

M. A Thesis Evaluation

Huseynli, Javid (2015) *Turkey and the Balkans in the Geopolitics of the Contemporary Regional Development*. Master Thesis. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies. Supervisor: Frantisek Sistek PhD.

In his M. A. thesis, Javid Huseynli focused on the marked increase of Turkish interest and multiple involvements in Southeastern Europe since the beginning of the 21st century, which is especially evident in the sphere of economic exchange and “soft power“ activities in the cultural, educational, religious and humanitarian sphere. This trend has been partly facilitated by the end of the Cold War division of the region at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the pacification of the region after the end of the wars of Yugoslav succession, democratization of the post-Yugoslav successor states after 2000 and post-Communist economic liberalization throughout the entire region. However, the author also points to the change of paradigm of Turkey’s foreign policy towards this mostly “post-Ottoman“ region, which has been apparent already in the 1990s and became more pronounced after the victory of AKP (Justice and Development Party) in 2002. Huseynli pays special attention to the role of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkish foreign minister since 2009 and prime minister since 2014, who has provided ideological justification for a new policy towards the Balkans in his influential texts. The role of Turkey in contemporary Balkans is indeed an important and fruitful topic. In his thesis, focusing on the “geopolitics of regional development“, the author tries to provide a complex overview of Turkish involvement in the entire region (including Romania and to a lesser degree Greece). His work is based upon a satisfactory number of primarily English and partly also Turkish language sources, including primary sources such as official governmental documents, scholarly articles and several works of a more theoretical nature.

In the introductory chapter, Huseynli first briefly outlines the change of Turkish attitudes towards the Balkans at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Since the 1920s, the new Republic of Turkey showed limited interest in the region. In this section, Huseynli does not support his claims by references to literature which deals with the reasons why post-Ottoman Turkey “turned its back“ to the region that had been of great importance for the Ottoman empire for centuries (e. g. Ebru Boyar: *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, London 2007). A new, dynamic involvement in the region has been apparent especially since the AKP rose to power in 2002. Apart from pragmatic reasons, this shift was possible thanks to a new, more positive assessment of the historical legacy of the Ottoman empire as well as renewed interest in the Muslim communities in the Balkans as possible instruments of Turkish political and economic interest. Huseynli’s main research question is an assessment of reasons and impact of the newly developing

relations of Turkey with the Balkan countries.

In the second chapter, the author focused on the influential geopolitical concepts of Ahmet Davutoğlu which have provided guidelines and justifications for increased Turkish involvement in the region. Huseynli managed to present Davutoğlu's views relatively well and in sufficient detail. His attention to Davutoğlu's geopolitical visions is justified, nevertheless, it is regrettable that he did not pay at least some attention to other Turkish voices who have been shaping and justifying foreign and economic policies of the recent years as well. Despite occasional references to Davutoğlu in other parts of the thesis, Huseynli has refrained from his own critical assessment of these ideas and their practical validity. It can be argued that Davutoğlu's thoughts contain certain contradictions. One of his declared aims is overcoming the distrust and negative stereotypes towards Turkey in the Balkan Christian Orthodox states. At the same time, he promotes the idea of establishing Turkish "zones of impact", comprising primarily of Balkan regions dominated by Muslims (primarily Bosniaks and Albanians). The politician seems to be torn between pragmatism on the one hand and ideology of cultural, religious and historical affinity on the other. Are Davutoğlu's visions supported by data or belong only to the sphere of policy justifications and theorizing about "big topics" of geopolitics and history?

In chapter 3, Huseynli turns his attention to the practical side of Turkish interest, mostly in the recent 5-8 years. He provides different examples of Turkish involvement in the region: regional initiatives (Southeast European Cooperation Process – SEECP, trilateral Balkan summits of Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia etc.), participation in peace-keeping missions and international organizations etc. He also devotes attention to Turkish "soft power" in the Balkans. Agencies and institutions such as TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), Diyanet (religious organization stimulating cooperation between Muslim leaders from the region and Turkey) and Yunus Emre Institutes of Turkish language and culture focus most of their attention on Muslim areas of the Balkans. In my opinion, he should have mentioned that Romania, which remains the most important trading partner of Turkey in the region, enjoyed this prominent position already in the 1990s, therefore, before AKP rose to power. Apart from that, the competition of Turkish companies with companies from the Arab Gulf states deserves more attention. Huseynli mentions the failed attempt of Turkish Airlines to purchase a major share in Air Serbia, which was finally purchased by Etihad Airways instead. More data and information on other projects would probably show that companies from the Emirates and other Persian Gulf States are indeed serious competitors of Turkish companies on the Balkan markets (the large-scale city development project in central Belgrade and the successful establishment of Al Jazeera TV in the South Slavic languages are just two prominent examples). It would also be interesting to compare Turkish business involvement with that of major EU countries, especially in areas described by Davutoğlu as "zones of impact

Two subchapters dedicated to „Sustainability in the Region and the Role of Business“ and “Economic cooperation from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) View“ are questionable and problematic in several ways. Especially the passages about sustainability are not well connected with the overall topic of the thesis. There are a few examples from the region in the second subchapter on CSR (e. g. bank loans as example of CSR practices). Despite that (and despite my previous discussions on this topic with Javid Huseynli over earlier drafts of his thesis), I cannot escape the impression that these sections stick out from the entire thesis and their inclusion is not well justified. I hope that this problem will be addressed and possibly explained during the defense.

Chapter 4 tackles an important and indeed inevitable question: does Turkish political and economic involvement in the region run contrary to the goals of the EU and the prospect of integration of the entire region in the future? The author’s response is conciliatory and positive: Turkey’s economic capabilities help to improve the overall economic situation and therefore coincide with EU goals of increasing economic prosperity. Both Turkey and the EU can actively pursue their interest in the region without becoming rivals, to the benefit of all. As such, author’s claims have so far been more or less justified, but sound somewhat vague and idealistic. A comparison of Turkey’s involvement with that of another outside political and economic power – Russia – would perhaps provide a useful counterpoint. Russian involvement in the region is certainly more problematic and has caused frequent problems in the relations between the EU and certain Balkan countries in the past several years. Such comparison could have lent more credibility to Huseynli’s arguments.

The last chapter is entitled “Conclusions and Recommendations“. It is questionable whether to include recommendations in an M. A thesis. Here (and occasionally elsewhere throughout the thesis) the text sometimes reads more like a policy paper by a Turkish politician or business leader than an academic text. Throughout the thesis, the author does not hide his positive assessment of Turkey’s Balkan involvement. It is beyond doubt that the lack of sufficient political, cultural and economic links between Turkey and the neighboring region of Europe throughout much of the 20th century was quite unnatural. Still, it would have been beneficial if Huseynli also focused more attention on certain questionable or controversial issues (such as the already mentioned validity of Davutoğlu’s geopolitical theories, continued mistrust of Turkey in certain Christian Orthodox countries, economic competition with Arab and other companies etc.). In his idealism, Huseynli sometimes takes for granted or at least does not question concepts which certainly deserve to be questioned for their validity: “zero problem policy in the neighborhood“, “win-win strategy“ etc. In my opinion, he frequently and too easily equates economic and national interest. In the age of globalization and neoliberalism, this correlation should not be taken for granted. Which structures, classes, political, business and clientelist groups benefit from increased political and economic

relations between Turkey and the Balkans? Assumption that “all sides“ and “everybody“ reap the fruits of these developments cannot be possibly justified. One small remark at the end – when speaking about Turkish policy towards the Balkans, Huseynli repeatedly uses the term “overseas policy“. Is this a mistake (Istanbul lies on the Balkan shore of the Bosphorus after all) or a term really used in Turkey?

The M. A. thesis of Javid Huseynli is not without certain flaws, however, it is praiseworthy that he chose to tackle a topic which is currently relevant, knowing in advance that trying to cover the Turkish involvement in the entire Balkan peninsula will be a difficult task. In the end, he managed to provide interesting and valid overviews of particular questions and has successfully answered the main research questions as well. I therefore recommend his thesis for the defense.

Proposed grade: 2 (*velmi dobře*)

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June 8, 2015