

SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN COOPERATION PROCESS AND TÜRKİYE'S BALKAN IDENTITY

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SEECP Summit in Sofia as a Lens on Balkan Regional Ownership

This analysis takes as its point of departure the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) Heads of State and Government Summit held in Sofia on 10 June 2026, at which Türkiye participated at high level in deliberations on regional cooperation and security in South-East Europe. Rather than approaching this summit as a news item, the text situates SEECP within the broader architecture of Balkan regional initiatives. It underscores that it is a platform created by the regions own political will, not an instrument imposed from outside. Against this backdrop, the analysis argues that SEECP exemplifies regional ownership in the Balkans and provides concrete institutional confirmation of Türkiyes status as an integral Balkan country, thereby offering a vantage point from which to examine both the historical evolution of regional cooperation and contemporary debates on fragmentation, politicization, and the marginalization of Türkiyes Balkan identity.[1]

From Post-Conflict Initiative to Regionally Owned Framework

The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) was launched in 1996, when Bulgaria hosted a meeting in Sofia at which South-East European states agreed to establish a regionally driven forum to promote peace, good □□□□□□□□□□ relations, and stability in the Balkans. Conceived in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and in parallel with other regional initiatives, SEECP aimed to strengthen democratic institutions and cooperative security through dialogue and confidence □□□□□□□□ among all participating countries, rather than relying solely on external actors or organizations. In this sense, SEECPs founding documents, notably the 1996 Sofia Declaration on Good □□□□□□□□□□ Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in the Balkans and the 2000 Charter on Good □□□□□□□□□□ Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South □□□□□□□ Europe,

explicitly echo principles found in OSCE commitments and United Nations resolutions on cooperative security and regional confidence □□□□□□□□□ even as they are articulated through a framework designed and owned by the Balkan states themselves.[2]

Over time, SEECP adopted political declarations and guidelines that consolidated its role as the only framework bringing together all states of the region, while also interacting with the European Union, NATO, and other institutions without subordinating itself to them. [3] This evolution reflects a legal and conceptual commitment to regional cooperation and cooperative security that resists the externally imposed fragmentation of the Balkans into artificial sub-regions such as the so □□□□□□□ Western Balkans, a categorization that AVİM analyses have criticized for obscuring the broader regional context and for implicitly casting out Türkiye.[4]

Türkiye as a Co-Owner of the Balkan Order

The historical evolution of SEECP underlines that Türkiye is not an external observer but a founding and continuous participant in a regional architecture designed by the Balkan states themselves. Geographically, part of Türkiyes territory lie within the Balkan Peninsula. At the same time, historically, linkages between the Ottoman and Republican eras have produced dense sociocultural ties through shared urban spaces, family networks, religious communities, and migration patterns spanning the region. AVİMs analyses emphasize that these ties, combined with Türkiyes longstanding diplomatic engagement in Balkan security and reconstruction processes, justify describing Türkiye as a Balkan country not only in geographical terms but also in historical and sociological senses.[5]

Türkiyes active role in SEECP □□□□□ its early support for the initiative to later chairmanships and participation at summit level □□□□□□□□□ concrete institutional evidence of this embeddedness. The fact that SEECP brings together all regional states on an equal footing and that Türkiye has repeatedly assumed responsibility in shaping its agenda demonstrates that Ankara is a co-owner of the Balkans cooperative security architecture rather than a partner invited from outside. This view is consistent with AVİMs broader approach, which rejects portrayals of Türkiye as an external power in the Balkans and instead frames it as a regional stakeholder whose national identity, historical memory, and security interests are inseparable from developments in South-East Europe.[6]

Western Balkans and the Intended Fragmentation of Türkiyes Balkan Identity

The view that Türkiye is a constitutive Balkan actor sits uneasily with European discursive practices that promote categories such as Western Balkans, which are not neutral geographical labels but political constructs that implicitly detach Türkiye from the broader Balkan context and reframe the region as a semi-periphery of the European Union. Building on AVİMs critique of Batı Balkanlar as a misleading designation, this analysis argues that such terminology exemplifies conceptual abuse and Eurocentric dependency:

it normalizes a fragmented vision of South-East Europe in which selected states are grouped into an accession queue, while others, notably Türkiye, are symbolically shifted outside the regions core historical and legal frame.[7] In contrast, SEECPs inclusive design □□□□□□□□ together all Balkan states on an equal footing and emphasizing jointly owned agendas □□□□□□□□ an alternative logic that resists portrayals of the Balkans as either the EUs backyard or a playground for external powers, and instead foregrounds the regions capacity to act collectively with Türkiye as a full stakeholder.

Safeguarding Regional Ownership and Türkiyes Balkan Role

The preceding analysis shows that regionally owned frameworks such as SEECP, and Türkiyes constitutive role within them, are exposed to the gradual entrenchment of divisive regional labels and conceptually skewed categorizations. If left unaddressed, such practices risk undermining mechanisms that embody Balkan regional ownership and eroding recognition of Türkiye as an integral Balkan country, whose identity and security are tied to developments in South-East Europe. At the same time, the inclusive design of SEECP offers concrete opportunities to reinforce cooperative security, promote rule □□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ cooperation, and support balanced historical narratives that acknowledge all regional stakeholders, including Türkiye, as co □□□□□□□ of the Balkan order. In this context, SEECP summit declarations and chairmanship programmes increasingly reflect Ankaras consistent emphasis on the Processs inclusive, all □□□□□□□ scope and on Türkiyes embeddedness in regional cooperative security; it is therefore essential that regional governments and international partners read and engage with these signals as invitations to align their own discourse and practice with a non □□□□□□□□□□□□ law □ and norm □□□□□□ understanding of the Balkans, rather than with frameworks that implicitly sideline Türkiyes Balkan identity.

SEECPs Future and Türkiyes Long-Term Interests in the Balkans

This analysis has argued that the South-East European Cooperation Process is not a routine summit framework, but a tangible expression of Balkan regional agency that emerged in the mid-1990s as a regionally owned response to instability and external dependency. By tracing Türkiyes founding and ongoing role in SEECP and highlighting its historical, sociocultural, and institutional ties to the region, the analysis has underscored that Türkiyes identity and security are inseparable from the Balkans and that Ankara is a co-owner of the regions cooperative security architecture. Against this backdrop, the critique of fragmenting labels such as Western Balkans has shown how certain European discourses risk normalizing exclusionary hierarchies that endeavor to marginalize Türkiye and downgrade regionally owned mechanisms. It is therefore essential that future developments in SEECP and related regional forums be closely monitored to determine whether they reinforce or erode inclusive and cooperative understandings of the Balkans. In a forward-looking perspective, the consolidation of SEECP as an inclusive, norm-based framework will remain closely linked to Türkiyes medium- and long-term interests in a

stable, legally coherent, and non-fragmented Balkan order.

*Picture: *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

[1] Sofia Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in the Balkans, adopted at the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Countries, Sofia, 6 □□ July 1996, accessed 18 June 2026, https://www.seecp.info/declarations.

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