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TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN WESTERN BALKANS SECURITY COOPERATION

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide a descriptive analysis of Türkiye's role in security cooperation in the Western Balkans and the criticisms of Türkiye's position on this cooperation. In order to achieve this, the article identifies active security cooperation mechanisms in the Western Balkans, analyses Türkiye's activities in these mechanisms and the security dimension of Türkiye's bilateral relations with the countries in the region. Furthermore, criticisms of Türkiye's attitude towards regional security cooperation efforts after 2016 have been put forward and these criticisms have been discussed. As a result, it is understood that Türkiye plays an active role in regional security cooperation, contributes to the security cooperation of the region, and has the potential to support the capacity building of Western Balkan countries in specific areas such as counterterrorism.

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BATI BALKANLAR GÜVENLİK İŞ BİRLİĞİNDE TÜRKİYE’NİN ROLÜ

Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye’nin Batı Balkanlar bölgesindeki güvenlik iş birliğinde nasıl bir rol oynadığına, Türkiye’nin pozisyonuna ilişkin eleştirilere ilişkin betimleyici bir analiz sunma arayışındadır. Makale çerçevesinde, Batı Balkanlarda aktif güvenlik iş birliği mekanizmaları tespit edilmeye çalışılmış, bu mekanizmalar incelenerek Türkiye’nin bu mekanizmalardaki faaliyetleri ve Türkiye’nin bölge ülkeleriyle kurduğu ikili ilişkilerin güvenlik boyutu incelenmiştir. Ayrıca 2016 yılı sonrasında Türkiye’nin bölgesel güvenlik iş birliği çabalarına yönelik tutumuna getirilen eleştiriler ortaya konarak bu eleştiriler tartışılmıştır. Sonuç olarak; Türkiye’nin, bölgesel güvenlik iş birliği kapsamında aktif bir rol oynadığı, bölgenin güvenlik iş birliğine katkı sağladığı, terörle mücadele gibi spesifik alanlarda Batı Balkan ülkelerinin kapasite geliştirmesine destek olabilme potansiyeli taşıdığı anlaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Batı Balkanlar, Güneydoğu Avrupa, Güvenlik İş Birliği, İkili İlişkiler.

Introduction

The Western Balkans are distinguished by their profound historical roots and intricate geopolitical complexities. The security architecture has been a focal point of interest for regional and global actors for a considerable period of time (P. Djukic and Obradovic 2020). Security cooperation initiatives are of significant importance in this region, which encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. These countries are situated in close proximity to numerous European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation (NATO) member states. Since the 1990s, initiatives have been implemented with the objective of addressing a range of security threats, including ethnic tensions, political instability, organised crime and socio-economic disparities.

Türkiye occupies a distinct position within this security cooperation framework. Türkiye plays an indispensable role in this security system, not only as a neighbouring country but also as a country with deep historical, cultural and economic ties with the Western Balkans. Türkiye has a centuries-old historical connection with the region, dating back to the Ottoman period. In today's geopolitical landscape, it can be said that its connection with the region is also of great importance on security grounds. Consequently, the multifaceted nature of Türkiye's role in Western Balkan security cooperation necessitates a detailed analysis.

In this context, the article seeks to examine Türkiye's role in the context of Western Balkan security cooperation. The study is of significant importance for a more profound comprehension of Türkiye's role in security cooperation in the Western Balkans and its consequences for regional security and stability. In this way, the study aims to address a gap in the academic literature and contribute to a better understanding of this complex issue and its importance in the broader regional security cooperation debate. The study presents findings on the

development and current state of security cooperation in the Western Balkans, Türkiye's presence in the security cooperation ecosystem, Türkiye's bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries on the basis of security cooperation and the criticisms in the academic literature on Türkiye's position in regional security cooperation.

1. Overview of Western Balkans Security Cooperation

In the aftermath of the war environment that emerged following the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans has been the focus of many efforts to ensure peace and stability. In other words, the Western Balkans, which has a turbulent history, has been the focal point of numerous international efforts aimed at promoting peace, stability and cooperation among countries (Gajic and Ejodus 2018). Many cooperation mechanisms led by the international community have been established, some of which have survived (Haider 2019), and thus shaped the security landscape of the Western Balkans.

This security cooperation found its foundations in the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, which was established in 1999 (Gajic and Ejodus 2018). This pact, covering the states of the former Yugoslavia, Southeast European countries seeking EU membership, and Albania, made it necessary to establish and develop regional cooperation programmes and improve Balkan relations. As an important step towards regional cooperation, the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe laid the

foundation for a number of cooperation mechanisms that have since been established, aiming to promote peace, democracy, human rights and economic reconstruction in the region (Vucetic 2001).

Contemporary threats such as violent extremism, serious and organised crime, corruption and the migration crisis have led to an intensified dialogue between the EU and the region on its potential contribution to common European security. It can be said that the EU tried to establish stability in the Western Balkans until 2008; after 2008, the EU considered the region as an extension of its own security system and increased its efforts to ensure security in the region; as a result of these efforts, it strengthened regional security cooperation mechanisms, and many cooperation mechanisms in the region were financed by the EU (Haider 2019). The Sofia Declaration adopted by the leaders of the EU and the Western Balkans in 2018 once again called for a common commitment to mutual security interests and challenges, strengthening the EU's work in the area of security and rule of law, which has been at the top of the EU's regional agenda since the late 1990s (European Commission IPA multi-country programmes. Activity report January-June 2018, 2018). At the same time, the 2018 EU Strategy for the Western Balkans reiterates the EU's support for the region and states that membership will be realised if the EU criteria are met, which could happen in 2025 and beyond at the earliest

(Klemenc, Hrabalek and Đorđević 2021).

Conversely, regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans is also perceived as a necessity for the countries of the region (Djukic and Obradović 2020). This necessity necessitates the establishment of multilateral arrangements in various fields, including functional cooperation, policy coordination and internal affairs and security. There are three main rationales for the necessity of security cooperation in the Western Balkans. Firstly, the establishment of a strengthened cooperation mechanism will provide the necessary environment for the creation of political stability, security and economic prosperity in the region (Djukic & Obradović, 2020). Secondly, regional security cooperation can be used to combat organised crime, corruption, terrorism, extremism, illegal migration, border management and drug trafficking, thus creating an integrated mechanism to address security challenges that destabilise the region (Emini and Marku 2019). Finally, the security of the Western Balkans is not the sole responsibility of individual countries. Rather, the security of the Western Balkans is indivisible. While there are economic, cultural and ethnic divisions, security is a common denominator. This is a point that Djukic and Obradović (2020) make clear.

Looking at the Western Balkans security cooperation mechanisms, it is observed that initiatives are generally handled in three groups. The first group includes EU partnerships, the

second and most populous group includes international partnerships and regional initiatives, and the third group includes mutual and active communities of regional states (Haider 2019).

According to another classification, the security cooperation mechanisms established in the Western Balkans are explained by the parameters of external-local, upward-downward. Accordingly, externally driven regional cooperation initiatives constitute the most common form of regional security cooperation mechanisms in the Western Balkans. The source of this orientation is mostly the EU and EU member states (Bechev D. 2016). Top-down initiatives are usually political and implemented by governments, while bottom-up initiatives refer to cooperation between civil society actors. Within the parameters of this classification, it is stated that security cooperation has recently been recognised as beneficial for the citizens of the region and local top-down initiatives have increased and these initiative efforts have expanded, yet almost all of the security cooperation mechanisms are funded by the EU and member states (Haider 2019).

In the Western Balkans security architecture, many security cooperation mechanisms have been established with the encouragement and support of the international community. Although it is difficult to identify the reasons for the establishment, objectives, components and activities of all

regional security cooperation mechanisms established in the Western Balkans, studies on their effectiveness have been conducted. Iztok Prezelj, in his 2013 study focusing on the “South-Eastern Europe” region, identified 33 security cooperation mechanisms including the Western Balkans region and analysed the linkages between these mechanisms. Prezelj confirmed that the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEEC) is one of the most important documents within this regional security cooperation network and emphasised the importance of regional ownership, complementarity and bilateral relations (Prezelj, 2013).

On the other hand, Donika Emini and Donika Marku, in their report on security cooperation, identified six mechanisms in the fields of security cooperation and home affairs and justice and determined the participation status of Western Balkan countries in these mechanisms (Emini and Marku 2019). Accordingly, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and North Macedonia have participated in all of these mechanisms, while Croatia has participated in 11, Bulgaria in 7, Greece and Türkiye in 3, Moldova in 7, Romania in 8, Kosovo in 3 and Slovenia in 6. It is seen that countries such as Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Romania, which can be classified as neighbouring countries to the region, are included in the mechanisms they focus on regionally, while Kosovo can be included in very few of the mechanisms due to

the problem of recognition (Table-1).

SECURITY COOPERATION						MD	MNE	RO	SRB	MKD	TR	KOS	SLO	Others
Taskforces and Initiatives in SEE	ALB	BIH	BG	CRO	GR									
Centre for Security Cooperation (RAC/VIAC) - Zagreb	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	in 2014 has been invited to participate - not yet a member
Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative (DPP/ISEE) - Sarajevo	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X			X	
The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) - Belgrade	X	X		X		X	X		X	X		X		Italy, Ukraine, USA, Georgia (observer)
South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) - rotating	X	X	X	X	X	Observer	X	X	X	X	X		X	
The United States Adriatic Charter - No HQ	X	X		X			X		Observer	X		Submitted Application		USA
Forum for Western Balkans Defense Cooperation (SEEC) No HQ	X	X		X			X		X	X			X	
JUSTICE AND HOMELAND COOPERATION						MD	MNE	RO	SRB	MKD	TR	KOS	SLO	Others
Taskforces and Initiatives in SEE	ALB	BIH	BG	CRO	GR									
Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) - Skopje	X	X		X			X		X	X		X		
Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative - Sarajevo	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				
Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) - Bucharest	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	Hungary
Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEPCA)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X		
Women Police Officer Network (WPON) - No HQ	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				
Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC-SEE)	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X				Hungary, Austria

Table 1 - (Emini and Marku 2019)

Analysing the institutions and mechanisms that have a deep-rooted infrastructure in the region, are still active and have a mission in the field of security cooperation in line with their objectives will contribute to understanding the overall picture of regional security cooperation.

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has an important place in the Western Balkans regional security cooperation mechanism. The RCC, which was established to enable the implementation of regional cooperation programmes for economic and social development in the region within the framework of the political principles set out by the SEECP, in which all countries in the region participate and which is seen as an important tool in the context of EU and Euro-Atlantic integration (De Vrieze 2016), also operates in the field of justice and home affairs. In the field of justice and home affairs, the Regional Cooperation Council has missions such as “providing political guidance to regional efforts in the implementation of regional security cooperation and strategic objectives in South-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans” and “supporting regional efforts in the fight against contemporary security challenges” (Maja Pinjo-Talevska 2020). In the field of “security cooperation” between October 2022 and March 2023, the Council identified security needs in the areas of preventing violent extremism, combating terrorism, serious and organised crime and border security, established a security database,

strengthened the exchange of intelligence information among the participants of the South East Europe National Authority Chiefs' Forum (SEENSA), facilitated participation in regional security cooperation mechanisms (RCC 2023).

Within the RCC, SEENSA, the South East Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs' Forum (SEEMIC) and the Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) have been established in the field of security cooperation (Ailello and Hadžović 2019). Integrative Internal Security Governance; security in the Western Balkan region collective efficiency by mapping needs and coordinating responses to threats (IISG, 2023). In this respect, the IISG is a coordination platform that brings together relevant international partners, Western Balkans partners, EU actors and EU Member States in the fields of counter-terrorism, organised crime and border security in line with the EU's regional perspective. The IISG includes the Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative (WBCTi), the Western Balkans Counter-Serious Crime Initiative (WBCSCi) and the Western Balkans Border Security Initiative (WBBSi) (IISG 2023).

On the other hand, The Centre for Security Cooperation (RACVIAC) emerged in 2000 as a project arising out of the Stability Pact. RACVIAC started its work as a multinational regional centre to assist the countries of South-Eastern Europe in the implementation of arms control agreements and in its first

period focused on the implementation of arms control, confidence-building measures (Maksimovic, Talijan and Slavkovic 2015). RACVIAC operates with the aim of strengthening dialogue and cooperation through the partnership of member states and other international actors, contributing to and supporting regional security and stability. In fact, RACVIAC's activities have been expanded over time, adding cooperation on security sector reform and European Integration to the arms control-focused cooperation.

The South-East European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC) was established by a convention signed by 13 member states in Bucharest on 9 December 2009. It functions as a successor to the South-East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) Centre for Combating Transnational Crime. The expiry date of SECI has been set as 6 October 2011. It entered into force with the Convention on the South-East European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC) signed in Bucharest on 9 December 2009 with the high-level participation of 13 member states (SELECE 2023).

This mechanism is a platform focused on combating regional crime and other security threats. In this context, it operates to promote information sharing among the countries of the region and with international organisations and to improve police cooperation.

The Police Cooperation Covention for South East Europe

(PCC SEE) is an agreement that aims to strengthen police cooperation to combat organised crime at the regional level. This agreement aims to facilitate the tracking of criminals and sharing of forensic information (Banutai, Travner, Podbregar and Lobnikar 2011). The Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE) promotes a regional approach to counter natural and man-made disasters and focuses on improving capacity and information exchange in disaster management (Prezelj 2013).

2. Türkiye in Regional Security Cooperation Mechanisms

Türkiye does not have a separate policy for the Western Balkans, as it officially rejects the “artificial division” between the Balkan countries, but instead adopts a unified approach to the Balkan region as a whole (Ekinci 2018). In other words, Türkiye aims to be economically involved in the region and establish a stronger political presence. In line with this idea, Türkiye’s main political objectives in the neighbouring regions have been two-dimensional. In the short and medium term, Türkiye aims to develop economic partnerships and establish a strong economic presence, while in the long term, it ideally aims to become an influential regional power among different regions (Ekinci 2018).

Where are 24 cooperation mechanisms working in the field of regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans,

which are active and active between 2019-2023 (Table-2). It has been determined that Türkiye actively participated in 10 of these mechanisms, which can be classified as institutions, agreements or projects, took part in their activities and studies, provided financial and personnel support, and appointed representatives at the institutional level.

An assessment of Türkiye's role in these mechanisms will be possible by looking at the mechanisms in which Türkiye actively participates. The Programme Manager for the Cooperative Security Environment Pillar of the Centre for Security Cooperation Initiatives (RACVIAC) is a Turkish officer with the rank of colonel appointed by the Turkish Armed Forces. On the other hand, all seminars and courses organised by RACVIAC in 2022 were attended by participants from Türkiye (RACVIAC 2023).

Regarding the Regional Cooperation Council, Türkiye held the rotating presidency of the South East Europe Cooperation Process between 2021-2022, the Summit of the South East Europe Cooperation Process was held in Antalya on 17 June 2021, and Türkiye handed over the rotating presidency to Greece in July 2022 (RCC 2023). RCC Secretary General Majilinda Bregu stated that RCC's 2030 Strategy document covers EU member states, Türkiye and Moldova in addition to the Western Balkans, and that Türkiye is of great importance both as a part of the European region and as a G-20 member

country (RCC, SEE2030 Strategy Approved by the SEECF Leaders at the Summit in Antalya 2023).

The Director General of the South-East European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC) is the chief executive officer and legal representative of SELEC. The Director General is a citizen of one of the member states elected by the Council for a term of office of four 4-year terms. Oğuz Serkant Akın, who previously served as the Head of Department at the General Directorate of Customs Enforcement of the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Türkiye, was elected as the Director General of SELEC in May 2022 with the votes of 8 out of 11 members. In addition, in the 30 joint investigations coordinated by SELEC between 2018 and 2023, Turkish law enforcement agencies took active roles in 11 investigations, including NALUCA, TAKSIM, REACTION II, “Philip Plein”, “Discussion”, SUNSHINE, SUNSHINE II and “Panamera” (SELEC 2023). Türkiye also actively participates in the Task Forces on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Illegal Migration, Combating Drug Trafficking, Financial and Computer Crimes, Combating Fraud and Smuggling, Combating Terrorism, Container Security, Stolen Vehicles, Environmental and Nature Related Crimes, which are established within SELEC. It is observed that Türkiye participates in seminars, conferences and trainings organised by the Strengthening the Fight against Firearms Trafficking in South-Eastern Europe Project (SIRAS) and the South-Eastern

European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG), which are projects carried out within SELEC (although no update has been made for the period after 2019 as of 2023), at the participant, speaker and trainer levels.

Regional Security Cooperation Mechanisms	Türkiye's Participation
Centre for Security Cooperation - RACVIAC	Member
Regional Cooperation Council - RCC	Member
South East Europe National Authorities Chiefs' Forum SEENSA (RCC)	Member
Southeast Europe Military Intelligence Chiefs' Forum - SEEMIC (RCC)	Member
Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative - MARRI	Not Member
Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative - RAI	Not Member
RAI Network of Experts	Not Member
South-East Europe Law Enforcement Forces Centre - SELEC	Member
Against Firearms Trafficking in South-Eastern Europe Strengthening the Challenge Project - SIRAS (SELEC)	Member
South-Eastern European Prosecutors Advisory Group - SEEPAG (SELEC)	Member
Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association - SEPCA	Not Member
The Police Cooperation Convention for South East Europe - PCC SEE	Not Member
Western Balkan Prosecutors Network	Not Member

South East Europe Law School Network - SEELS	Not Member
Central Europe Initiative - CEI	Not Member
Salzburg Forum	Not Member
Adriatic-Ionian Initiative	Not Member
Brdo-Brijuni Process	Not Member
EU-Western Balkans Justice and Interior Ministerial Forum	Not Member
Southeast Europe Cooperation Process - SEECF	Member
The Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe - DPPI SEE	Member
The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons - (SEESAC)	Not Member
South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial - Coordination Committee - SEDM-CC	Member
Adriatic Charter	Not Member

Table-2

3. Türkiye's Bilateral Relations within the Framework of Security Cooperation

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Türkiye has been maintaining bilateral relations with the region and an important dimension of these relations is security. Türkiye's bilateral cooperation in the Western Balkans in the field of security is characterised by its military presence in the region with the aim of establishing peace, providing military equipment, weapons and training support, and supporting police reform and training.

In addition, Türkiye's recent developments in the field of UAVs and UCAVs, and Türkiye's defence industry products proving themselves in Syria and Iraq, as well as in the Second Karabakh War and the Russian-Ukrainian War, have resulted in an increased demand for these products (AA 2023). Türkiye also exports various defence industry products, especially UAVs and UCAVs, to the Western Balkan countries. This section examines Türkiye's bilateral security cooperation with the Western Balkan countries since the 1990s and the recent defence industry agreements.

In the improved security environment in the Western Balkans since the 2000s, Türkiye has continued to be actively involved in the region and in the stabilisation process. In the aftermath of the Bosnian War, the Turkish Armed Forces have been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure peace and stability within the scope of Operation Peacekeeping Support in 1994, UNPROFOR between 1992-1995, NATO IFOR between 1995-1996, NATO SFOR between 1996-2004 and EUFOR Althea since 2004 (Land Forces Command 2023). In the process of the transfer of NATO SFOR to the European Union Force in 2004, Türkiye's troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina also participated in this unit. Türkiye is one of the 5 non-EU countries participating in EUFOR Althea and is the second country that has contributed the most to the task force since its inception (Land Forces Command 2023). In addition, Türkiye

participated in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an observer in the Joint Combined Battalion Task Force under NATO's Partnership for Peace agreement. Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a cooperation agreement aiming for Bosnia and Herzegovina to use and benefit from free access to a NATO counter-terrorism training base (Vracic 2016). During his visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018, Nurettin Canikli, then Minister of National Defence, stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina was a valuable and important country for Türkiye, that the two countries agreed on Türkiye's increasing defence cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Türkiye would continue to support Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Türkiye believed that the country would soon become a member of NATO and the EU, and that Bosnia and Herzegovina's security was essential to the security of the Balkans and the EU due to its strategic position (AA 2023a). Three years after this statement, in 2021, a "Military Financial Cooperation Agreement" was signed between Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina (AA, 2023).

There is a strong defence/security cooperation relationship between North Macedonia, which lacked international support and recognition until the Prespa Agreement signed in 2019, and Türkiye. Until 1994, Türkiye provided military aid to North Macedonia totalling \$1.9 million, including military equipment and ammunition (Vracic 2016). In 2006, Türkiye donated

military equipment to North Macedonia with a total value of \$15 million. Türkiye is the largest non-EU supporter of European Union Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations in North Macedonia. In addition, North Macedonia has decided to purchase 18 “Boran” howitzers from Türkiye in 2021 and the delivery is expected to be completed by 2031 (AA 2023b).

Security relations between Türkiye and Albania started with the defence cooperation agreement signed in 1992. Türkiye participated in NATO’s air strikes against Serbia and Montenegro in 1999 and supported the international peacekeeping force with nearly a thousand personnel in July 1999 (Eralp 2010). Türkiye also joined the Kosovo Force as a result of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1255 after Kosovo came under UN administration and played an active role in the reconstruction of the country with its peacekeeping mission. Türkiye also contributes to the EU mission in Kosovo. On the other hand, Türkiye and Serbia signed the “Agreement on Security Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the Republic of Serbia” in Belgrade on 07 October 2019 (Law No. 7400 dated 14/04/2022).

Significant cooperation between Türkiye and the Western Balkan Countries is also taking place in the field of defence industry. Especially within the framework of Türkiye’s

increasing UAV and UCAV capacity and technological development of these vehicles, these products are in great demand from the Western Balkan countries. It was announced in the press in December 2022 that Baykar, Türkiye's company operating in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles, will sell 3 TB-2 model UCAVs to Albania. After the sale, it was decided that 30 Albanian military personnel would be trained by Baykar at Kucova Air Base (Bekdil 2023).

Kosovo is one of the countries that has shown its interest in this technology first-hand. Fikrim Damka, Minister of Regional Development of Kosovo, announced in 2022 that the UCAV issue was on their agenda and that they would sign a contract in this context. In this respect, 5 of the UAVs ordered in May 2023 were delivered to Kosovo (Yiğitoğlu 2023). Following Kosovo's request for UCAVs from Türkiye, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandr Vucic reacted to this issue, and in his statement in December 2022, Vucic stated that Türkiye's export of TB-2 to Kosovo would have consequences for relations and that it was unfair to sell UCAVs to a country like Kosovo, which has no right to have an army according to international law (Serdaroğlu 2022).

4. Criticisms of Türkiye's Role in Regional Security Cooperation

The debate on whether there has been a change/transformation in Türkiye's foreign policy has

intensified especially after the coup attempt in Türkiye in 2016, Türkiye's purchase of the S-400 air defence system from Russia and its exclusion from the F-35 project. Although these debates seem to have been frozen by Türkiye's stance during the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Türkiye's leading role in the Grain Corridor Agreement, there has been an increase in assessments that Türkiye's foreign policy has pursued an "anti-Western" stance, especially between 2016 and 2022. These assessments can also be found in the context of Türkiye's impact on security cooperation in the Western Balkans.

In particular, there are assessments that Türkiye's security objectives in the Western Balkans are determined by the priorities of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and that these policies include supporting political actors with authoritarian tendencies and reducing the influence of political opponents who are considered to have influence in the Western Balkans (Flessenkemper and Kmezic 2020). At this point, it should be emphasised that the "political opponents" whose influence is to be reduced are the representatives of FETÖ/PDY, which is defined as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish judiciary, in the Western Balkans. These individuals are FETÖ/PDY members and are referred to as "members of the F.GÜLEN movement and coup supporters" even in articles criticising Türkiye's stance (Vracic 2016). In 2018, the deportation of six FETÖ/PDY members to Türkiye by the Kosovo Intelligence

Service (AKI) and Bosnia and Herzegovina's decision to extradite some FETÖ/PDY members who were found guilty by a judicial decision in Türkiye led to criticism that Türkiye was interfering with its own citizens as if they were on its territory, which caused discontent among political elites (Szerencsés 2021). On the other hand, it was stated by the then Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj that the Turkish Intelligence Service (MIT) received 6 FETÖ/PDY members in Kosovo in coordination with the Kosovo Intelligence Service, but R. Haradinaj added that he would open an investigation against those responsible (Bytyci 2018).

There is also criticism that the declining influence of EU membership on Türkiye has led Türkiye to prioritise political and security relations in the Western Balkans region, particularly Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, leading to a simultaneous decline in alignment with EU policies (Flessenkemper and Kmezic 2020). However, it is also stated that this situation is not aimed at blocking the Euro-Atlantic integration project (Flessenkemper and Kmezic 2020). At this point, it can be said that the criticism is based on the assumption that "Türkiye is not sufficiently supportive of the EU despite the EU". On the other hand, within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic organisation, Türkiye's influence in the Western Balkans is complementary to NATO's actions and objectives,

and Türkiye has participated in the EU's policies in the Western Balkans from the beginning (Tardy 2014).

The evaluations on the impact of the changes in Türkiye's political stance on the Western Balkans security ecosystem do not stop there. It is stated that the "Neo-Ottomanist" policy, which was frequently expressed especially in the 2010s, indicates Türkiye's effort to re-establish a sphere of influence in the Balkans, and it is pointed out that this is also compatible with the "Green Corridor" paradigm (P. Djukic and Obradovic 2020). It is emphasised that the "Green Corridor" paradigm means creating a political corridor with a Muslim character from Istanbul to Bosnia, creating an ethno-ethnic network between Muslim communities along this route (Trifković 2013). The relationship that Türkiye has developed with Serbia as a non-Muslim country since the second half of the 2010s and even the assessments that this level of relationship is to the detriment of Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Eren 2022) weaken this claim.

On the other hand, Türkiye is associated with threatening and/or potentially threatening countries such as Russia and China within the Western Balkans security structure. This is seen as an unfair perspective for a country that has historical, cultural and sociological ties with the Western Balkans region and, more importantly, is a NATO member and has EU ties. Moreover, the main reason why Türkiye is mentioned together

with the aforementioned countries is that the country isolated itself after the coup attempt in 2016 and did not provide sufficient support to EU and NATO activities (Flessenkemper and Kmezic 2020), which contradicts the criticism of Türkiye's presence in the region as "supremacist". In both cases, approaches that Türkiye has a damaging and erosive effect on regional security cooperation are considered to be unfounded given Türkiye's support for regional cooperation mechanisms, mostly financed by the EU and other international institutions, and its bilateral security cooperation agreements.

Along with all these, it is also useful to evaluate the political background of a geographical conceptualisation within the framework of regional cooperation. The most important foreign policy instrument of the European Union, which is politically, economically, geographically and sociologically engaged in the Western Balkans region, is seen as the membership perspective (Bechev D. 2006). Although this foreign policy instrument has a great impact on the Western Balkans, which is still a relatively new concept, it cannot be said to be "new" for the Southeast Europe region, which historically includes the Balkans region, and the countries in the region. According to the EU definition, the Southeast Europe region includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Romania, Serbia and Türkiye (Emerson, Blockmans, Cenus,

Kovziridze and Movchan 2021). Since 2000, the process of shifting the EU membership perspective to this region and the confirmation of potential candidates has started (Jano 2008). Accordingly, within the framework of the Copenhagen Criteria (although it is debatable whether some of the later member states fulfil these criteria), Romania and Bulgaria gained EU membership in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. Currently, the EU has set different enlargement commitments to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, which are among the countries of South-Eastern Europe in the “Western Balkans” region. Accordingly, unlike previous enlargement periods, the EU has refrained from setting a clear membership timetable for these countries and has also demanded non-negotiated policy changes. Nevertheless, as a counterbalancing factor, the EU provided the Western Balkan countries with privileges such as additional financial assistance for integration or visa liberalisation (Renner and Trauner 2009). In this framework, it would not be wrong to say that Türkiye is the only country that is not a member of the EU and is not included in the Western Balkans region, that the EU’s current substitution of the concept of “Western Balkans” for the concept of “Southeastern Europe” is a political preference, and that this preference basically aims to provide a different engagement towards Türkiye than the other Balkan countries.

In this respect, it becomes possible to look at the criticisms that Türkiye's role in the Western Balkans security cooperation is not in line with the EU from a different perspective. The assumption that Türkiye does not pursue a policy in line with EU policies is unfounded because, as explained above, Türkiye's policies are in line with the EU's approach to security cooperation in the region. However, it is evident that Türkiye is not in the same status as other Southeast European countries in terms of the use of the EU's foreign policy instruments. In this respect, Türkiye's involvement in the "Western Balkans" regional security cooperation process within the framework of the EU's policies would not be expected due to the nature of the concept. Moreover, it can be said that Türkiye is generally included in the Western Balkans security cooperation mechanisms covering the "Southeastern Europe" region.

Conclusion

Within the framework of the study, the development and current status of security cooperation in the Western Balkans region was tried to be examined, and the security cooperation mechanisms in the region in question and their general outlook were investigated. In addition, 24 cooperation mechanisms in the Western Balkans, which work in the field of regional security cooperation and have activities and activities between 2019-2023, were identified and it was understood that Türkiye participated in 10 of these mechanisms.

The mechanisms in which Türkiye is involved have been analysed and determinations have been made regarding Türkiye's presence and activities in these mechanisms. On the other hand, bilateral relations, which is another dimension of Türkiye's security cooperation presence in the region, have been addressed.

In addition to this, the criticisms levelled against Türkiye in the literature on security cooperation in the Western Balkans have been revealed and the issues on which these criticisms are based and the consistency of these criticisms within themselves have been discussed. As a result of the study, some conclusions can be drawn regarding Türkiye's role in the Western Balkans security cooperation. First of all, it is seen that the concepts of Western Balkans and Southeastern Europe are actually geographically intertwined political conceptualisations, however, in the field of security cooperation, the countries in the Western Balkans can also carry out their cooperation mechanisms under the concept of Southeastern Europe. Among the Western Balkans security cooperation mechanisms identified, all mechanisms, except for the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in which Türkiye participates, are basically structures that cover Southeastern Europe and include this concept in their names. Considering that the term "Western Balkans" is actually a part of the EU's enlargement policy and excludes Türkiye, unlike the concept of "Southeast Europe", it

can be said that Türkiye is actually an important part of the “Southeast Europe” mechanisms. However, the fact that a significant part of the mechanisms active in the Western Balkans region are also under the heading of “South-Eastern Europe” can be the subject of a separate study.

On the other hand, Türkiye actively participates in the cooperation mechanisms in which the countries in the Western Balkans region are actively involved, especially in the strengthening of law enforcement forces, prevention of various crimes and governance of security institutions. When the activities of SELEC, which has an important place in the Western Balkans security cooperation framework and has concrete outputs such as “joint investigations” and “joint operations”, are analysed, it can be stated that Türkiye plays a very important role in this mechanism and is one of the countries contributing the most to the joint fight against crime.

The criticism that Türkiye is “indifferent” to security cooperation efforts in the Western Balkans and that it is creating an “erosion” like Russia and China has been mentioned above. This criticism is based on an unfair comparison. It is considered that Türkiye can directly and unilaterally improve cooperation among the Western Balkan countries in certain areas. Especially in the period when the terrorist activities of the Syrian Civil War and DAESH were at their highest point, concepts such as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and transnational terrorism

affected the Western Balkans as in the whole world, and this situation led to a greater focus on border security, partnership in the fight against terrorism and migration. The Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative (WBCTi), which is included in the study, is seen as an example of this. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine War, there has been an increase in the security concerns of the countries in Russia's "threat area" (Atalay 2022), and even Sweden and Finland, countries that had not discussed taking part in a security alliance for years, took steps towards NATO membership (Deni 2022). Moreover, the demand for Turkish UCAVs, which have been successfully used by Ukraine and are popular with the public, has increased in the aftermath of this war. Based on these issues, Türkiye, which has a successful and long-term counter-terrorism experience, can contribute to joint counter-terrorism initiatives specifically in the Western Balkans region.

It is considered that the countries in the region can take initiatives to increase their capacity to fight jointly and individually. In this way; Türkiye can strengthen its presence in the region by contributing to the cooperation initiatives in the region, at the same time it can increase its capacity to fight against terrorist organisations in the Western Balkans region, which concern it and which find a living space especially in Europe, thanks to its counter-terrorism initiatives, and on the other hand, the countries of the Western Balkans can meet on a

common ground in the fight against terrorism and organise joint trainings, conferences and conferences, Within the framework of activities such as joint investigations and joint operations and information sharing systems, it can be stated that Türkiye can gain an integrated struggle against terrorism, which is a common problem of the region, and this situation can both help to control terrorist activities in the region (which are not proportionally high in the current situation but have the potential to increase in the future) and strengthen the security cooperation ground in the region. Especially in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine War, Türkiye, as a NATO country, could increase the level of Türkiye's engagement in the region and strengthen the Euro-Atlantic integration of these countries.

On the other hand, in the context of Türkiye's breakthrough in UAV and UCAV technologies and the demand for these products by the countries in the region, Türkiye has established a cooperation mechanism through the export of defence industry products within the framework of regional cooperation. Although Türkiye's defence industry exports to the countries in the region sometimes draws the reaction of the countries with which Türkiye has political conflicts, it maintains its existence as a foreign policy tool for Türkiye in the region.

Although the Western Balkans is a region with which Türkiye has deep ties in historical, cultural and sociological dimensions, Türkiye also has deep ties with the Western

Balkans in terms of security and foreign policy. The region, which has been reshaped by wars, internal conflicts and political stalemates after the collapse of Yugoslavia, continues to be an area of focus for Türkiye as a regional power as well as global actors. The security cooperation infrastructure in the region, as in other areas of cooperation, is generally driven and funded by the EU. This reality is also directly related to the long-standing EU-oriented political purpose of the Western Balkans. Türkiye, while at times remaining outside the EU policy in the region (passively at some point due to the EU's stance), is involved in security cooperation processes in parallel with the EU's policies in the region (Bechev D. 2022).

The article argues that Türkiye has been very active in regional cooperation mechanisms through the concept of "Southeast Europe", on the one hand, it has shaped regional cooperation through bilateral agreements with countries in line with its own security concerns and the demands of the countries in the region, on the other hand, defence industry exports are a serious foreign policy tool in terms of Türkiye's bilateral security cooperation, It has been concluded that Türkiye's regional security cooperation policies are in line with the EU policies, that it strengthens the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries through its NATO membership and EU ties, that it supports the defence reform and army modernisation of the countries in the region with its military

presence, and that it assumes a “supportive” role in regional security cooperation in this framework. It is also concluded that Türkiye has assumed a “supportive” role in regional security cooperation in the future in areas such as counter-terrorism, intelligence, joint defence where Türkiye can make an explicit contribution or in areas left vacant by the EU.

In addition to this, it is considered that the Western Balkans security cooperation can be permanently strengthened by directly playing a leading role in the establishment of mechanisms where the relevant public institutions and institution managers of the countries can come together on issues involving the common concerns of the Western Balkan countries in the aforementioned areas; joint training, investigations, operations, conferences, seminars, conferences, seminars, establishment of intelligence / information sharing systems, and the establishment of mechanisms where the relevant public institutions and institution managers of the countries can come together, and by involving actors such as NATO, EU, Interpol, Europol, UN, especially NATO, and by providing the necessary financing.

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