

Turkey's president visits Bosnia and Herzegovina

Turkey's President Abdullah Gul visited Bosnia and Herzegovina on 2 – 3 September. This visit by a representative of the Turkish state to the Balkans following on the heels of previous visits proves Ankara's increasing interest in this region. However, this stronger engagement in BiH has provoked protests from Bosnian Serb leaders, who are accusing Turkey of supporting the policy of Bosnian Muslims.

The visit was intended to enhance co-operation between the two countries, primarily in the field of economics. The president was accompanied by a numerous delegation consisting of MPs, ministers and businessmen. Good political relations between the two countries have not translated to economic contacts as yet. Although trade exchange has been rapidly growing (from US\$165 million in 2006 to US\$600 million in 2009), it is still low. The value of Turkish investments in Bosnia is relatively small (US\$100 million). However, no binding decisions in this area were taken during the visit.

The Turkish delegation's visit coincided with the launch of the campaign preceding elections in BiH, scheduled for 3 October. President Gul in his speech at the parliament in Sarajevo appealed for a reform of BiH based on a compromise between the three ethnic communities which at the same time would also consolidate their common statehood. The authorities of Republika Srpska understood this as an expression of support for the policy of Bosnian Muslims, who want a unification of the country, and the prime minister of RS, Milorad Dodik, accused Turkey of interfering with the country's internal affairs. Representatives of RS, to demonstrate their protest, boycotted the meeting with Gul.

Turkey's ambition is to play the role of mediator in the Western Balkans with the goal of contributing to a durable stabilisation of the region. One measure to achieve this goal was the establishment of the trilateral co-operation mechanisms Turkey – Bosnia – Serbia and Turkey – Bosnia – Croatia. The perception of Ankara as Bosnian Muslims' advocate may make it difficult for Turkey to achieve this goal. <MarSz>