THE NOTION OF 'WESTERN BALKANS', THE BALKANS, AND TURKEY

Özge Nur ÖĞÜTCÜ

Analyst (2013-2017)

On 17 May 2017, four speakers delivered statements focusing on the Balkans at the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats under the House of Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives.[1] Discussions on the topic of the Balkans in one of the most significant committees of the legislative organ of a country that has a voice in world politics such as the US is important in terms providing public attention to developments in the Balkans and for supporting regional stability. Unfortunately, none of the speakers stated which geographical definition and criteria they used while speaking of the Balkans. Instead of this, they used the notion of Western Balkans that has been popping up recently in the discussions of the international community.

It can be seen particularly in the sources of the European Union (EU) and the documents of Western establishments that Western Balkans has been used in the political jargon regarding the Balkans since the beginning of the 2000s. Within the given statements of the speakers in the afore-mentioned subcommittee, which hail from the world of ideas and politics of the US, it is unclear where the Balkans correspond to in the geographical sense, and on what basis a segregation such as the term Western Balkans is being utilized. It should be kept in mind that there is no region referred to as Eastern Balkans in the discussions of the international community. According to the modern-day usage in EU documents, Western Balkans encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo. Based on this, it is possible to say that the term Western Balkans was created without any intellectual infrastructure as a result of the EUs plans for enlargement towards the south, and partitions the Balkans region by ignoring the historical perspective. This usage has gained a permanent quality in time through its use in EU documents and with practices like the ongoing Western Balkans Summit that initially emerged as the Berlin Process in 2014. In 2014, the then-President of the European (Union) Commission Jean-Claude Juncker stated that EU enlargement had been paused for the next 5 years. Nonetheless, the Berlin Process was created with the support of Germany for the purpose of reinforcing the relations of the Balkans with the EU.[2] The first summit was held in Berlin, the second one in Vienna, and the third one in Paris. The most recent fourth summit was held in the town of Trieste in Italy on 12 July 2017. However, what will happen at the end of the 5-year pause period that targets integration with the EU remains to be seen.

What should be remembered here is that Turkey, which is apparently being excluded from the Balkans with the notion of Western Balkans, is a regional leader country that fostered cooperation and solidarity throughout the Balkans with the idea of Balkan Pact that the country had pioneered in the recent past. With the initiative taken by Turkey and Greece, both of which are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries, the Balkan Pact was formed after a treaty that was signed between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Greece, and Yugoslavia in 1953 and became official in 1954. Even though it lost its function within a short period of time, this Pact that was established pact carried an embracing quality with its inclusive composition. Similarly, because the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI)[3], which was established after Yugoslavia's breakup in the early 1990s, also puts aside the notion of "Western Balkans", it functions as a tool in the making of various cooperation projects that aim for security and trade in the Balkans in the classical sense. This initiative, which also gained the support of the US at that time, is a structure that takes into consideration regional dependency and connections, and is more inclusive than the notion of "Western Balkans".

The notion of "Western Balkans" that was put forth by EU in the early 2000s lacks the function of covering the Balkans with an integrative perspective. Also, it should be remembered that EU fund programs mention Turkey alongside the Balkan countries and that Turkey has the capacity to contribute to regional stability and cooperation exercises in the region through its cultural, historical, and economic connections. Turkeys policy towards the Balkans has been shaped within the framework of four main elements: High-level political dialogue, Security for everyone, Maximum economic integration, and the Conservation of the multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious societal structure in the region. In this context, Türkiye's contribution to the region will undeniably lead to positive results. Besides the cultural and economic relations, the Balkans have also been seen as the European extension of Turkey due to its historical connections and geographical location. Additionally, it is possible to say that, also being a member of NATO, Turkey supports the integration of the Balkan countries with the EU and NATO. Turkey has always been a part of the Balkans. Thus, just as considering the Balkans enlargement without Turkey is not possible, an approach that separates Turkey from the geographical integrity of the region, like "Western Balkans," is -to say the least- simply detached from reality.

[1] For further details about the subject, please see: http://avim.org.tr/tr/Bulten/AMERIKAN-TEMSILCILER-MECLISI-DIS-ILISKILER-KOMITESI-AVRUPA-AVRASYA-VE-YUKSELEN-TEHDITLER-ALT-KOMITESI-BALKANLAR-IFADELERI

[2] The Western Balkans' Berlin process: A new impulse for regional cooperation, *European Parliament*, 4 July, 2016, accessed July 12, 2017, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)586602.

[3] The member countries are as follows: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia-Montenegro, Slovenia, Türkiye, and Greece.

About the Author :

Özge Nur Ögütcü was an Analyst at AVİM between October 2013 to December 2017. Ogutcu pursued her works on Iran and Central Asia.

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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