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# Is Turkey a Rival to the European Union? Neo-Ottoman Influence in the Balkans

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Thank you to Professor Paul Kubicek for his guidance and mentorship throughout this project, all the help he provided me is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the Department of Political Science at Oakland University and all the professors within the department that have supported me through my undergraduate career and given me the opportunities to work on research to increase my understanding of international relations.

## 4

# Is Turkey a Rival to the European Union? Neo-Ottoman Influence in the Balkans

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**ABSTRACT**

Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s presidency, has begun to re-animate some aspects of its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Many observers of Turkey speak of “Neo-Ottomanism,” both at home and in its foreign policy. With respect to the latter, aspects of neo-Ottomanism are very evident with Turkey’s engagement in the Balkans. As European Union (EU) accession seems more and more unlikely for Turkey, one might wonder if Turkish actions in the Balkans can be seen as trying to rival the EU for influence. This paper thus seeks to answer two questions. First, what factors are motivating Turkish foreign policy, and does Turkey’s neo-Ottoman influence in the Balkans make it a competitor or a partner to the EU? This paper will look at Turkish policies in the Balkan region, focusing particularly on Bosnia and Moldova, and analyze whether its growing influence is making it a competitor to the EU.

**KEYWORDS**

Turkey, Erdoğan, Moldova, Bosnia, Ottomanism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the dominant figure in Turkey in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, serving as Prime Minister (2003–2014) and now occupying a newly empowered presidency (2014–present). Erdoğan's rise to power has transformed the Turkish state, domestically and internationally (Rodенbeck, 2016). One important aspect of Erdoğan's presidency that has had domestic and international implications is his neo-Ottoman policies. These policies have been criticized by Western nations as increasingly authoritative and nationalistic. Some critics have perceived Erdoğan's policies as grounded exclusively in religion, but this is not the case (Rodенbeck, 2016). His neo-Ottoman policies have more cultural motives than they do religious ones, particularly in the case of the Gagauz people in Moldova.

This paper seeks to answer two questions. First, what factors are motivating Turkish foreign policy? Second, does Turkey's neo-Ottoman influence in the Balkans make it a competitor or a partner to the EU? This paper will examine Turkey's increasing economic and political influence in the Balkans, focusing primarily on Moldova and Bosnia, and the implications that these neo-Ottoman policies have on Turkey's relationship to the European Union.

## 2. BACKGROUND HISTORY

The history of Turkey's quest to become a full member of the European Union (EU) is a long and tumultuous one. In 1963, through the Association Agreement between Turkey and the European Economic Community, the predecessor to the EU, the prospect of full membership for Turkey began. Turkey's application was first deferred in 1987, in which the European Commission cited Turkey as having an unfavorable political environment in which to begin negotiations (retrieved from the Turkish Embassy in London Archives). In 1999, the European Council granted Turkey the status of candidate country for the European Union during the Helsinki Summit (Onis, 2000). This decision from the EC came with conditions which Turkey had to resolve in order to begin ascension discussions, based on the Copenhagen Criteria for membership. The EU decided, at the December 2002 Copenhagen European Council meeting, that it would open negotiations with Turkey (Yuhannan, 2017). This decision led to accession negotiations for membership in 2005. Since then, Turkey has been trying to attain full membership in the EU, but many obstacles have turned their ascension into a decades long case.

Egemen Bağış, former Minister for Relations with the EU, stated that Turkey would never become a member of the EU because some of the members are prejudiced against Turkey (Spillus, 2013). He believes that Turkey will become like Norway, close to but formally outside the EU. The obstacles that have hindered Turkey's accession to the EU, as indicated by Yuhannan (2017), include many political, economic, and social issues. Some critics of the EU's action against Turkey believe that it is due to Turkey being never recognized as a "real" European country. Geographically, Turkey lies between the East and West, with around 90% of land in Asia. This argument states that because Turkey's mainland does not lie in Europe, it does not make it a European state. Nicholas Sarkozy, former President of France from 2007 to 2012, has publicly rejected Turkey's membership in the EU, claiming that Turkey is culturally incompatible with Europe and argued that Turkey should thus maintain only a partnership with the EU, not full membership (Paul, 2012). However, this debate on whether Turkey is a true European nation or not is met with criticism. Turkey has been a prominent player in European geopolitical environment for

more than six centuries, and was formally declared “European” by the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961 (Yuhannan, 2017).

Turkey has faced major backlash for decades now for their denial of the Armenian genocide. Yuhannan argues that it is in the interest of Turkish people and their future to acknowledge the role of the previous government in the Armenian genocide (Yuhannan, 2017). Their recognition of the genocide would allow Turkey to have a clean slate in the European Union, if it would ever be accepted to join. Many historians and scholars of the genocide have submitted evidence to the EU over the actions of the then–Ottoman government against Armenians and other minorities from 1915–1917 (Yuhannan, 2017). This denial of responsibilities by the Turkish government—the successor to the Ottomans—has created a sour taste against Turkey and any action they take towards becoming a member of the EU. Member states of the EU have urged the EU to add this recognition as a criterion for membership for Turkey, but in 2006, the European Parliament voted against a proposal to formally add the issue as a criterion (European Parliament resolution on Turkey’s progress towards accession, 2006/2118).

Another set of issues that has been brought up numerous times against Turkey and its accession to the EU, are Turkey’s political and human rights abuses. EU member countries have brought allegations of violating rule of law, as well as censorship of social media, against Turkey (Yuhannan, 2017). The Copenhagen Criteria play a huge role in the awarding of EU membership. The Turkish government must follow all these protocols in order to be eligible for full membership. Critics against Turkey’s accession have cited several instances of human rights abuses in Turkey, including media censorship and the treatment of minorities in the country, particularly the Kurdish population.

One could argue that, thus far, Turkey has abided by the Copenhagen requirements, such as abolishing the death penalty in 2002. But, with the rise of Erdoğan and the instability that rocked Turkey in 2016 in the wake of an attempted military coup, matters have deteriorated. A year later, the European Parliament called for a formal suspension of Turkey’s EU bid in April 2017 (Reuters, 2017). The military coup of 2016 and the actions of Erdoğan and his government thereafter have hindered all of Turkey’s efforts to become a member of the EU. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) has criticized Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) by arguing that they have used the EU membership process to undermine secularism and increase their conservative policies, and by doing this, the AKP has failed to protect Turkey’s national interests (Celep, 2011).

Turkey has recently begun shifting away from EU membership and looking towards spreading their influence in the neighboring regions, particularly the Balkans. Their growing influence within Balkan states, which are also not EU members, has begun to intrigue observers as to whether Turkey is becoming a rival to the EU or a partner. The following sections discuss neo–Ottoman influence in the Balkans, along with two case examples, Moldova and Bosnia, in which Erdoğan’s policies have solidified Turkey’s place in the region.

### **3. TURKISH INFLUENCE IN THE BALKANS**

Under Erdoğan, Turkey has invested significant efforts into gaining political, cultural and economic foothold in the Balkans (Weise, 2018). Increasing Turkish and neo–Ottoman influence in the Balkans should not come as a surprise as centuries of Ottoman rule have influenced the region and encouraged population transfers. From data acquired

by Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), a Turkish think tank, Turkish investments have dramatically increased in the region, from only \$435 million in 2002 to \$3 billion in 2016. Expanding economic relations between Turkey and the region have drawn critics to Turkey's reasoning for this increased influence and relationships. Critics argue that there is a religious component to this, based on shared adherence to Sunni Islam, but this is not the case. In the following case study, we will examine the Gagauz people in Moldova, who are ethnically Turkish, but are a Christian group, which shows this is not a religious matter, as it is more about culture more generally and about increasing Turkey's presence in a region often overlooked by the EU.

Erhan Turbedar, a Kosovan scholar, outlines five key reasons that explain Turkey's increasing influence in the Balkans. The first one is simple: there is a common history between Turkic people and the peoples of the Balkans. Second is a human factor: Turbedar states that more than one million Turkic/Turkish minorities live in Balkan states (Turbedar, 2011). These communities are important for Turkey's foreign policy. The third reason is geography: Erdoğan has stated that history has shown that global peace cannot be maintained without peace and stability in the Middle East and in the Balkans (Turbedar, 2011). Turkey must make sure that the Balkans are stable, as because of their instability, conflicts can spillover quickly. The fourth reasoning Turbedar presents is Turkey is increasing its presence in the Balkans through improving economic presence. The fifth and final argument Turbedar makes is that Turkey's policy in the Balkans is to also secure allies to support Turkey's EU bid in the future (Turbedar, 2011). As we have seen in the preceding sections, Turkey's accession to the EU is almost close to dead. One remarkable relationship Turkey has secured in the Balkans is with Bosnia—through building schools and institutions, Erdoğan has garnered immense support from the Bosnian government and people.

#### 4. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

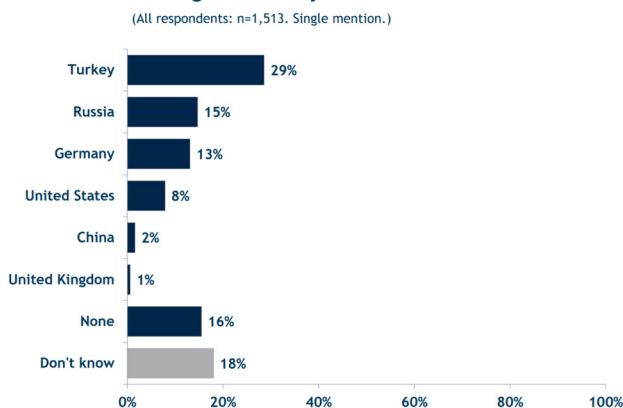
Bosnia and Herzegovina, being a relatively new nation having only gained independence in 1992, has a long historical and cultural attachment to Turkey. Bosnia is an ethnically diverse country, which holds a Muslim majority. Sunnie Rucker-Chang argues that Turkish practices have historical significance in Bosnia, as Ottoman Islamic traditions are the source of Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Chang, 2014). The connection to Islam is important, as Chang argues. This connection allows Bosnia to look at Turkey as a “kin-state” and vice-versa. Bosnia's Turkish Embassy estimates there to be around 5,000 Turkish nationals living in Bosnia (Colborne & Edwards, 2018). During an election rally for Erdoğan held in Sarajevo in 2018, Bakir Izetbegović, the Bosniak chairman of Bosnia's tripartite presidency declared that “...[t]oday the Turkish nation has a person sent by God. He is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan” (Colborne and Edwards, 2018). Izetbegović went on to call Erdoğan Bosnia's best friend and “big brother.” As seen in Figure 1, a survey by the Center for Insights in Survey Research found that out of 1,513 Bosnian citizens, 29% listed Turkey as the greatest ally of Bosnia.

Turkey's influence in Bosnia reaches far beyond economic investment, and includes cultural and social institutions. The government of Turkey has two privately funded universities in Sarajevo, along with Erdoğan pledging €3.5 billion for the construction of a highway system between Belgrade and Sarajevo (Colborne & Edwards, 2018). Erdoğan has spread his growing neo-Ottoman influence into Bosnia by restoring Ottoman architecture, including mosques that were destroyed by Bosnian Serbs during the civil war. Erdoğan has

even gone to the international stage on Bosnia's behalf by demanding revisions of the Dayton Agreement of 1995, which ended the war in Bosnia. This agreement is where Bosnia's current tripartite presidential system comes from. In a joint press conference with Erdoğan and Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitrović, Erdoğan stated that this agreement needs to be reexamined and revised, due to it being written and ratified so quickly, and that it also is the reason behind the deep ethnic divides within Bosnia to this day (Vladisavljevic & Buyuk, 2019).

Figure 1. In your opinion, from the listed countries, which is BiH's greatest ally?  
(retrieved from: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/march\\_28\\_april\\_12\\_2018\\_bih\\_poll.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/march_28_april_12_2018_bih_poll.pdf))

### In your opinion, from the listed countries, which is BiH's greatest ally?



Turkey's increasing influence in Bosnia is political, economic, and social. The relationship between the two nations is built along a century's long history of agreements and trade. Critics of Turkey have argued that its influence in Bosnia is due to shared religion, Islam, but that is not entirely the case. As is evident, while Turkey has been using religious institutions to appeal to Bosniaks, it is also using social and economic influence to appeal to all Bosnian citizens, not just Muslim ones. As critics claim Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman policies are rooted in Islamic influence, another case this paper analyzes is the Gagauz people of Moldova, who are ethnically Turkic but are Christians. This goes to show that Erdoğan's policies are not strictly for religious reasons, but are cultural and economic, rooted in neo-Ottoman tradition.

## 5. MOLDOVAN GAGAUZ

The Gagauz people of Moldova are one of the smallest minorities in Eastern Europe. An ethnically Turkish community, not more than 300,000 members live in the Balkans, and around 150,000 in Moldova (Menz, 2007). The biggest difference between the Gagauz and other Turkish groups in the Balkans is that they are Orthodox Christians, not Muslims. The Gagauz in southern Moldova date back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Menz, 2007). In 1990, the Moldovan parliament declared the Gagauz an ethnic minority whose homeland is Bulgaria. Astrid Menz argues that the Gagauz do not feel overly close to their

Turkish counterparts for two reasons. One is that Turks are Muslims, while they are Christian. The second reason is that the only Turks the Gagauz see are businessmen, while they are mainly farmers, so there is a disconnect between the two groups of people in terms of economic and religious affiliations (Menz, 2007). Although the Gagauz people feel disconnected from mainland Turks, they are still connected through their shared ethnicity and history.

Erdoğan has expanded his neo-Ottoman influence into Moldova and towards the Gagauz people. This is another sign that these policies are not merely religious, but also contain a shared cultural component within them. Turkey has been increasingly active in Gagauzia, the autonomous region for the Gagauz, through contributing to the development of the region. These contributions include investments and aid for health care, education, and infrastructure (Cantir, 2015). Along with these investments, Turkey has strengthened their cultural ties to Gagauz through educational development of the Gagauz language and an exchange program (Cantir, 2015). In his visit to the Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, Erdoğan proclaimed that, although there is no physical border between Moldova and Turkey, he still sees it as one of Turkey's neighbors (Daily Sabah, 2018). Erdoğan promised to support the Gagauz people and begin planning a possible Turkish Consulate in Gagauzia. Before leaving, Erdoğan gifted the Moldovan government two water trucks (Necsutu, 2018).

Erdoğan's commitment to the Gagauz in Moldova can be looked at as a kinship relationship, between two governments that share common culture and history. The case of the Gagauz and their relationship with Erdoğan is unique and important because it diminishes the argument some critics have against Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman policies, citing them as his way of spreading Islamic influence, as this clearly shows this is not a religious issue. Erdoğan's policies are looking to be more culturally based, rather than religious.

## **6. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE EU?**

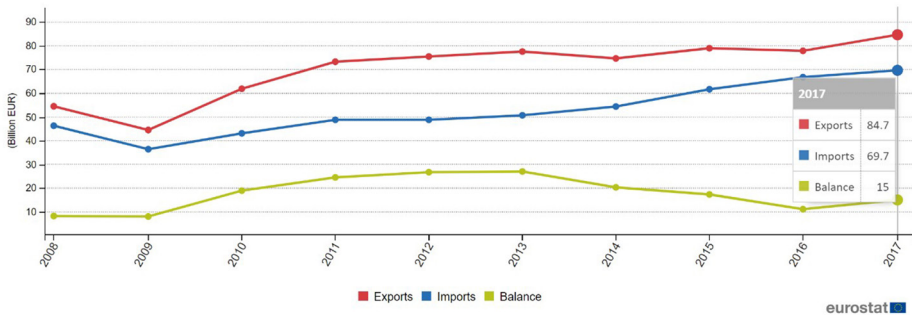
Erdoğan's and Turkey's increasing economic, social, and political influence in the Balkans has raised the question, is Turkey becoming a partner or rival to the EU? This is an important question to understand, considering the growing economic influence of Turkey within Balkan states, such as Bosnia and Moldova, as we have just observed in the preceding pages. In 2018 alone, Turkey's exports to Balkan countries rose 22 per cent in the first five months and earned the country almost 4 billion US dollars (Buyuk, 2018). An important factor to consider when analyzing Turkish influence in the Balkans, is that it is mainly dealing with countries that are also not full members of the European Union. This is an important consideration because it means that the EU and Turkey can both offer these states different things, which could create competition between the two bodies. To really understand this question, we must take into account the economic implications that Turkey's relationship with Balkan states would have for the EU.

The European Union is an enormous organization made up of 28 member states. According to the World Bank, the GDP for the European Union reached nearly 16 trillion US dollars in 2017, while Turkey's GDP was 851 billion US dollars. Thus, the EU has a considerable advantage over Turkey. It is also important to consider that the EU is comprised of 28 nations, while Turkey is a sole sovereign state. The economic dependency of European Balkan states on the EU is unsurpassed and could never really be taken over by Turkey's economic contributions to the region.



According to data retrieved from the European Commission, the EU is the leading trade partner in the Western Balkans, accounting for 73% of the region’s total trade (European Commission, 2019). On the other hand, Turkey is the EU’s 4<sup>th</sup> largest export market and 5<sup>th</sup> largest provider of imports, while the EU is Turkey’s number one import and export partner. Further, the EU makes up around 44.5% of Turkey’s main exports. Figure 2 below displays the import, export, and trade balance between the EU and Turkey. In 2017 alone, Turkey imported around €84.7 billion in goods from the EU, while the EU imported €69.7 billion in goods from Turkey. This shows the important relationship that these two actors have with each other regarding economic trade and dependency.

Figure 2. Imports, exports, and trade balance in goods between the EU and Turkey, 2008-2017 (retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Turkey-EU\\_-\\_international\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Turkey-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics))



In the two cases analyzed in the preceding pages, the discussion of Turkey’s influence in Bosnia and Moldova’s is still valid, but there are some obstacles that could make the EU more powerful than Turkey within this region. For instance, most of Bosnia’s investors are member states of the European Union, and 75% of Bosnians support Bosnia’s accession to the EU (Colborne & Edwards, 2018). As seen in Figure 3, the EU exported around €5.9 billion in goods to Bosnia in 2017. In comparison, Turkey exported only \$348 million in goods to Bosnia in 2017 (Turkstat, 2019). Turkey is not as huge of an investor in Bosnia as it may look. Their contributions are still very significant and influential in the political relations between Turkey and Bosnia, but many other EU member nations are more significantly conducting trade with Bosnia. In Moldova, Turkey has the upper hand with the Gagauz, being that they share a Turkic background and that their autonomous region needs recognition on the international stage, which Turkey could provide. On the other hand, based on economic data retrieved from the European Commission, the EU is Moldova’s biggest trading partner, with around 66% of its exports going to the EU. Although the EU is Moldova’s biggest trading partner, the EU’s trade with Moldova accounts for only 0.1% of its overall trade (data from the European Commission).

Based on economic influence, the EU has an advantage over Turkey in its relations with the Balkan states, some of which are still trying to attain EU membership. Although they are not yet members, many of these Balkan states still conduct trade with the EU and its member states on a larger scale than with Turkey. Although it might not have a huge economic advantage, Turkey’s investment in the Balkans, and particularly in Bosnia and Mol-

dova, has made it a more desirable partner. Although it could not live up to the economic advantage that the EU possess, Turkey is offering more social and political advantages to the Balkan region than the EU can. Turkey is thus making its way to become a competitor to the EU within the Balkans.

Figure 3. EU trade with Bosnia and Herzegovina  
(retrieved from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614775/EPRS\\_ATA\(2018\)614775\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614775/EPRS_ATA(2018)614775_EN.pdf))



When considering the social and political contributions that Turkey has made to the region, it is right to assume that these Balkan states are looking more favorably towards Turkey and its willingness to help these nations. One might consider the idea that for some of these Balkan states, EU membership is far off and the EU's demands and criteria that they impose on member states make some wary of accession. On the other hand, Turkey by and large does not make such demands on these states, and Turkey tends to be more respectful of sovereignty. Turkey has recently been becoming more anti-West and has been moving towards harnessing relationships with their Balkan neighbors that are in the same position as them in regards to EU membership. Now, some might be wary of why Turkey is choosing to expand into the Balkans and not the Middle East, given the richer Ottoman connection that it has with the Middle Eastern region. There is a simple answer to this: Turkey sees the Balkans as a much easier contender, given that it has more peace and stability, compared to the Middle East.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Turkey, under Erdoğan's presidency, has begun to reinstate some of the policies and traditions of its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. "Neo-Ottomanism" has recently begun to sweep Turkey, both domestically and through its foreign policy, particularly with states in the Balkan region. Aspects of neo-Ottomanism are very evident with Turkey's engagement in the Balkans, which were once under Ottoman control and contain Muslim populations in several countries. As discussed throughout this paper, the argument that Turkey is taking advantage of the economic opportunities offered in the Balkans is only part of

the story. However, it is important to consider Turkey's actions in the Balkans and how it relates to the long history of their accession to the EU.

Critics of Erdoğan paint his neo-Ottoman policies as “Islamist,” but we have seen that is not the case. Turkey's growing influence within the Balkans, and especially with the Gagauz Christians in Moldova, has demolished the caricature of Erdoğan as being an “Islamist.” The turn in Turkey's influence from the Middle East towards the Balkans has garnered a lot of support from the governments of these Balkan states. Turkey's contributions in the Balkans have been economic, social, and political. The increasing influence by Erdoğan and his policies has raised the question of Turkey's competition with the EU as a major power in the Balkans. Although Turkey is not and could never really be as powerful as the EU, its growing and strengthening influence in the Balkans could potentially make it a competitor to the EU.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Professor Paul Kubicek for his guidance and mentorship throughout this project—all the help he provided me is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the Department of Political Science at Oakland University and all the professors within the department that have supported me through my undergraduate career and given me the opportunities to work on research to increase my understanding of international relations.

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