



The Geopolitical Environment of EU Enlargement: Turkey's Strategic Engagement in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

Europe has rediscovered the Western Balkans. What was long treated as a slow and largely technical enlargement process has returned to the geopolitical agenda. Russia's war against Ukraine, growing instability across Europe's southern neighbourhood and renewed debates over European defence have reminded policymakers that the continent's security will also be shaped by developments beyond the EU's current borders. Enlargement is therefore increasingly understood not simply as an institutional process, but as an investment in Europe's long-term security.

This renewed attention comes at a time when the Western Balkans are becoming an increasingly competitive geopolitical space. While the European Union remains the region's dominant political and economic actor, other powers continue to expand their political, economic and security engagement. Unlike Russia or China, Turkey occupies a more complex position. As a NATO member, Turkey increasingly combines diplomacy, economic engagement, defence cooperation and institutional outreach in pursuit of broader geopolitical objectives that do not always align with those of the European Union.

If enlargement¹ is increasingly viewed as a geopolitical project, then assessing candidate countries alone is no longer sufficient. The strategic environment in which those countries operate deserves equal attention. This analysis argues that the geopolitical environment surrounding EU enlargement can no longer be understood without taking Turkey's long-term regional strategy into account. Ignoring this dimension risks reducing enlargement to a technical process at a time when it has become an increasingly geopolitical one.

A Strategic Environment in Transition

The **Western Balkans** are no longer viewed solely through the prism of enlargement. Over the past few years, the region has returned to the centre of European strategic thinking as policymakers increasingly link enlargement to security rather than simply institutional reform. Russia's war against Ukraine accelerated this shift, but it is only one element of a much broader transformation.

¹ https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en

At the same time, developments in the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East have become increasingly interconnected. As a result, the Western Balkans are no longer viewed as an isolated theatre but as part of [Europe's wider southeastern security environment](#).

This changing context also exposes an important weakness in the current enlargement debate. The European Union continues to evaluate [candidate countries](#) primarily through the traditional accession criteria such as the rule of law, democratic governance and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*². These remain the foundation of the accession process. However, they reveal relatively little about the [external pressures, competing partnerships and security dynamics](#) that increasingly shape the political choices of candidate countries³. If enlargement is increasingly understood as a geopolitical project, then the geopolitical context surrounding candidate countries deserves equal attention.

The strategic environment in the Western Balkans has become considerably more complex than it was a decade ago. While the European Union remains by far the region's principal political and economic partner, [candidate countries increasingly engage with a diverse range of external actors](#) whose interests do not always coincide with those of Brussels. This evolving landscape requires a broader geopolitical assessment alongside the traditional accession criteria.

Turkey's Strategic Footprint

Turkey's engagement in the Western Balkans is often explained through Ottoman history, religion and cultural ties. While these factors remain important, they no longer provide a sufficient explanation of Ankara's [regional policy](#). Over the past two decades, Turkey has broadened its engagement by combining diplomacy, economic cooperation, development assistance, defence partnerships and institutional outreach across the region.

These activities should not be viewed as isolated initiatives. Together, they reflect a broader effort to preserve Turkey's political relevance, expand its regional influence and strengthen its ability to shape developments in Southeast Europe. More broadly, this approach mirrors the evolution of [Turkish foreign policy](#), which increasingly combines diplomatic, economic and security instruments in pursuit of greater strategic autonomy and a stronger regional role.

² https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/language-technology-resources/jrc-acquis_en

³ For the purposes of this paper, the term "Western Balkan accession countries" refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. References to Kosovo reflect its status as an EU potential candidate under the Union's enlargement policy. Although Turkey remains an official EU candidate country, it falls outside the geographical scope of this analysis.

Turkey has not pursued the same approach across the Western Balkans. Its priorities differ between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and Albania, reflecting local political realities, bilateral relationships and Turkish strategic interests. While the instruments vary, the broader objective remains consistent: to maintain long-term political access, cultivate strategic partnerships and ensure that Turkey remains an influential regional actor.

For the European Union, this development has important implications. If enlargement is increasingly understood as a geopolitical project, Brussels must assess not only whether candidate countries are prepared to join the Union, but also the strategic environment in which they already operate. Understanding Turkey's regional engagement is therefore not about overstating Ankara's influence, but about recognising that EU enlargement will unfold in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment where multiple actors seek to shape long-term political and security outcomes.

Political, Economic and Security Engagement

Turkey's regional strategy is implemented through a combination of mutually reinforcing political, economic, security and societal instruments. Rather than representing separate policy initiatives, these instruments form part of a broader strategy aimed at securing long-term influence, expanding Turkey's regional leverage and ensuring that it remains difficult to exclude from future regional security and political arrangements in the Western Balkans. Their relative importance varies from one country to another, but together they reinforce Turkey's ability to shape the regional political environment.

1. Political Engagement

Political engagement remains central to Turkey's regional strategy. Ankara has invested considerable diplomatic effort in building political relationships across the Western Balkans, seeking to expand its regional leverage and secure a lasting role in shaping regional political developments. Rather than pursuing a uniform policy across the region, Turkey has [adapted its engagement to the political realities of individual Western Balkan states](#). Recent developments illustrate this differentiated approach. In July 2026, the [Democratic Party of Turks of Macedonia](#) (TDP), which represents North Macedonia's ethnic Turkish community, joined the country's governing coalition, securing a ministerial position after reaching an agreement with Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski. At the same time, Ankara has maintained particularly close strategic

relations with Albania despite the absence of an officially recognised Turkish minority, while also cultivating high-level political ties with Serbia through sustained diplomatic engagement. The evidence suggests that **Turkey's regional policy is driven less by historical or demographic factors than by pragmatic geopolitical calculations aimed at maximising Turkey's regional influence wherever political opportunities emerge.**

Economic Engagement

Economic cooperation supports [Turkey's wider geopolitical strategy](#) rather than constituting an end in itself. Ankara has expanded its use of trade, investment, infrastructure projects and development assistance to strengthen bilateral ties and reinforce its regional presence. [North Macedonia illustrates this approach](#). Beyond growing trade and investment, economic relations have increasingly focused on [transport connectivity, industrial cooperation and integration into regional supply chains](#), reflecting a shared effort to deepen long-term economic interdependence. Turkish investment has also become an important component of North Macedonia's foreign investment landscape, while both governments continue to promote closer economic cooperation through infrastructure projects and the modernisation of bilateral trade arrangements. Although these activities remain modest compared with the European Union's overall economic footprint in the Western Balkans, they provide Turkey with additional opportunities to support its broader political and strategic objectives.

2. Security and Defence Cooperation

Security and defence cooperation has become an increasingly important component of Turkey's regional strategy. Ankara increasingly employs defence diplomacy through bilateral defence agreements, officer training, military education, defence exports, military assistance, intelligence cooperation and participation in NATO-related activities to strengthen long-term security relationships in the Western Balkans.

Turkey's security engagement should also be understood within the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. NATO remains the principal security guarantor in the Western Balkans through [KFOR, NATO Headquarters Sarajevo and its wider partnership network](#). Rather than operating outside this framework, Turkey increasingly leverages its position as a NATO Ally to deepen bilateral defence relationships, expand institutional access and advance broader national strategic objectives. At the same time, it has sought to institutionalise this engagement through initiatives such as the [Balkan Peace Platform, launched in 2025](#). Bringing together

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, the platform reflects Turkey's effort to complement its participation in NATO-led structures with a parallel regional framework through which it can expand its diplomatic and institutional presence in the Western Balkans.

[Albania provides one of the clearest examples](#) of Turkey's defence diplomacy in practice. Bilateral defence cooperation extends well beyond the transfer of military equipment. In addition to supplying armoured vehicles, small arms and Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial systems, Turkey has invested in officer training, professional military education, capacity-building programmes, military infrastructure and regular joint exercises. While these activities contribute to interoperability between two NATO Allies, they are implemented through bilateral defence arrangements that also deepen institutional ties between the two defence establishments. As a result, they expand Ankara's access to regional security institutions, strengthen military-to-military networks and provide sustained opportunities for political and strategic engagement.

For the European Union, the challenge is not the existence of Turkish defence cooperation itself. The concern is that sustained bilateral engagement, when combined with the legitimacy and institutional access associated with NATO membership, may gradually consolidate Turkish influence through long-term institutional relationships, reducing the Union's ability to remain the primary geopolitical reference point in the Western Balkans.

3. Cultural and Institutional Engagement

Historical and cultural ties continue to support Turkey's broader regional strategy. Rather than relying solely on state-to-state diplomacy, Ankara has invested in a network of public institutions that operate across the Western Balkans. Through organisations such as [TİKA, the Diyanet, the Yunus Emre Institute and the Maarif Foundation](#), Turkey aims to promote development assistance, educational exchanges, religious cooperation, language and cultural programmes, and the restoration of Ottoman-era cultural heritage. Collectively, these initiatives seek to preserve long-term societal and institutional links while supporting Turkey's broader political and strategic objectives. **They should therefore be understood not merely as educational or cultural initiatives, but as instruments of a broader state strategy through which Turkey seeks to preserve long-term influence and expand its political footprint in the Western Balkans.**

Policy Recommendations

The European Union has correctly recognised that enlargement is no longer merely a technical accession process but a geopolitical investment in Europe's long-term security. [Recent declarations by European leaders and the 2026 EU–Western Balkans Summit reflect this shift](#), presenting enlargement as a geopolitical necessity in response to an increasingly contested European neighbourhood. However, **recognising this reality is only the first step**. The European Union must now translate this geopolitical narrative into a coherent long-term strategy. As this analysis has demonstrated, candidate countries are not operating in a geopolitical vacuum. They are increasingly exposed to external actors that combine political engagement, economic statecraft, defence diplomacy and institutional outreach to cultivate long-term influence. If enlargement is to strengthen Europe's strategic position, the EU must move beyond a predominantly technical approach and respond with an equally integrated geopolitical strategy.

1. Integrate geopolitics into the enlargement process

The EU should move beyond assessing candidate countries exclusively through the Copenhagen criteria⁴ and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*. Enlargement policy should also incorporate systematic geopolitical assessments of the strategic environment surrounding candidate countries, including the activities of external actors seeking to expand their political, economic and security influence. If enlargement has become a geopolitical project, then geopolitical risk assessment must become an integral component of the accession process.

2. Adopt a permanent strategic presence rather than episodic engagement

The European Union can no longer assume that its political and economic predominance will automatically translate into long-term geopolitical influence. External actors increasingly pursue coherent, long-term strategies that combine diplomacy, defence cooperation, investment and institutional engagement. Rather than reacting to individual initiatives, the European Union should maintain a sustained political and strategic presence capable of reinforcing its credibility as the region's principal geopolitical actor.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accesion-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>

3. Avoid strategic vacuums

Strategic vacuums rarely remain unfilled. Delays in the enlargement process, inconsistent political engagement and fragmented implementation of EU policies create opportunities for external actors to establish long-term political, economic, security and institutional influence. Maintaining a visible and sustained European presence should therefore become an objective in its own right rather than merely a by-product of enlargement. Geopolitical influence is never permanent. If it is not continuously reinforced, it will inevitably be contested by competing actors.

4. Approach Southeastern Europe as a single strategic theatre

The European Union should abandon the artificial separation between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. Security developments increasingly transcend regional boundaries, linking the Balkans with the Eastern Mediterranean through energy security, maritime infrastructure, organised crime, migration, connectivity and regional stability. European strategic planning should therefore treat Southeastern Europe as an integrated geopolitical space rather than a collection of separate policy theatres. In this context, initiatives such as [IMEC](#) demonstrate that connectivity is no longer solely an economic issue but an increasingly important instrument of geopolitical competition. Closer integration between enlargement policy, regional connectivity and emerging strategic partnerships, including Greece, Cyprus and Israel, would reinforce the Union's long-term strategic presence while reducing opportunities for competing geopolitical actors to exploit regional fragmentation.

5. Improve strategic coherence

Ultimately, the EU does not suffer from a lack of resources but from a lack of strategic coherence. The challenge is not to match Turkey's individual initiatives but to ensure that European political engagement, infrastructure investment, defence cooperation, enlargement policy and strategic communications reinforce one another as components of a single geopolitical strategy. Fragmented policies inevitably create opportunities for external actors pursuing more coherent long-term objectives.

6. Strengthen strategic awareness and intelligence-informed policymaking

Finally, the EU should integrate intelligence-informed geopolitical assessments more systematically into its enlargement policy. [Strategic warning](#) depends not only on monitoring immediate threats but also on recognising gradual geopolitical shifts before they fundamentally alter the regional balance. The challenge in the Western Balkans is therefore not any single Turkish initiative, but the cumulative effect of long-term political, economic, security and institutional engagement. A more anticipatory approach would enable the European Union to identify emerging geopolitical trends earlier and respond before they evolve into strategic disadvantages. Ultimately, the challenge facing the European Union is not Turkey itself, but the persistence of a reactive strategic culture in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment.