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The End of the Turkish-Serbian Rapprochement?

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Abstract

After nine years of significantly improved relations between Turkey and Serbia, we have recently been faced with a renewed deterioration of these relations. This paper analyzes the reasons for this new trend and finds them primarily in the areas of armaments, arms trade, and security, as well as in the dynamic and chaotic international order. A brief overview of the relations between Belgrade and Ankara over the past few decades is provided, and current economic, trade, and cultural relations are examined. The reasons why there is a conviction in Belgrade that Turkey is starting to play a more offensive role in the Balkans through Balkan Muslims are presented as well. The article concludes by highlighting the absence of a permanent social and academic infrastructure for dialogue between Turkish and Serbian actors that would proactively identify potential issues and work towards their resolution.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has visited Serbia several times, leading numerous delegations that included many businesspeople. After 2017, 2019, and 2022, Erdoğan's last visit was in October 2024, when 11 agreements on cooperation in various areas were signed, ranging from economy and



social welfare to science and cooperation between state archives, as well as sports and cooperation between capital cities.

Only a year later, after a series of visits by Bosniaks and Albanians from Kosovo, dominated by topics of cooperation in the security sector and the supply of weapons to Balkan Muslims, Balkan was shaken by alleged Erdoğan warning of Serbia "not to touch Bosniaks and Albanians, otherwise it would have about a hundred million Turks against it". This turned out to be a piece of false news, but damage has already been done. Serbian President Vučić reacted to the delivery of a large number of Turkish drones to Priština by stating that Turkey was violating Resolution 1244 and "dreaming of restoring the Ottoman Empire". Thus, after nine years of diplomatic and geopolitical rapprochement between these two countries, we have returned to the rhetoric of 2009-2016, when, following Davutoğlu's speech in

Sarajevo announcing Turkey's return to the Balkans, relations were quite strained and tense.

It is undeniable that issues related to weapons, armaments, and security are among the most significant reasons for new disputes, alongside the geopolitical orientation of these states. Last year, Turkey agreed to and implemented the delivery of several Bayraktar drones to Kosovo, opened a drone factory there, and initiated intensive security contacts with Bosniaks aimed at enhancing the capacity for ammunition and weapons production, as well as for the overall restoration of combat readiness. At the same time, Serbia exported a quantity of weapons to Cyprus* and continued with a large export of ammunition to Israel, which uses it in Gaza for operations that the Muslim world unanimously calls "genocide".

The Period of Rapprochement after the Coup Attempt of 2016

This radical elevation of rhetoric to the level of threats and accusations comes after nine years of significant diplomatic, political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical disarray that was of great importance to both sides. Relations between Belgrade and Ankara were notoriously bad during the 1990s due to the civil war in Bosnia and Turkey's participation in NATO operations against the Former Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. Attempts to establish a kind of trilateral dialogue with Sarajevo during the era of Serbian President Boris Tadić, as well as Turkey's efforts to mediate the issue of internal

relations between the conflicting factions of the Islamic community in Serbia, encountered significant resistance in Serbia, resulting in this format not yielding any improvements. Until 2016 and the attempted coup in Turkey, Davutoglu's extensive attempts at direct and public diplomacy to open up space for Turkey in all Balkan countries were viewed with great skepticism in Belgrade and Banja Luka. *Strategic Depth* was translated in Belgrade (2014), and a huge public space was given to Professor Darko Tanasković's book *Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's Return to the Balkans*. He held numerous lectures and presentations of the book all over the Serbia and Republic of Srpska, warning on the dangers of the ambitious Ankara's plans. Turkish diplomacy viewed our academic attempts to study processes in contemporary Turkey with equal distrust when we organized a major conference in 2012 and published the collection "*Turkey-Regional Power?*" in 2013.

However, after 2016, a radical shift in events occurred. Serbian officials were among the first to call on Erdoğan and publicly support him. In general, the Serbian people showed great sympathy for the Turkish people, who were resisting what they saw as an externally instigated violent change of power. Serbia gradually also met Turkish demands and completely closed all institutions from the Gülenist infrastructure, unlike some other Balkan countries, where they continue to function.

Relations have since improved in all areas. Last year, it was noted that trade exchange had increased sevenfold in

* Turkey does not extend diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Cyprus, which it calls Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus.

just ten years from 2009-2019 and was approaching the figure of 2.6 billion euros. Turkish companies have as many as 57 projects in Serbia and are among the most significant investors, employing around 100,000 workers. They are significantly present in the construction of infrastructure, the textile industry, and other sectors. Thanks to the visa-free regime, Turkish citizens have discovered Belgrade and other tourist destinations, becoming the most numerous foreign visitors to Serbia. Of course, a huge number of Serbian citizens regularly spend their summers on the Turkish coast.

What the presidents jointly defined last year as a “golden age” in mutual relations has also manifested itself in cooperation in many different fields, ranging from culture to science and agriculture. TIKa and Yunus Emre are very active in Serbia. Serbs, as well as almost the entire world, could not resist the charm of Turkish TV serials of various types. They have watched all the great Turkish hits, starting with *Gümüş* and *The Magnificent Century*. Even today, many Turkish series continue to be shown on television and digital platforms. On the other hand, the successes of Željko Obradović, Tijana Bošković, and other Serbian athletes in Turkish clubs, as well as the growth of tourism, raised the popularity of Serbia, and it seemed that relations could only progress.

Another important area for mutual support was Turkey's significant shift in its geopolitical orientation. Namely, since 2016, Turkish diplomacy has no longer prioritized its presence in the Balkans within the framework of Euro-Atlantic integration, and it is evident

that there are serious problems in Turkey's European integration process. Support for European integration in Serbia fell to around 30%, so the Serbs welcomed this turn of events among the Turks, as well as the significant improvement in relations with Russia and the beginning of Ankara's interest in cooperation with BRICS, SCO, and other non-Western forums.

The New Geopolitical Context

After the start of the war in Ukraine, Serbia and Turkey were the only European countries to refuse to impose sanctions on Russia and continued to maintain all real forms of cooperation with it, including air traffic. Both countries showed interest in acting as mediators in the negotiations, which Turkey succeeded in doing. Turkey managed to maintain relatively stable relations with Russia, despite serious sale of drones and other weapons to Ukraine. Belgrade and Ankara, along with Budapest, became the bearers of a belt of relatively neutral countries that saw themselves as a buffer zone between the two emerging blocs.

However, Turkey has meanwhile achieved significant geopolitical, strategic, and military successes in projecting its power in the Caucasus and the Middle East. With its military and logistical assistance, Azerbaijan has managed to regain the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, which have been under the control of Armenia since 1991. This was the first war in modern history to be resolved by drones, and the entire event was an excellent advertisement

for Turkish lines of drones that Turkish companies marketed to various parts of the world.

Another major success is the end of the war in Syria, where Turkey has been involved for almost a decade and a half. In December 2024, after an evident agreement between the great powers, the forces of Jolani, who had serious Turkish logistical assistance, overthrew the Assad regime and took power in Damascus. These two successes of Turkey in projecting power towards the Caucasus and the Middle East raised questions in the Balkans about whether Turkey would undertake or encourage something similar in its third traditional area of interest, Rumelia. Greece has been afraid of some kind of Turkish military intervention towards the islands close to it since 2023, and now speculation has begun both there and in Serbia about whether Turkey could encourage Balkan Muslims to take advantage of the new global chaos and achieve some military results against its neighbors [1]. At the same time, NATO initiated alliances that were also clearly directed towards Serbia, such as the military agreement between Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo.

These new tensions did not have any specific reason in the behavior or statements of the Serbian leadership, except for the possible recent demonstration of renewed military equipment at a parade in Belgrade. Namely, on September 20, a military parade was held in Belgrade with around 10,000 members of the Serbian Army, and 2,500 pieces of weapons and military equipment, over 600 vehicles, 70 aircraft and 20 vessels were presented. President Vučić said that Serbia wants peace, but that everyone

is preparing for war and therefore it must demonstrate its deterrence capability. Moreover, Belgrade has not altered its attitude or rhetoric towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo from the policy for which Erdogan praised it last year. Belgrade is under enormous new pressure from the West due to its failure to impose sanctions on Russia and its position of formal military neutrality. Serbia undoubtedly needs peace and stability in this part of the world, as well as good relations with Turkey, which Balkan Muslims perceive as their patron.

Moving Beyond Personalization of Relations?

One of the possible problems in relations is the over-personalization of relations between the two countries, as reflected in the personalities of the two presidents. With all the understanding of the specificities of both systems, it seems that this period has not been used to establish regular forums between academics, chambers of commerce, and experts of various types who would analyze possible problems in a timely manner, point them out, and offer preventive solutions to avoid such verbal, and possibly political, and even military, clashes.

Of course, the question is whether one or perhaps both sides are really moving intentionally towards a political dispute and preparing for some kind of action of that type. If this is not the case, however, it would be necessary to initiate meetings and debates at the societal and academic-diplomatic levels, with adequate media coverage, to revive awareness of common interests and prevent conflicts.

[1] For example two hours political TV show at the Serbian Kurir television, 18October 2025.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoQFuLaGZhY>

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He is also a former adviser to the Serbian Prime Minister for political affairs (2005) and a political adviser to the President of the Serbian People's Party in Montenegro, serving between August 2006 and July 2008. He worked as a political and business consultant in the Balkans. He is one of the authors of the *Ethical Code for Broadcasters in Serbia* (under the auspices of the Serbian Broadcasting Agency in 2007). He has been a columnist in the leading Serbian daily, *Politika*, for over 20 years.



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