

## Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans

During the Cold War, Turkey's interest in the Western Balkans remained relatively dormant, yet the wars that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the active diplomacy pursued by the Turkish AK political party from 2002 onwards triggered greater Turkish involvement in the region. Nevertheless, Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans remains mainly based on cultural and educational programmes offered to those countries with a large Muslim community and steadily developing trade.

### Turkey as a peace-builder in the Western Balkans

In the 1990s, Turkey, a NATO ally and a close partner of the EU, played an important role in the stabilisation of the region after the post-1991 wars. Turkey had sided with the Bosnian Muslims at the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), yet remained loyal to NATO's decisions during the 1990s. Ankara [participated](#) in the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and sent a [1 000](#)-strong peacekeeping force to Kosovo after the war. Since 2000, Turkey has also been promoting [trilateral meetings](#) with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia. These meetings and Turkish mediation enabled BiH to [send](#) an ambassador to Belgrade and to facilitate the first efforts at reconciliation with regard to [Srebrenica](#); these efforts continue to this day.

### Post-Ottoman cultural policies

In the Western Balkans, national identities largely developed in line with or against the Ottoman heritage. While scholars disagree on the 'neo-Ottoman' [aspect](#) of Ankara's foreign policy, Muslim communities are unquestionably the priority beneficiaries of Turkish soft power in the Western Balkans.

#### Cultural influence

In the early 2000s, the new [AK Party](#) government developed fresh interest in the Western Balkans; [Ahmet Davutoglu](#), the intellectual who shaped Turkey's renewed foreign policy, saw the region as considerably important for his country from a geopolitical standpoint. Turkey's soft power in the region was reinforced by the popularity of Turkish culture, especially TV shows and entertainment industries, among certain sectors of the population. Furthermore, the Turkish development agency [TIKA](#) is active in almost all Western Balkan countries, but places special focus on Muslim communities. For instance, TIKA has participated in the renovation of Islamic heritage sites such as mosques, bridges and fountains across the region, and especially in BiH. Moreover, Turkish-language schools and universities have

Figure 1 – Turkish exports to the Western Balkans (US\$ thousands)

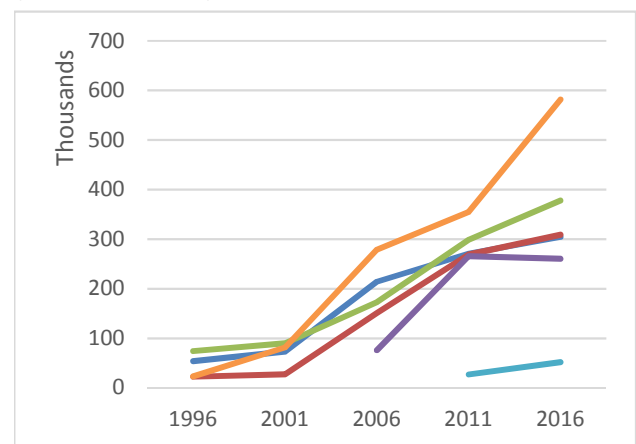
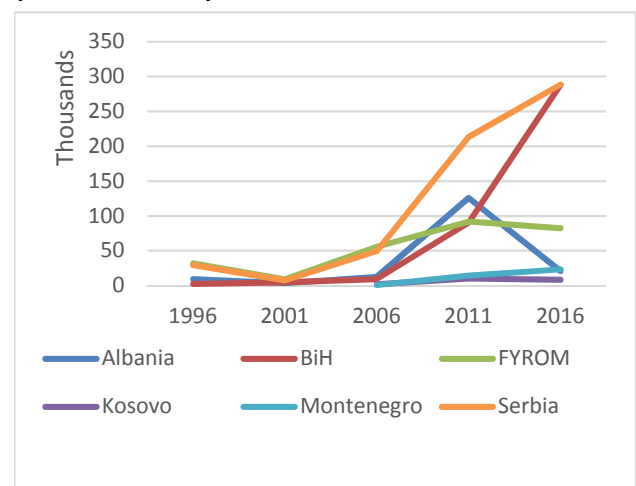


Figure 2 – Turkish exports to the Western Balkans (US\$ thousands)



Data source for both figures: [Turkstats](#), 2017. Kosovo's secession from Serbia in 2008 and Montenegro's independence in 2006 explains why data on them were previously attributed to Serbia.



sprouted across the region with support from the Turkish government and Fethullah Gülen's [movement](#), which is strongly engaged in the educational field both in Turkey and the rest of the world. After the failed [July 2016 coup](#) in Turkey and the accusations against Gülen of involvement in it, it remains to be seen whether Turkish cultural influence in the Western Balkans will remain at the same level as before.

## Migration management

Since the start of the refugee crisis, the Western Balkans have been the main [route](#) to the EU for Syrians and other refugees arriving via Turkey. The number of refugees crossing the Western Balkans peaked in the second half of 2015, causing a very destabilising effect on the societies of the region (according to estimates by the Serbian NGO, Grupa 484, more than [650 000 refugees](#) registered in Serbia from June 2015 to June 2016). The EU-Turkey deal reached in March 2016 contributed to a significant decrease in refugee numbers, making it once again clear that stable EU-Turkey relations are of vital importance for the Western Balkans.

## Economic investment

### *Turkey as a trading partner*

Since the 1990s, and especially after the boom of the Turkish economy in the 2000s, Ankara has been increasingly developing trade relations with the Western Balkans. While the region has benefited tangibly from Turkish investment, it remains a [secondary](#) partner for the Turkish economy: Turkish exports to the region are worth 1.32 % of total exports and 0.32 % of total imports. Turkey lags behind the region's European trading partners: for instance, it ranked 15th as a destination for Serbian exports, and 8th for imports in [2015](#). Even with regard to its traditional trading partner, Albania, in 2015 Turkey [ranked](#) as Albania's 10th export destination with 2.7 % (behind Italy with 45 %, or even China with 4.7 %). In terms of imports, Turkey ranks second alongside Greece, with Italy occupying the top position. Looking at the World Bank's [ranking](#) for the Western Balkan countries' top trading partners, their third partner is more often China than Turkey, behind the EU and Russia.

### *Turkish investment*

In the Balkans, Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) is targeted primarily at EU Member States rather than at Western Balkan countries. In the Western Balkans, BiH is the top destination for Turkish FDI. Nevertheless, in [2015](#) Croatia was the top investor in BiH with €82 million, followed by the Netherlands (€44 million), Turkey (€33 million) and Luxembourg (€32 million).

## Priority countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo

### *Albania*

Today, Turkey invests in Albania through major economic projects, among them the creation of a national [airline](#), the erection of the Western Balkans' [biggest](#) mosque and the building of George W Bush Street in Tirana. For years, the Gülen Movement schools fostered Turkish influence, and six out of seven religious seminaries in the country were run by this movement. In a visit to Tirana in December 2016, [Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) called on Albania to close all Gülen institutions, and recalled Turkey's help to Albania with the recognition of Kosovo. Turkey and Albania are also cooperating in the [military](#) field: both are NATO members and Turkey is supporting Albanian army reform. Turkey sent troops to Albania during the war in Kosovo, and Albanian troops participated in NATO missions in Afghanistan under Turkish command.

### *Bosnia and Herzegovina*

During the Bosnian War, Turkey helped Bosnian Muslims [discreetly](#). Since then, Turkish [influence](#) in the country has been significant: Turkish investment is prominent and two Turkish universities have been opened. Turkey has also invested in the preservation of the country's Ottoman heritage. Turkey [advocated](#) the early admission of BiH to European organisations, such as the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe, and recently, to NATO. Yet, its influence in BiH is [limited](#) to the Muslim community; the Croatian and Serbian communities and media are reluctant to let Turkey play a decisive role in the country.

### *Kosovo*

Ankara's recognition of Kosovo's independence triggered a debate in Turkey because of the implications it might have regarding Kurdistan. However, Turkey is an important partner for Kosovo, while concurrently developing relations with Serbia. Turkey supports the EU's [mediation in the conflict](#), and has invested in Kosovo's stability and economy.