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WESTERN NARRATIVES OF THE 'WESTERN BALKANS' AND REGIONALLY OWNED COOPERATION

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As the accession process of Türkiye to the European Union was stalled, the Balkans were repeatedly reframed through politicized labels such as Western Balkans, which tended to fragment the region conceptually and to cast some actors, including Türkiye, as partial outsiders rather than integral parts of the Balkan order. AVİM and Turkish diplomacy have consistently resisted this approach by emphasizing regionally owned cooperation frameworks, above all the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), and by underlining that Türkiye is a Balkan and Black Sea country whose stability and security are inseparable from those of its neighbors. Türkiye treats the Balkans with the same seriousness and sense of responsibility that it brings to the Black Sea, where the Montreux Convention anchors a carefully balanced legal order, and AVİMs work has reflected this dual commitment.[1] This long-term insistence on legal continuity, regional ownership, and cooperative security has helped protect the Balkans from being reduced once again to a field of external experimentation, and it forms the backdrop to the following message addressed to Western European audiences.

Implications for Western Europe

Over the past three decades, the Balkans have undergone a significant transformation from a region associated with conflict and external interference to one of regionally owned cooperation mechanisms. The South-East European Cooperation Process and related frameworks show that actors from within the region can design and sustain mechanisms for dialogue, confidence-building, and practical cooperation without constant external guardianship. This evolution is fragile, but it has created a degree of predictability and mutual restraint that should not be lightly put at risk.

For Western European states, the temptation remains to treat the Balkans primarily as a periphery to be managed through ever finer political labels or selective conditionality. Such approaches not only reopen old sensitivities but also overlook the deeper strategic shifts that Europe must confront. The principal systemic challenge to Europes autonomy and cohesion in the coming decades is unlikely to come from a Türkiye that insists on its rightful place as a Balkan and Black Sea power.

On the contrary, destabilizing a region where cooperative practices have finally taken root, or marginalizing a key regional actor like Türkiye, is a risk that Europe can scarcely afford for a reason which is historically the soft belly of Europe.

A Europe that is serious about its long-term security will treat the Balkans as a zone of shared responsibility and Türkiye as a partner in managing wider Eurasian risks, rather than as a problem to be managed on the margins.

*Photo: DHA

[1] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun. Türkiye Is The Guardıan Of The Montreux Conventıon Regardıng The Regıme Of The Straıts And The Backbone Of Securıty And Stabılıty In The Black Sea. Commentary No: 2026/24. 03.04.2026. https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/TURKIYE-IS-THE-GUARDIAN-OF-THE-MONTREUX-CONVENTION-REGARDING-THE-REGIME-OF-THE-STRAITS-AND-THE-BACKBONE-OF-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-THE-BLACK-SEA

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