how it affects Bosnia, must be further examined for the sake of regional stability.

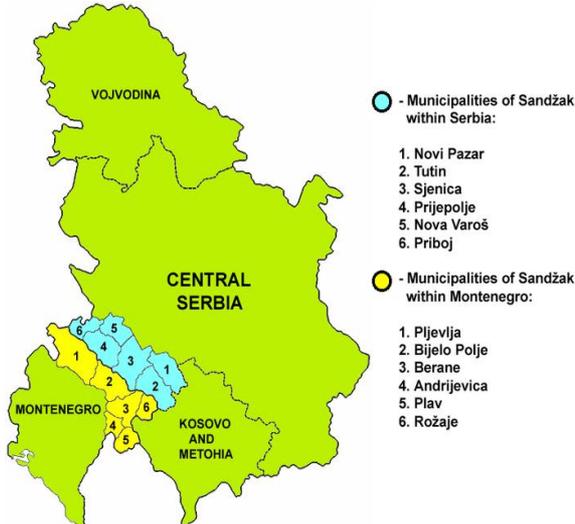
- The integration of ethnic Serbs from northern Kosovo

Mitrovica is the divided regional capital of Northern Kosovo. The Serbs report north to Belgrade, while the Albanians report south to Pristina. Tensions randomly flare in this region, so understanding the situation of both ethnic majorities in this region are critical to Kosovo's first few years as an independent nation.

- The integration of ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians in southwestern Serbia.

Bosniaks and Albanians situated in southern Serbia experience dramatically higher unemployment rates than the rest of the country, allowing tensions and claims of ethnic equality to fester in the region. Serbia's dealing with these two southern regions will surely dictate how the national government will handle relations with Bosnia, Albania, and newly independent Kosovo.

Turkey will especially need to stress to its EU counterparts to ensure that political and economical decentralization within Serbia is critical to not only modernizing the country, but important in quelling domestic ethnic-based frustrations, particularly in its' southern region Sandžak.



Sandžak¹ is an impoverished region in southern Serbia that is predominantly occupied with ethnic Bosniaks, with the region technically extending into the northeastern part of Montenegro, as well. Sandžak is also populated with Albanians within the Preševo Valley

region. The citizens of Sandžak are fairly content with remaining a part of Serbia,

¹ Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

but have highlighted the dearth of economic activity, lack of political representation, and social woes (mainly organized crime and drug use amongst the youth) as primary obstacles for their communities. These two factors are also targeted as being a reason that various frustrated youth been drawn by the small Wahhabi movement that's steadily growing in the region. Sandžak was treated as a special interest region during the Bosnian war, where (Serbian military) General Mladic was strictly forbidden from killing Muslims on Serbian territory. The bulk of the terror reigned on Sandžak's citizens included harassment and humiliation techniques. But this did not stop many Sandžak locals from being forcibly bussed across the Bosnian border in order to be killed. The pre-war census in 1991 stated that approximately 224,000 Bosniaks were living in Sandžak, with between 60-80,000 Sandžak refugees leaving the region in 1992² to Western European countries (according to UN sources). This is a tell-tale sign of the devastation that the region experienced less than 20 years ago. The region has experienced significant trauma, with growing poverty and perceived discrimination only aggravating existing inter-ethnic tensions in the country. These tensions are simmering, and while they are not an imminent threat to Serbia and the region's stability, the area's Bosniaks must have their overall standard of living improved to enhance other integration mechanisms.

1. DECENTRALIZATION

Although it might seem paradoxical, Turkey will need to help Serbia gradually decentralize in order to maintain the unity of the country and maintain stability within the region (domestically and outside of its borders). Decentralization is part of the EU accession process, and mandated as a pre-requisite for receiving EU aid funds, which must be distributed through the relevant regional and local level channels. As Serbia has applied for EU membership status, and Turkey is an EU candidate country, it is in both countries' interests to improve their internal structures as a means of efficiently running their own countries. Such decentralization processes also assist towards facilitating more efficient trade

² Mirkovic, Rastislava. "Bosniak Minority in Sandzak (Serbia)-from Constitutive Nation to Minority."

practices with one another. Turkey can assist Serbia in completing the necessary reforms in good (decentralized) governance, as Turkey was also forced to implement. Reforms are needed in hopes of running the state in the better manner, improving state stability and security, and improving public opinion throughout the country in the process. Serbian President Tadić supports decentralization if it means more state stability, and additional improvements in arenas like transport, telecommunications, and managing ethnic conflict.

As Serbia develops and becomes more urban and commercial, the need for decentralization (from an economic viewpoint) will be necessary during the times of rapid industrialization. Decentralization based on ethnic grounds will prove more tricky for a state and its' media that has a history of being largely biased against ethnic minorities.

The current Serbian state is still highly centralized, a hangover from the Slobodan Milosevic era. The only tangible decentralization in Serbia is the autonomous Vojvodina region, since Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Kosovo was once an autonomous region of Serbia during the days of (former ex-Yugoslavia leader) Marshal Josip Tito, but was forcibly adjoined during the Milosevic reign after 1980. The Serbian constitution currently recognizes two types of territorial arrangements: local governments and autonomous regions.³ Due to the problems at the central government level with reform implementation, and the local governments' inability to adequately equip with the numerous social and economic problems within their regions, decentralization in the near future could be carried out at the municipal level.

Further encouraged by the abolishment of visas between the two countries, Turkey has begun investment in Serbia's Sandžak region, but is among the few investors that has not been deterred by the overall bureaucratic nature of the current Serbian state. Public property is wholly state-owned, prohibiting municipalities and

³ Djokić, Bratislav, "Decentralisation Process in Republic of Serbia in View of Optimal Territorial Organization", Presented at conference entitled 'Decentralisation between Regionalism and Federalism in the Stability Pact Countries of the Western Balkans', June 9th-10th, 2006.

local governments from properly convincing outside investors of the independence of their investment. In an attempt for an EU bid, recent legislation indicates that Serbia is making steps towards reorganizing state property, and possibly opening up state assets for sale to investors, which is remarkable start. However, municipalities and local governments are still generally prevented from running their areas efficiently due to the lengthy bureaucratic procedure of having to ask permission from central authority figures to alter or change any public property in their region. Gaining consent from state authorities to alter or add state-owned property has (in many cases) taken years, a process that keeps once-interested investors at a distance.

The 2010 EU progress report on Serbia's candidacy has also seen similar results,⁴ noting that while some competencies have been delegated to the local government level, ensuring capacity and resources has not been factored into this devolution process. Laws regarding public property regulation have not been adopted, and guarantees of local government resources have not been ensured. Such laws are hindering regions from carrying out the local economic and social development projects needed for regional progression.

Devolution of control over state property, in addition to state services like electricity and gas, are items that Turkey must push Serbia into doing for the region, being an investor itself. Giving the regions more control over investments in their regions will open up the opportunities for projects and job creation, which is so sorely needed in Sandžak. The EU's progress report on Serbia has stated the need for Serbia to continue the decentralization process as a means of distributing the nearly €198 million received through the EU's IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession) funding instrument. The first €50 million dispensed through the EU package was meant to spur economic growth in the country, which has experienced recent economic hardship.

⁴ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, "Serbia 2010 Progress Report; accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council; Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011, November 9th 2010.

1.1. Public Opinion

According to Gallups' 2010 regional polls, 78% of Serbians have experienced difficulties making ends meet, with over 70% of respondents saying that economic conditions were deteriorating in the country. The overall unemployment rate in Serbia hovers at 19%, which it reaches nearly 50% in the Sandžak region.⁵ Despite these hardships, more than 77% of Serbians have stated their wishes to avoid emigration and remain in Serbia. These findings suggest that Serbians are generally willing to take advantage of economic opportunity if presented in their territory, a welcome sign for an investor country like Turkey. In addition to easing the burden from the central government's other domestic goals, these new potential jobs will also increase the representatives of Sandžak locals at the political level. In effect, it will also increase the use of Bosnian language at the governmental level, particularly in judicial and police positions. Seeing Sandžak natives and Bosniak language used at administrative levels will help facilitate projects and ease claims of discrimination in the region.

Turkey will need to assist Serbia in whichever capacity that it can. This will include outlining the power devolution/fiscal decentralization process by amending and strengthening the current Serbian legal framework. Sandžak's economic revitalization is critical to cementing stability in Serbia. In addition to eventually outlining the new competences under the state level, the central government should also devote resources to the capacity-building of municipality and local-level staff in Sandžak.

1.2. Turkey's Own Experience

Although Turkey is still a highly centralized state that generally opposes any type of ethnically based decentralization on its' own territory, it has instead made significant strides in general governmental and fiscal devolution. These improvements are noted in the public sector reforms (administrative, judicial,

⁵ Huszka, Beata, "Decentralisation of Serbia—the Minority Dimension", Central European University, Center for Policy Studies, 2006-2007.

fiscal, and many others) that were made after 2001 Turkish financial crisis.⁶ Turkish reforms paved the way for various municipal and local government laws to be enacted, easing the burden from the central government and allowing locals to take ownership over their respective resources. Serbia has made reasonable effort in this arena. Serbia is privatizing more and more as a means of relinquishing power and responsibility in hopes of salvaging existing industries. One example includes the serious consideration of Turkey's 2008 offer to take over Serbia's debt-ridden JAT Airways, buying up to 48% of the company if it also receives partially control of Belgrade's main airport. Turkey hopes to revitalize the airline, and increase flights between their two countries along with increasing the number of regional flights (particularly inter-Balkans flights, which are sparse and extremely expensive for local populations). Turkey completed similar actions in Bosnia, recently taking over ownership of their national airline, boosting sales of the once-suffering company.

What would have once been out-of-the-question given Serbia and Turkey's past, is now on the negotiation table. Such progressive talks signal Serbia's loosening economic grip in hopes of jump-starting a lagging economy filled with frustrated citizens. Reforms would encourage democratic practice for maximum efficiency and prompt local participation in regional affairs, spurring municipal economies in the process. Turkey must encourage Serbia to continue carrying out the judicial and financial reforms necessary to not only lift the country from its' economic crisis, but also help the country be in line with EU candidacy recommendations.

1.3. Collective Bosnian Voice

The Serbian government will also need to be more aware of its' political dealings in the region, as it has been accused of instigating and exploiting cleavages between rival Bosniak political factions in the southern region of the country. Such

⁶ Dedeoğlu, Emin, "Perspectives on Decentralisation in Turkey", TEPAV (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey), Fiscal Decentralization Donor's and Local Stakeholder's Coordination Workshop, Istanbul, Turkey, November 29th-30th 2006.

behavior is not conducive to a productive and healthy development environment. There are approximately eight political parties representing Bosniaks in the region [National Movement of Sandžak, the Sandžak Coalition, the Sandžak Islamic Community, Party of Democratic Action, the List for Sandžak, the People's Movement of Sandžak, the Committee of the Islamic Committee, and the Bosniak National Council]. While Sandžak's citizens generally want to remain as a part of Serbia, the political interests within the region vary, from some parties demanding more autonomy from Serbia, while others advocate for better integration. Currently, there are struggles between two main political groups in the region. Clashes have occurred in the area, not just on an ethnic basis, but particular struggles have been noted between local groups and municipal authorities (as seen in the southern city Novi Pazar).⁷ One way in which Turkey can assist would be helping the Bosniak Minority Council (founded in June 2010) in amending its' constitution. Such amendments would help the party to be able to legally register and become operational as a vocally representative and unified power for the

region. The council, which would work in the realms of education, culture, media, and language, needs to become fully representative and inclusive of all Bosniak factions within the Sandžak region. Uniting Bosniak factions in order to present one voice of solidarity to negotiate with Serbian local and state authorities would add weight to any grievance claims.

While Serbia has instituted major legal mechanisms to help protect Human and Minority Rights (as part of the EU's



⁷ International Crisis Group, "Serbia's Sandzak: Still Forgotten", *Europe Report* # 162, April 8th 2005.

accession process), the implementation process is often much slower than the drafting of legal orders. This could be due to the concern about how constitutional judges are appointed in Serbia. Also, it identifies how their (lack of) political will lead to lengthy judicial implementation processes for upholding legal rights of Sandžak residents.

1.4. Albanian Grievances

While Sandžak is of great importance for Turkey, the neighboring **Preševo Valley** region in southeastern Serbia should not be neglected. Predominantly ethnically Albanian, the region been more adamant about wanting autonomy, and ultimately, independence from Serbia. Insurgency within the region has been as recent as 2001, with the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (or in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Preshevës, Medvegjës dhe Bujanocit*, UCPMB). Directly adjacent to Kosovo, this region once actively wanted to join Kosovo, but has now reduced talks to more self-determination. More self-governance talks are been attributed to the lack of Albanian representatives and local and state government attending to concerns in the region (such as tension, crime, etc). The ethnic Albanians in this region are experiencing much of the same economic devastation affecting the southern region's Bosniaks. Investment in this region has been paltry, with unemployment in the ethnically Albanian districts of Preševo and Bujanovac (some of the poorest in the country) lingering at 40% and 27%, respectively. Economically devastating effects like brain drain have particularly affected the Preševo Valley, as lack of education options and jobs using Albanian language as a medium are few and far between, pushing many residents to instead seek out opportunities in neighboring Kosovo, Albania, or Macedonia (where over 20% of citizens are ethnically Albanian).

1.5. Media

Media options in Albanian language are also limited, with many yet-to-be-privatized southern Serbian media outlets incorporating pirated media footage from Kosovo and Albania to address the language needs of the Preševo Valley residents. In March of this year, the country's only Albanian-language newspaper,

‘Nacional,’ was established, marking some improvement in the minority print media aspect.

1.6. Inadequate Representation

Ethnic barriers remain at administrative levels, where very few ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians hold political office positions. Although there is a National Council for Albanians currently operating, there is currently only one ethnic Albanian (Riza Halimi) serving in the Serbian Parliament.⁸ Although the Serbian constitution guarantees employment opportunities for citizens of all backgrounds, the ethnic composition of state employees is often different from the backgrounds of the citizens that they represent. Such political imbalances have boosted increasing claims of ethnic discrimination from ethnic Bosniak and Albanian-dominated southern regions. Serbian authorities have claimed that the lack of qualified applicants from certain regions have made them unable to hire locals. But this further stresses the overall need to build the capacities of local populations in order to be better represented at the municipal level. Also, in order to constitute a council, political thresholds within the Bosniak Council’s constitution were also suddenly and inexplicably raised to a two-thirds majority needed in order to pass mandates (instead of the once-simple majority system) set by the Serbian Ministry of Human and Minority Rights. The Ministry, by enacting a different rulebook regarding the Bosniak minority, has singled out and prevented the Bosniak Council from being constituted. The legislation change has drawn further protest from the Bosniak community due to the increased barriers in being represented at higher levels of government. The Bosniak community, left with no qualified and unified representational body that has a ratified and recognized constitution, has recently reached out to the international community to draw attention to its’ plight with Belgrade.

⁸ Obradovic, Pedja, “Serbia Makes Uneven Progress on Integrating Minorities”, April 20th, 2011, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-makes-uneven-progress-on-integrating-minorities>.

1.7. Worrisome Future

Rising ethnic tensions and economic devastation to the region became more evident to the EU in 2009, when thousands from southern Serbia filed for asylum once the EU's visa-free regime with Serbia was established. A key (and controversial) Bosniak leader within the region advocating for Sandžak's political autonomy is Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, who has even warned others that if Belgrade continues with its' neglectful policies towards the southern (minority-dominated) region of the country, uprisings similar to those 2011 'spring revolutions' of North Africa and the Middle East could take place. Such clashes would be potentially devastating for the region still reeling from past ethnic-based wars. With donor aid gradually reducing to both ethnic Bosniak-and Albanian-dominated areas of southern Serbia (in addition to overall reduction of aid to the region⁹), Turkey must utilize this economic stagnation as an opportunity to invest in the region. Turkey must in effect prevent the region from relying on deepening ethnic cleavages (due to economic crisis) as a pretext for future conflict, particularly given the existing present tension.

2. BOSNIAN/KOVOSAR FRAGILITY¹⁰

To solidify regional security in the Balkans, Turkey must also further assist Serbia in reducing its' potentially destabilizing behavior in two neighboring countries: **Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo**. In BiH, Serbia's influence over the Serbian entity Republika Srpska (RS) holds great weight regarding the stability in the region. This growing relationship must be carefully examined and managed in a productive manner. Both Serbia and Republika Srpska have recently signed increased trade agreements regarding infrastructure and energy fields. The ethnic and historical alliance between Serbia and Republika Srpska is evident, with President Tadić and (Republika Srpska) President Milorad Dodik continuing and strengthening their solidarity pact over recent years. But Serbia's financial and moral support to primarily one entity of the federal BiH is destabilizing the

⁹ Woehrel, Steven, "Future of the Balkans and U.S. Policy Concerns", Congressional Research Service, May 13th, 2009.

¹⁰ Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



country, as talks of secession referendums once gained speed in Republika Srpska's (capital) Banja Luka. Especially as nationalism strengthens in all the entities (and is frequently cited as an obstacle to peace in the region), multi-ethnic BiH is unquestionably fragile at the moment.¹¹ Yet RS President Dodik has remained firm in his stance that country's constitution reform¹² (which has been the source of BiH's EU candidacy refusal due to various inherently ethnically-related discriminatory features) should not be changed in a

way that challenges RS's autonomy. Dodik, elected on a nationalist platform, has also stated that he advocates an internal solution for BiH, one reached without the dramatic assistance of foreign interference. Dodik's government has often been at odds with the Office of the High Representative, which remains the protectorate of the country through the implementation of the Dayton Agreement. However, he has increasingly criticized the growing centralization of BiH's (fairly weak) political institutions in the country. Therefore, Republika Srpska remains heavily committed to Serbia. Serbia continues to invest in Republika Srpska because one of the policies of the Serbian government is the protection of ethnic Serbian citizens both domestically and abroad.

2.1. Economic Woes

However, the dearth of economic investment in Bosnia has exasperated ethnic tension in the region, as the (2011) estimated 43% unemployment rate is projected

¹¹ Shaw, Calum, The Quaker Council for European Affairs, "The EU and the Western Balkans: Grassroots Peacebuilding and Enlargement", January 2009.

¹² Joseph, Edward P., and R. Bruce Hitchner, "Marking Bosnia Work: Why EU Accession is Not Enough", United States Institute of Peace, June 2008.

to grow if political and economic reforms continue at its' current slow pace. The unemployment rate in the Bosniak-Croat entity is much higher than that in Republika Srpska,¹³ as RS enjoys heavy investment from Serbia and Russia. The unemployment disparities are as high as 68% in the Bosniak and 47% in RS, particularly among female youth. The Bosniak entity is also more likely to be dissatisfied with the public services offered by the government, compared to those citizens of RS. Bosnia's economy is thought to be buoyed only by the assistance of foreign aid and international officials, and deep ethnic cleavages have grown wider due to the economic crisis, as talks of ethnic-based secession for the country's major ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs) have turned from murmurs to weekly topics of conversation. The viability of the state has always been in question for the last fifteen years, and has reached a critical point in the last few years. The troubles that BiH currently faces have not changed these regional concerns.

Turkey's role in BiH in recent years can be described as one of continued commitment to the country, as Turkey is helping the country lay foundations for stability and growth. Turkey is BiH's 4th largest investor, including the recent (49%) purchase of BiH's main airline. Turkey also helped steer negotiations between Serbia and Bosnia, helping Serbia deliver the long-awaited apology for the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. However, Turkey must use its' restored relationships with both Serbia and Bosnia to help maintain equal and fair cooperation and investment between the two countries. While Serbia has officially stated that it respects the territorial integrity of Bosnia, its preferential bilateral agreements with Republika Srpska and continued investment to that specific region has made the economically-challenged Bosniak-Croat entity suspicious of Serbian investment in the country. Serbia's (ethnically aligned) investment behavior in BiH is essentially fueling separatist dialogue from RS's President Dodik, potentially destabilizing the already fragile country. Turkey must help Serbia equally invest in both entities of BiH. Turkey should further encourage Serbia to hold talks with Republika Srpska

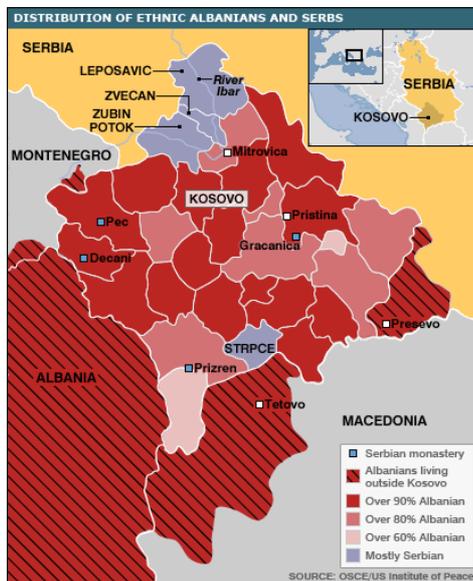
¹³ "Bosnia and Herzegovina Gap Analysis", Europe and Eurasia Bureau, US AID. Strategic Planning and Analysis Division, January 2011, p. 5.

http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/wp/mpc_gap_analyses-bosnia_january_2011.pdf.

to drop barriers for non-Serbian investors in their entity. With such unofficial barriers in place, tensions over ethnic discrimination will continue to rise throughout BiH. The precarious economic situation in BiH makes for a perfectly dangerous foundation for ethnic strife to once again take root.

2.2. The Role of Civil Society

Reducing nationalist rhetoric from Republika Srpska will be critical, along with spurring economic investment to both BiH entities. Support of civil society is especially important in BiH, where three major ethnic majorities still harbor general mistrust of one another. In this case, civil society can be effectively used in alleviating social tensions and increasing understanding between ethnic groups. In addition, civil society groups can assist in providing education and training on the local level for jobs created from (eventual) further economic growth in the region. Bosnia's media, for example, has been identified as a source of contention. This widely used information source has traditionally sided along ethnic lines, and often delivers biased and journalistically flawed information to the masses. Civil society organizations, supported by federal government funding, could help address this



problem with proper media training for these media outlets, for example. While Serbia is further along the EU path than BiH, Turkey will also need help BiH in stepping up its' involvement in strengthening state institutions within the country, or at least boosting inter-institutional cooperation between both federal entities. BiH still has many reforms on its' agenda (constitutional, judicial, economic, and social items namely). These reforms have unfortunately slowed with the global economic crisis and the increase of nationalist-themed vitriolic dialogue within the country.

Turkey will also need to use its' newfound friendship with Serbia in helping the country also reduce its' seemingly destabilizing behavior in Kosovo, a southern province that seceded from Serbia and declared independence in 2008. As Serbia's increased investments in Republika Srpska are viewed negatively in BiH, Serbia's continued support of northern Kosovo's Serbian minority is also viewed negatively within the Kosovo.¹⁴ Mitrovica, seen as the administrative capital of Serbian-dominated northern Kosovo, reports primarily to Belgrade, instead of the country's established (and Albanian-dominated) capital Pristina. The city is divided in half by a natural barrier, the Ibar River. But it remains (unofficially) socially divided as well, with the northern part being inhabited by ethnic Serbs, and the southern region being ethnically Albanian. This ethnic composition has been the source of many deadly ethnic clashes in the city, the most recent of which occurring during Kosovo's recent elections.

Northern Kosovo's Serbian enclave does not trust many international institutions, including NATO-led KFOR (Kosovo Forces), UNMIK (the United Nation's policing forces in Kosovo), and the KPS (Kosovo Police Force). They failed in protecting the Serbian minority during ethnic clashes in both 1999 and 2004. 2010 was marred with random violent incidents throughout Mitrovica, with acts of vandalism and explosions occurring throughout the city. In 2011, responding from rising tensions in local authorities, Mitrovica announced that it would cease cooperation with the EU's mission in Kosovo (EULEX) unless it began to abide by the original domestic mandate given in the country. USAID, America's primary international development instrument, has also been heavily protested in northern Kosovo. Turkish military involvement in the region (as part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force/KFOR) is still up in the air, as many of the Serbs in Mitrovica believe that Turkish troops would not only align themselves with Albanian residents, but serve as symbolic protection forces of the existence of Kosovo. Given Turkey's militaristic history in the region under the Ottomans, the best solution to support Mitrovica is through the monetary and structural support of

¹⁴ European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document. "Kosovo 2010 Progress Report; accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council; Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011. November 9th 2010.

fellow international actors with a pre-existing military infrastructure on the ground (such as KFOR). Turkey can provide the same active support for cross-cultural civil society organizations in the region, but given the existing tensions, Turkish military support in the region is discouraged at the present time.

With a 40% unemployment rate, Kosovo has a generally youthful population that has also been left out of the EU's visa liberalization scheme in the Western Balkans, further isolating the new country. The country's fragility and stagnation in reform implementation, due to widespread corruption, have frightened investors in the region. Other investors have avoided investment in the country for fear of decreased relations with Serbia and other countries that do not officially recognize the new nation-state. Regular state procedures, like conducting censuses, take on a new form in the Balkans, given its' ethnically fragile makeup. For example, northern Kosovo will only allow authorities in Belgrade to conduct censuses on its' populations. Another incident highlights this division, when northern Kosovo's Serbs refused to pay electricity bills to authorities in Pristina. Serbia stepped in, offering (only fellow Serbs) electricity services. Serbia still refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence, but with Kosovo being recognized as sovereign by more than 70 countries worldwide, Serbia's strong hand in northern Kosovo may be viewed as destabilizing the country.

Turkey must help coordinate international efforts in Kosovo to help focus on civil society level ethnic tensions as the source of the inherent mistrust throughout the country. Gallup's 2010 findings in Kosovo stated that while 91% of Kosovo's citizens believe that their government is corrupt,¹⁵ more than 90% of both ethnic Kosovars and Serbs opposed any type of ethnic-based population exchanges in the country and Serbia. Such statistics signify both communities' willingness to stay and find a resolution despite the government's deficiencies. However, more than 50% of Kosovo's citizens say they're having financial difficulties due to the slowing economies. Much like the rest of the region, ethnic tensions are rising and becoming entrenched amidst the region's economic crises. Turkey, which has many investments in Kosovo, will need to help calm ethnic strife and encourage

¹⁵ Gallup Balkan Monitor -Insights and Perceptions: "Voice of the Balkans. 2010 Summary of Findings", p. 13.

reforms as a means of securing its' investments in the new country. Using its' new alliance with Serbia, Turkey can serve as a medium between Serbia and Kosovo in increasing trade and investment to the entire country. The recent trade tariffs barriers that have arisen between Serbia, Kosovo, and BiH are telltale signs of a region falling into economic despair, further exasperating already struggling small businesses owners in the region. Turkey must move quickly on eliminating the retaliatory trade barriers that have spiked in the region, to save local economies and reassure investors in the region.

CONCLUSION

Serbia is nearly at the epicenter of every major political discussion regarding changes in the Western Balkans. Serbia's cross-border relations with neighboring countries is now more important than ever with the slowing of EU accession talks in the region due to the global economic crisis. Helping the entire Western Balkans achieve NATO membership¹⁶ would be a significantly progressive step towards avoiding conflict in the region, as Croatia, Albania and Turkey are already members. EU membership for the entire region¹⁷ is similarly viewed in the same way, as countries with intertwined financial markets are less inclined to war. If Turkey can help Serbia curb its' arms sales and highlight the positive aspects of NATO membership in hopes of securing regional security, it would greatly alleviate regional and international stereotypes of Serbia being the regional aggressor. Serbia's heavy investments in Republika Srpska and northern Kosovo are also potential political landmines. Serbia's actions in these regional entities often contradict their official position of respecting national administrative authorities (like Pristina and Sarajevo). Serbia's own internal policies towards its' minority dominated southern region will also need to be further examined and ameliorated. Tensions have risen sharply in the region with the increase of unemployment, crime, and religious extremism.

¹⁶ Eralp, *Doğa Ulaş*, "Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Future Reflecting on the Past". SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, SETA Policy Brief, #46. August 2010.

¹⁷ Vachudova, Milada Anna, "The European Union, the Balkans, and Turkey: Can Soft Power Bring Stability and Democracy?" The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, *Meeting Report* 280, October 2003.

Thorough and efficient political and economic reforms on a decentralized basis are desperately needed in Serbia for effective management of the country in all aspects. Turkey must also help in strengthening state institutions in which a culture of corruption and inefficiency has been the norm. Therefore, when they are decentralized, the problems that plagued the once-bigger institutions do not continue on the local level, and put further (economic and social) development in the country at risk. Serbia must overcome the oft-feared ‘decentralization = secession’ argument. It must come up with its’ own form of decentralization that works for the country’s multiple problems, without instilling any sort of fear of further loss to their territorial integrity. Serbia has a negative past with federalism, and thus decentralization, so all of these processes must also be sought to be done with the inclusion of Serbian officials from all regions, with all ethnic groups represented, so there is a sense of ownership over the reforms that are being completed, in addition to promoting regional mutual respect across ethnic groups.

The economic crisis has hit the Western Balkans hard, particularly those countries that are regular recipients of large foreign aid packages. Once (moderately dormant) ethnic issues are now coming to the surface, and if they are not managed properly, waves of conflict could engulf the region once more. Turkey must help Serbia in achieving its EU goals of democratization and completing the Copenhagen criteria for accession to progress without delay.

Civil society in these regions is of utmost importance. The ethnic issues in these countries are the foundation for mistrust and inefficiency that has spread up to the institution level. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Serbia are now more vibrant after experiencing many problems during the wars and authoritarian regimes. But most suffer from many problems, including: how to secure funding sources (having English-competent staff to help apply for many of those funds, for example), and executing activities that incorporate different ethnic groups. Sustainability is key for these organizations. As of 2005, more than 70% of the civil society organizations in Serbia receive foreign funding; giving the impression that Serbia either does not have the fiscal capacity for such support, or merely does not place emphasis/importance on civil society organizations. CSOs have some of the largest potential in fostering inter-ethnic strife in many parts of the country. Increased

funding to these sectors will help improve security and understanding in the region. The power of CSOs in improving social standards and improve public opinion should not be underestimated, particularly when given great responsibility from an over-burdened (and highly centralized) Serbian state.

For example, public opinions generally improve over generations with improved policies. Hence, while the older Serbian generation might remember stories about difficulties during Ottoman rule, the younger generations in Serbia often welcome Turkish investors, particularly if it means more job creation and better infrastructure development in the country. Job creation leaves less unemployed youth, and ideally reduced incidents of conflict as economic and education levels rise. Turkey can assist on the civil society level in many ways, including providing any support for establishing and supporting existing ‘truth and reconciliation commissions,’ regarding the healing process following the atrocities committed in the regions’ past wars. For instance, Turkey opening a Yunus Emre Cultural Center in Serbia, as it has done in Sarajevo and Prizren, would be a step forward in not only educating locals about Turkey’s historical presence in the region, but providing cultural education needed in the region among ethnic groups, serving as a role model NGO for other CSOs in the region. Turkey’s plans to open state schools in the region, including Kosovo, have been received by mixed results. However, such Turkish efforts in providing resources and venues to enhance integration and cross-cultural understanding are laudable, particularly in a region that any international actors deem hopeless.

Turkey can also assist in educational reform in the long-term, assisting to remove any harmful or biased language in Serbian textbooks that might be fueling negative viewpoints towards not only Turkish involvement in the region, but other neighboring Balkan actors. Serbia can improve its’ image in the region through increased cooperation with a (Muslim) state like Turkey, and thus improving neighboring relations with Turkey’s allies in the region, fellow (majority) Muslim states like Albania, Kosovo, and BiH. Tadic’s government generally supports civil society, and advocates for stronger civil societies across the Balkans. He has provided funds for the creation of a unified Balkan civil society network which can coordinate cross-border/cross-regional projects in the region regarding capacity-

building of staff/local administration, youth employability, inter-ethnic understanding, etc.

Boosting development, and thus regional security, in Serbia thus further prepares the nation for eventual EU membership. If Turkey can help Serbia realign its' priorities towards proper fiscal investments domestically and abroad, while efficiently carrying out the necessary EU democratic and economic reforms, Serbia will cement its' place at the heart of Balkan politics in a more positive and productive light.

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