



TÜRKİYE'S APPROACH TO THE BALKANS AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

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- Why is the Balkans important for Türkiye?
- What are the key characteristics of Türkiye's Balkan policy?
- What are the main issue areas in Türkiye's Balkan policy?
- What can we expect for Türkiye-Balkans relations under different scenarios for the region?

Why the Balkans is important for Türkiye

As a middle-sized power, Türkiye aims to be actively engaged with its surrounding regions, and among these regions, the Balkans holds a special place. Geographically, Türkiye is not an external actor but an integral part of the Balkans, as its Thrace region belongs to the Balkan Peninsula. Due to its proximity, developments in the politics and security of the Balkans are always a matter of concern for Türkiye. The peace and stability of the Balkans are especially crucial for Türkiye, as the maintenance of stability provides it with opportunities to develop its relations with all countries and societies in the region. In contrast, any instability or conflict in this adjacent region could pose threats to Türkiye's own security and disrupt its trade with Western Europe.

The deep social and cultural bonds shared by Türkiye and the Balkans add another dimension to the region's importance. These bonds are rooted in their common history, as the Balkans

was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. This shared history involved extensive interaction between Turkish and Balkan peoples, leaving a lasting legacy evident in the many common elements of culture, language, and lifestyle that these peoples still share. This shared heritage creates a strong potential for Türkiye to engage with all states and societies in the region. The Turkish and Muslim communities in the Balkans, who often look to Türkiye for support, underscore the region's importance as a socio-cultural priority for Türkiye.

Economically, the Balkans is also an attractive partner for Türkiye. The region's geographical proximity to Türkiye's industrial centers facilitates trade, while its developing infrastructure and emerging markets offer potential investment opportunities. By leveraging its larger economic potential, Türkiye aims to strengthen its position in the Balkan economies, which would also positively impact its economic relations with the European Union.

Key characteristics of Türkiye's Balkan policy

The main principles and priorities of Türkiye's current policy towards the Balkans have remained consistent since the end of the Cold War, with minor adjustments according to changing regional and global dynamics. Recognizing the strategic importance of the Balkans, Türkiye reconfigured its Balkan policy in the early 1990s to a proactive and multi-dimensional one. During the 21st century, Türkiye's Balkan policy has gained unprecedented momentum, with Ankara utilizing a wide array of diplomatic, economic, and cultural instruments to deepen its relations with the region.

At the core of Türkiye's approach lies a commitment to maintaining peace and enhancing prosperity, which Türkiye views as essential for its own security and economic interests, as well as for consolidating its influence in the long term. Accordingly, Türkiye has developed its current Balkan policy on two pillars. The first one is "regional ownership," which promotes the idea that regional issues should be resolved by the regional actors themselves. Türkiye's emphasis on this principle is meant to reduce external influence in the Balkans and prevent rivalries among global powers from creating new tensions. The second pillar, "inclusiveness," advocates the involvement of all regional parties in regional decisions, regardless of differences among their perspectives and interests. Türkiye's aim here is to support dialogue and cooperation, encouraging mutual understanding among Balkan countries to resolve disputes peacefully.

Following a policy upon these pillars requires active, multisided, and continuous diplomacy, which Türkiye has followed on both bilateral and multilateral bases. Recognizing that its potential to become an influential player in the region relies on its ability to engage with all parties involved, Türkiye endeavors to develop and main-

tain strong relations with all countries and societies in the region. To this end, Türkiye adopts a balanced and constructive approach, avoiding actions that could jeopardize its relations with any particular country or group, and focusing on areas to advance relations on the basis of mutual gains. So far, Türkiye has established High Level Cooperation Councils with Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Albania, and signed a strategic partnership document with Romania. Every year, frequent high-level contacts with Balkan governments result in the signing of numerous agreements in economic, military, social, and cultural areas. Türkiye has free trade regimes with all Balkan countries and visa-free travel regimes with all Western Balkan countries. Türkiye also demonstrates its interest in the welfare of Balkan countries by providing financial and technical support for their development and capacity enhancement.

In terms of multilateral diplomacy, Türkiye is engaged with the Balkans in various venues and platforms. By fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and collaboration, Türkiye seeks to contribute to the development of a more cohesive and resilient Balkan region. Türkiye has actively participated in various regional organizations and platforms, such as the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), and South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG). Türkiye has also spearheaded multi-party cooperation initiatives, including the Türkiye-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia and Türkiye-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia trilateral consultative mechanisms and the recently-launched trilateral task force with Bulgaria and Romania for clearing mines in the Black Sea. The trilateral with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia has culminated in the ongoing Belgrade-Sarajevo highway project, which is currently the largest project supported by Türkiye in the Balkans. It is aimed at not only improving the road infrastructure of the Balkans

but also fostering connections between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Overall, Türkiye's Balkan policy is characterized by a consistent emphasis on regional peace and stability, dialogue and cooperation, balanced diplomacy, and development support. By maintaining an impartial stance and encouraging dialogue, Türkiye positions itself as a trusted partner and contributor to regional stability. At the same time, through active engagement with the Balkans, Türkiye aims to strengthen its economic and social ties, increase its presence and visibility, and enhance its political influence as a key regional actor.

Main Issue Areas in Türkiye's Balkan Policy

A primary focus of Türkiye's Balkan policy is the development of strong economic relations. Despite strong competition in the regional market, Türkiye wishes to consolidate its position in the Balkan economies by taking advantage of its geographical and socio-cultural proximity. With the establishment of free trade regimes and visa-free travel agreements from the early 2000s onward, Türkiye's trade with the Balkans has shown consistent growth. Türkiye's trade volume with the 11 Balkan countries, which stood in 2013 at around \$20.8 billion increased in 2023 to an all-time high of \$32.3 billion. As of the first two quarters of 2024, Türkiye's trade volume with the region was recorded at \$18 billion, with exports totaling \$12.8 billion—both marking the highest figures for any two-quarter period. Turkish investments in the Balkans have also grown notably thanks to the interest of Turkish businesses in sectors such as telecommunications, energy, tourism, construction, and finance. According to the data published by the Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, the total investment stock of Turkish citizens in the Balkans rose from \$1.11 billion in 2013 to \$3.13 billion

in 2023, although if subsidiaries and indirect investments from third countries are included, this figure should be much higher. These increasing trade and investment ties are mutually beneficial, contributing to the Balkans' economic development while supporting Türkiye's own economy.

In addition to economic engagement, Türkiye has prioritized development and humanitarian aid in the Balkans since the 1990s, aiming to improve infrastructure and promote social welfare. Aid levels have increased substantially from the mid-2000s, with significant contributions made during times of natural disasters and crises. According to OECD data, Türkiye's official development aid to the region in 2022 reached \$25.6 million. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has been instrumental in these efforts, implementing projects to upgrade infrastructure, boost small businesses, and improve health and education services. Türkiye has also mobilized aid quickly during times of crisis, such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating a commitment to supporting Balkan societies in challenging times.

Another notable aspect of Türkiye's contemporary Balkan policy is the increasing focus on military and defense cooperation. In the face of regional security challenges, Türkiye seeks to enhance its military engagement with Balkan countries, positioning itself as a key partner in efforts to maintain stability and counter potential threats. This has involved the signing of new military and defense agreements, increased high-level military visits, and the provision of military training and equipment to Balkan armed forces. Türkiye's growing defense industry has emerged as a significant asset in this context, with Turkish companies assisting Balkan countries in modernizing their armed forces and exporting a range of military products. In particular, the sale of armed drones, which have so far been acquired by Romania, Albania, Kosovo,

and Bosnia and Herzegovina, has become a prominent feature of Türkiye's defense diplomacy in the region, which not only contributes to regional security but also bolsters Türkiye's political influence and economic interests.

Educational cooperation is another core element of Türkiye's Balkan policy. Building on the deep historical and cultural ties that bind Türkiye and the Balkans, Ankara seeks to strengthen people-to-people connections and enhance its soft power in the region. Türkiye provides educational support through the Türkiye Scholarships program, managed by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), which has enabled thousands of Balkan students to study at Turkish universities. The Türkiye Maarif Foundation contributes to education in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia, offering programs from preschool to higher education. Additionally, Turkish-supported universities in the Balkans, such as the International Sarajevo University in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the International Balkan University in North Macedonia help foster academic and cultural ties. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Turkish language education has been available in Bosnia and Herzegovina's primary, middle, and high schools since 2011, deepening cultural engagement. All these activities are aimed at raising the education level of the region on the one hand and strengthening the region's ties with Türkiye on the other.

Türkiye's visibility in the Balkans is also strengthened through media and cultural diplomacy. The Anadolu News Agency provides news content across the region, and the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) offers digital news in Balkan languages. In addition to publishing content tailored to local contexts, these media outlets bring news about Türkiye to the attention of the Balkan people. Institutions such as TİKA and the Directorate General of Foundations contri-

bute to the preservation and promotion of shared heritage by restoring Ottoman-era historical buildings, enhancing Türkiye's cultural footprint in the Balkans. The Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) promotes Turkish language and culture through its centers located in all Balkan countries excluding Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia.

Türkiye also maintains close ties with Muslim communities in the region. Through the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its affiliate, the Diyanet Foundation, Türkiye provides support for religious education, trains religious personnel, and finances the construction of mosques. Among the newly-built mosques by Türkiye, the Namazgjah Mosque in Tirana, Albania, was opened on October 11 as the largest mosque in the entire Balkans. All these initiatives support local Muslim communities' spiritual needs while promoting a moderate understanding of Islam in contrast to extremist influences.

In sum, Türkiye's engagement with the Balkans spans multiple sectors, which includes both government-to-government cooperation and activities directed at the needs of the people. In return, Balkan governments have acknowledged Türkiye's contributions to regional stability and prosperity and declared their willingness to further cooperate with Türkiye. The deepening of relations in various areas demonstrates that the golden age of Türkiye-Balkan relations, which started in the early 2000s, still continues.

Future scenarios

The future of Türkiye's relations with the Balkans can be discussed through three potential scenarios regarding the region's political outlook. The first and most likely scenario is the continuation of the status quo in the Balkans. Under this scenario, Türkiye is expected to maintain its long-standing policy of multi-sided and balanced engagement with the region. Türkiye would continue to develop its relations with Balkan

countries based on mutual respect and shared interests, further deepening its cooperation in areas such as defense, energy, and construction, which have gained momentum in the last two decades. It would also persist in its efforts to promote regional dialogue and collaboration, actively participating in regional organizations and platforms. Additionally, Türkiye would sustain its cultural and public diplomacy initiatives, seeking to strengthen people-to-people ties and enhance its soft power in the region. Türkiye's continuation of its longstanding approach, paired with its perception as a strong and reliable partner, would allow Ankara to further solidify its position as a key actor in the Balkans, while Balkan governments would likely continue pragmatic cooperation with Türkiye on economic, political, and security issues.

The second scenario, a potential outbreak of conflict in the Western Balkans, is the least likely one given current regional dynamics. Despite outstanding disputes, the shared ambition of EU membership among Balkan countries encourages regional cooperation and discourages policies that might lead to conflict. The presence of international peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two most volatile areas in the region, acts as a strong deterrent against the escalation of tensions into full-blown conflict. In the event of rising tensions, these missions are expected to intervene and defuse the situation. Additionally, Western actors, such as the EU, European states, and the United States, have placed great importance on the region's security and stability, particularly since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, and have intensified their diplomatic efforts accordingly. The emergence of a conflict environment in the Balkans would not suit the interests of non-Western external actors, either. China has been investing in the region in the contexts of the Belt and Road Project and the 14+1 Initiative, and the region's stability is crucial for its trade with Western Europe, whereas Russia has neither the

motivation nor the capacity to foment conflicts in the region on its own.

However, if conflict were to arise, Türkiye would likely respond swiftly with mediation efforts, as it did during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. Türkiye's balanced and neutral stance in the region would allow it to act as a mediator, encouraging dialogue between opposing parties. Leveraging its long-standing connections and balanced diplomacy, Türkiye would work to prevent further escalation. Nonetheless, Türkiye's stance could shift if a crisis threatened Turkish or Muslim communities, as seen in past conflicts. In such a situation, Türkiye might abandon its neutral position and take a more active role in defending these populations, a departure from its usual balanced approach in the region.

The third scenario involves the Western Balkans' accession to the EU, which is not expected to take place in the near future, either. Even for Montenegro, the country most advanced in the accession process, the earliest potential date for membership is 2028. While the most recent EU report, published on October 30, suggests that this target is realistic, the ultimate decision will depend on the continuation of these reforms and the political will of EU member states to support further enlargement. For other candidates, the timeline for accession is even less certain.

Some observers have suggested that EU membership might reduce Türkiye's influence in the Balkans, but current indicators regarding economic, societal, military, and political relations do not support this view. On the contrary, as long as EU membership brings increased prosperity and wealth to the region, it is likely to boost mutual trade and Turkish investments. The fact that EU member states already account for the majority of Türkiye's trade with the Balkans is not coincidental. In 2023, Türkiye's trade volume with the five EU member states constituted 82.20% of its total trade with the 11 Balkan countries, and, according to the Central Bank of the Republic of

Türkiye, the top two destinations for Turkish investments in the Balkans in 2023 were Greece and Romania—both EU members. Even in Croatia and Slovenia, where economic ties have traditionally been limited, Turkish construction companies have recently undertaken large projects, highlighting Türkiye’s economic resilience in the entire Balkan region. The stability and prosperity that EU membership would bring to the region could further attract Turkish businesses to the Western Balkans.

Given the geographical and cultural proximity between Türkiye and the Western Balkans, a decline in societal relations is not anticipated either. The only potential impact of EU membership on people-to-people ties might be a decrease in visits from Türkiye to these countries, as they would become subject to the EU visa regime. However, this would not fundamentally damage the strong bonds between Turkish and Balkan societies. As for military and defense relations, since they are primarily conducted within the NATO framework and Türkiye’s defense cooperation with the Balkans aligns with NATO’s collective security objectives, EU membership for

Western Balkan countries would not directly impact these ties.

In political relations too, the Western Balkans’ accession to the EU should not make a palpably negative effect. Türkiye has a track record of maintaining good relations with EU member states, even during periods of disagreement with the Union. Thanks to Türkiye’s balanced and constructive approach to the Balkans, its relations with EU member states in the region have remained on cordial terms. Even the occasional tensions with Greece, which arose due to the perennial disputes in the Aegean, were followed by mutual efforts for dialogue and cooperation. Therefore, as long as Türkiye maintains its balanced and positive stance towards the region, the Western Balkan countries’ EU membership is not expected to significantly undermine mutual relations and Türkiye’s influence in the region. Such a possibility could arise only if there is a major deterioration of relations between Türkiye and the EU and the Western world in general, a process that would depend on larger geopolitical dynamics.

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