



A NEW APPROACH IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: HAKAN FIDAN'S VISION OF THE BALKANS

Mervegül Kınalı

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- What has been Türkiye's historical approach to Balkan policy?
- Does Türkiye define its foreign policy approach to the Balkans in terms of national interests or historical and cultural heritage?
- How is Türkiye's Balkan policy shaped in Hakan Fidan's perspective?
- According to Hakan Fidan's foreign policy approach, how should Türkiye's missing elements in the Balkans be completed?

Türkiye's relations with the Balkans have been one of the most important axes of Turkish foreign policy since the foundation of the Republic due to its historical unity dating back to the Ottoman Empire, as well as geographical proximity and cultural ties. Türkiye's relations with this geography have continued in continuity. Taking into account the geopolitical position and ethnic diversity of the region, it has changed depending on the dynamics of periodic conditions, international conjunctures and domestic policy transformations. In 2002, Türkiye began to play a more active role in the Balkans with its changing foreign policy approach. With the developments and changes following Hakan Fidan's appointment as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the foreign

policy approach of many years continues and a multidimensional diplomacy is being carried out. In this context, the parameters that shape Hakan Fidan's policy on the Balkans will be discussed and the perspective in the understanding of diplomacy in the Balkans will be tried to be presented.

Türkiye's Balkan Policies in Historical Perspective

The Ottoman Empire's nearly 500-year rule over the Balkans came to an end with the Balkan Wars. In the foreign policy understanding shaped after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the Western Thrace issue affected the foreign policy agenda for the first seven years in addition to the issues that could

not be resolved in the Lausanne Peace Treaty. During this period, Türkiye prioritized stability and peace in the nearby geography by focusing on security concerns. In its foreign policy approach, it wanted to strengthen relations with its neighbors in the Balkans and to ensure a lasting peace environment with a long-term agreement. For this purpose, it tried to develop bilateral relations with the Balkan states after some agreements. During this process, nationalist and expansionist ideologies were rising across Europe. Türkiye signed bilateral agreements with Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece guaranteeing the inviolability of its borders in anticipation of threats from the Balkans. After some attempts by Türkiye, the Balkan Treaty, consisting of three articles and an additional protocol, was signed on February 9, 1934 between Türkiye, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia. Albania and Bulgaria refused to cooperate due to their continuing ethnic and territorial claims and their support for revisionist policies. Despite Türkiye's efforts, the Balkan Treaty, which focused on security and defense issues, failed to be a deterrent in practice and failed to show any effectiveness. With Yugoslavia and Romania coming under German influence, the Balkan Treaty was weakened and it disintegrated after the Second World War.

After the Second World War, socialist regimes were established in all Balkan states, except Greece, and this situation created security concerns in Türkiye. Under the influence of the Soviet threat, Türkiye moved closer to the Western bloc and pursued a foreign policy in harmony with the United States.

With the support of the US, Türkiye signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Yugoslavia, which did not want to come under USSR control and was expelled from the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) in 1948, and Greece, which was going through a civil war. A year later, a military treaty was signed, creating the Balkan Pact. However, in the following period, Yugoslavia moved closer to the Soviets again, the good relations between Türkiye and Greece were interrupted by the Cyprus problem, and the Balkan Pact lost its foreseen functionality and disintegrated.

Türkiye's Cyprus problem with Greece affected its foreign policy with the Balkans. Unable to get the support it wanted from the US in the Cyprus issue, Türkiye was forced to review its relations with the West and started to display a multilateral foreign policy. Türkiye tried to improve its relations with the region in order to reduce Greece's influence in the Balkans and to find support for itself, especially in the Cyprus issue. After the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, Türkiye sought cultural and technical cooperation in the Balkans.

In the 1980s, Türkiye maintained relatively stable relations with the Balkan countries, except for Bulgaria and Greece. During these years, Cyprus, Aegean Islands and continental shelf issues continued with Greece. Bulgaria, on the other hand, started an intensive assimilation policy against the Turkish minority in 1984 and Türkiye tried to solve this problem. It wanted to sign an immigration agreement with Bulgaria, but Bulgaria interpreted this as interference in its inter-

nal affairs and postponed the immigration agreement until 1989.

After 1989, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the emergence of a new Balkan map, Türkiye entered a process of change in its foreign policy. In the early 1990s, Türkiye signed friendship, neighborhood and cooperation agreements with Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia and Romania in order to contribute to the prosperity and stability of the region. When conflicts broke out in the region, Türkiye emphasized the security issue in its foreign policy agenda. It followed the conflicts in the region with concern and tried to develop solutions to the conflicts. It made intensive efforts on international platforms to prevent the massacres against Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina due to the conflicts. It mediated between Bosniaks and Croats. After the end of the war in Bosnia, Türkiye took up the Kosovo issue at a high level and played an important role in international platforms to find a solution to the problem. Although Türkiye shifted to a proactive policy in the Balkans in the 1990s, political instability, economic crises, and terrorism problems made it difficult to focus on the Balkans. This situation prevented Türkiye from establishing stable relations with the entire region.

Redefining the Balkans in Türkiye's Foreign Policy

Since the 2000s, Türkiye has pursued an active foreign policy and conscious public diplomacy strategy in parallel with international transformations and developments in

global politics. In this period, while ensuring its sphere of influence in the foreign policy process, Türkiye interpreted the Ottoman mentality in a new perspective and put it into practice. As a result of this understanding, multifaceted proactive diplomacy, the principle of zero problems with neighbors and the soft power method that will make this principle possible have been determined as the target. With these multifaceted components, Türkiye has adopted a bridge role for itself and maintained close relations with the Balkans along with its foreign policy indices. During this period, it has tried to find solutions to the problems between the Balkan countries that have persisted from previous years.

While determining the principles of its Balkans policy in its new process, Türkiye took into account its inter-regional interdependence as well as its historical heritage, intra-regional balances towards the Balkans, policies encompassing the region, and the global systemic instruments NATO and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In this regard, in the early years of its foreign policy transformation, Türkiye took steps consistent with its main objectives, to the extent that the international conjuncture allowed. Starting from these years, Türkiye waged strong diplomatic and economic campaigns to increase its influence in the Balkans.

Türkiye's new era Balkan policy is characterized by historical and humanitarian ties. Stability and security were pursued based on the principles of regional ownership and inclusiveness. As a result of all these objec-

tives, Türkiye acted together with public institutions and organizations to increase its effectiveness in the region. It has increased its activities in the region at the social level through soft power tools. In this respect, Türkiye has started to have a multifaceted presence in the region with its increasing political and economic capacity. It has carried out many social, cultural, religious and educational activities through institutions in the fields of public and cultural diplomacy. In addition, intensive activities with Turkish NGOs have played an important role in ensuring stability and prosperity in the region. All these diplomacy tools have helped to better understand the current internal dynamics of the region and the effects of global politics in the region. It ensured that the activities carried out proceeded on a realistic basis. Along with these developments, military agreements have been made to prevent the crises and armed conflicts of the past and to ensure peace and security. At the same time, free trade agreements were signed with all the countries in the region through cooperation in economic fields. As a result, there has been a great increase in trade. Türkiye has gained momentum in the region in private sectors such as banking, construction and transportation, and has supported the country's foreign policy as part of its economic development strategy.

Since the late 2000s, Türkiye has assumed a mediator role to resolve disputes and promote cooperation among the countries in the region. It has implemented multilateral dialogue mechanisms. It has pioneered political initiatives to emphasize the common

values of the region. Starting with the Arab uprising in 2011 and the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Türkiye's focus of attention has shifted to the Middle East on the security axis. Although Türkiye's interest in the Balkan countries decreased as a result of this situation, it maintained its relations with them, especially through public diplomacy tools. At the same time, illegal and irregular migration has been Türkiye's main agenda with Balkan countries. In 2016, after the coup attempt in Türkiye, Türkiye tried to cooperate in the fight against FETÖ. However, there was not enough response.

Türkiye has supported the integration of the countries of the region into Euro-Atlantic institutions. In this respect, he considered NATO's mission important for the prevention of a possible security crisis in the region and the EU's mission important for unity in the region.

After 2020, new actors began to assert influence in the Balkans. In this context, China's investments in the region have increased with the "Belt and Road Initiative". Russia, using tools such as religion, culture and media, has influenced the dynamics of the region. Gulf countries' investment policies in the region have increased competition. In this process, Türkiye has tried to be a balancing actor. At the same time, it has prioritized mediation activities for peace, stability and solidarity. Frequent presidential visits and high-level contacts were made to the region. It has maintained its policy based on a multi-dimensional approach through public diplomacy tools and technical assistance.

The Hakan Fidan Era: Fundamental Continuities and Differences

Since Hakan Fidan took office, relations between Türkiye and the Balkans have been highly active and positive. Priority has been given to maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans, enhancing prosperity and deepening relations with all communities. Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Balkans is shaped by the principles of inclusiveness and regional ownership. It strives to maintain its active engagement on bilateral, regional and multilateral platforms with a foreign policy based on dialogue and consensus. During Hakan Fidan's tenure as Foreign Minister, rather than a sharp change in the Turkish foreign policy line towards the Balkans, certain priorities were redefined. The security-centered approach has become more visible.

Türkiye positions the Balkans as a neighborhood defined by historical and cultural ties. Within this framework, it continues to maintain its soft power elements, bilateral relations and regional mediation role.

After taking office, Hakan Fidan carried out intensive telephone diplomacy as well as high-level contacts with the Balkan countries. The positive relations between Türkiye and Greece continued to increase during Hakan Fidan's tenure. In this regard, active diplomacy was maintained through both mutual visits and phone calls. Türkiye aims to resolve its problems with Greece over the Aegean Sea in a comprehensive manner. On the Cyprus issue, Türkiye seeks a solution that will ensure the security, freedom and

prosperity of both Turks and Greeks. Important steps have been taken in terms of trade and economic relations with the Joint Business Council established between the two countries. Türkiye would like to see more effective cooperation from Greece in the fight against terrorism and illegal migration. The situation of the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace (BTTA) and the Turkish compatriots living in the Dodecanese Islands constitute the priority agenda items in the talks with Greece. In addition to all these, cooperation in the field of defense continues.

Hakan Fidan attaches importance to joint efforts with Bulgaria to strengthen cooperation and solidarity in the Balkans. In this respect, he sees multidimensional friendship and alliance as one of the basic building blocks of stability in the Balkans. Türkiye cooperates with Bulgaria in the field of security. It aims to increase cooperation in tackling challenges such as terrorism and irregular migration. The energy crises caused by the war in Ukraine have put the countries in a difficult situation. The cooperation between the two countries in the strategically important field of energy is of great importance not only as a commercial activity but also for the security of energy supply in the region. One of the most important aspects of the multidimensional diplomacy with Bulgaria is the Turkish and Muslim population living in Bulgaria. This issue is addressed in bilateral meetings without interruption.

Türkiye has maintained uninterrupted relations with North Macedonia since its independence. Hakan Fidan aims to further

strengthen and institutionalize the basis of relations. However, increasing cooperation in energy and economic fields and strengthening military cooperation are among the priority foreign policy issues. Fidan attaches importance to the positive development and maintenance of relations between all communities in North Macedonia. In particular, he expects the government of North Macedonia to meet the mother tongue, education demands and infrastructure needs of the Turkish community within the framework of the laws. Stronger support is requested from North Macedonia in the fight against terrorism. Within all these frameworks, mutual visits and telephone diplomacy are carried out between Türkiye and North Macedonia.

Fidan seeks to expand strategic cooperation areas with Croatia, a NATO member. He sees Croatia as an important partner for regional peace and stability in the Balkans. Within the trilateral consultative mechanism between Türkiye - Bosnia and Herzegovina - Croatia, Türkiye would like to organize meetings more regularly in order to improve the ties between the three countries, to take regional ownership of the issues in the Balkans and to improve cooperation.

Türkiye's relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to develop in the Fidan period. The security and stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a key country in the Balkans, is important for all Balkan countries. In this regard, Türkiye is one of the countries that deploys the highest number of troops in international military missions to maintain peace. Türkiye wants to increase cooper-

ation with Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of defense. It expects stronger cooperation and concrete steps from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the fight against terrorism. At the same time, Fidan attaches importance to maintaining an impartial diplomacy with all segments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and continues the dialog process with mutual high-level contacts.

Maintaining intensive diplomatic traffic with Serbia, Türkiye organized the fourth High Level Cooperation Council during the Fidan period. Subsequently, eleven agreements were signed between the two countries to strengthen the covenant basis in different fields. At the same time, increasing cooperation in the field of defense is also among the objectives.

Fidan, who wants to provide a comprehensive strategic vision for Türkiye's relations with Kosovo, emphasizing security, politics and economy as the three main pillars of cooperation. In this regard, he keeps political and diplomatic contacts at a high level. He aims to institutionalize security issues with a long-term approach. Securing security and stability in Kosovo is important for establishing lasting peace and stability throughout the Balkans. In this regard, Türkiye, which is under the command of NATO Kosovo Force KFOR, has a very critical and important role in terms of establishing security in this region. It supports the dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo to ensure lasting peace and stability in the region. Türkiye continues to support Kosovo's security forces in the fields of education and defense indus-

try during the Fidan period. In this process, it is aimed to increase military and defense industry cooperation. Türkiye expects decisive support in the fight against terrorism. It shows great sensitivity to the strengthening of state institutions in Kosovo.

Türkiye improved its bilateral relations with Albania during the Fidan period and signed agreements in different fields following the High Level Cooperation Councils. Türkiye, which has strong cooperation in the defense industry and military field, expects concrete steps from Albania in the fight against terrorism.

Relations between Montenegro and Türkiye are progressing at a high level with mutual diplomacy. There is extensive cooperation. These cooperations are mainly on political, economic and cultural grounds. It is aimed to strengthen trade and economic cooperation with Montenegro.

Under Hakan Fidan, Türkiye continues to approach the Balkan countries with the understanding of regional ownership of regional problems. In this respect, Türkiye actively participates in the activities of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the only regional initiative that brings together all Balkan countries. Türkiye maintains diplomatic relations with the countries of the region at a high level without discrimination. The first meeting of the Balkan Peace Platform was held in an informal format under the leadership of Türkiye. This platform constitutes a new link in the regional ownership approach. It aims to develop a result-oriented and unique structure that addresses the

problems in a sincere manner and enables regular contacts between the parties. It is also intended to provide a complementary format to existing platforms and initiatives in the region.

The Balkans in Hakan Fidan's Approach to Foreign Policy: Complementary Elements of Foreign Policy

Türkiye's role in the Balkans has been reconstructed not only through historical ties, but also in the context of regional security, crisis management and the continuity of multidimensional cooperation mechanisms. In this regard, multi-channel dialogues are used to strike a balance without engaging with one side. With the Balkans, the focus is on the greater prosperity and interests in the region through peace, dialogue, development and system building rather than small gains. Türkiye seeks to pursue its foreign policy objectives on a win-win basis, in contact with both regional and international actors.

It is seen that the regional ownership approach has become more systematized during the Fidan period. Türkiye supports not bilateral relations between Türkiye and the Balkans, but collective processes that bring the countries in the region together for dialogue, building trust and producing lasting solutions. It conducts pre-emptive diplomacy by aiming to address crises in the region before they escalate. It has a proactive and systematic strategic attitude towards the future. In this regard, Fidan conducts multi-

dimensional diplomacy not only in times of crisis but also through continuous dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. He also attaches importance to stability and economic integration in the region. He sees the Balkans as a critical crossroads for the security of Europe and Türkiye. Its Balkan policy is not limited to cultural, economic and diplomatic areas. During the Hakan Fidan era, visibility in Balkan policy has increased and platforms have been given more importance. In this regard, it attaches importance to strengthening regional dialogue mechanisms, taking decisions in the region together with Balkan countries, acting jointly on certain issues, and high-level cooperation, especially in the defense industry and security issues.

Hakan Fidan wants the Balkan countries to focus on their own potential and progress at a level that will develop themselves. He aims to develop together in the Balkans where different ethnic groups live together without any problems, where the interests of the region are prioritized and energy resources are utilized. At the same time, he aims to reach consensus and deepen strategic partnerships with the Balkan countries through high-level political dialogue.

When all these objectives are taken into account, some shortcomings stand out and may cause disruptions in the desired policy approach.

First of all, the Balkans should be studied step by step by state institutions and NGOs, a panorama should be drawn, and all scenarios in the Balkans should be considered

and evaluated. Accordingly, strategic steps should be taken much earlier. In this regard, reports should be prepared by holding serial meetings and interviews with Balkan countries. As a result of these reports, strategies suitable for alternatives should be developed.

Second, there is a lack of communication and coordination among public officials assigned to Balkan countries. This leads to gaps in many areas and makes it difficult to get the desired feedback in the field. At the same time, this deficiency opens space for different organizations such as FETÖ and Wahhabi in Balkan countries. In order to ensure strong integration among the personnel assigned to the countries in the region, they should be subjected to orientation and training. Communication and coordination deficiencies among the personnel in the field should be eliminated. The effectiveness of the integration between institutions should be reviewed and evaluated every 6 months. Necessary arrangements should be made according to this evaluation.

Third, a representative in contact with each Balkan country separately should be appointed. This representative should know the region and the country he/she is assigned to very well with his/her field experience. The reflections and feedbacks of the determined policies on the field should be reported in detail by this representative.

Fourth, Türkiye should take the necessary stance against countries that threaten the stability of Balkan countries. Efforts should be made to accelerate the process of moving

from a dialogue-based approach to full normalization among Balkan countries.

Fifth, it is observed that Türkiye's institutional soft power initiatives have weakened. It is noteworthy that Türkiye has prioritized other aspects of its domestic and foreign policy balances due to a global increase in dynamism. It should be more balanced in this situation and should give more importance to maintaining its visibility in the Balkans.

Finally, the principles of Orthodoxy and minority should be addressed separately in Greece's school closures and Greece should be subjected to external pressure. The concerns and expectations of the Turkish people in North Macedonia, which has recently been experiencing problems with the census, school closures and Turkish course content, should be addressed. Cultural activities should be organized in the region through Turks living in Bulgaria. Sandzak is import-

ant as it borders Montenegro and is a Muslim region between two Orthodox Christian populations. Serbia should pioneer investment in the Sandzak region. In Kosovo, there has been a great development in terms of the prevalence of the Turkish language and its becoming an official language. It is valuable to carry out studies to reveal the Turkish identity alongside the Albanian identity. Ties with Croatia should be improved and the country should always be an active force in the Bosnia-Herzegovina issue. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, work should be carried out on Islamic organizations in the region and their own identity should always be taken into consideration. Montenegro has recently received a lot of immigration from Türkiye, along with developing commercial cooperation with Montenegro. Cooperation in the country should be based on migrant entrepreneurs.

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Mervegöl Kınalı completed her bachelor's degree in International Relations at Selçuk University. She worked in the field of Africa for a short time. She received trainings on certain geographies. She is currently continuing her education life. His research interests include the Balkans, the Middle East and East Africa.

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