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TURKEY'S BOLSTERING ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract

Historically, the relations of Turkey with Bosnia and Herzegovina have remained very cordial, and friendly. The foreign policy of Turkey under President Erdogan has taken a new fresh route as the country has progressively asserted its influence in the Balkan region by benefiting from the common historical and cultural relations. Investing in infrastructure developments and educational sectors of the Balkan region under cultural diplomacy has helped Turkey to build its soft image. Turkish companies are actively investing in the various sectors and the industries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including telecommunication, energy, transportation, health, tourism, construction, and banking, etc. Common history, geographic proximity, and Turkey's expanding economic importance, all these factors have resulted in boosting the Turkish investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Turkey is also trying to promote regional trade cooperation besides the bilateral trade agreements like the establishment of a trilateral economic discussion mechanism between Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia. This article has explained the historic and contemporary economic and political relations of Turkey with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The article also suggested that Turkey needs to employ a more transparent and effective policy towards Bosnia & Herzegovina by addressing some reservations of Bosnian people like the provision of more jobs in the infrastructural development projects. At the same time, Bosnian foreign policy towards Turkey also needs to take a stand for its own objectives, aspirations, and long-term goals.

Keywords: Turkey, Bosnia, Economic Integration, Foreign Policy, Bilateral Trade

1. Introduction

In a world where political dynamics and the nature of inter-state relations are ever-evolving, there are certain examples where such relations have stood the test of time. One such example is that of Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The formal relations of the Republic of Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina started in the year 1992, after the conclusion of the Bosnian Civil War. Turkey was the first country to recognize the sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the 1990s, Turkey has been developing a new unique, and strong relationship with Bosnia-Herzegovina based on trade, investments, infrastructure, energy supply, tourism, etc. The country has promoted a wide range of cultural and educational initiatives, the majority of which have been implemented by "The Turkish National Agency for Cooperation and International Development (TIKA)" the "Yunus Emre Foundation" network of cultural centers, and the construction of new mosques because of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Turkey has been one of the most passionate advocates of

Bosnian unity and independence in the post-conflict period (ratification of the "Declaration of Peace and Stability in the Balkans," signed in Istanbul on April 24, 2010, by Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia) (Ekşi, 2017).

Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) has been cultivating cultural relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina through language lessons, seminars, conferences, concerts, art exhibitions, literature nights, and other activities at its cultural facilities in Sarajevo, Mostar, and Fojnica. The "Turcology Project" is one of YEE's most well-known educational activities. Programs include the "Turkish Elective Foreign Language," "Rebuilding the Cultural Heritage in the Balkans," "Revival of Traditional Turkish Hand Crafts in the Balkans," "100 Turkey Library Project," "100 Turkey Book Translation Project," and "Joint Painting Exhibitions" are among the YEE's recent projects in the Balkans (Hake and Radzyner, 2019). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, TIKA has completed over 700 projects, including the restoration of Banja Luka's "Ferhadija Mosque," Visegrad's "Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic Bridge," Sarajevo's "Emperor's Mosque," Mostar's "Old Bridge," and Blagaj-"Blagaj Mostar's Dervish House." In this way, TIKA contributed not only to the cultural sustainability of Bosnia and Herzegovina but also contributed to the flourishing of the tourism sector. Most Bosnians now support Turkey's steadily increasing dominance in the country. Bosnia - Herzegovina, on the other hand, claims that Turkey is attempting to establish a so-called "Neo-Ottoman Balkan,". Since the Turks occupied the Balkans for more than five centuries, Turkey has historical and cultural ties with Bosnia - Herzegovina. Bosnia - Herzegovina was named Bosnian Krajite, the westernmost Ottoman province, in 1463. Socio-cultural values evolved because of Ottoman rule (1463-1878), owing to cultural and theological transformations.

The article discusses Bosnia and Herzegovina's history as well as the dynamics of its multicultural, multiethnic, and especially multi-religious identity. Simultaneously, it is noted that interpretations and understandings of the Ottoman era in Bosnia and Herzegovina differ while Bosniaks regard the Ottoman era as the country's "Golden Age". Bosnia-Herzegovina's Christian populations of Serbs and Croats regard the Ottoman period as a period of centuries-long enslavement. Bosnia and Herzegovina were an important stronghold for the Ottoman Empire against Austro-Hungary until 1878 when it was turned over to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There were no meaningful opportunities for Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina to establish significant ties from that time until the Cold War ended in 1989. Despite this, the Republic of Turkey attempted to keep a friendly relationship with Yugoslavia (Mujadžević, 2017). The Turkish government has made a significant contribution to education by providing monetary support to two universities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, the "International University of Sarajevo" and the "International Balkan University", respectively. Turkey has consistently sponsored the provision of textbooks and teachers in areas populated by ethnic Turks, as well as in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Cantons where the Turkish language is taught in schools. All of these actions have improved Turkey's exposure and recognition in the Western Balkans, as well as the region's social and economic relations with Turkey. Turkey's educational activities not only promote human growth but also help to reduce unemployment by providing new academic and professional prospects (Rašidagić and Hesova, 2020).

2. Turkish foreign policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina

Over the last decade, Turkey has engaged in "hyperactive diplomacy" in connection to political ties between Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is an indication of the fact that the AKP's foreign policy was aimed towards promoting stability within the region and employing investment, strategic, economic, and culture diplomacy tactics to exert their influence. We can say that certain triggers influenced the Turkish state that led to this resurgence in ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The violent breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) reignited the passion and desire of Turkey to re-emerge as a geopolitical player in Southeast Europe and this has been in the pipelines since the conclusion of the Cold War. During the 1990s, many Gulf actors became more involved in local Muslim communities, both for humanitarian and religious reasons (Baracani and Çalımlı, 2019). Turkey did not get involved until the first decade of the twenty-first century when the AKP came to power and reshaped Turkey's foreign policy and role in Southeast Europe. However, unlike other nations in the region with kin

communities, Turkey's impact in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been limited, focused mostly on the three areas: economic investments, cultural heritage, and education (Özerim, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that an increase in critical observations on Turkey's economic role is also coming from Bosnian circles, and it is affecting people from all possible demographics. In response to President Erdogan's visit to Sarajevo in 2018, retired grand mufti Mustafa Ceri sarcastically stated: "We have two direct flights between Istanbul and Sarajevo every day, but they are operated by Turkish corporations" and our airline went bankrupt (Rašidagić and Hesova, 2020), p. 99). Why cannot Turkey rent two 'Boeings,' train our pilots, and let Bosnia and Herzegovina operate this line?" Similar concerns have been frequently raised by the public against Turkey's employing only Turkish workers on Bosnian construction projects, as well as importing building materials created in Turkey rather than allowing local businesses to participate which would create jobs and provide an inflow of revenue and profit in the region. It is worth noting that the debate over mosques vs industries is not entirely new. The debate dates to a time when the socialist Yugoslav government prioritized investments in industrial infrastructure above religious infrastructure. The comment, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of not just the quantity but also the quality of these investments, as well as how they affect local actors (Aydın, 2019).

While direct economic involvement does not often materialize right away, other forms of investment and aid have more apparent and immediate effects being contributing to the notion that Turkey is the world's most important economic actor. These are numerous 'spectacular investments' intended at infrastructural development (e.g., motorways, airports, as in Kosovo) and more specifically, cultural heritage infrastructure from the Ottoman Empire which boosts its public awareness and kin narrative once again (Aydın, 2019). In these endeavors, TIKA is a prominent player. There have been multiple attempts by municipalities around the Balkans and Turkey to rehabilitate historic areas of villages, towns, and cities over the last decade to renovate places that would become venues for modern civic activities, which will be funded by development organizations and government sectors. The response that received for these efforts has been mixed, with them being both welcomed and garnering discontent among the kin communities.

TIKA's efforts are broad but the restoration of Ottoman cultural legacy has been the primary focus in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where kinship links are being revitalized (Henig, 2019). Educational and cultural exchanges are another essential pillar of Turkey's cultural diplomacy and soft power among its kin populations. Indeed, this has proven to be a successful diplomatic strategy over the past decades. This dynamic plays out in Bosnia-Herzegovina along two broad axes: local educational infrastructure and bringing kin subjects to Turkey. Several educational institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina are currently involved in Turkey's sphere of influence. The International University of Sarajevo is arguably the most well-known (established in 2004) (Henig, 2019).

3. Increased Turkish investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Investments and other forms of economic aid have proven to be extremely effective forms of diplomacy in the post-WW2 world. In the light of the changing global trends, Turkish investments have been made into Bosnia Herzegovina which has served as the basis of economic cooperation between the two countries in various fields. Turkey is the country's tenth-largest investor, having invested 41.72 million euros in Bosnia-Herzegovina since December 31, 2009. Another measure of the country's success is that 50 companies have been established in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the help of Turkish investments. Defense, industry, coal and steel, textile, wood and paper industry, furniture, leather, electronic, and food industries all have seen significant economic cooperation between the two countries. Turkey was the first country to invest the most in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2009, with 94.6 million euros, and it was sixth in 2010, with 20.1 million euros. A large part of the investments made by Turkey has been in the cultural sector. The country has spent 300 million euros in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an ethnically split country with a Muslim majority, on projects such as mosque renovation and Ottoman-era monuments. This allows them to build stronger ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially with the Muslim population and the commonality of religion and the cultural values that come with Islam (ZHITIA, 2021).

In 2018, President Erdogan pledged Turkish investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina and signed a statement of intent for the construction of a highway linking Sarajevo and Belgrade, with a total estimated cost of roughly EUR 3 billion. The expressway is aimed to connect Sarajevo and Belgrade via two separate routes. It is expected to cost roughly 1.8 billion euros. Even though the project was proposed more than two years ago, the relevant authorities were unable to agree on a route due to the administration's dualism, with one side wanting the highway to travel through Tuzla province and the other insisting on its route via Visegrad province. To avoid conflict, both parties' suggestions have been adopted. The credit of this intelligent decision goes to President Erdogan's backing. The highway is projected to play a significant role in the growth of economic and trade links between the two countries, as well as regional stability. The project will be developed by Turkish companies with domestic labor employing a build-operate-transfer strategy (Sabah, 2018). The Free Trade Agreement was inked between Turkey and Bosnia & Herzegovina with the aim to enhance the trade volume to around USD 1 billion in 2019. FTAs provide a supportive environment for foreign investors as they help them to secure intellectual property rights, institutionalize their participation in the host economy, and assure them of the government's commitment to a liberal economic policy (Kayani, 2021). According to Aysan et al. (2020), COVID-19 has plunged the world economies into deepest recession. But even in this catastrophic situation the relations of Turkey with Bosnia and Herzegovina remained unjolted.

Furthermore, President Erdogan iterated that the TurkStream gas pipeline project had Turkey's blessings and that they would use their influence to have it built via B & H. (Donmez, 2019). The TurkStream project aims to deliver Russian natural gas from the depths of the Black Sea, bypassing Ukraine in the process. The Turkish market will be served by one pipeline, while the other will transit via Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary before arriving in Western Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina could play a role in the second path (Elliott, 2021). Turkey has been focusing on normalizing and expanding cultural, political, and economic ties with neighboring countries, particularly Albania and other Balkan countries, to meet the "No Problem with Neighbors" policy. As a result, relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina have improved significantly. In this sense, boosting economic integration and diplomacy as a means of problem-solving has aided Turkey's soft power profile. Common history, geographic proximity, and Turkey's expanding economic importance are all factors pushing Turkish investment in Bosnia's economy. On the Bosnian side, the government has designated Turkey, along with Italy, Greece, and Austria, as a vital partner in the so-called "four-angle" Bosnian foreign strategy (Yaşar and KORKMAZ, 2017).

Turkey has promoted regional trade cooperation in addition to bilateral trade agreements. The establishment of a trilateral economic discussion mechanism between Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia is a tangible result of these efforts. Following the establishment of a combined trade office in Istanbul in 2016, it is expected that trade between the three nations would be more systematic and coordinated. Free trade agreements help in attracting FDI, which further helps in bringing external funding, latest technology and reducing the unemployment (Kayani, 2017). Until the mid-2000s, Bosnia and Herzegovina were home to most Turkish firms in the Balkans (Pavlović, 2015). Following then, Turkey's investments in the Western Balkans have seen a general upswing, but with some variations. This improvement is owing to the Turkish economy's overall dynamism and progress, as well as a decline in capital investments from European stakeholders who were affected by the global financial crisis. Turkish companies are active in a variety of industries, including telecommunication, energy, transportation, health, tourism, construction, and banking, and the presence of Turkish-owned banks in Bosnia and Herzegovina has helped in decreasing the investment hurdles (Hake, 2019). Turkish investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina have increased significantly since 2006. Turkish FDI in Bosnia was barely 34 million dollars at the end of 2005. Turkish FDI was roughly 210 million dollars at the end of 2016. Turkey's total inward FDI to Bosnia and Herzegovina was US\$ 126 million over a ten-year period from 2009 to 2019, accounting for 60% of total FDI inflows to the Balkan countries (Ekinci, 2018).

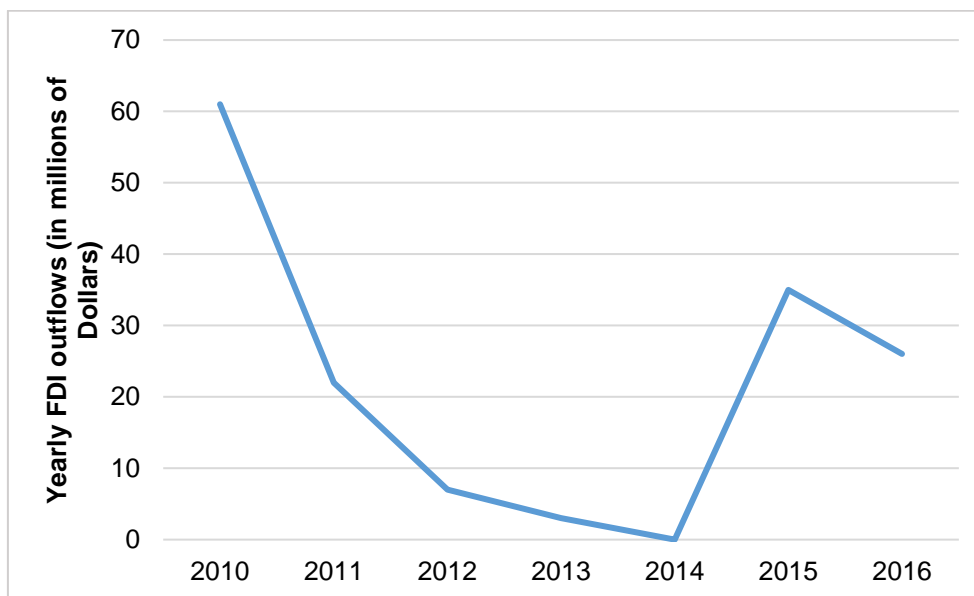


Figure 1. Yearly FDI outflow from Turkey to the Western Balkans

Source: Ekinci (2018)

4. Blossoming bilateral economic and trade relations

International trade specialization can be classified as either geographical (structured in accordance with nations) or commodity-based (structured by products), with both subdivided into export specialization (supply specialization) and import specialization (demand specialization). Trade specialization, either vertically or horizontally, in terms of distinguishing inter-industry from intra-industry trade, has never been explored in Bosnia and Herzegovina-Turkey ties (Demirtaş, 2017), even though there had been unrestricted trade for nearly two decades between Turkey and Bosnia. This should have resulted in significant impacts and piqued researchers' attention; some generalized developments have been examined in few studies. This has been mainly as part of a broad evaluation to analyze the trends regarding trade among Turkey and Balkan countries. In the period from 2006-2013, it has been observed that Turkey and Balkan countries experienced increased economic flows especially to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The DEK/Turkey-Bosnia-Herzegovina Business Council was established in 1995 with the goal of becoming a major facilitator in the development of bilateral business relations and in helping Bosnia-Herzegovina to achieve economic rehabilitation. Turkey was a donor country for post-war reconstruction, and the Council was charged with promoting cooperation with local partners and advising Turkish enterprises ranging from huge corporations to small businesses on how to participate in construction and industrial projects. The Council has highlighted the defense industry, iron and steel, textiles, wood processing, paper, furniture, leather, leather processing, electronics, and food as the key areas of collaboration. Individual Turkish enterprises are currently submitting legislation and bureaucratic procedural recommendations to the government. However, for the Business Council to be an effective lobbying entity, regular information exchange with Bosnian officials is required (Pavlović, 2015).

Within the context of a reciprocal trade regime that is already highly liberalized, trade trends and patterns are heavily influenced by the characteristics of the trading country like, size, economic performance, and trade performance to be more specific. In this example, Turkey in comparison to Bosnia and Herzegovina is a far bigger country when considered geographically, demographically, and in economic aspects. The land area, population, and GDP of Turkey are 15 times larger, 25 and 38 times higher, respectively. The countries also differ significantly in terms of trade performance and global competitiveness, with Turkey having an advantage. If trading activities are increased among two countries, the characteristics specific to a country are bound to have a greater impact as is the situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey as they have

bilateral relations (Demirtaş, 2017). For years, Turkey has been one of Bosnia's most important trading partners. Turkey placed seventh or eighth in terms of Bosnian exports and eighth in terms of Bosnian imports, in accordance with the data from the "Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations" of Bosnia and Herzegovina, except for 2019, when it ranked sixth (Akan and Balin, 2016).

Between 2009 and 2019, goods trade between Bosnia & Herzegovina and Turkey rose steadily. It was three times as valuable in 2019 than it was in 2009, with a value of roughly 1.2 billion BAM. The increase in trade was due to an increase in Bosnia's exports and imports, with exports growing faster. The value of exports has increased fivefold since 2009, while the value of imports has increased threefold. In 2016, export-import coverage in Bosnia and Herzegovina boosted from 14% to 58% (Čaušević, 2015). However, the gap between imports and exports remains large, resulting in a significant trade imbalance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The export demand saw a shift after 2017 which is a major contributing factor to increased growth which was declining while imports were increasing continually (Figure 2). The export-import coverage, on the other hand, declined to about 30% in 2019. According to government statistics, Turkey's share of the Bosnia and Herzegovina trade imbalance scaled up from 4.50% in 2017 to 7.48% in 2018 and 8.39% in 2019, with industrial products accounting for much of the rise (BASILGAN and Akman, 2019).

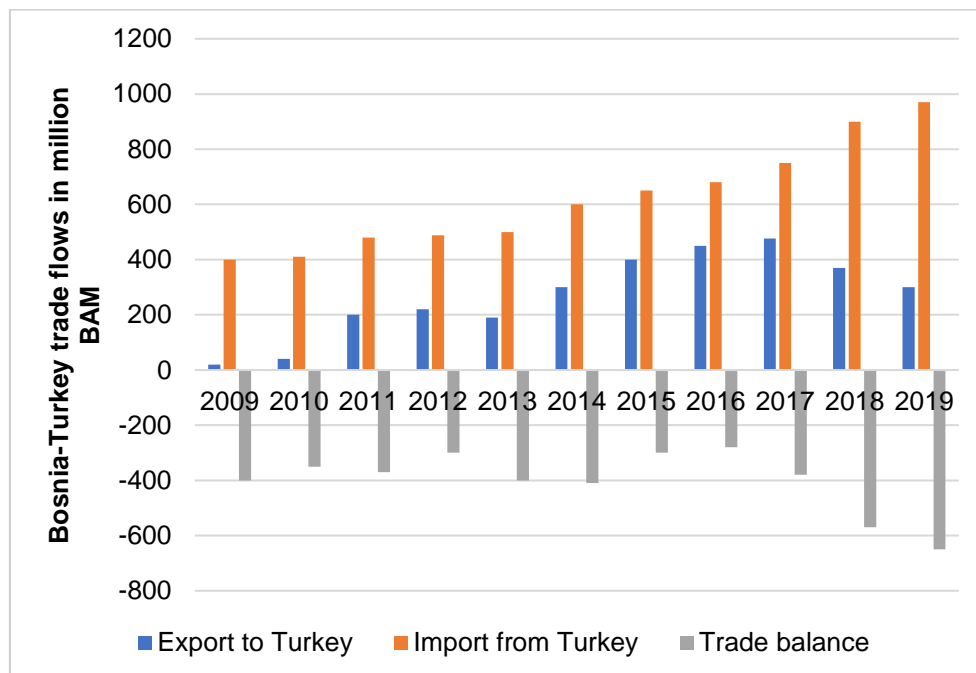


Figure 2. Trajectory of Bosnia-Turkey trade flows in million BAM (2009-2019)

Bosnia and Herzegovina have improved their trading performance with Turkey to certain extent, although economists and policymakers assess that there is an ample room for improvement in the country's contemporary position. During much of the examined period, trade between the two nations rose, with Bosnia and Herzegovina's exports growing faster than imports. Similarly, the export-import market between the two countries is also undergoing diversification and expansion. However, the trade deficit with Turkey remains large, and it has been re-growing in recent years because of a downward tendency in Bosnia and Herzegovina's export volumes. Furthermore, the trajectory of the export rates demonstrates a high degree of concentration, based on a large export share of many product categories. Most of these products are low-value-added. In few industrial sectors, Bosnia and Herzegovina's comparative advantages were revealed (Rašidagić and Hesova, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Turkey has increasingly used its soft power potential to further consolidate its economic and political influence in the Balkan region and particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over the last two decades under the leadership of President Erdogan, Turkey's already active foreign policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina has got further pace and momentum. The role of Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA) has also been phenomenal in restoring the Ottoman monuments, libraries, and mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The economic relations of Turkey and Bosnia are flourishing at tremendously fast pace. The geographical proximity has resulted in reducing the transportation costs between Turkey and Bosnia. Furthermore, the similarities in the consumption habits of Turkish and Bosnian people have also make it very profitable for the Turkish companies to invest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian foreign policy towards Turkey must also take a stand on its own aims, aspirations, and long-term goals in bilateral economic and political relations.

Even if cultural investments are most visible and undoubtedly welcomed by all, Bosnia and Herzegovina are in desperate need of steps that will assist it to develop its economy and strengthen its European Union membership. Given the current state of relations between Turkey and Bosnia, there is still a significant room for the improvement and development of the relationships.

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