

Balkan Think Tanks Convention

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Ankara

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

The Balkans have been undergoing a difficult path since the end of the Cold War. Transition to democracy and market economy was an arduous process for people and institutions that had lived under completely different political and economic systems before. In addition, historical disputes among Balkan communities, which had largely been frozen during the Cold War, came to the fore again with new areas of competition. As a result, a number of inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts took place in the Balkans during the 1990s. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo showed clearly how much it needed to be done to bring a long-lasting peace and stability in the region and to ensure its economic development.

From the turn of the 2000s onwards, the EU integration process opened a new path for the Balkans by promising stability, order and economic development. The accession of the Balkan states to the European Union requires them to ensure the rule of law, a functioning market economy, and stronger democratic institutions and public administration. In order to receive the membership carrot, the Balkan states have embarked on a comprehensive reform process in all these areas.

Consequently, four states (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia) have become member to the European Union so far. Four states (Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania) have received candidacy status, while two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) are at earlier stages in their accession process. Even though the process has made the EU as the primary international actor in the region, the prolongation of the accession process has put the Western Balkans in limbo. In addition, the relative decline in its economic and political leverage in recent years has brought about the view that the EU is not irreplaceable. As a result, the six non-member states, who are still struggling with economic problems, are in the meantime looking for complementary, if not alternative, policies to speed up development and economic growth. While they continue to pronounce the EU as the first priority, they are furthering their relations with other actors, among which Russia and Turkey have lately become conspicuously active in the region. In the meantime, economic problems, shortcomings in democratization, liberalization and institutionalization, and the volatile dynamics of international politics, make the region vulnerable for destabilization.

To discuss the current political issues faced by the Balkans and Turkey, the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) organized, with financial support of the Turkish Prime Ministry Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), a convention of Balkan think tanks specializing on political research. The event, which took place on 10-12 June 2015 in Ankara, was attended by researchers working at think tanks from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey.

The convention included a two-day-long workshop, which consisted of six panels. Each panel included four interventions followed by an open roundtable discussion. The themes of the panel sessions were: 1) regional political issues of the Western Balkans; 2) international actors in the Balkans; 3) the EU integration process of the Balkans and Turkey; 4) Turkey in the Balkans; 5) repercussions of the Syrian civil war in the Balkans; and 6) energy issues connecting Turkey and the Balkans.



This report summarizes the remarks made during the workshop.







Panel I

Challenges to the Stability of the Western Balkans: Key Regional Disputes

Since the end of the Cold War, the Western Balkan countries have made remarkable achievements in political and economic transformation. Yet, a set of common problems and vulnerabilities are still observed in most of the Balkan countries today. These include fragile rule of law and democratic governance, inconsistent fight against corruption, insufficient economic development, incomplete liberalization of the economy, and lack of strong cohesion among ethnic and religious groups. All these challenges have hindered rapid progress in terms of internal reform and regional cooperation. Even though all Western Balkan governments have declared their strong disposition toward EU integration for the last two decades, the steps they have taken for reform and regional cooperation have been slow and inadequate. Without strong dedication of the regional actors, international efforts for peace and stability, such as the EU-led Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, have yielded only limited results.

According to one opinion, long-term peace and tranquility cannot be assured in the Western Balkans without strengthening three essential values, i.e., democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The immaturity of democratic culture and institutions makes the region prone to authoritarianism, which can have very strong destabilizing effects. Due to a number of reasons, EU conditionality is not as appealing and credible a drive for reform as it was before. Furthermore, as a discussant argued, the example of Ivo Sanader may be discouraging many Western Balkan leaders from undertaking serious reform, due to the concern of being convicted of their earlier wrongdoings. As a result, it is possible to observe a trend of authoritarianism in almost all Western Balkan countries today, even if at varying degrees. This trend is not only a domestic-level challenge to democratization, but also a challenge to regional peace and stability. This is because, authoritarian leaders usually resort to populism and ethnic nationalism in order to gain or remain in power. To give a typical example, the ethnic-based discourse and agenda adopted by the leaders of the Republika Srpska (RS) has been not only a source of instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also a main obstacle in the country's Euro-Atlantic future.

Two discussants argued that settling longstanding territorial disputes is essential for a lasting peace in the Western Balkans. Lingering aspirations for territorial changes can lead to grave consequences. As seen clearly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the nationalistic rhetoric used by circles belonging to all the three main elements undermines the viability of the state as well as the solidarity of people. As long as nationalism continues to be strong in the region, it will be difficult for peoples and governments to come together and for the region to move forward altogether.

The dialogue among Western Balkan nations will very much depend on the way how the shared past is

handled. As one discussant underlined, the conflicts and disputes in the Western Balkans are not primordial; they were shaped under certain historical circumstances and were primarily elite-driven. Even today political elites often use nationalist arguments to play on the sentiments and fears of masses for their own political benefit. The use of nationalism as a political tool is therefore another challenge to regional peace. Instead of regarding inter-ethnic and territorial disputes as eternal and existential, political elites and people should be able to re-calculate their national interests according to the needs and realities of the present.

Another salient problem in most of the Western Balkan countries is the corruption of the political elite. As a recent example, in Macedonia, the opposition published wiretaps to expose the frauds of the government. This incident has caused serious turbulence in domestic politics, which could, as seen in the Kumanovo incident in May 2015, trigger or facilitate a variety of new disputes and conflicts in the wider Balkan region. While the fighting in Kumanovo was going on, the Serbian government, apprehensive of the security threat it posed, presented the issue to the United Nations well before the Macedonian government. The Bulgarian government took a number of security measures along the Macedonian border. Kosovo and Albania also became alert, especially because their citizens were involved in the incident. These reactions illustrate the trans-border potential of intra-state dynamics and the fragility of regional stability in the Balkans.

The relative weakness of the rule of law in the Western Balkans also crystallizes in the weakness of institutions. With weak institutions, it is difficult to find sustainable solutions to problems.

Despite experiencing common political, economic and social problems, it is still unclear whether Western Balkan governments and societies feel that they are on the same boat. Stronger dialogue and cooperation in the region is necessary. This will not only enable the Western Balkan governments to effectively tackle common problems, such as refugee issues and terrorism, but also lay the groundwork for resolving historical disputes and moving on towards a prosperous future.

According to a discussant, even though the memories of past conflicts and disputes are alive, states and societies in the Balkans need to find ways to move forward. Resorting to rational thinking will make policy makers realize that emotional and populist foreign policies are often unproductive. For instance, if Serbia re-calculates the costs and benefits of its Kosovo policy, it may find that recognizing Kosovo and helping it become a strong and viable state will be a more opti-

mal policy than undermining and weakening Kosovo. While a weak Kosovo could be a security problem for Serbia and a source of instability for the Balkans, a strong Kosovo can offer opportunities for cooperation and collective development. Western Balkan countries can take the example of the rapprochement between Germany and France in the aftermath of the Second World War, which was in fact a more vicious war compared to the recent conflicts in the Balkans.

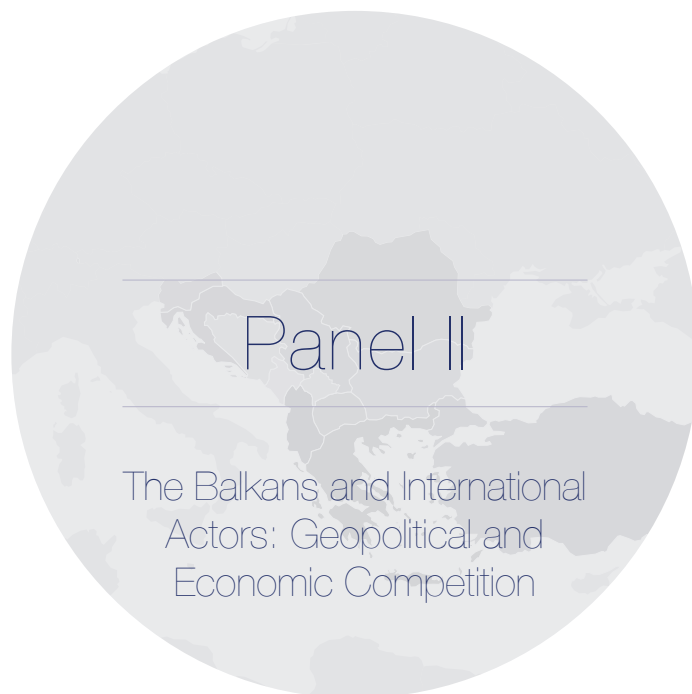
Another serious challenge that the region copes with is the on-going irregular migration flows. With the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, the Western Balkans have lately become a main transit route of irregular migration toward Europe. The increasing pressure on borders, the intensification of human smuggling and organized crime, and the tragedies faced by the migrants pose serious risks and problems that cannot possibly be tackled singlehandedly by any government. Western Balkan countries need to come together and develop a regional response.

A discussant argued that some Western Balkan countries, especially those that are ahead of others in fulfilling the EU criteria, are concerned that regional integration would delay their own integration into the European Union. Instead of deepening their relations with their neighbors, these countries actually want to “escape” the region by joining the EU.

A discussant underlined that in recent years there has been increasing cooperation among Western Balkan countries, particularly in the areas of security and home affairs. Yet, political disputes, institutional shortcomings and the lack of coordination are hindering the progress of cooperation amongst governments. Historical thinking, existing stereotypes, and language barriers hamper strong inter-societal dialogue. Balkan societies are still marked by high polarization and low tolerance for cultural hybridity. The region also lacks strong institutions that would initiate and foster cooperation among countries. International incentives, even pressures, are therefore essential to accelerate regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

A discussant observed that Western Balkan countries show little interest in their neighbors’ problems unless they are directly related to themselves or their congeners/coreligionists. According to another discussant, this is mainly because these countries are already overwhelmed by a number of political and economic challenges and spend their energy on them.

Another discussant warned about various ultra-nationalist groups operating in various parts of the Western Balkans. Even if these groups appear minor and marginal, their potential to promote hatred, reproduce nationalist rhetoric, and provoke masses should not be overlooked.





Panel II

The Balkans and International Actors: Geopolitical and Economic Competition

Recent developments have been indicating that international geopolitics is re-shaping rapidly. Particularly the clash of interests and power between Russia and the Western world have become visible in some geopolitical fault lines such as Syria and Ukraine. The Western Balkans have not yet become one of these fault lines, as the EU's influence over the region is still high. However, the decline in the EU's political and economic leverage has led to new emerging powers such as Russia, Turkey and China.

Since the end of the Cold War, many parts of the world have been undergoing a phase of transition under a Kantian liberal democratic hegemony. In the Balkans, the transition has been along the lines of an EU-based understanding of development and a NATO-based understanding of international security. A universal and societal model for development has been adopted by Balkan countries since the fall of

Communism. Concomitantly, the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration has been embraced strongly; for being a part of the Western bloc is considered as indispensable for moving away from Communist values in exchange for adopting democratic ones. All Balkan states have regarded the EU, which would provide them with better economy and security, as their final destination.

However in recent years the institutional and financial crisis in the EU has exposed the deficiencies of the Euro-Atlantic model. The integration of the Eastern Europe in the EU, which was initially seen as a success story, has been in question; as some claim that the latest accessions (i.e., those of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia) were premature. The on-going Greek debt crisis has also affected the EU's enlargement policy negatively by making some member states more reluctant toward further enlargement.

In fact, both the EU and Balkan governments have their responsibility in the slow progress of the Western Balkans' integration in the EU. On the one hand, European institutions have proven ineffective so far in providing Balkan countries adequate political, economic and institutional support for liberalization, democratization and EU integration. On the other hand, Balkan governments have largely failed to act decisively in undertaking the reforms asked by the European Union. As the Balkan states still have a fairly large room for improvement in establishing a well-functioning democracy and market economy, it is difficult to integrate them with the politically and economically advanced states in the EU.

A discussant stressed that the common belief in the Balkans that the EU will resolve all their problems was a mistake. The region's development must be based on the virtuous circle of "more economy" and "more security", which will eventually result in "more EU integration". Strengthening of democracy and ins-

tutions is also required for EU integration. However, recent indicators show that with the exception of Albania and Kosovo, democratization is sliding backwards in the Balkans. It has become obvious that the governments engage in reform only when strong pressure comes from Europe. One needs to ask at this point until when the Balkans will and should rely on Europe.

The geopolitical location of the Balkans is favorable for attracting trade and investment, but at the same time it brings a number of challenges such as refugees and trans-border crime. As Balkan states do not have the capacity to handle these challenges alone, the EU needs to develop a well-coordinated regional approach to support these states.

The EU's reluctance and inability in following a clear strategy has strengthened Euro-skepticism and damaged its attractiveness in the region. In order to repair its image and emphasize its commitment to enlargement, the EU launched the Berlin Process in 2014. However, the Western Balkan states, who were in need of prompt solutions to their problems of underdevelopment and unemployment, had already begun to look for alternative strategies. They started to develop new partnerships with other economic powers like Russia, Turkey, and China, in areas such as trade, investment and development. Today, the Western Balkan states are ready to receive whatever international actors offer to them. As they do not have enough power to set the rules of the game that they want to play, they are trying to profit from all the opportunities available.

The Russian policy in the Balkans can be said to be a selective and interest-based "macro strategy", which neither cares about the welfare of Balkan societies nor offers a complete model for the region's development, security, or communal values. Since the 1990s, the main strategy of Russia has been to monopolize the supply of energy, particularly natural gas, wherever possible. During the Putin era, Russia has increasingly been more intrusive in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. While undertaking big energy projects, which would make these regions more dependent to Russia, Moscow has also endeavored for keeping the institutions of these countries under its control. These policies have been more visible in Serbia and Bulgaria, both of which had common traditional and religious links with Russia. As a result, some Balkan states have become strongly dependent on Russia in energy, finance, and infrastructure. Russia often uses its monopoly in these sectors to gain political support. Dependence on Russia leads to stronger political and economic ties with Moscow, and as seen in the Ukrainian crisis, it puts countries in a difficult diplomatic position if there is a rift between the EU and Russia.

By offering material incentives, Russia hopes to entice Balkan countries to give up pro-Western ideas

and opt for the so-called Eurasian integration. Even if Eurasian integration has no real appeal for Eastern European and Balkan countries, Russia will likely adhere to this cultural-civilizational and propagandist discourse as its relations with the EU remains sour.

A discussant observed that Russia had managed in the last years to develop a particular way of political conservatism in Eastern Europe as an alternative to the European-style post-modern liberalism. This political culture involves authoritarian regimes similar to the system that Vladimir Putin has been running in Russia, and statesmen like Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia and Viktor Orbán in Hungary appear to be following that example.

Turkey, another rising actor in the Western Balkans, follows a different approach from that of Russia. It rather implements a set of "micro strategies," based on direct relations with communities. Through the use of these strategies, Turkey aims to expand its cultural, educational, religious and economic influence all over the region. Turkish businesses are growing in the Balkans, particularly in the fields of telecommunications, transportation, infrastructure, and finance.

A discussant claimed that Turkey's Balkans policy was also a selective one, mostly directed at Turkish and Muslim communities. Such an approach can have a destabilizing effect if it creates new division lines among communities of different cultural and religious belongings.

China is also increasingly becoming active in the Western Balkans, especially in terms of economic cooperation. Trade relations between China and the region have grown significantly during the last decade. The Chinese government has been promoting its "New Silk Road" vision, which, if realized, could serve as a tool for China to export more into Europe. For the same objective, China has also made a major investment in the Greek port of Piraeus.

Among other emerging economic actors in the Balkans, a discussant singled out the United Arab Emirates, which has recently launched an ambitious, if not aggressive, campaign of investments in Serbia. The discussant found this puzzling particularly because the UAE had been the first Arab country to recognize Kosovo and received strong protest from Belgrade back then. Another participant commented that even though there were different rumors about the motivations behind the Arab investments in the Western Balkans, their amount and allocation in the region might simply be because of personal connections.

According to a discussant, the strategies of Russia, Turkey, and China are only partial approaches and the long-term stability and development of the Western Balkans still lies with European integration. Howe-



ver, the enlargement process has slowed down and the EU has failed to develop a substitutive strategy to support reforms in the region. This vacuum may prove dangerous for the future of the EU, as well as of the Western Balkan countries.

Russia is bound to be at odds with the EU in the Western Balkans if it keeps requesting Western Balkan countries to relinquish European values and to re-orient themselves towards Eurasia. With regards to Turkey, some discussants argued that as an economic power it was not a yet a rival but a complementary substance to the EU. Another opinion was that Turkish activities in the Balkans did not always coincide with the EU's universalism, as they were often directed at particular communities.

It is obvious that the Western Balkan countries are pursuing economic benefits from different donors and projects. For a speedy development of the region, new ways to increase the attention of international actors to the region and to attract new investments should be developed. Developing a regional perspective would be an effective way to resolve the common problems that the Western Balkan countries are facing today. According to a discussant, the best way to attract large foreign direct investment in the Western Balkans is through regional projects, as national economies are too small to offer large profits. Particularly regional infrastructure projects can be rewarding for both the international investors and Western Balkan economies. It is therefore in the interest of Western Balkan countries to develop regional projects that would bring foreign investment in the short term and bolster regional cooperation and interdependence in the longer term.





Panel III

The EU Integration of the Balkans and Turkey: Shared Experiences and Challenges

Both Turkey and the Western Balkans have a long history of relations with the European Union. Today, all Western Balkan countries regard the EU as their main destination, and their policies are often shaped by the accession criteria and other calls from the EU. However, since each of these countries have made different levels of progress in fulfilling EU criteria, making an overall assessment of the region's EU integration is difficult.

Turkey's integration into the EU (then the European Communities) started as early as 1959 and Turkey received candidacy for full membership in 2004. Notwithstanding all the progress made so far, there are still doubts about the future of Turkey's EU accession process. Since 2006, the membership negotiations are virtually blocked because of the Cyprus question.

Given the current political obstacles to Turkey's integration in the EU, a discussant handled the civil society dimension of this process. The EU regards the

civil society as a key actor to prepare candidate countries for accession with the view that a stronger civil society will not only consolidate democracy but also intensify societal dialogue with Europe. Accordingly, the EU has been offering financial, technical and political support to NGOs in Turkey. This support has relatively increased from the mid-2000s onwards.

However, due to mainly three reasons the EU's civil society policy has not yielded desired results in Turkey. First, perceptions of this policy in Turkey are still ambivalent. Secondly, the EU generally assumes NGOs to be neutral actors; but in Turkey most of the NGOs have strong political and ideological orientations. For this reason, not all NGOs supported by the EU are genuinely working in accordance with EU values or Turkey's membership perspective. Thirdly, the NGOs in Turkey, most of which are small and directly dependent on the EU's support, have significant shortcomings in administrative, technical and financial capacity. Their lack of professional and experienced personnel in the NGO sector makes it difficult for them to improve. As a result, even though the number of NGOs in Turkey has increased in recent years, the increase in the number of volunteers has been marked at a much slower pace, which indicates that a civil society culture has not yet been solidly established in Turkey.

As a counter-example in the Western Balkans, the civil society in Montenegro, another EU candidate, takes an active part in the EU negotiation process, and its role is comparable to that of political parties.

When it comes to the political relations between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries, there are still considerable gaps that need to be bridged. Even though the EU declared the region as a part of Europe in the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, only Croatia has managed to become a full member in the EU since then. According to the number of the

chapters that have been opened and provisionally closed, the closest candidate for EU membership at present appears to be Montenegro. However, pessimistic voices regarding Montenegro's membership still exist as accession is considered to be a political decision not necessarily determined by the candidate's success in fulfilling the criteria.

Today, the EU Commission and some member states are against enlargement at least until 2020. Arguably, due to the internal and external crises it is facing, enlargement is not the EU's main focus for the time being. Negative messages coming from the EU have been damaging the credibility of the enlargement process, which has in turn decreased popular support to EU membership, discouraged governments from carrying out reforms, and even affected the countries' external relations. According to a discussant, the inconsistent attitudes in Europe and the lack of a coherent EU enlargement policy encourages actors like Russia to profit from uncertainty.

The EU integration process of the Western Balkans has been based on two main elements, i.e., stabilization and association. Until recently, the general conviction in Europe was that the stabilization stage of the region was over and the focus should be placed on fulfilling association. However, recent events in the region have increased the concerns that there is a considerable risk of destabilization. For the settlement of democratic norms and institutions, the Western Balkan countries, which are all relatively young democracies, need clear incentives and continuous support from the EU.

A discussant laid out four possible scenarios for EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. The first is the continuation of the gradualist approach, which will likely lead to an unequal progress in the countries' accession processes, with one or a few of them coming to a deadlock. Second scenario is the decline of membership expectations due to the EU's strict application of conditionality, which will alienate Western Balkan countries from Europe. Third scenario is the EU's abandonment of enlargement due to its own problems. In this case the entire region may go under the influence of other international actors. Fourth scenario is the accelerated admission of all Western Balkan countries into the European Union, which will after all be a political decision requiring the resolution of disputes and possibly some relaxation in the *acquis* criteria. The discussant concluded that while the fourth scenario seems the least likely one because of the EU's current lack of political commitment, the remaining scenarios involved too much risk for the region's future. The EU should therefore explore new approaches to expediting the transformation and integration of the Western Balkans.

The Berlin Process is a positive development in this regard. Yet, it will not yield substantive results unless the EU and the Western Balkan countries genuinely commit to intensifying dialogue among each other. Another discussant suggested the creation of a dialogue mechanism between the EU and Turkey for building a common strategy in the Western Balkans; as the EU is struggling to be fully effective in the region alone.

As observed in Croatia today, becoming member to the EU does not automatically end skepticism towards Europe. To obtain full membership, Croatia had to undergo a lengthy and challenging stabilization and association process. Those championing EU membership hoped that membership would bring more EU funds, better foreign investment and faster economic growth. However, for almost two years of membership, no significant improvement in economy and employment has been observed. External debt, dependence on foreign funds, and the rate of unemployment are still high. At its accession to the EU, Croatia had to leave CEFTA, which had provided a market for its small domestic industries and agricultural production. The amount of Croatia's financial contribution to the EU so far exceeds the amount it has received.

For a discussant, while the lack of strong financial structure and bad management by the political elite are among the causes of the economic and financial problems in Croatia, the greater responsibility for the current situation falls upon international actors. This is primarily because, for more than two decades political, economic, and social life in the country has been under the strong influence of international actors such as the European Commission, the World Bank, the United States and Germany. From the 2000s onwards, neoliberal reforms, which were the political conditions for EU membership, resulted in privatization of valuable state properties, liberalization of the food imports, and regulation of the energy prices, all of which were injurious to Croatia's economy. Privatizations created the crony capitalism of particularly German and Austrian capital, which has been flowing into Croatia since the declaration of independence. Reforms for the sake of fulfilling EU criteria also required borrowing large amount of loans, which augmented the country's external debt. As a result, Croatia entered into the EU as a country in Europe's periphery and the unequal economic relations with the core continues as "a new form of colonialism". Croatia's negative experiences during its EU and NATO membership, which are being voiced by the opponents of Euro-Atlantic integration, may also complicate the public opinion in other Western Balkan countries regarding the EU.

Another discussant responded that the EU should not be regarded as a problem-solving machine but a

stable and progressive bloc with high economic and democratic standards. It falls upon the governments to resolve their own problems, while the EU can only provide assistance and encouragement. If there is strong commitment to reform and institutionalization, EU integration will yield positive results. As an example, Romania has made a remarkable progress in terms of consolidating the rule of law, and this owes much to the judicial reforms conducted for fulfilling EU conditionality. The reforms also increased the success in fighting corruption, which had been undermining public morality and economic development for decades. The reforms did not bring immediate success, though; it took some years for the resistance against the implementation of reforms to break and the real results to be achieved. The Western Balkan countries should also keep patient and implement the reforms persistently.

The Macedonia example has shown that the prolongation of integration process diminishes the EU's transformative power over accession countries. Its name dispute with Greece has long been blocking Macedonia's membership to the EU, and this has been among the primary causes of the slowdown of reforms and the emergence of autocratic tendencies in the country. According to a discussant, in order to start negotiations without much delay, the EU can use creative methods such as handling the name dispute as a separate chapter.

Even though the EU remains the main donor in the Western Balkans, given the fluid dynamics in the region it is by no means irreplaceable and what it has achieved so far can reverse in a short period of time. The rise of new political and economic actors alre-

ady indicates that the EU's power in the region is not what it used to be earlier.

According to one view, the European Union's strict application of conditionality and its reluctance and pessimism regarding the Western Balkans can complicate the integration of the region, which will be an unfavorable outcome both for the region and the EU. In order to accelerate the integration, the EU needs to revise its enlargement policies.

Other discussants argued that the EU should keep applying conditionality to the Western Balkan countries as there have been signals that these governments are not "doing their homework" but waiting for Europe to get tired and accept them in. According to this view, even if some of these countries are currently developing new partnerships with third countries, in the long term they will all prefer to be in the EU. Thus, strict application of conditionality will likely accelerate reforms in these countries, while any concessions may damage the EU's credibility, hence its transformative power. In addition, leaving some reforms to the aftermath of accession is not a good idea as is seen in the examples of the new members to the EU; as long as full membership is achieved, there remain no strong incentive or pressure for carrying out new reforms.

Another discussant opined that the Western Balkan countries should accelerate domestic reform whether or not the EU pushes for it. With a better administration and stronger institutions, the economy and security of these countries will improve, and their accession to the EU will be easier. On the other hand, the more governments resist introducing reforms, the more they will experience difficulty in cooperating with the EU.





Panel IV

Turkey's New Activism in the Western Balkans: Policies, Practices and Reactions

Turkey, unlike many other international players in the Western Balkans, has a centuries-long history of relations with the region. The strengthening of Turkey's presence and influence in the Balkans has been a continuing trend since the early 1990s. When the Cold War ended, new opportunities and challenges of the new world order urged Ankara to act more pro-actively in the surrounding regions, including the Balkans. Accordingly, Turkey endeavored to develop new policies that would offer more economic involvement and eventually a stronger political influence. Turkey's main political goal was to become a pivotal state within its region, which involved becoming an influential regional player in the Balkans. Achieving this would naturally entail a multi-dimensional approach and the advancement of relations with all Balkan countries and societies.

However, until the early 2000s, there was only limited progress in the achievement of these ob-

jectives. A number of external and internal factors hindered Turkey's active involvement in the Balkans. Conflicts and tensions in the region and the slow transition to market economy discouraged Turkish businessmen from investing in the Balkans, despite geographical proximity. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo urged Turkey to side with Muslim communities against Belgrade. As a result, its relations with not only Belgrade but also all Serb communities in the Balkans remained very limited until the 2000s. Nevertheless, Ankara endeavored to contribute to the peace of the region alongside the international community, by offering mediation and participating in peace missions. Its unilateral regional initiatives were limited and did not go against the initiatives of the international community. During these years, Turkey signed some bilateral agreements with countries like Macedonia and Albania on matters like commercial, military, educational and cultural cooperation.

Internal difficulties made a pro-active foreign policy difficult as well. Frequent changes of governments, most of which were coalitions, made a coherent, carefully-planned, and far-sighted foreign policy difficult. Turkey's economic situation was also precarious. Especially the two grave crises in 1994 and 2001 put a heavy blow on the Turkish economy. As a result, Turkish businesses did not flourish rapidly and their entry in foreign markets remained slow.

The general principles and concerns of Turkey regarding the Balkans have remained more or less the same since the early 1990s. Turkey deems the maintenance of peace, stability and economic development of the region important, primarily because political and economic problems in the Balkans can affect Turkey's security negatively. As a country implementing export-led growth strategy since the early 1980s, Turkey has aimed to develop its economic relations with the Bal-

kans, which is geographically close to the industrial centers of Turkey. Politically speaking, Turkey's long-term objective in the post-Cold War period has been to become a pivotal state among a number of different geographical regions and an influential regional player in these regions, including the Balkans.

In the meantime, Turkey's approach to the Balkans has another aspect, which is the special attention to the welfare and well-being of the ethnic Turks and Muslim people. As these populations largely consider Turkey as a kin state, Turkey has assumed the responsibility of providing help and assistance to them in areas such as security, education, health, and religious affairs. Nevertheless, due to its long-term ambition to become a pivotal regional power, it would be unwise for Ankara to construct its Balkans policy solely upon Turkish and Muslim populations, disregarding other political and social actors. This is why Turkey has been careful to portray a balanced attitude in the Western Balkans.

While Ankara has maintained these general concerns and objectives since the end of the Cold War, the methods and intensity of Turkey's engagement with the region have shown a significant change from the mid-2000s onwards. The political stability and economic progress Turkey enjoyed during the 2000s encouraged Ankara for more dynamism in foreign affairs. Turkish businesses, which flourished rapidly during the same period, sought opportunities for markets and investments abroad, and this affected Turkey's economic activity in the Balkans positively. Turkish NGOs, supported by new public institutions, undertook international projects and fostered Turkey's social and cultural relations with other societies, including those in the Balkans.

Regional political and economic circumstances during the 2000s were also favorable for Turkey to deepen its relations with the Balkans. The common EU membership vision of the Western Balkan countries rendered the region relatively peaceful and stable compared to the 1990s, making these countries focused on reform and economic progress. This was an ideal atmosphere for Turkey to implement a balanced and multi-sided policy based on soft power instruments like free trade agreements, visa-free travel, developmental aid, and language education. Turkish soap operas increased Turkey's attractiveness in the eyes of Balkan societies. Later, the global economic crisis, which negatively impacted not only the whole region but also some investors to the region, augmented Turkey's role and prestige in the Western Balkans even further. As its economy remained relatively unharmed by the crisis, Turkey was regarded in the region as one of the most promising investors, and Balkan countries continuously called for stronger economic relations with Turkey. Consequently, the trade volume between

the Western Balkans and Turkey has increased more than fourfold since 2002. Turkish investments in the region has increased significantly, if not steadily, as well.

A discussant argued that Turkey is perceived as an ascending power in the region and this ascendancy has been regarded as concomitant to the consolidation of the AK Party rule. Being considered as the architect of the Turkish foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu has been a key figure in determining Turkey's approach in the Balkans as well as in other regions. Under the discourse of "zero problems with neighbors," he has aimed to reach as many actors, societies, and states as possible. According to the discussant, Davutoğlu's emphasis on conflict resolution, international peace and stability has been a key factor in erasing the militaristic image of Turkey's past and making Turkey's soft power-based policies succeed.

A discussant commented that unlike during the first two AK Party governments, Turkey has not undertaken a major diplomatic initiative in the Balkans for the last few years. Another discussant responded that in the aftermath of the Arab Spring Turkey's pre-occupations with the Middle East had slowed down its active involvement in other regions. Due to immediate security concerns, particularly those caused by the Syrian civil war, the energy and attention of Ankara has been largely focused on the affairs of the Middle East. In addition, domestic-level disputes and successive elections during the last couple of years have caused some degree of instability in Turkish politics. Consequently, even though Turkey's investments in and trade with the Western Balkans have been increasing, Turkey's political initiatives for regional cooperation has not yet made a significant progress. The normalization of Turkish domestic politics and the restoration of peace in the Middle East are necessary for Turkey's more active engagement and stronger political role in the Balkans.

The crises and conflicts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring have made it impossible for Turkey to actualize its "zero problems" vision properly in the Middle East. In contrast, when we look at the Balkans, the absence of conflicts and the countries' search for stability and prosperity has provided a permissive background condition for the implementation of this policy. According to a discussant, any future conflict in the region will work against Turkey's influence in the Balkans by pushing it to pick a side and consequently to reduce its relations with the other side(s) to a lower level.

There have been different reactions in the Western Balkans regarding Turkey's activism. On the one hand, governments and people have largely welcomed Turkey for its economic contributions, developmental projects, and efforts for mediation. Muslims and ethnic

Turks are also happy with the increasing presence and support of Turkish public institutions and civil society actors in the region. On the other hand, there are still suspicions, particularly among the Christians, that Turkey might have a “hidden agenda” in the Balkans. This is largely due to the belief that Turkey has a preferential treatment to Muslim populations in comparison to the Christians. Some nationalists even fear that Turkey is pursuing “re-colonization” in the Balkans. Nevertheless, positive expectations towards Turkey, both as an investor and a political balancer, outweigh these fears for the moment. For instance, a discussant argued that the fair and impartial attitude Turkey has shown towards Macedonians, Albanians and Turks in Macedonia could be an indicator to show Turkey’s potential as a balancing actor, which could encourage dialogue and cooperation among bickering actors in the region.

One feature of Turkey that makes it attractive in the Western Balkans is that it is a monolithic actor, unlike the EU. Unrestrained by lengthy bureaucratic processes and political conflicts of interest, Turkish institutions can work fast and their projects can yield quick results. For the sake of effectiveness, Western Balkan countries, who are in need of economic sources and developmental assistance, often prefer to cooperate with Turkish institutions. On the other hand, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the low degree of cooperation between Turkish institutions and their international counterparts has sometimes led to speculations regarding the implementation Turkish-led projects, as well as the genuine motivations behind them.

For a discussant, relations between Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina are dominated by reciprocal sentiments of Turks and Bosniaks towards each other, whereas Serbs and Croats approach Turkey largely on rational, i.e., economic grounds. The expectations in Bosnia-Herzegovina for Turkish investments have not been fulfilled yet. For stronger economic relations between the two countries, each side has to fulfill its responsibility. The administrative structure and bureaucratic complications in Bosnia-Herzegovina do not offer a convenient business environment to foreign investors. The government of Bosnia-Herzegovina needs to take necessary steps to facilitate foreign investment. In the meantime, Turkish public and non-state

actors, as well as their Bosniak counterparts, need to go beyond romanticism and spend more endeavors to get to know and better understand each other. Another discussant added that Bosnians’ disappointment with regard to the amount of Turkish investments and the trade volume with Turkey might also be stemming from the fact that they often confused business with developmental aid. Due to the high degree of dependency on external aid since the war, there is still too much expectation in Bosnia-Herzegovina from external actors, even in the areas of business and commerce, which should normally be based on give and take.

According to a view, in recent years Turkey has been applying different policies in different regions. While largely appealing to moderate Islamic factions in the Middle East, it has followed a society- and region-based approach in the Balkans. Contrary to concerns from certain circles, Turkey has so far been careful not to present itself in the Western Balkans as an alternative to the EU. It has rather offered its contribution to the development of the region. Another discussant claimed that despite the intensification of relations from the 2000s onwards, Turkey has not yet displayed the economic capacity and political weight that could make it compete with the magnetism of the EU for Western Balkan countries. In addition, Turkey’s cultural influence is still mostly limited to the Muslim population in the region.

Today, Turkey regards the German-led Berlin Process positive as long as it contributes to the normalization and long-term stability of the Western Balkans. At the same time, Ankara asks the European Union to treat all candidates equally and to not let the Berlin Process relegate Turkey’s accession process to a secondary status. As Turkey has also been pursuing EU membership, Balkan policies of Turkey and the EU should not necessarily conflict with each other. A discussant suggested that Turkey should create and follow such a strategy in the Balkans that would work within the EU framework so both these two actors would proceed on a parallel track. According to another view, Turkey has strong potential to help and guide Western Balkan countries to adopt membership criteria. Such an undertaking will be welcomed by the EU and will dispel the doubts about Turkey’s motivation for EU accession.





Panel V

Reflections of the Syrian Civil War and the ISIL Phenomenon in Turkey and the Balkans

For more than one year, the international community has focused on the emergence of ISIL and its consequences in the Middle East and beyond. Just like the years between 1999 and 2009 marked the decade of al-Qaeda, at present we can see a rise in what can be called ISIL's time and it appears that this will continue for some years.

ISIL was born in Iraq, a country which has been in a constant state of internal conflict and instability since the U.S. invasion in 2003. A key reason behind the emergence and rapid strengthening of ISIL was the failure of the Iraqi government to develop an inclusive approach for the Sunni population. The marginalization of the Sunnis in politics and state administration made them increasingly disappointed with the Baghdad government. To show their discontent, the Sunnis started with peaceful demonstrations but the government increased its pressure leading in turn to their radicalization. Many moderate Sunnis then started to align with radical groups, which gradually gained more

ground as ethnic and sectarian conflicts went on. Among these factors, ISIL, which was led by former Baath commanders and equipped by modern American weapons, rapidly grew strong. The stronger ISIL grew the more support it gained from the discontented Sunni population, both voluntarily and through intimidation. Not before too long, it spread to Syria, where a large number of Sunni factions were fighting against the unpopular and autocratic Assad regime.

Today, ISIL is a quasi-state actor controlling about one-third of both Iraq and Syria, a territory approximately as large as the Great Britain. Its army, which is almost in the size of the Iraqi army, is equipped with modern weapons. In actual fact, governing a territory makes ISIL different from other terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and Taliban. The activities of ISIL are not limited only to Iraq and Syria, however. The organization has expanded to Europe and Africa as well. Countries with mixed Sunni and Shia population are presumably the ones that are under the most imminent threat of ISIL attacks. Considering this, ISIL will face difficulty in spreading its ideology in predominantly Christian societies, and therefore is unlikely to become a big security threat for Europe. On the other hand, Turkey, which has already faced a number of attacks by ISIL, has to keep vigilant.

Since 2005, Turkey has formally described ISIL and its affiliates as terrorist organizations. Especially from the year 2014 onwards, ISIL has posed a serious security threat for Turkey, which has over 1200 kilometers of borders with Syria and Iraq. The Turkish parliament, acknowledging this threat, adopted a resolution in October 2014 allowing cross-border military operations whenever necessary. The resolution also permits the stationing of foreign troops in Turkey and their use in operations in Syria and Iraq. Turkey also allowed the international coalition to use its military infrastructure. In response to the tragedy faced by the civilians, Tur-

key opened its borders to over two million refugees from Syria and Iraq. Over recent months Turkey has increased border security measures to prevent foreign fighters coming from Europe and joining terrorist forces in Iraq and Syria. Hundreds of suspicious people were detected in airports and bus stations and deported eventually. Turkey has also been endeavoring to cut the economic sources of ISIL, especially in terms of oil smuggling. However, the fact that Turkey has long borders with Syria and Iraq makes the control of trans-border movements difficult. This difficulty is further exacerbated by the mass influx of civilians that are fleeing the civil war. According to estimates, there are 600 to 800 ISIL-affiliated people in Turkey.

Collective efforts of the international community to counter ISIL have been only partly effective. Despite the formation of a wide-ranging international coalition, the strength and resoluteness in the fight against ISIL is not at the desired level. Countries are often trying to pass the responsibility on the shoulders of others. Major international actors do not show much enthusiasm to defeat ISIL in the short term, and appear to wait for its failure and weakening with the pass of time. For effective results in the short term, the on-going air bombardments should be complemented with a ground operation. Yet, a collective military operation does not appear forthcoming before the international actors agree on the future of Syria and Iraq after the defeat of ISIL.

In the long term, however, fighting radical groups will not put an end to the extremism emanating from the Middle East. Instead, the international community has to deal with the root causes that give birth to and strengthen such movements. Considering that sectarianism was one of the key reasons for the birth and spread of these groups, establishing more inclusive and democratic regimes in Iraq and Syria is imperative. Otherwise, even if ISIL is eliminated one day, marginalized groups having no viable political channels to defend their rights will resort to violence in the future. The international community should support the states in the Middle East so that they would function properly and provide basic services to their citizens. As states continue to fail in the region, non-state actors with radical ideologies will fill the vacuum.

As for the Balkans, a discussant observed that radicalization had not yet developed into a major challenge comparable to corruption and organized crime. Nevertheless, a few hundred Muslims in the Balkans have joined ISIL and other groups fighting in Syria. Poor level of education and development in many parts of the Balkans is providing a suitable background for the spread of extremism. It is not surprising to observe that most of the people who join extremist groups such as ISIL are of low education and/or have criminal history.

Another factor that has pushed people towards extremism is the double standards of Balkan governments in approaching the Muslims and respecting Islamic values. For instance, while expressing negative views about national heroes and politicians are often punished by law, there are no restrictions upon insulting religious values and personalities like the Prophet of Islam. Christian religious symbols are far more publicly visible in the region compared to the Muslim ones. Such discriminatory practices have kept the “we/they” dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims alive, driving some Muslims that feel vulnerable towards extremist organizations.

The civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIL, and the Syrian refugee crisis have created some challenges for Balkan governments, which had had no previous experience in handling similar situations. The fact that many Syrians have been using the Western Balkans as a transit route to Europe led these governments to revise their immigration management and border control practices. This revision was also necessary due to the security threats created by the fighters joining ISIL from the region. Governments have taken a number of measures to contain radicalization both at the stage of recruitment and in the aftermath of the fighters’ return from the Middle East.

Some discussants emphasized that Balkan governments should plan carefully how to handle their citizens whose links with radical groups are detected and those who return home after fighting in the Middle East. Fighting these groups heavy-handedly may lead to further radicalization. Instead of merely punishing the returnees, the governments should resort to constructive methods aiming to re-integrate them into the society. This is because, if they went to the war with no intention to commit terrorist acts but to help their Muslim brethren against the Assad regime, de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs would be more appropriate ways to deal with them than putting them in prison. Moreover, since it is not yet clear what exactly these fighters have done in the Middle East, accusing them of war crimes or terrorism would be unjustified.

According to some discussants, another challenge that the Balkans are experiencing is the politicization of terror. A typical way of politicizing terror is defaming political opponents -even if they are not Muslim- of being somewhat connected with ISIL or another terrorist group. In order to legitimize their political goals, political actors, including governments, may exploit public concerns about security and attack certain groups on the grounds that they support terrorism. An example to this is the arrest in Republika Srpska of a group of Muslims having a copy of Koran in their houses. Governments should be aware that adopting such policies will likely backfire; radical groups will use this to legitimize their causes and their arguments will sound more appealing for Muslims.





Panel VI

Turkey and the Balkans in International Energy Politics

Due to their limited hydrocarbon resources, most of the Central and Eastern European countries have to import oil and gas, and Russia has been the main exporter to these regions. Some Balkan and Central European countries, such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia and Hungary, are highly dependent on Russian supply of energy. Overdependence to Russian energy creates a security risk to not only these countries but also the region as a whole. The risk is aggravated by the increase in the demand for energy and the shortcomings in energy infrastructure and efficiency.

The EU has for some time been looking for alternative energy resources other than Russian oil and gas to make sure that its energy supply is not interrupted and the prices remain stable. The growth of political tensions with Russia in recent years has accelerated these efforts. The EU also wants to implement energy market legislation with a strong competition policy to protect the consumers from future abusive acts by Russia.

In recent years thanks to the so-called “shale gas revolution” in the United States and the concomitant

decrease in the US energy imports, the European market was able to diversify its natural gas sources to a certain degree. Both the decline in its share in the EU market and the fall of gas prices due to the increased supply have been undesired for Russia. Furthermore, the antitrust case against Gazprom, which was opened by the European Commission in 2012, can lead to further complications for the Russian gas exports to Europe, if the company is found guilty of pricing abuses.

While these developments are creating pressure on Russia, it is still early to talk about the end of the Russian predominance in European and Balkan energy market. Further diversification of sources does not seem possible in the short term, due to the political crises in the Middle East as well as the high costs of unconventional methods of extraction and transportation. The EU’s goal of incorporating the Balkan and Black Sea countries into its energy network requires substantial investments to build up a regional infrastructure and dedicated efforts for market integration and liberalization.

The undergoing pipeline projects are changing the dynamics of international energy politics, and there will be new competitors to Russian gas in the European market. While the EU wants to incorporate the Balkans into its energy network with new sources and suppliers, Russia, unwilling to lose its monopoly, is endeavoring to secure its market in the Balkans through big investments, special offers and bilateral agreements. Hence, the Balkans are gradually becoming a battleground over energy.

The recent crisis in Eastern Ukraine has increased the energy security risks for the Balkans and the Black Sea region, and the European Union does not appear to be prepared to help these countries adequately deal with future energy crises. Today, the lack of a realistic EU energy policy, the failure of the energy dialogue with Russia, and the government deficits in the energy sector are among the key challenges in this regard.

The first important step taken for the integration of the Eastern Europe to the EU energy network, Energy Community Treaty was concluded with Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Ukraine and Moldova. Even though the treaty has been in force since 1 July 2006, it has not come into full effect due to problems regarding the rule of law, weak public administration and infrastructural shortcomings in these countries. If these countries would like to end their dependency on Russian gas, they need to cooperate to tackle and eliminate their common problems.

Despite the efforts of international organizations for regional integration, Balkan countries are still pursuing their energy security largely through bilateral agreements. However, the need for infrastructural improvements and cross-border connections cannot be effectively fulfilled with such an individualistic approach. The European Union should intensify its efforts towards establishing a European energy union including the Balkan countries. This should involve a common mechanism for energy trade bargaining, expansion of regional gas and power interconnectors, construction of new storage facilities, market liberalization and energy efficiency.

A participant stated that pipeline projects can be a way of developing stable relationships in the Balkans. Once the pipelines are built, they will remain there as a bridge among countries. Transferring gas with tankers may be a cheaper option, yet the pipelines will bring long-term benefits thanks to the interdependence they will bring.

As one of the few Eastern European countries having substantial energy resources, Romania has recently increased its efforts for energy independence. The Romanian government has been emphasizing nuclear power development and shale gas extraction, while seeking international partnerships for new power plants and off-shore operations. Even though the long-term feasibility and sustainability of Romania's energy independence is questionable, Romania can still contribute to the energy security of the Balkans if its energy infrastructure and connections with the Balkan region is improved.

With regards to Greece, the current crisis and high unemployment rate makes the energy sector particularly important. Increasing energy supplies will reduce the costs for production and can create more jobs. Geographically, Greece can connect Europe with energy producing countries through both land and sea. In addition to a number of pipeline projects involving Azeri and Russian gas, there are also discussions about the feasibility of a pipeline carrying Eastern Mediterranean gas into Europe through Greece. Greece can also benefit from offshore production of hydrocarbons, even though this option is highly costly for the moment.

For Bulgaria, the on-going Trans-Adriatic Pipeline Project will not cure the energy security risks of

the Balkan region, primarily because its route does not cover the countries that are most dependent on the Russian gas. Sofia would prefer alternative supply routes from countries such as Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean to be developed. However, for political reasons none of these options seem likely in the short term.

Turkey, another country dependent on Russian gas, also would like to diversify its energy sources both to evade the high prices applied by Russia but also to secure its energy supply. Turkey has both the curse and the benefit of being close to the major oil-producing areas. The curse is due to the incessant conflicts and crises throughout the Middle East for years. It is also a benefit because Turkey can receive a lower price as a transit country. With pipeline projects carrying gas from countries like Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkmenistan into Europe, Turkey aspires to offer its contribution to Europe's energy security as a regional trading hub.

Recently, the Russian-led Turkish Stream pipeline has been included in the prospective projects involving Turkey. Since it was broached by Vladimir Putin in lieu of the South Stream, this project has attracted significant attention in the international arena. Although there are substantial uncertainties about the project and it has not found political support in the European Union, Turkey has shown a positive attitude towards the Turkish Stream for several reasons. From the economic perspective, the project will not only help Turkey in becoming a regional gas hub, but also reduce gas prices in the Turkish market. From the political perspective, it will increase Turkey's bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU.

A discussant claimed that while engaging with Russia in the field of energy, Turkey should not sacrifice its long-term benefits for the short-term ones. A typical example to this is the case when Turkey allowed Russia to use its exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea in return for a discount in the price of gas. Despite being convenient for the short term, this deal basically increased Turkey's dependence on Russian gas and could disrupt its relations with the Western world in the long term.

According to another discussant, unless Turkey undertakes a series of structural and legal reforms, it will not be able to fulfill its goal of becoming a regional trading hub. Turkey has so far preferred to follow an independent energy policy and refused to join the Energy Community in order not to be bound by European rules. Instead, Turkey should import the energy market legislation of the European Union, especially because there is currently a suitable ground for cooperation among the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey in the field of energy. In the meantime, the EU should open the energy chapter without much delay; as the further EU pushes Turkey away the closer it will get to Russia.

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