

## The Turkish–Albanian Relations

### In the Post–Cold War Era: Between National and Supranational Interests

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**Abstract** The aim of this paper is to analyze the Albanian–Turkish relations in the post Cold War era. The dynamics of these relations, which can be divided in two different periods, have been defined by both domestic and international factors. Respectively the first period runs from 1990 until 2002 and the second from 2002 to present.

Since the end of the cold war Albanian’s foreign policy has undergone profound changes. Turkey has been ever since one of the main partners of the country. In the first half of the 90’s, during the DP government, Albania increased bilateral relations with Turkey aiming to balance the influence of Greece in order to secure its political and economic interests. The situation changed after the elections of 1997 when the socialists came in power. Afterwards Albania started to develop closer relations with Greece meanwhile Turkey due to its domestic problems decreased its presence in the region.

The main characteristic of Turkish policy towards the region, until 2002, was to preserve Turkey’s security by active involvement in the region’s affairs in NATO and ONU military and peace–keeping operations. After the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) came in power, in 2002, it defined a new vision of Turkey’s role in the international arena. Graeme Herd explained the Kantian strategic culture in the “new” Turkish foreign policy, which is based on a conservative realistic vision: zero sum balance of material power approach to international relations, self-help and mistrust. The new Turkish political leadership promoted, especially since 2005, a multi-dimensional foreign policy that pays more attention to the Balkans. The implementation of this policy relies basically in the use of soft power tools like economic cooperation, cultural projects, and the transposition of a Turkish lifestyle. This strategy is widely reflected in the Albanian–Turkish relations after 2005, which coincided with the coming in power of the Democratic Party in Albania.

After 2005 the bilateral relations were enhanced as a result of a different strategy adopted in the foreign policy of the two countries. The Turkish support to Albania’s NATO membership, the economic and military assistance as well as the transformation of Albania in Turkey’s main strategic partner in the region are all evidences of this new era in relations between the two countries.

The “zero problems with the neighbors” principle of the Turkish foreign policy has also been adopted from the new socialist government as one of the main pillars of the Albanian foreign policy. The good relations and the bilateral interest of the two countries were evidenced in the official visit in October 2013, of the Turkish and Albanian prime ministers in Kosovo.

To sum up, the relations between the two countries were widely shaped from the different

approaches toward the foreign policy, the different political parties have pursued in both countries. One of the most important and innovative instruments in the shaping of these policies was the role the cultural and religious factors played. The stress made on these factors differed from one political actor to another. Turkey as a more important actor played a supporting role in a parallel policy which aimed the strengthening of the Turkey's role in the region and the EU membership goal. Meanwhile Albania had to preserve a difficult equilibrium between the EU membership aim and the preservation of the national interests in the delicate international environment of the Western Balkans.

### **Introduction: Turkish-Albanian foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War**

When the sound of the *Pet Shop Boys* "Go West" echoed throughout the already *ex soviet* bloc, a new era of hopes was promised to the Eastern European countries.

It was not so easy indeed.

The wind of change resulted in a storm and the wrecks of the communist collapse opened the doors to new actors and transform the role of the existing ones.

The end of a bipolar world did not result in the melting of the once called *eastern unfortunate brothers*. It resulted in new divisions. The disintegration process enhanced by the fall of communism gave way to an unpredictable maverick in the eastern countries. The Balkans showed again that they worthy their nickname, *i.e a powder keg*.

Albania, after the fall of the *regime* wasn't anymore part of the communist *bloc* but a « new » state eager to find its place in the international arena and to reach Western European countries, a dream denied for a long time.

So, in the aftermath of the cold war, Albanian international role has been characterized by many open questions. What place for Albania in the region, Europe and in the world? What risks and opportunities in the relations with the neighbors and abroad? How will Tirana deal with a multi-polar world? Which will be the Albanian strategic partners and allies?

The transition that broke in the 90's included not only the organization of the state, the transition from a mono-party system to a pluralist system, from a centralized economy to a market economy, but held in also an interior crisis of the civil society and the values that the regime inculcated in more than 50 years.

This situation was reflected in the fragile foreign policy, not only a change from previous model but also a challenge in a new historical environment.

The new strategy was not constrained to respect the rigid division between *west* and *east*, but had to deal with former "*enemies*". In fact the *vision of evil* – the west with the USA in pole-position, after 1991 became the mirage to reach, the focus of the foreign policy, and nowadays Albania is still concentrated in the road towards the European Integration.

The range of possibilities was quite wide, going from a globalized Albania, more closely related with European Union and the West, with an assertive approach toward the region, to a more nationalistic country pursuing more constrained regional policies and a foreign policy rotated toward national interest.

In this complicated puzzle, the paper tries to illustrate the Albanian foreign policy towards Turkey and their bilateral relations, in two different periods from 1990 to 2000 and from 2000 to present days.

Casting a glance over Turkey, the other actor and object of this paper, we can notice that it faces a troubled domestic and international environment in a new multi-polar world.

During the Cold War, Turkey acted as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence into the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East [1]. After the end of the Cold War, Turkey became a

more assertive and independent actor on the international stage. It has always *gone west*, but in a new world with other priorities and interests, soon became conscientious of its role in the Balkans, a region that carries inside a piece of ottoman legacy; so today Ankara is increasing its focus in the Balkans.

The relation between Turkey and the Balkans, an image of a glorious past, is extremely important because the country stands at the nexus of three areas of increasing strategic importance to the United States and Europe: the Balkans, the Caspian region and the Middle East, so, Turkey's strategic importance has increased. [2]

Ankara is redefining its foreign policy and rethinking its international relationships in a new world.

There to the shape and the content of foreign policy interests toward the Balkan region differ not only after the cold war but depend also from the visions of the various governments. So after the 2005 when Turkey-EU relations stagnated, Turkey begins to play a more assertive role in the region and this is reflected in the relations between Albania and Turkey.

Last but not least, the element that shape Albanian – Turkey relations is that the two countries are the only two secular states with majority of Muslim population; this common element contributes to the improvement of the dialogue between civilizations in broader sense.

In this frame the paper will try to explain why Albania is important for the Turkey and *vice versa*.

### **1. Albania – Turkey relation from 1990 to 2002: rediscovering an antic connection**

After the fall of the communist regime, in March 1992 with a decisive electoral victory, the anticommunist opposition came in power. Sali Berisha, the leader of the Democratic Party became the new President of Albania. It was necessary for the government to formulate a new foreign policy in accordance with the objectives of a liberal - democratic state. The government was eager to integrate Albania into the Western European institutions and its citizens were impatient to become part of Western Europe, a cultural space denied to them for 50 years.

The Albanian Foreign Policy in these years pursued three broad objectives: increasing interaction with Western powers to strengthen its security and prevent the Yugoslav war of secession from spreading to Albanian-inhabited territories; seeking international economic assistance for the implementation of radical reforms; and negotiating a *modus vivendi* with neighboring countries that simultaneously would protect the rights of ethnic Albanians there [3].

Unfortunately the focus on these objectives became extremely difficult with the abruption of the war in ex Yugoslavia which dramatically changed the political landscape of the Balkans creating new challenges for Albanian foreign policy. Buffeted by the powerful neighbors to the north and to the south, Albania finds itself at the center of the storm. The main risk at the moment was the military involvement of Albania with Serbia over Kosovo, inhabited from two millions of ethnic Albanians. The speech of Berisha in the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia which took place in Genève in 1993 was a clear commitment of his preoccupation about the situation. In this conference Berisha expressed the fear of an escalation of the conflict as a result of the big Serbia project within a clear ethnical territory, and asked for the intervention of NATO, UN and CEE. [4]

Lacking the military experience to affront this problem, Albania sought protection and tried to forge links with US, NATO and Turkey. Albania was the first former Warsaw pact country that requested NATO-s membership but realizing that this was impossible at that moment, in a pragmatic foreign policy Berisha expanded military ties with Turkey and Germany to address its security concerns.

Albania signed military cooperation agreements with Turkey but also bilateral cooperation was

developed in economic field and culture dimension above military assistance. For the first time in the history of the two countries a highest rank representative, President Ozal visited Albania and gave a speech to the parliament in 1993. During this visit President Demirel sought to President Berisha the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia asserting that this would help to the stability in this area and would prevent the spread of the war. [5] Indeed Albania in April 1993 communicated the recognition of Macedonia [6] which was also a vital interest, impeding to the country to be circled from Greece to the south and Serbs to the North.

Albania cultivated a special relationship with Turkey, which became one of the main and strategic partners of the country. The two countries signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation and a defense cooperation pact. Also Berisha asked for Turkey's support in Albania's membership application into NATO, for peaceful settlement in Kosovo issue and for the protection of the rights of Kosovar Albanians. Financial assistance provided by Turkey was another issue in Berisha's agenda.

The main stream of the Albanian foreign policy until 1998 was the support of Turkey, USA, and the European Community. Considering the fact that was still early for the integration of the Balkans into CEE and also in the deficit of a specific European strategy towards the Balkans, Berisha sought to get Turkish support against Albania's problems with Greece.

Traditionally one of the Albania's foreign policy objectives has been the prevention of Athens-Belgrade alliance directed against Tirana and finding a Great Power ally to get potential Greek-Yugoslav designs on its territory under control [7]. As a result the Great Power ally was naturally Turkey considering also that the impediment of an alliance Athens-Belgrade was a common interest.

The Turkish interest is expressed clear in the words of the President Demirel, the recognition of Macedonia was clearly in the direct interest of Turkey foreign policy that in this way was trying to balance the influence of Greece over the Balkans and especially was tried to put in difficulty the axe Beograd- Athens by increasing the importance and the ties of the axe Tirana – Skopje.

Obviously Skopje was the most predictable variable; the problems with Greece about the denomination of the Republic made Macedonia a natural ally of Ankara, so the efforts of the foreign Turkish policy get concentrated on the behavior of Bulgaria. The goal was the impediment of a Greek – Bulgarian - Serbian axis. So in October 1995 during a meeting at the United Nations President Demirel after a discussion with the counterpart of Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria reached an agreement on a four-year project. This project was the construction of an international highway linking the port of Durres with Istanbul through Skopje and Sofia.

In the first years of its existence as a democratic republic, Albania developed its relations with Turkey considering this country none only as a part of the west, not only a natural ally but also in some cases like the only choice. It was the Turkish support in Albanian main concern of territorial security like the case of the wars in former Yugoslavia and its strained relations with Greece.

Turkey by the other side in this way could reduced the influence of Greece as a principal actor in the Balkans, and made in front of Beograd-Athens axis the Skopje-Tirana axis and persuaded Bulgaria to join the *club*.

In 1998 with the implosion of the war in Kosovo, one of the most concerning question, frosted during the cold war, emerged as one of the main problems waiting for a solution. At the same time in Albania after the pyramidal crisis of the 1997, came in power the Socialist Party with Fatos Nano as a leader and prime Minister. During the opposition years, Nano and his party often criticized Berisha, for pursuing pro-Turkish foreign policies and consider Turkey as a supporter of Berisha so after the electoral victory, Nano increased bilateral close relations with Greece despite of Turkey.

In these years the main concern of the Albanian foreign policy was the conflict in Kosovo. Prime Minister Nano declared that the idea of Greater Albania was not accepted in serious political

environment in Albania and Albanians itself appears reluctant to entertain Greater Albania idea [8]. This assumption was seen as the right way by the west to ensure peace and stability in the region because the least thing needed in the Balkans was another state again with *megalomaniac* ideas and objectives, enough is enough.

Evaluating the position of Albania as politically correct one, didn't resolve the Kosovar issues which raised security concerns in Western countries and USA, in the Balkan region and in the European continent.

The European Union was still an incoherent actor that wanted to play a game as international and regional actor but unfortunately the *hour of Europe* didn't come neither this time. So the United States intervention was indispensable for the solution of this huge problem in the middle of European Continent.

Making a step behind and analyzing the foreign policy of Turkey in this crisis, principally was alienated with the West and with USA in specific. This none unilaterally policy was cause of delusion for millions of Kosovars who expected a greater involvement of Turkey which was seen as a natural ally and great power due to historical, cultural and religious reasons and also for the presence of a small Turkish community in Kosovo. For all this reasons Turkey should have been the first among the international community members to support the Kosovo battle for independence.

Turkey abstained from unilateral involvement during the development in Kosovo. Turkey sought a solution under the framework of international consensus and Turkish officials expressed their support for only internationally decided action. Summarizing this foreign policy gave priority to the use of diplomatic action rather than the use of military force and also Turkey missed a chance to play a role as mediator in the region using its historical ties.

The Turkish foreign policy was the result of domestic constrains and the consequence of an internal political environment. Turkey, in principle, support the movement for independence of the states of former Yugoslavia likes as Slovenia and Croatia but Kosovo was nominated as an internal problem, and was a province of the Republic of Serbia. Due to this denomination a greater support for the Kosovo issue would be seen as a support for the separatist curd movements inside the Turkish state.

But despite this Turkey wasn't indifferent in the Kosovar conflict so in 1998 reiterated its willingness to donate humanitarian aid and equipment for sheltering refugees. Turkish military forces plaid an important role supplying troops and logic supports under NATO forces. Turkish Foreign Ministry in late 1998 due to a still unresolved conflict called warring parties to cease fight immediately and unconditionally support NATO military intervention also participated in peacekeeping missions and reconstruction arrangements in the region.

Out of the Kosovo crisis the influence of the Turkey in the Balkans and in Albania specifically deteriorated after 1995, due to domestic problems. Albania under the socialist government began to increase economic and military cooperation with Greece. Greece became the main foreign investor and leading trade partner in the country substituting Turkey role in Albania until 2002 when the domestic factor in Albania and Turkey changed again.

The main objective of Turkey in the Balkans after the cold war was to preserve its security by its involvement in regions affairs in a realistic foreign policy formulation based in its national interest.

The main characteristic of Turkish Foreign policy in Albania during the 90's is an active involvement expressed in economic and military ties and its contribution to regional stability and maintenance of peace and democracy.

In this decade the politic of Turkey was supported also by the USA and took advantages in its position in Albania and Macedonia from hostile Greek foreign policies.

By the other side Albania in the aftermath of the Cold War in its fragile position tried to resolve

its security problems gaining Turkey's support as a reliable ally dusting their cultural and religious ties but majorly under governance of the Democratic Party than under the governance of the Socialist Party.

## 2. Changes and challenges in a new millennium

Relations between Turkey and Albania have common aspects with the Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans.

At the beginning of the new millennium Turkey has faced some important changes in its domestic affairs. A liberal Muslim oriented party, AKP, won the elections and a single party government was established which defined a new vision to Turkey in the international arena.

The line guide of this new foreign policy were traced by Ahmet Davutoglu, such as zero problems policy toward the neighbors, develop relations with the neighboring regions and beyond, adherence to a multi-dimensional Foreign Policy and implementing rhythmic diplomacy [9]. Also neo-Ottomanist ideological supplement was underlined in this new foreign policy which gives more importance to its relations with its neighboring countries and stressed the historical ties and legacy of Ottoman past in these regions. In this context new foreign policy orientation of Turkey determined its vision as a strong regional power in the Balkan region with a greater involvement in regional affairs.

After that AKP came in power we can specify two phases of its foreign policy towards the European Union and the Balkans. The AKP government pushed for Turkey's full EU membership and executes far-reaching reforms to improve its democratic performance from 2002 to 2005, following the EU policy.

Turkey- EU relations were suspended after 2005. The public opinion lost its enthusiasm to join the EU and the political leadership is accelerating a more multi-dimensional foreign policy [10].

In this context recreating itself as the benefactor of the Balkans, on the periphery of the EU is a useful way to secure closer cooperation with Europe and cement Ankara's image as an indispensable geopolitical partner in the region [11].

As a result UE must either embrace Turkey as a member or face off against Turkey in the Balkans and perhaps beyond. The realization of this strategy is evident in Bosnia (at this moment Turkey can't be ignored as a mediator in the relations between Bosnia and Serbia) and less in Albania where the bilateral relations after 2005 were imprinting in the support that Turkey gave towards the Albanian integration in the Atlantic Structures.

Turkey as a member of NATO is regarded as an important regional power in Albanian politics but the Neo-Ottomans element it's not present in the policy toward it, because Albanians are quite indifferent to religion and quite indifferent towards ethno-religious policies of foreign countries.

In 2005 after eight years of a Socialist Government guided by Fatos Nano, came in power the Democratic Power guided by Sali Berisha but the main strategy of the foreign policy was almost the same regarding the integration into Western Institutions and improvement of good relations with Balkans state.

In those years Greece became an official strategic partner for Albania, not only as a result of strong economic ties and as the first donor but also the Greek government changed its strategy towards Albania, increasing political relations, official visits, giving a message of peace and stability. Considering its problematic relations with Macedonia the Greek government tried to balance the Turkish power in the region acting in a more friendly way with Albania.

In 2009 Berisha government got the principal victory for the country, its membership to NATO, the second of the *Western Club* (NATO, UE, Council of Europe), Albania is member of two of them but missed the third and also the most important in the Albanians optic, the UE.

Despite this NATO membership was a great event supported by Turkey as an important and powerful member of the Alliance not only for the peace in the region and its stability but also to get more support inside NATO. One other reason of the support for the inclusion of regional states into international bodies was to enable multilateral involvement regarding the Balkan affairs. For Albanian by the way the integration in NATO means the modernization of the country and its military capacities.

If we take a detailed look at bilateral relations Turkey - Albania, one of the most sensitive episodes was the abstention of the Albania regarding the Palestinian status in the ONU. Erdogan himself tried to convince Berisha for a pro-vote regarding the status of Palestina in ONU, but the result was not positive for Turkey; it was a difficult decision for the ex-premier Berisha. In this specific case Albania demonstrated again the importance of its relations with USA, Berisha couldn't act against US interests, because it is not possible for Albania to act as an independent actor in the international arena.

Acting as an independent actor it isn't quite simple neither for Turkey, which is pursuing a foreign policy based in new relations with south and east, improving relations with Islamic countries but it can't ignored its relations with US, its EU candidature and its NATO membership. The change in its foreign policy, which shift from a conservative realistic approach in a more civilian one, its demonstrated in the use of soft power instead of military power [12].

The use of civilian power is demonstrated in economic cooperation, cultural projects (TIKA center in Albania is one of them), the presentation of Turkish lifestyle and tourism. Also Turkey is playing a role as a mediator in the Balkans, by the trilateral mechanism between Turkey-Serbia-Bosnia-Herzegovina led by Turkey trying to resolve the conflict between Serbia and Bosnia is a clear message not only of the use of civilian power but a change in the conventional strategic culture. In this way Turkey is trying to be more independent in the international arena, intensifying its influence in the Balkans.

Turkey contributes in Albania enduring peace and stability, in a realistic approach of foreign policy implementation after the cold war. The intervention of Turkey in Kosovo was aligned to the international community and its general interests, avoiding unilateral interventions. The implementation of Turkish foreign policy was not inspired by neo-ottomanist or Islamic ideology and it's characterized by maintaining soft power skills in a Kantian strategic culture in sustaining stability.

In 2013 came in power the socialist party but with a new leader, Edi Rama as a prime minister. The prime minister actually adopted a new strategy in Albanians foreign policy, and one of the principal assumptions is zero problems with the neighbors. A strong message was the visit that the prime minister makes in Turkey immediately after his election. In these 20 years after the cold war Turkey was considered as a partner but not officially as a strategic partner. The strategic partners of Albania as a result of the prosecution of a national interest in its foreign policy, embodied in the European integration, have always been Greece and Italy, neighboring countries and members of UE. With these visits and also with the visits of two premiers in Kosovo it seems that actually Turkey will be the strategic partner of Albania. Inspired by the Turkish foreign policy "zero problems with neighbors", the new government adopted literally and concretely the axiom, the visit of the prime minister in Greece and his visit in Turkey is a clear example of this. *Turkey is our strategic partner, as we announced in our program, Turkish-Albanian is a long friendship, and the prime minister is our friend* [13].

Today Turkey is the second major trade partner of Albania, with a total value of Turkish investments over 1 billion Euros [14].

Today the major change in the foreign policy of Albania is not the research of a balance between Greece and Turkey but to transform Turkey officially in a strategic partner without missing the support of Greece. Also, in a region that it's not affected anymore by ethnic wars the problem of

Albania it isn't the integrity of its territory but the economic development of the country. In this optic the use of the soft-power from Turkey and the increasing bilateral relations are been accepted in the country. Today out of the frame of a religious and ethnic division in the region, the main goal of the two countries is the empowerment of their role in the international arena. It is clear that the role of Albania can't be compared with the role of Turkey as a global actor but trying to be a more assertive actor in the region helps the country to gain more visibility.

Concluding Turkey's interest toward Albania and *vice versa* is not a new phenomenon, but their recent orientation toward each other is more sophisticated and better coordinated. It seeks to achieve many interrelated objectives: to develop closer bilateral relations, create multilateral dialogue mechanisms, and energize regional cooperation.

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