

Chapter Eleven

Turkey and the Western Balkans: Stable Relations and Deepening Cooperation

Mehmet Uğur Ekinçi

Because of its geographical proximity and historical, social, and cultural ties, the Western Balkans region is of particular interest to Turkey. Since the 2000s, in parallel to its foreign policy activism, Turkey intensified political dialogue, economic relations, public diplomacy, and cultural activities with this region. In the late 2000s, Ankara began playing an active role in regional politics and started several important initiatives to establish regional cooperation and mediation. However, following the Arab Spring, the emergence of new security risks and instabilities caused Turkey to concentrate primarily on the Middle East and slow down its political initiatives elsewhere, including in the Western Balkans. Turkey prioritized stability in its political relations, strengthening economic, social, and cultural ties with the region. Due economic shortcomings, unemployment, and the risk of irregular immigration, Western Balkan governments have been careful to maintain good relations with Turkey.

This chapter provides a general overview of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans, and discusses Turkey's contributions to regional peace and stability in the region where the geopolitical dynamics are worryingly volatile.

Turkey's Approach to the Balkans

As Turkey formally opposes “artificial differentiation” among Balkan countries,¹ it does not have a separately tailored policy for the Western Balkans, but instead adopts a uniform approach to the Balkan region as a whole. Since the 1990s, Turkey's policy for the Balkans has shown continuity in terms of political objectives, main concerns, and general principles. After the Cold War ended, political observers and decision makers in

¹ Çavuşoğlu, Mevlüt. *2017 Yılına Girerken Dış Politikamız [Our Foreign Policy at the Turn of 2017]*. December 9, 2016, p. 48. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/site_media/html/2017-yili-basinda-dis-politikamiz.pdf

Ankara were worried that the traditional, cautious Turkish foreign policy would not work within the new, uncertain world order, and that Turkey should adopt a more proactive foreign policy.² In other words, they wanted Turkey to become more economically involved outside its borders and establish a stronger political presence.³ In line with this thinking, Turkey's main political objectives in the surrounding regions have been twofold. In the short and medium term, Turkey has aimed to develop economic partnerships and establish a strong economic presence. In the long term, Turkey aimed to become a more influential regional power, ideally a pivotal state across different regions.

Turkey's main concerns in approaching the Balkans can be categorized under three broad headings.

1. The first pillar is related to security. Due to the geographical closeness of the region, any crisis or conflict in the region can easily impinge on Turkey's own security, and may cause complications such as organized crime and immigration. A peaceful atmosphere in the region, on the other hand, would lay the groundwork for further regional cooperation, economic partnerships, trade, and tourism—all of which bring significant economic and political benefits to Turkey. The maintenance of peace and stability in the region is important also because the bulk of Turkey's trade with Europe is carried out via the Balkans.
2. Turkey's second concern is economic. Since the early 1980s, Turkey has followed neo-liberal economic policies, which involve an export-led growth strategy and a focus on private sector investments abroad. Like in other regions, Turkey desires to further its economic relations with the Balkans, and for this to happen, economic development of the region is crucial.
3. The third concern is socio-cultural. Because of a common history, cultural proximity, and social bonds, Turkey has a special interest in the Balkans. Besides, Turkey assumes the responsibility to support the Turkish and Muslim populations inhabiting the region, especially in terms of economy, education and social services.

² Sayarı, Sabri. "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Challenges of Multi-Regionalism." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 169-182.

³ These views were voiced by politicians, diplomats, and intellectuals of different ideological belongings. See: Öymen, Onur. *Türkiye'nin Gücü: 21. Yüzyılda Türkiye, Avrupa ve Dünya [Turkey's Power: Turkey, Europe and the World in the 21st Century]* (İstanbul: Milliyet, 1998); Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Stratejik Derinlik [Strategic Depth]* (İstanbul: Küre, 2001).

In line with its foreign policy goals and regional concerns, Turkey has formulated two general principles for its Balkan policy, “regional ownership” and “all-inclusiveness.” The former means the exclusion of the influence and involvement of external actors as much as possible, for Balkan issues to be settled by indigenous actors. The latter, which complements the first principle, means that all parties in the region should have their say in resolving problems.⁴

Despite these continuities in strategy,⁵ considerable changes have been observed in Turkey’s Balkan policy from the 2000s onwards in terms of intensity, methodology, and instruments used. In the 1990s, Ankara aimed to become more politically and economically active in the Balkans, but limitations in its social and economic capital and unfavorable domestic and international conditions made this difficult. Political instability, weak governments, terrorism, and economic crises hindered Turkey’s formulation and implementation of new foreign policy strategies. During the 2000s, the political stability under a single party government, the realization of structural and democratic reforms, and steady economic growth provided Turkey with more resources, dynamism, and self-confidence in conducting its foreign policy.

Approaches of Western Balkan Countries Towards Turkey

In the Western Balkans, Turkey is acknowledged as a significant regional player. While the region has been politically oriented towards the EU since the early 2000s, economic concerns have induced Western Balkan governments to cooperate with Turkey. The 2008 global financial crisis inflicted serious strains on the Western Balkan economies, which were already weak compared to the rest of Europe. Despite some recent macro-economic progress, the imprint of the crisis is still palpable. Due to their shortfalls in infrastructure, Western Balkan countries have experienced difficulties in attracting foreign investors, while high unemployment rates

⁴ “Balkan Ülkeleri İle İlişkiler [Relations with Balkan Countries].” *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/balkanlar_ile-iliskiler.tr.mfa.

⁵ For discussions on continuities in Turkey’s post-Cold War Balkan policy, see: Türkes, Mustafa. “Türkiye’nin Balkan Politikasında Devamlılık ve Değişim [Continuity and Change in Turkey’s Balkan Policy].” *Avrasya Dosyası*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2008, pp. 253-280; Anastasakis, Othon. “Turkey’s Assertive Presence in Southeast Europe: Between Identity Politics and Elite Pragmatism.” in Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu, and Mehmet Karlı, eds., *Another Empire? Turkey’s New Foreign Policy in the 2000s*, (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2012), pp. 185-208.

are causing significant socio-economic problems, brain drain, and emigration. Combined, these factors have resulted in a dire need to seek foreign investors, and Turkey's relative macroeconomic stability (in the face of the financial crisis of 2008) increased its attractiveness as a strong economic partner. Not only Turkish and Muslim circles (traditionally close with Turkey) but also non-Muslim politicians throughout the region have been calling for increased Turkish investment.⁶ Turkey's provisions of official development assistance, particularly to underdeveloped or disaster-stricken regions, were also received with gratitude.⁷

The majority of ethnic Turks and Muslims inhabiting the region see Turkey as a kin state and desire more involvement in regional affairs. Among other ethnic and religious groups, however, doubts and prejudices against Turkey still linger on. The negative Ottoman-Turkish image embedded in the historical discourses of Balkan societies continues to be an important factor shaping present-day opinions about Turkey. The rise of nationalist populism in the region in recent years reinforces the traditional skepticism about Turkey, while Turkey's differences with Europe and the United States have made liberals perceive it as a rival to the Western world. As a result, political observers of different ideological stances have expressed their suspicions about Turkey's engagement in the Western Balkans, and some of them have gone as far as attributing an Islamist and expansionist motive to Turkey's involvement.⁸

⁶ "Türkiye önemli bir role sahip [Turkey plays an important role]." *trthaber.com*, November 12, 2014; "Makedonya yatırıma çağırıyor," *dba.com.tr*, April 28, 2015; "Arnavutluk'tan, Türk işadamlarına açık çek! [Blank check from Albania to Turkish businessmen!]" *Dünya*, April 30, 2015; "Karadağ Cumhuriyeti Başbakan Yardımcısı: Türkiyeli iş adamlarını çağırıyorum [Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Montenegro: I invite Turkish businessmen]." *Vatan*, March 1, 2016; Gül, Kayhan and Baştuğ, Emre. "Bosna Hersek Bakanlar Konseyi Başkanı Zvizdić: Türk iş adamları Bosna Hersek'e yatırım yapınlar [Zvizdić, President of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Turkish businessmen should invest in Bosnia and Herzegovina]." *aa.com.tr*, May 22, 2017.

⁷ "The Turkish Government delivers aid to Svilajnac, Jagodina." *Serbia Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications website*, May 21, 2014. <http://mtt.gov.rs/en/releases-and-announcements/the-turkish-government-delivers-aid-to-svilajnac-jagodina/>; "Bosnian premier to push trade ties on Turkey visit." *aa.com.tr*, April 6, 2016; "TIKA continues to help flood-hit Bosnia-Herzegovina." *Daily Sabah*, 14 April 2017.

⁸ See, for instance, Tanasković, Darko. *Neo-Ottomanism: A Doctrine and Foreign Policy Practice*, (Belgrade: CIVIS, 2013); Jevtić, Miroljub. "Neosmanizam versus Panislamizam." *Politeia*, no. 2 (December 2011), pp.31-46; "Balkan o državnom udaru: Vreme izazova za tursku demokratiju i vlast [The Balkans on the state assault: A Challenging Time for Turkish Democracy and Leadership]." *slobodnaevropa.org*, July 16, 2016; Vllahiu, Arbër. "Referendumi në Turqi, neootomanizëm apo rritje e autokratëve në Ballkan? [Turkey's referendum, neo-Ottomanism, or rising autocrats in the Balkans?]." *Evropaelire.org*, April 18, 2017; Karakaş,

That being said, from the 2000s on, public perceptions of Turkey improved throughout the region.⁹ The Turkish government's adoption of new diplomatic practices and soft power instruments, the activities of Turkish NGOs, the increase in Turkish investments, and the rather unexpected popularization of Turkish TV shows and series have reinforced Turkey's visibility and image in the Balkans. This outcome was also very much linked to Turkey's emphasis on domestic reforms, development, integration with the world, peace and stability, and its economic progress during this period.

Areas of Importance in the Relationship between Turkey and the Western Balkans

The Economy

The economy is one of the most crucial aspects of Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans. As mentioned above, Turkey has sought to become an active economic actor in various regions of the world, a quest accelerated with high domestic economic growth during the 2000s. With its geographical and socio-cultural proximity to Turkey, the Balkans offer great potential for the development of economic relations. Turkish Ministry of Economy and the Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) have encouraged Turkish businesses to focus on the Balkans and have organized various activities to bring the Turkish and Balkan private sector closer together.

Trade and Investments

Generally speaking, Turkey's trade with the Western Balkans has increased throughout the 2000s. Until 2002, Turkey had only one free trade agreement (FTA) in the region (with Macedonia). Soon, bilateral FTAs were signed with all other countries of the Western Balkans,¹⁰ drastically increasing the trade volume with the region. In 2002, trade between the Western Balkans and Turkey stood at about 435 million dollars, but

Bernard. "Erdoğan želi stvoriti 'mini' Otomansko Carstvo [Erdoğan wants to establish a 'mini' Ottoman Empire]." *Vecernji List*, April 19, 2017.

⁹ Ekinci, Mehmet Uğur. "A Golden Age of Relations: Turkey and the Western Balkans During the AK Party Period." *Insight Turkey*, vol. 16, no. 1, Winter 2014, p.116.

¹⁰ The FTA with Kosovo is pending ratification, and the FTA with Croatia became obsolete with Croatia's membership to the European Union.

by 2016, this rose to 3 billion dollars, a seven-fold increase (see Table 1). The overall trade volume and Turkish imports in 2016 are the highest recorded numbers in history between Turkey and the region. Turkish exports in 2016 (slightly below the level in 2008) were also the highest since the financial crisis.

In addition to its bilateral trade relations, Turkey has encouraged regional trade cooperation. A concrete outcome of these efforts is the establishment of a trilateral economic dialogue mechanism between Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. After the opening of a joint trade office in Istanbul in 2016, it is expected that trade among these three countries will be conducted in higher coordination.¹¹

Until the mid-2000s, most of Turkish businesses in the Balkans operated in two countries, Romania and Bulgaria. Afterwards, a general increase, albeit with fluctuations, has been recorded in Turkey's investments in the Western Balkans. This progress is due to the overall dynamism and progress of the Turkish economy, but also because of the decrease of capital investments from European stakeholders who suffered from the effects of the global financial crisis. Turkish firms are currently operating in various sectors, including telecommunications, energy, transportation, health, tourism, construction, and finance, and the presence of at least one Turkish-owned bank in every Western Balkan country has reduced barriers for investment.

The amount of FDI outflow from Turkey to the Western Balkan countries, except Kosovo, during the 2010s is given below (see Table 2).¹² However, these figures are incomplete as they do not include Turkish FDI flows through third countries. According to data gleaned by the author from the central banks of respective countries, Turkish investments in the Western Balkans have recorded a more significant increase:

- In 2003, Turkish FDI stock in Albania was less than 7 million dollars. In 2013, it was measured at around 380 million dollars, making Turkey the fifth-largest investor in the country. In year 2016, Turkey ranked third in FDI inflows with 73 million dollars.¹³

¹¹ Rose, Eleanor and Pantović, Milivoje. "Serbia, Bosnia Open Joint Trade Office in Turkey." *balkaninsight.com*, October 27, 2016.

¹² The Central Bank of Turkey does not specify FDI outflows to Kosovo.

¹³ "Investimet e huaja arritën në gati 1 miliard euro në 2016-n, u rritën me 10% [Foreign investments amounted to almost 1 billion euros in 2016, an increase of 10%]." *gazetatema.net*, April 1, 2017.

Table 1: Turkey's Foreign Trade with The Western Balkan Countries (In Millions of Dollars)

	2002		2009		2016		2002-2016		2009-2016	
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Ex. % Change	Im. % Change	Ex. % Change	Im. % Change
Albania	79.760.797	3.972.887	273.109.889	4.694.093	304.609.648	20.602.168	281,90	418,57	11,53	338,90
Bosnia and Herzegovina	43.263.770	6.317.459	226.566.745	52.058.789	308.962.009	288.290.679	614,14	4463,40	36,37	453,78
Croatia	42.872.854	9.387.634	214.704.550	107.383.710	277.924.653	133.517.378	548,25	1322,27	29,45	24,34
Kosovo	...	...	278.078.176	10.178.451	260.727.537	8.506.957	...	...	-6,24	-16,42
Macedonia	101.316.280	14.913.715	283.463.840	39.879.037	378.000.161	82.581.069	273,09	453,73	33,35	107,08
Montenegro	...	...	26.483.438	5.845.468	51.806.619	23.363.677	...	...	95,62	299,69
Serbia	...	...	306.468.718	55.896.658	581.775.695	288.236.886	...	...	89,83	415,66
Yugoslavia	122.050.967	11.146.422	...	...	...	...	632,73*	2771,84*	...	...
Total	389.264.668	45.738.117	1.608.875.356	275.936.206	2.163.806.322	845.098.814	455,87	1747,69	34,49	206,27

*The aggregate amount of trade with Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia is taken for the year 2016.

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT).

Table 2: Yearly FDI Outflow from Turkey to the Western Balkans (In Millions of Dollars)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Albania	3	5	5	10	14	18	31
Bosnia And Herzegovina	61	22	7	3	0	35	26
Croatia	3	47	103	0	23	37	15
Macedonia	8	71	12	5	2	11	10
Montenegro	4	0	0	11	0	11	15
Serbia	3	0	7	4	0	16	11
Total	82	145	134	33	39	128	108

Source: Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey

- Turkish investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed significant increase from 2006 onwards. At the end of 2005, Turkish FDI in Bosnia and Herzegovina was at only 34 million dollars. At the end of year 2016, Turkish FDI was measured around 210 million dollars.
- In Croatia, there were no significant Turkish investments before 2007. By Q2 of 2017, Turkish FDI grew to 260 million dollars.
- Turkish FDI in Kosovo between January 2008 and February 2017 amounted to 436 million dollars, making Turkey one of the leading foreign investors in this country.¹⁴
- In Macedonia, Turkish share of total FDI stocks was around 1.5 percent until 2011, when it increased more than twofold. In the first ten months of 2016, Turkey was one of the two leading investors in Macedonia, alongside Germany, with FDI inflows of 26 million dollars.¹⁵
- Between January 2006 and May 2017, Turkish FDI in Montenegro amounted to 116 million dollars, the bulk of which entered this country after 2012.

¹⁴ “Zvicra dhe Turqia, investitorët më të mëdhenj në Kosovë [Switzerland and Turkey, the largest investors in Kosovo].” *telegrafi.com*, August 5, 2016.

¹⁵ “Bo 2016 [In 2016, foreign investment is at the last straw].” *slobodenpecat.mk*, January 3, 2017.

- Until 2015, Turkish investments in Serbia were not more than a few million dollars. In 2015 and 2016, Turkish FDI amounted to about 45 million dollars, including the acquisition of a Serbian bank. The increase in the high-level political dialogue between the two countries is signaling that further Turkish investments in Serbia are forthcoming.¹⁶

Despite this increase in investments in the Western Balkans, Turkey's position is still moderate. Only in Kosovo and Albania has Turkey become a major player in terms of foreign investment. Turkey's share in total FDI in Macedonia is only five percent, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia it is much lower. Between January 2008 and June 2017, the share of FDI outflows to the Western Balkans was hardly 3 percent,¹⁷ which means that the region is relatively unpopular for the Turkish private sector, despite geographical proximity and strong social bonds. More than 80 percent of Turkish investment in the Balkans is in Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, and Turkish investors continue to prefer these three countries as their primary destinations in the Balkans.¹⁸ This can be attributed to convenience (i.e., Turkish businesses are more familiar with these countries), but is largely also due to structural and political problems in the Western Balkans (i.e., insufficient market liberalization, infrastructural shortcomings, legal and bureaucratic complications, and political uncertainties).

Development Assistance

As the poorest region in Europe, its economic vulnerability not only limits Turkey's trade and investment opportunities but also poses an indirect security risk for Turkey, risking to nourish political and social instability. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has consistently provided development aid to Balkan countries to alleviate infrastructural shortcomings, accelerate development, and improve living standards. From the mid 2000s on, the

¹⁶ "Ljajić: Erdoganova poseta signal da treba ulagati u Srbiju [Ljajić: Erdogan's visit is signaling investment in Serbia]." *novosti.rs*, October 8, 2017; "Turci nam donose 4.000 radnih mesta [Turks will create 4,000 new jobs]." *novosti.rs*, October 12, 2017.

¹⁷ According to the data from the Central Bank of Turkey, the exact share of six Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo) in all FDI outflow was about 2,4 percent.

¹⁸ Ekinci, İbrahim. "Ucuz fiyat, yakınlık ve fırsatlar Türk yatırımcıyı Balkanlar'a çekiyor [Low prices, proximity and opportunities are drawing Turkish investors into the Balkans]." *Dünya*, February 28, 2017.

amount of financial assistance has increased considerably. In 2015, Turkey provided 154.6 million dollars' worth of official development assistance to the Western Balkan countries, the largest aid in Turkey's history to the region (see Table 3). The Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA), which is one of Turkey's most active public institutions in the Western Balkans, provides financial and technical support to small entrepreneurs, particularly in the field of agriculture, while offering contributions to health, education, and infrastructure in less developed parts of the region. A significant portion of TİKA's budget is allocated to the restoration of Ottoman buildings and monuments with the aim of reviving the history and increasing tourism in the region.¹⁹

Energy

Contributing to the energy security and interdependence of the Balkans through pipeline construction is a component of Turkey's economic vision towards the region. With the completion of the ongoing Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP) and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline Project (TAP), Caspian gas will be transported to Italy via Turkey, Greece, and Albania. The Turkish Stream, officially agreed on by the Russian and Turkish governments, will carry Russian gas via the Black Sea to Turkey's border with Greece. These pipelines will also provide gas to other Balkan countries in the region pending the construction of connection lines. If the Cyprus issue is resolved, the natural gas extracted off the shores of Eastern Mediterranean countries would be cheaper to transport to the Balkans via Turkey than via the other pipelines and LNG options.

Social and Cultural Relations

Tourism

Since the late 2000s, the volume of tourism between Turkey and the Western Balkans has shown a fairly steady increase. Due to a convergence of factors such as the conclusion of bilateral visa exemption agreements, an active cultural diplomacy, and the popularity of Turkish TV shows and series, Turkey has become one of the most popular tourism destinations for people from the region. The number of visitors from Western Balkan

¹⁹ "A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Think Tank Popolari Report*, May 2014, p. 13.

Table 3: Official Development Aid from Turkey (Gross, in Millions of Dollars)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Albania	1,67	0,45	4,71	6,98	7,14	4,30	4,37	8,61	7,75	3,58	7,89	9,24	12,8	85,73
Bosnia and Herzegovina	6,42	0,66	5,79	18,62	25,19	15,86	15,92	32,75	25,90	17,94	21,3	22,28	43,46	25,96
Croatia	0,02	0,03	0,53	3,21	0,68	0,85	0,52	0,13	0,42	...	...	...	...	...
Kosovo	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	20,63	22,13	22,38	20,00	15,26	17,73	9,86
Macedonia	0,52	0,32	4,09	6,57	5,17	9,18	9,86	6,00	28,28	6,76	12,08	13,19	14,42	25,55
Montenegro	...	...	...	...	1,46	1,19	5,25	2,82	10,10	2,87	2,75	13,32	5,92	3,36
Serbia	...	0,21	0,51	4,07	0,03	1,88	31,01	3,33	3,75	3,91	6,03	6,06	7,27	4,11
Ex-Yugoslav States (Unspecified)	0,04	0,86	12,65	16,23	16,15	25,54	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Total	8,67	2,53	28,28	55,68	55,82	58,80	66,93	74,27	98,33	57,44	70,05	79,35	101,60	154,57

Source: OECD.

countries to Turkey increased by around 69 percent between 2006 and 2015 (see Table 4). The sudden drop recorded in 2016 reflects the general trend in Turkey's overall tourism that year due to the rise of terrorist attacks and the failed *coup d'état* of July 15.

Education

Education has been among Turkey's main soft power instruments in recent decades. Due to their economic problems, Western Balkan countries have experienced difficulty in allocating a sufficient budget for education, and Turkey's support in the field is therefore welcomed. The Turkish government offers scholarship programs for university education in Turkey to hundreds of students from the Western Balkans, at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Two universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia (the International University of Sarajevo and the International Balkan University, respectively) are operating with Turkish funding. Turkey has continuously supported the supply of textbooks and teachers in places where ethnic Turks reside, and in the Cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Turkish is being taught in schools.²⁰ The Yunus Emre Institute, which has offices in all the Western Balkan countries, concentrates on teaching the Turkish language and culture, while the recently-founded Maarif Foundation has sought opportunities to acquire or open schools in the region.²¹ All these activities have increased the visibility and recognition of Turkey in the Western Balkans and consolidate the social and economic bonds between the region and Turkey. In addition to supporting human development, Turkey's educational activities are alleviating unemployment by opening new academic and professional career opportunities.

Religious Services and Education

Turkey is also active in the Western Balkans in the field of religion. Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs and its affiliate, Diyanet Foun-

²⁰ As of the spring of 2017, elective courses of the Turkish language are offered at around 130 schools in seven cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: "Unsko-sanski kanton dobio prvi kabinet za turski jezik [The Unsko-Sanski Canton received its First Cabinet for the Turkish Language]." *aa.com.tr*, March 17, 2017.

²¹ "Türkiye Maarif Vakfı Kosova'da faaliyetlerine başladı [Turkey's Maarif Foundation commences its activities in Kosovo]." *aa.com.tr*, April 25, 2017; "Maarif Vakfı ilk üniversite eğitimini Arnavutluk'ta başlatacak [Maarif Foundation will start its first university education in Albania]." *aa.com.tr*, May 12, 2017.

Table 4: Western Balkan Visitors in Turkey

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Albania	50.328	57.601	63.146	59.958	49.954	53.141	59.565	65.113	76.273	80.032	83.029
Bosnia And Herzegovina	40.489	50.437	58.91	52.271	47.361	56.522	61.851	72.086	83.258	85.434	66.177
Croatia	22.321	29.47	31.186	31.407	33.563	41.959	47.144	44.058	45.297	38.598	21.346
Kosovo	*	*	*	*	46.228	56.411	70.156	78.825	86.272	97.818	100.022
Macedonia	118.387	93.705	106.645	107.389	115.541	130.648	137.579	140.793	156.138	167.428	146.008
Montenegro	*	*	*	*	11.61	13.793	16.559	18.838	20.423	19.768	16.709
Serbia	163.765*	137.100*	170.399*	102.202*	113.465	137.934	157.568	169.988	189.396	178.997	110.594
Total	395.29	368.313	430.286	353.227	417.722	490.408	550.422	589.701	657.057	668.075	543.885

*Figures for Montenegro and Kosovo were calculated under Serbia until 2010.

Source: Turkish Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

dation, maintain strong relations with the Islamic institutions in Western Balkan countries, and support the financing and staffing of religious education and services. They also provide students from the region with financial support for studying in *imam-hatip* schools and theology departments in Turkey. Many Turkey-based associations carry out religious activities in the region, while Turkish municipalities often organize circumcision ceremonies and fast-breaking dinners during Ramadan.

Following the end of the Cold War, various religious circles from the Gulf countries, North Africa, and Iran have been active in the Western Balkans, preaching Islamic doctrines stricter than the traditional-Sufi understanding of Islam. Turkey's support for religious services and education has the aim of preventing radicalism²² and thus has been welcomed by some regional and international circles.²³

Military and Security Cooperation

Through bilateral agreements, Turkey provides military training, logistics, and technical support for the modernization of Western Balkan military forces. Turkish and other NATO member's armed forces participate in collective military maneuvers and cooperate in international military missions. Turkey also supports local police forces through the training of officers and the supplying of equipment.

Political Relations

As Turkey's economic, social, and cultural relations with the region improved, Turkey took steps to advancing its political role in the Western Balkans. In 2009-2010, during its chairmanship of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Turkish government launched a number of initiatives for resolving political problems and promoting regional cooperation. Two trilateral dialogue mechanisms (Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia, and Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia) were launched during this period, and produced some hope for the future as

²² Özgür-Baklacioğlu, Nurcan. "Between Neo-Ottomanist Kin Policy in the Balkans and Transnational Kin Economics in the EU." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2015, p. 66.

²³ Öktem, Kerem. *New Islamic Actors after the Wabbabi Intermezzo: Turkey's Return to the Muslim Balkans*, (Oxford: European Studies Center, University of Oxford, 2010): p. 24; Izeti, Metin. "Turkey and religious and cultural developments in the Balkans." *aa.com.tr*, January 24, 2016.

they yielded some (albeit symbolical) results in a short period of time. With these efforts, Turkey drew international attention as an honest broker and a rising political actor in the Western Balkans.

Following these developments, however, the emergence of political turmoil and security threats in the Middle East urged Turkey to divert its attention and energy and prevented the deepening of its political initiatives in the Western Balkans. The trilateral mechanism involving Croatia was practically discontinued after Croatia gained EU membership in 2013, and the other trilateral political leg was hampered after a minor polemic with Serbia later in the same year. Turkey's offer of mediation between Pristina and Belgrade did not bear fruit as the EU took a lead in this issue. Neither did Turkey's initiatives in the early 2010s, aimed at resolving the divide between Islamic communities in Sandzak, an intricate issue of social, economic, and political nature.

In recent years, internal political problems in Turkey and Western Balkan countries have also prevented the further deepening of political relations. Occupied by a variety of risks and instabilities, such as frequent elections, terrorist attacks, an influx of asylum seekers, and the coup attempt, have hampered Ankara to take on new political initiatives abroad. Hence, in response to alarming events and situations like the Kumanovo incident of 2015²⁴ and the years-long government crisis in Macedonia, Turkish officials have advised caution to the parties involved, instead of offering mediation as they did in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Despite occasional declarations of intent, Turkey has yet to establish high-level cooperation mechanisms with Western Balkan countries, whereas such mechanisms do exist with Bulgaria and Greece. Turkey's endeavors to promote SEECP as a regional cooperation mechanism have been insufficient to turn it into a platform significant enough to affect high politics.

Nevertheless, in these turbulent times, Turkey has managed to maintain good bilateral relations with all countries in the Western Balkans. High-level visits between are frequent, which often involve the signing of new cooperation agreements, even if of minor or technical scope. What is more important in these meetings is the continuation of high-level political dialogue. Economic cooperation has long been the main subject of discussion, where Western Balkan leaders have requested Turkey to increase its invest-

²⁴ On May 9, 2015, an Albanian armed group clashed with the police in the Macedonian city of Kumanovo, causing 18 deaths from both sides. This incident alarmed the international community as a possible spark of a regional conflict.

ments in their respective countries. Since 2015, the refugee crisis has been another hot topic with strong concerns in the region about the socio-economic burden that the influx of refugees would bring. In bilateral meetings, local officials have applauded Turkey's role in keeping transnational refugee traffic under control, discussing possible ways of cooperation.²⁵

The activity of the Gülen network, long present in several Balkan countries (e.g., Albania, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) in education, media, trade, and business became another main agenda item in recent bilateral relations.²⁶ Following the July 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish government declared the Gülenists an armed terrorist organization (FETÖ/PDY) launching a diplomatic campaign to stop or curb its activities abroad. Balkan governments have emphasized with Turkey's concerns,²⁷ and some symbolic steps have been taken. For example, Albania has prohibited the use of Turkish symbols by schools linked to this network.²⁸ Nevertheless, no extensive investigation has been launched in any Balkan country on Gülenist schools and companies so far.

What Could Turkey Contribute to Regional Peace?

In recent years, political observers have discussed the possibility of conflict in the Western Balkans as the EU began to lose its interest and transformative capacity in the region. These discussions intensified after 2016,

²⁵ "Erdoğan: Gospodarske odnose moramo poboljšati [Erdoğan: We must improve relations]." *Vecernji List*, April 26, 2016; "Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu'nun Sırbistan Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Ivica Dačić İle Ortak Basın Toplantısı [Joint Press Conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Ivica Dačić, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia]." *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website*, October 5, 2016. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu_nun-sirbistan-disisleri-bakani-ortak-basin-toplantisi_-5-ekim-2016_-ankara.tr.mfa.

²⁶ "Fetullah Gülen's broad Western Balkans network." *aa.com.tr*, July 28, 2016.

²⁷ Huseinović, Samir and Martinović, Marina. "Turkey's Gülen crackdown comes to Bosnia." *dw.com*, August 20, 2016; "Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu'nun Bosna Hersek Dışişleri Bakanı Igor Crnadak ile Ortak Basın Toplantısı [Joint Press Conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Igor Crnadak, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina]." *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2016; "Kosova Cumhurbaşkanı Taçi: Bir Şahıs Ya Da Örgüt Türkiye Açısından Terörist İse Kosova İçin De Teröristtir [President of Kosovo Taçi: Any individual or organization regarded by Turkey as terrorist is a terrorist for Kosovo too]." *Milliyet*, December 29, 2016; "Arnavutluk FETÖ'cüler hakkında soruşturma başlatacak [Albania will investigate FETÖ members]." *Hürriyet*, May 23, 2017.

²⁸ "Ministry of Education Prohibits Turkish Symbols on Private Schools," *exit.al*, November 2, 2016.

when the United Kingdom, one of the champions of EU enlargement, decided to leave the EU and the newly elected U.S. president, Donald Trump, adopted a rather unsupportive stance towards the EU.²⁹ Russia has been filling the vacuum left by the EU by bolstering actors that are economically, ideologically, and socially related to it. This strategy clearly aims to undermine Western influence in the region, and to prevent the region's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions as a whole. In addition to the strategic competition between Russia and the West, which is often referred to as a "new Cold War,"³⁰ the slowdown of reforms, the rise of populism and nationalism in politics, unresolved social and economic problems, and ethnic tensions all signify the fragility of peace in the Western Balkans.

Turkey has the potential to establish close relations with Western Balkan countries and communities on various grounds, perhaps more so than any other major international actor involved in the region. Shared elements in language, religion, and culture provide fertile ground for a wide range of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans. Furthermore, common economic interests and security concerns encourage cooperation between Turkey and the region. Because of such structure of opportunity, a continuation of peace in the Western Balkans is crucial for Turkey's interests. As long as peace and stability prevails in the region, Turkey will be able to communicate and cooperate with a wide spectrum of political and social actors. In case that peace and stability is damaged, Turkey will not only have to cope with the complications caused by the conflict(s), but also be obliged to choose a side—especially if Turkish or Muslim actors are involved, thereby losing the opportunity to use its broad relationship potential.

Defined through "regional ownership" and "all-inclusiveness" principles, Turkey's Balkan policy offers the region a vision of regional peace and stability based on intergovernmentalism and interdependence. At a time when EU members are reluctant of enlargement, European initiatives (such as the ongoing Berlin Process) provide only partial encouragement

²⁹ See, for example: Schindler, John R. "President Trump's First Foreign Policy Crisis: Balkan War Drums Beat Again." *observer.com*, January 25, 2017; "Donald Trump's rhetoric could spark war in Balkans, warns EU chief Jean-Claude Juncker." *The Independent*, January 25, 2017.

³⁰ Prelec, Marko. "New Balkan Turbulence Challenges Europe." *International Crisis Group*, April 28, 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/macedonia/new-balkan-turbulence-challenges-europe>.

for regional cooperation and understanding. Turkey's vision can help Western Balkan countries resolve their problems through dialogue and allow them to cooperate through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. This bottom-up approach can be embraced by a wide range of actors, from euroskeptics opposing Western neo-colonialism, to Russo-skeptics fearing Russian expansionism. Turkey, a NATO member and EU candidate itself, can thus play a complementary role for a fair and healthy progression of integration of Western Balkan countries and societies.

Conclusion

Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy of the 2000s has remained unfruitful in the Caucasus and the Black Sea, and became impractical in the Middle East with the dramatic changes in regional dynamics following the Arab Spring. However, even though its creator (former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu) is no longer in charge of Turkey's foreign policy, this policy has arguably continued in the Western Balkans to this day.³¹ While the 2010s have marked significant ups and downs in Turkey's relations with major powers (i.e., the EU, the U.S., and Russia), its relations with Western Balkan governments have been relatively positive and stable.

Although Turkey's political initiatives in the region have slowed down as Ankara focused on Middle Eastern affairs, relations in economic, social, and cultural areas have continued to grow. These relations will continue even after the Western Balkan countries become EU members, as they did when Bulgaria and Romania received EU membership. However, the re-strengthening of the EU's political influence in the region will make it much harder for Turkey to establish and carry out political initiatives. On the other hand, if Turkey's EU membership perspective loses further credibility, one can expect new moves for political dialogue and cooperation.

With its potential to communicate and cooperate with a broad range of political and social actors, Turkey can bring different parties together, boost regional cooperation, and offer mediation to resolve political disputes. Turkey's assumption of such a role depends on three conditions. First, Turkey needs to revitalize its interest in the Western Balkans and pursue its political vision with greater determination. Second, Turkey

³¹ For further discussion, see: Ekinci, Mehmet Uğur. "Turkey's 'Zero Problems' Era in the Balkans." *SETA Analysis*, October 2013.

should approach the region in a balanced and fair manner, avoiding preferential treatment among regional actors. Third, Turkey should maintain its image of being a strong and respectable country by exerting political stability, economic power, and democratic governance.

The EU and its member countries have not shown much interest in the affairs of the Western Balkans, and their interest will likely decrease even further after Brexit. It is telling that the EU's lack of involvement urged the United States to take action and resolve recent political crises in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania.³² Turkish multilateral political initiatives can also help prevent unforeseen crises and conflicts that could emerge in a geopolitical vacuum. Since peace and stability in the Western Balkans is in the interest of both the EU and Turkey, Turkey's involvement in the region should be regarded favorably, and even encouraged by the EU, especially at a time when the EU is no longer the only political power in the Western Balkans. Turkey and the EU may even opt to work on a common strategy to promote regional dialogue, understanding, and cooperation. As a NATO member, Turkey's stronger political relations with the Western Balkans will also mean further consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic bloc in the region.

³² "The chaotic western Balkans take a sudden turn for the better." *The Economist*, May 19, 2017; Bieber, Florian. "Trump's presidency keeps US Balkan policy unchanged." *balkaninsight.com*, May 30, 2017.

