

TURKEY'S SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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 Analysis

While the US has appointed a Special Representative for the whole Balkans and especially to boost the dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo, Germany and France have announced that they will also appoint their Special Representatives. But Turkey, with its close relations with the Balkan countries and who sees the Balkans as a strategic region still does not have any official Special Representative there.

In late August, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Palmer as his Special Representative for the Western Balkans. Two weeks later, the White House stated that its top diplomatic representative in Germany, Richard Grenell, would be its new special envoy for the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia. This is a process that has been stalled

since November 2018, when the Pristina administration imposed a 100 percent tariffs on imports from Serbia as a retaliatory measure against Belgrade's aggressively campaign on the country. At the time Belgrade worked to persuade third countries not to recognize Kosovo's independence and made diplomatic moves to block Kosovo from joining multilateral organizations and sports bodies such as the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, UNESCO and the INTERPOL.

Following the aggressive US return to the region, the two largest EU countries namely France and Germany, also announced that they would appoint their Special Representatives, particularly for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue process. But the recent cancellation of the start of EU membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania, vetoed by France, will have arduous



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consequences between the union and the region. Once again, a veto done by a powerful EU country proved the union's failure to deliver its promises, which leads to the EU's undeniable crisis of identity.

It is interesting how in the last few months the US who until recently had lost interest in the Western Balkans has taken a sharp U-turn to the region. The reason why Western powers have restored their interest in the Balkans cannot possibly be merely to promote the rule of law, democratic institutions and economic growth. Underneath the aforementioned slogans, it is safe to say that their action aims to prevent the increasing influence of significant actors in the region such as Russia, China and Turkey. For example in the analysis written by the recently-appointed US Representative, it is stated that the new Special Representative should seek, again working with the EU, to reset the working relationship with Russia, China and Turkey in the region.

This shows that Turkey, despite its shared policies on the Western Balkan with the EU is no longer seen as an EU's ally, but rather as a competitor. This is why Turkey has to review its policies and political strategies regarding the Balkans and to be able to reciprocate any step taken by the EU and the US.

The first step that Turkey must take is to appoint its own Special Representative for the entire Balkans country or appoint one Representative for each problem to start initiatives for the region. Turkey has proven its political success in the Balkans. For example Turkey has started an initiative of Turkey-Bosnia with Herzegovina-Serbia and Turkey-Bosnia with Herzegovina-Croatia. In these Trilateral Summits, as well as overcoming existing issues among the countries in question, relations between those countries have also developed. But Turkey's internal problems such as the failed coup attempt in July 2016, problems surrounding the Syrian war and its refugee crisis that affected Turkey the most compared to any other country, have shifted the

country's energy and interest away from the Balkans. After six years of attempts and failure, the Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia Trilateral Summit was finally realized this year during Erdogan's visit to Serbia.

The success of the Summit is evident that Turkey is capable to become an important actor in the region. But the Turkish political system has no tradition of appointing a Special Representative to a region other than the non-crisis regions.¹

There are regional divisions within Turkey's different Ministries. Yet we have to admit that such divisions would not create substantial political effect, since the Special Representatives appointed by the Western countries occupy the public opinion of the region, unlike the much lesser known presence of such divisions in the Ministries of the Republic of Turkey.

The appointment of a Special Representative to the region will show Turkey's interest and seriousness about the Balkans. It will also ensure that Turkey's foreign policies there are carried out in a more coordinated manner. Because trying to develop good relations with any country in the Balkans would most probably cause problems with other Balkan countries with the same level of relations. For example, Albania and Bosnia – Turkey's strategic allies – were quick to protest about Turkey's visit to Serbia along with its 200 businessmen. On the one hand Turkey must maintain its relations with its strategic allies, but on the other hand creating more allies in the region is no less important for the sake of the stability of the whole region.

At the same time, Turkey should also use its good relations with international powers. Turkey from one side is "strategic partner" of the US and the EU, and from other side it recently has developed good relations with Russia -although they don't share the same goals in regards to the Balkans- which is known as a troublemaker in the region. Due to this expanded relations to the Eastern and Western powers, Turkey has a privileged status, which enables it to act as a mediator.

Furthermore, appointing a Special Representative will also contribute to the fight against FETO, a terrorist organization that is working against Turkey and has created a great damage to the country's diplomatic system. The Special Representative may also gain support from other countries in the region against the injustices imposed on the minorities in Greece, in particular against the Turkish minority living in Western Thrace.

Currently there is a black propaganda against Turkey on the international media about its counterterrorism operation in Northeastern Syria. Turkey could benefit from conducting similar activities in the Balkan countries to create a positive global public opinion showing that Turkey is not interested in being an invader to another country, but it is more interested in eradicating terrorism in its own country as well as in its neighboring countries.

A few issues need to be taken into consideration regarding a Special Representative to the Balkans. Firstly, it should be underlined that the appointed Special Representative should not be of the Balkan origin. Because we have seen how politicians influential in Turkey's Balkan policies and who are also Balkan origin

have implemented policies that strengthened only their circles in the region instead of gaining everyone's win. Instead of such Representatives, diplomats who are well acquainted with the region and have an equal proximity to all actors should be appointed.

In order to educate such diplomats, they should serve at embassies in all Balkan countries from a young age to provide them with adequate knowledge about the region. For example, the Special Representative of US Palmer comes to the Balkans as a diplomat with relevant experience in region. His first foreign mission was in Belgrade in 1993 and he speaks Serbian because his wife is a Serb.

Finally Turkey shouldn't decline the investments with which is trying to finance and help the Balkan minorities and ensure the stability in region. Otherwise, Turkey's painstakingly built investments will be destroyed and to rebuild it would take Turkey more than 30 years, to say the least.

Considering all of these potential benefits, in this period, when Turkey's transition to a new system is taking place, such a leap of faith in its foreign policy would be fruitful.

Endnotes

¹ For example there are special representatives of Turkey for Iraq and Libya.