

## A New Perspective on the Profound Ties between Türkiye and the Western Balkans: A Case Study of Albania and Kosovo



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**ABSTRACT:** There's no doubt that between the state of Türkiye and the Western Balkan states, and in this context: the states of Albania and Kosovo, there's a profound and an historic relation that encompasses a larger space in which history, economy, social capital and regional politics intertwine in a very positive and constructive structure, and all this being achieved: having in mind the existing complexity and challenges that engulf the region of the Western Balkans in which Albania and Kosovo are important political and regional factors.

Türkiye holding its Natural Position (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023) for its legitimacy and effective involvement in the region of the Western Balkans, and in its relations with Albania and Kosovo (especially after 1997 in the case of Kosovo), have been involved deeply in recent history, but also there's a plenty of space for further improvements and deeper cooperation, and this not only for the benefits of this triangle, but this cooperation helps substantially the region of the Western Balkans and Türkiye, having in mind the political stability, economic development and regional perpetual peace.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo in terms of their historical, economic and geo-political structures, and while utilizing the concept of Natural position we will see the possibilities for a redefinition of the Türkiye's position in its involvement in Albania and Kosovo, and also the perspective of the EU integration and regional development will be discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Türkiye, Albania, Kosovo, Western Balkans, Complexity, Integration

### INTRODUCTION

Türkiyes involvement in the Western Balkans is profoundly related visa its continues well established ties with all countries in the region as a middle power factor, but also it can be seen as a momentum for deepening its involvement further via its strategies, soft power, hard power and its immense social capital that was developed throughout years.

The relationship of Türkiye towards Albania and Kosovo has an historical root but also does have a contemporary context, namely, Albania is becoming a very prosperous country in terms of economical and infrastructural development, even though it had installed a totalitarian regime under Enver Hoxha after the second World war (Bideleux & Ian Jeffries, 2006) and went through one of the toughest shapes of communism compared to Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. While Kosovo does have a very complex position between its de facto and de jure state identity after 2008 self-determination process and declaration of independency, as well as its challenging power sharing model with the Serbian community within Kosovo and its late issues in Northern Mitrovica (Ibish & Ferhad, North Mitrovica: Profound challenge in KosovoSerbia ties, 2023). But even with these challenges, Kosovo lately is showing a systematic political culture progress for a small country and that gives new opportunities for democratic development, changes and economic progress.

Albania is an emerging state in the region, with NATO membership and strives for an active EU membership (Szucs, 2022), meanwhile, Türkiye, an old NATO member, is an aspiring middle power in the region (Yalçın, 2012). Türkiye and Albania have a profound legacy of existing relations and mutual relations from the very beginnings of the two established republics, meanwhile for Albanian communities in general, Türkiye means much more than just a regional actor. The background of an Ottoman factorship in the Western Balkans and the reality of a highly-integrated Albanian community within the "Devlet-i Aliyye-i Osmaniyye" (Ottoman State) (Licursi, 2011) has laid foundations of a very strong social capital for commonality and context for closer relations between the Turkish state and the Albanian communities in the Western Balkans. The idea of deepening and expanding relations today, would open the way to a trilateral perpetual benefit for Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo.

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The established relations between Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo, as well as Albanian communities as a whole in the Western Balkans have already paved the way for very fruitful outcomes for all parties involved, however this can be even further dilated with remarkable impacts for all sides.

The EU aspirations of Albania and Kosovo and a possible future full-fledged membership could be seen as an important asset for Türkiye not only in having mutual platforms of interactions and developments but also could be seen as a space in which Türkiye does have a say and a possible political impact. With this, Türkiye should not be seen as a counter part or a competitor of the EU in the Balkans, but on the contrary, it should be seen as a complex- interdependency factor with positive modalities and joint progressive achievements and creating a special space for its future EU full-fledged integration.

The triangle between Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo have a lot to learn and a lot to benefit from their ties, however, all sides have not yet reached the full potential and the positive impact of bilateral and later trilateral ties.

### **A prelude to relations between Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo**

Looking at the historical background and context as an argument for the profound relations between Türkiye, Albania and Kosovo, one might see a very complex and substantial ground for a stable and long lasting relationship amongst this triangle of state relations. Of course, while delving deeper into the historical context helps a lot in understanding on how these relations were systematically constructed and foundations established.

The very first factor which needs to be acknowledged is the commonality of an Ottoman factor. Although the Ottoman state is regarded as a Turkish empire (Sykes, 1916), the impact and the blooming of the Albanian political factor within the Ottoman state and its military and administrative capacity should be well highlighted. The Albanian community was an integral part of the Ottoman state, envisaged in high positions within the political hierarchy (Comyn-Platt, 1906) and an integrated community within the Ottoman society (Özkul & Zullufi, 2019).

The Ottoman state was present for centuries not only in regions of today's Republic of Albania but throughout the Western Balkans (Sancaktar, 2011) and virtually any territory in which Albanian communities are present currently. Following the First Balkan War in which an alliance of newly-established Balkan states declared war to push the Ottomans out of the Balkans (Ginio, 2016), an agreement was signed, headed by major European powers in order to distribute the Ottoman lands in Balkans amongst the Balkan League parties, this agreement is known as the Treaty of London (1913) (Duggan, 1913).

Although the Ottoman State was not a signatory in the treaty, their vilayets (provinces) were shared amongst the Balkan League states, effectively ending the five-century long Ottoman presence in a region which was regarded as the homeland of the Ottoman state (Ortaylı, 2014). This defeat caused devastation and a political and cultural shock for the Ottomans (Boyar, 2007). For the newly-established Albanian state, the Treaty was an injustice from a different perspective. The treaty led to a huge chunk of Albanian-majority lands being annexed by Balkan League states (Elsie, 2010), resulting in the majority of Albanians in the Balkans living outside their sovereign territory. For both Turkish and Albanian political circles, the Treaty of London (1913) was considered a great political and a dividing injustice which resulted in irreversible damage and a deep cultural and a political shock for the Albanian communities in the Balkans. All of these consequences led to not an easy convalescence later on, and the price that the Albanian communities that remained out of the geographical frames of the newly established state of Albania had to pay was immense via its destroyed infrastructure, forced migration starting from the First Balkan Wars until 1950s, assimilation and systematic atrocities (Bideleux & Ian Jeffries, 2006).

In the 1920s, two new regimes were established which replaced the previous monarchies, the Republic of Türkiye (1923) and the Republic of Albania (1925), while Kosovo remained as part of the political establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918) and then Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945) known as second Yugoslavia or Tito's Yugoslavia (Ibishi & Ferhad, ANALYZING THE RELATIONS BETWEEN TÜRKİYE - ALBANIA AND ALBANIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS, 2024).

Both newly-established establishments in Türkiye, Albania and Tito's Yugoslavia under which Kosovo remained as an autonomous region within Serbia, tried political, social and economical reforms which transformed their respective states from Monarchism to Republics, although the Republic of Albania still settled for a constitutional monarchy instead of a full-fledged parliamentary republic (Ahmetaj, 2014).

Türkiye positioned itself affirmatively towards the Albanian state and wanted to create positive impact in the Balkan region and to have a positive impact via different pacts and agreements, even aiding and openly supporting the development of Albania, prior to its constitutional monarchy, in the hopes of ensuring an allied parliamentary republic in the region (Xhaferi, 2017), this was also followed with a Treaty of Friendship signed between Türkiye and Albania in 1923 which opened the door to official diplomatic relations between the two countries (Ibishi

& Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023).

Türkiye also developed its foreign policy via its defensive pacts in the Balkans and within the frame and the so called Kemalist doctrine of "Peace at home, Peace in the world" led to Treaties of Friendship being signed also with Yugoslavia in 1925 in which

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Kosovo was an integrated part but without any political autonomy for the Albanian community that was a majority in terms of population.

After the Second World War (1939-1945), both the Republic of Turkiye and the Republic of Albania went into very different trajectories, Turkiye move towards western alignment and joined NATO as a parliamentary democracy, meanwhile Albania was under the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (Abrahams, 2015), while Kosovo as an autonomous region within Serbia under Titos Yugoslavia continues to exist but under a very repressive political, economical and social difculies that Serbia applied perpetually.

The ideolgical assymetric postioning of the Turkish state under democracy, while Enver Hoxhas Albania under a very strong totalitarian system, hindered ties in diplomatic relations as the new communist regime in Albania refused to recognise agreements and diplomatic missions of the previous regime, which lasted until 1959 in which diplomatic ties were once again restored (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania, 2023). As for Kosovo under Titos Yugoslvia we can say that the relationship cotinued to exist under mutual agreements such as the Balkan Pact 1953 but unfoertnelty this corredpocne only resulted in a systematic forced migration flow from Yugoslavia, mostly Albanians left their capital, infrustructure and home (but also Turks and Bosniaks) and this brought devastation and demographic instabilty and radical changes, while the whole process was orchestarted via the Serbian political paradigm and had the biggest benefits in the afterwards (Judah, 2008).

Although realtions between Albanina and Turkiye were not in systeamtic coresedeocen and had interuptions in its diplomacy, with ksoovo via Ytugosloiva coreseeoice was functioning in much better platfrom. The position of Turkiye with regard to Albanina communties in the Balkans was substantially visible via the Kosovo War in 1997/99, and a new context was born with Turkiye, providing aid and support to the Albanians in Kosovo against the surpression of human rights performed by the Milosevic regime thourgh Yugolsvian mechanism, despite reservations due to domestic political factors (Ali, 2016).

### **‘Natural Position’ of Turkiye and its implications for Albania and Kosovo**

Observing the historical and recent developments and context in the relations between Turkiye and Albania as well as Albanian communities throughout the Western Balkans, one can detect that the Turkish position is quite complex and multi-layered. One of the concepts which can be utilized in order to analyze and understand the Turkish role and its complexity is through the concept of *Natural Position* (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023). *The concept of Natural Position in international relations states that the shared heritage and/or values between a regional actor and a certain region should be acknowledge as an important source of legitimacy for said actor’s involvement, this commonality can be seen from a historical, social, political and/or economic context* (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023)

The Natural Position concept helps to vividly understand the multi-layered context and properly comprehend why the state of Turkiye has a justufiable postion as a regional and laetley a middle power actor in the Balkans and especially in Albanina and Kosovo.

Through the concept of Natural Position, we understand that Turkiye has an undeniable advantage when it comes to historical commonality with the region, the Albanian communities and the Republic of Albania (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023) , the instances of which have already been mentioned. Turkiye, and Kosovo and the Albanina communties in the Balkans can benefit substatially while utiulkitising the social and cultural bonds in strengthening their relations, since the cultural, social and hitroical heritage cobined woth econoimical and newly politicalluy contexs can brins a common path which brings an essential complex interedepoendecy. The existence of a significant number of ethnic Albanians in Turkiye and ethnic Turks in Kosovo and Albania (Bulut, 2008) as well as Turkish institutions and their investments in both countries and in regions with Albanian communities throughout the Western Balkans also enlarge the scope of the social context for a Turkish ‘Natural Position’ and furthermore a very huge capacity for developing further relations between Turkiye and Albania.

### **Complex Interdependency via Economy, Security and Investments**

Even though Turkiye signed a great number of agreements for cooperation on variety of fields, including economy, security and education, the transformation of these agreements into a real strategic plan is in need. Making a more vivid cooperation can be plausible and beneficial for this triangle and further more support the region of the Western Balkans in general.

The state of Turkiye has abreat capacity and undibale experince sectors in which Albania and ksoovo as a newly established state, can significantly benefit, potential Turkish investments in infrastructure, logisitics, tourism, and new platfroms of Foregnd Direct Investements would elevate Albania and Kosovo into a new hub of business and development in the Western Balkans, these potential investments would succeed the vast amounts of investments and projects already undertaken by Turkiye and Turkish actors in the region in both a financial and cultural perspective (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023).

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Türkiye should utilise its position and intensify the already existing platforms with which it has been reflecting as a real regional power in the Western Balkans and enlarging its scope diplomatically, culturally and economically through investments and strengthened relations.

Furthermore, observing the vast potential of Türkiye in becoming an energy hub in the region (Yılmaz-Bozkus, 2019; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022), if utilized and capitalized correctly, the benefits in energy sustainability and economic benefits for both sides would be immeasurable. Türkiye is the only regional actor that can utilise the benefits of the Azerbaijani capacities and the great potential that comes from the Central Asian energy recourse, can play a great energy interconnector for the benefits of the Albanian Kosovo but in general the Balkans. Further more this gas pipeline routes can be the only alternative to Russian dependency not only in the Balkans but also in the whole Western Europe.

Already, Türkiye heavily invested in the Albanian markets with investments and export, which has shown its fruits for all sides involved, Türkiye has found fertile market for their products while Albania and Kosovo have gained a new trading partner. Observing the last decade, one can clearly see a steady rise in the trade volume between Türkiye and the Western Balkans, and specifically with Albania and Kosovo (Jusufi & Ukaj, 2021). Türkiye stands as the second largest trade partner, after EU, for both Albania and Kosovo, with a collective value of over 1 billion dollars in exports to both countries with another billion dollars in investments by Turkish companies in the two states. (Szpala, 2022). In Kosovo, Turkish companies, namely, Çalık and Limak own the country's sole electricity distributor. In Albania, Kürüm Holding has privatised the Altelecom telecommunications company, hydroelectric power plants, steelworks and mines, not to mention that Çalık also hold 28% market share in the Banking sector of Albania (Szpala, 2022). There is no doubt that Türkiye has been heavily focused on enlarging its capacity in the Western Balkans in recent years and Albania, Kosovo as well as the Albanian community at large has become one of the focal points for this focus. Türkiye has officially stated that one of its foreign policy objectives is to increase the capacity of economic cooperation with Albania and has taken actions in that regard (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022).

In the field of defensive cooperation between Türkiye and Albania and later Kosovo, the most significant steps were taken in the 1990s, with a defensive cooperation pact being signed between Türkiye and Albania in 1992 (Vračić, 2016), which was followed by a very encouraging attitude by the Turkish side towards Albania, even though Albania had not attained NATO membership at the time. Along with this, Türkiye held a supportive position for the Albanian community with regards to the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia in the late 1990s, its positioning along USA and other NATO members and within the alignments of the humanitarian interventions in 1999 in Belgrade, speaks volumes about the Türkiye's involvement and support that was given to Albanians in Kosovo and Albanians in general, which is a significantly positive factor for stronger relations between Türkiye and Albania as well as the Albanian community at large. Therefore, the cooperation between the two sides is not only limited to economic agreements, as both Türkiye and Albania have been eager to increase their defensive cooperation (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Albania, 2020), in line with this, the groundbreaking development and impact of the Turkish UAV industry has not been unnoticed, with Albania being a buyer of the Bayraktar drones (Daily Sabah, 2022), with Kosovo following suit within just a few months (Beksac, 2023).

These agreements have benefitted both sides tremendously and continued to advance the domestic objectives of both sides, profoundly. Türkiye can capitalize on this by strengthening its diplomatic presence and role in the Western Balkans while also increase the ever-growing interest in its defensive industry and its economic capacity as a whole. Meanwhile, Albania has no doubt enjoyed the enlargement of its defense and security capabilities through agreements with Türkiye and Turkish industry, while also reaping the benefits from a strong ally with mutual issues and simultaneously enjoying the economic growth which would result from increased trade and cooperation with Turkish businesses and trade.

### **The complex role of Türkiye in the Balkans and its new approaches towards Albania and Kosovo**

Of course, it's not an easy task to understand the position of Türkiye and the natural obstacles with regards to the balance of relations with Balkan states, as they're divided in terms of internal and geopolitical interests, and that needs a complex role that Türkiye holds and endorsed as a method throughout these years via its natural position.

*In order to be able to effectively exert influence and attain cordial relations, Türkiye has to balance between the historical and cultural tensions of North Macedonia and Bulgaria, the ethnic tensions of Albanians and Serbs in Serbia and Kosovo as well as the ongoing instabilities within Bosnia and Herzegovina, between the entities of Republika Srpska and the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Ibish & Ferhad, WESTERN BALKANS, TÜRKİYE AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL POSITION, 2023).

In order to sustain its natural position as a regional power and lately as a middle power, Türkiye has to take intelligible stands and be more visible with regards to policy decisions and political agendas of Western Balkan states and all this, for a greater support and stability in the Balkans. The great existing paradigm via the channels of complex interdependency between the parties needs to be maximized and fully utilized via an effective diplomacy backed by economical, infrastructural and educational platforms. Türkiye has the potential to further increase its diplomatic and soft power capacity by rethinking its approach and methodology in the states of Albania and Kosovo.



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First of all, the almost universal aim of accession into the European Union in the Western Balkans should be viewed as an opportunity for Turkiye from several aspects. Firstly, the institution-building mechanisms of the EU and the ambition of Albania and the Western Balkans would lead them to further cooperation with Turkiye in this regard as the Turkish experience and capacity for building and sustaining capable state institutions can be an invaluable asset for Albania and Western Balkans states. In the same context, Turkiye would benefit from an EU-sponsored stable and reliable market and state capacity in Albania and Western Balkans in both its aspirations for financial and business investments and its regional power role. Additionally, prospective membership in the EU for Albania and other Western Balkans states would give Turkiye a significant influence over the EU due to its permanent role as an actor in the region via its Natural Position. Additionally, Both Turkiye and Albania have a common obstacle in their maritime affairs in their mutual neighbor, the Hellenic Republic (Greece). The Greek objection to certain Turkish claims in the Aegean sea as well as the Mediterreanen (Dalay, 2021) and likewise its clash with Albania over maritime jurisdiction (Mazrek, 2022) can open the door for cooperation between Turkiye and Albania in this regard, helping to resolve the disputes using joint methodologies or in the very least gain leverage against the Greek claims.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that state relations between Turkiye, Albania and Kosovo are deeply established via its historical, economic and political ties, but also the Turkiye benefits from its natural position that helps a lot in this triangle and not only in new developments and legitimacy but also in the continuation of these relations.

Having in mind the contemporary challenges in the Western Balkans from possible conflict zones to economic development and regional complexity, Turkiye, Albania and Kosovo should engage much more in their diplomatic activities and they should move from formal diplomacy to active and efficient diplomacy engagements. These engagements are not only beneficial for this triangle, but for the whole region of the Western Balkans.

We say that Turkiye must engage more vividly in the political development within the states of the Western Balkans, and with that it will show its regional power, its know-how and possibilities to help reconciliation, to support regional development and to justify its natural position. The state of Albania, but especially Kosovo needs Turkiyes involvement in times of crises in North Mitro vica, new challenges of Kosovo in its statehood, sovereignty and the engagement of the Serbian community via the state of Serbia to create the Zajednica (Community of Serb Municipalities) in Kosovo (2013).

A more pro-active role of the state of Turkiye should be visible especially in the states with power sharing mechanism and multicultural spaces in the Western Balkans, and especially where the Albanian communities are an important political, economic and social factor, such as the states of North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro.

Turkiye must engage in serious economical projects with Albania and Kosovo and in which the energy independency is the priority, foreign direct investment and agricultural projects, followed by defensive cooperation to support the balance power amongst the Balkans states and be a visible regional factor in terms of mediation, political support and guide force. The EU integration process should not be undermined, and underestimated, since Turkiye is historically engaged in this process since 1987 and continues to be an important factor: in this case the EU aspiration process is a common goal. Even though Turkiye pends in front of the doors of EU for years, and even if the Western Balkans states are fully engaged as members of EU, Turkiye will be more influential as it will hold a specific position and it will remain an undoubtful influence in this region and within the EU itself.

Turkiye should not only follow these above-mentioned processes but it should be an active player in these regional developments that seeks space for its influence but also delivers substantial projects that legitimize its existence and factorship.

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