

Balkans

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(Redirected from Balkan peninsula)

The **Balkans** is the historic and geographic name used to describe southeastern Europe (see the Definitions and boundaries section below). The region has a combined area of 550,000 km² and a population of around 53 million.

The countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, mainland Greece,(former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia and the European part of Turkey are commonly described as being in the Balkans. The boundaries of the region are somewhat elastic, so Romania and Slovenia are not always included.

The region takes its name from the Balkan mountains which run through the centre of Bulgaria into eastern Serbia, and the term 'Balkan' itself might come from the Turkish word "bölge" meaning "area, region".

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Southeastern Europe seen from NASA's Terra Satellite

Definitions and boundaries

The Balkans are generally considered to comprise the lands to the south of the Kupa, Sava and Danube rivers, which bisect Croatia and Serbia and form a natural boundary between Bulgaria and Romania. North of that line lies the Pannonian plain and (in the case of Romania) the Carpathian mountains. Romania is conventionally included as a successor state to the old Ottoman Empire, which formerly ruled the whole region; the inclusion of Slovenia is more controversial but it has often been regarded as Balkan due to its association with the former Yugoslavia.

The Balkan land mass is sometimes referred to as the **Balkan peninsula** as it is surrounded by the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean, Marmara and Black seas from the southwest, south and southeast. While it is not a model peninsula as it has no isthmus to connect it to the mainland Europe, this definition is often used to denote the wider region.

The distinct identity of the Balkans owes as much to its fragmented and often violent common history as to its mountainous geography. The region was perennially on the edge of great empires, its history dominated by wars, rebellions, invasions and clashes between empires, from the times of the Roman Empire to the latter-day Yugoslav wars. Its fractiousness and tendency to splinter into rival political entities led to the coining of the term Balkanization (or *balkanizing*). The term **Balkan** commonly connotes a connection with violence, religious strife, ethnic clannishness and a sense of hinterland.

Due to the aforementioned connotations of the term "Balkan", many people prefer the term **Southeastern Europe** instead. The use of this term is slowly growing; a European Union initiative of 1999 is called the *Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe*, and the online newspaper *Balkan Times* renamed itself *Southeast European Times* in 2003. The use of this term to mean the Balkan peninsula (and only that) technically ignores the geographical presence of northern Romania and Ukraine, which are also located in the southeastern part of the European continent.

The countries commonly included in the Balkan region are:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Greece
- Republic of Macedonia
- Serbia and Montenegro
- Turkey, but only the European part of it around Istanbul (traditionally called Rumelia or Eastern Thrace)

Romania and Slovenia are sometimes included in the list as well.

Many regions in the countries listed as Balkan states can be in many respects rather distinct from the remainder of the region, so countries that are borderline cases (often far away from the Balkan mountain itself) usually prefer not to be called *Balkan countries*. Prime examples of this are Romania and Slovenia, sometimes also Croatia and Greece.

Other countries not included in the Balkan region that are either close to it and/or play or have played an important role in the region's geopolitics, culture and history:

- Cyprus (see also Cyprus dispute)
- Hungary (see also Austria-Hungary)
- Austria (see also Austria-Hungary, Assassination in Sarajevo)
- Italy (see Dalmatia, Zara, Fiume)
- Russia (see History of Serbia)

Nature and natural resources

Most of the area is covered by mountain ranges running from south-west to north-east. The main ranges are the Dinaric Alps in Croatia and Bosnia, the Šar massif which spreads from Albania to Republic of Macedonia and the Pindus range, spanning from southern Albania into central Greece. In Bulgaria there are ranges running from east to west: the Balkan mountains and the Rhodope mountains at the border with Greece. The highest mountain is Musala (2925 m) in Rila-Rodopa, Bulgaria.

On the coasts the climate is Mediterranean, in the inland it is moderate continental. In the northern part of the peninsula and on the mountains, winters are frosty and snowy, while summers are hot and dry. In the southern part winters are milder.

During centuries many woods have been cut down and replaced with bush and brush. In the southern part and on the coast there is evergreen vegetation. In the inland there are woods typical of Central Europe (oak and beech, and in the mountains, spruce, fir and pine). The tree-line in the mountains lies at the height of 1800-2300 m.

The soils are generally poor, except on the plains where areas with natural grass, fertile soils and warm summers provide an opportunity for tillage. Elsewhere, land cultivation is mostly unsuccessful because of the mountains, hot summers and poor soils, although certain cultures such as olives and grapes flourish.

Resources of energy are scarce. There are some deposits of coal, especially in Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia. Lignite deposits are more widespread. Petroleum is scarce, although there are small deposits in Serbia, Albania and Croatia. Natural gas deposits are also scarce. Hydropower stations are largely used in energetics.

Metal ores are more usual than other raw materials. Iron ore is rare but in some countries there is a considerable amount of copper, zinc, tin, chromite, manganese, magnesite and bauxite. Some metals are exported.

Geopolitical significance

In classical antiquity, this region was the most developed part of Europe as the center of the Greek-speaking world.



During the Middle Ages, the Balkans became stage for a series of wars between the Byzantine and Bulgarian Empires, as both countries struggled to establish control over this key region.

By the end of the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire became the controlling force in the region, although it was centered around Anatolia. In the past 550 years, because of the frequent Ottoman wars in Europe fought in and around the Balkans, and the comparative Ottoman isolation from the mainstream of economic advance (reflecting the shift of Europe's commercial and political centre of gravity towards the Atlantic), the Balkans has been the least developed part of Europe.

The Balkan nations began to regain their independence in the 19th century, and in 1912-1913 a Balkan League reduced Turkey's territory to its present extent in the Balkan Wars. The First World War was sparked in 1914 by the assassination in Sarajevo of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union and communism played a very important role in the Balkans. During the Cold War, most of the countries in the Balkans were ruled by Soviet-supported communist governments.

However, despite being under communist governments, Yugoslavia (1948) and Albania (1961) fell out with the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia, led by Tito, first propped up then rejected the idea of merging with Bulgaria, and instead sought closer relations with the West, later even joining many third world countries in the Non-Aligned Movement. Albania on the other hand gravitated toward Communist China, later adopting an isolationist position.

The only non-communist countries were Greece and Turkey, which were (and still are) part of NATO.

In the 1990s, the region was gravely affected by armed conflict in the former Yugoslav republics, resulting in intervention by NATO forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia. The status of Kosovo and ethnic Albanians in general is still mostly unresolved.

Balkan countries control the direct land routes between Western Europe and South West Asia (Asia Minor and the Middle East). Since 2000, all Balkan countries are friendly towards the EU and the USA.

Greece has been a member of the European Union since 1981. Slovenia and Cyprus since 2004. Bulgaria and Romania are set to become members in 2007. Accession talk will open in early 2005 with Croatia. Turkey initially applied in 1963 and as of 2004 accession negotiations have not yet begun, although some customs agreements have been signed. As of 2004 Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia are also members of NATO.

All other countries have expressed a desire to join the EU but at some date in the future.

Population composition by nationality and religion

The region's principal nationalities include Greeks (10.8 million), Turks (9.2 million in the European part of Turkey), Serbs (8.5 million), Bulgarians (7 million), Albanians (6 million, with about 3.3 millions of them being in Albania), Croats (4.5 million), Bosniaks (2.4 million), Macedonian Slavs (1.4 million) and Montenegrins (0.265 million). Practically all Balkan countries have significant a Roma minority. Other, though much smaller minorities without states of their own include the Gorani and the Vlachs.

The region's principal religions are (Eastern Orthodox and Catholic) Christianity and Islam.

Eastern Orthodoxy is the principal religion in the following countries:

- Bulgaria
- Greece
- Romania
- Serbia and Montenegro

Catholicism is the principal religion in the following countries:

- Croatia
- Slovenia

Islam is the principal religion in the following countries:

- Albania
- Turkey

The populations living in the following countries have a variety of religious and philosophic affiliations:

- Albania: Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism.
- Republic of Macedonia: Slavic population is mostly Eastern Orthodox, Albanian population is mostly Muslim.

Albania has a Greek minority which is largely Greek Orthodox in religion. The Greek population is mainly concentrated in its southern part, sometimes referred to as Northern Epirus.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has three constitutive nations: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats.

Bulgaria has a 700,000-strong Turkish minority (largely Muslim), in the northwestern part of the country and in the Kurdzhali region.

Croatia has a Serb minority, the majority of which is displaced and now lives in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Greece has a 120,000-strong Muslim minority in Thrace. It is also the recipient of economic migrants, mostly from Albania; the majority migrated illegally during the 1990s and various political efforts are pushed forward, by both sides, to resolve the illegal status.

Kosovo has an ethnic Albanian majority population which is largely Muslim.

(former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia has a large ethnic Albanian minority (more than 25% of the total population), which is largely Muslim.

Serbia has a Hungarian, Croat and Slovak minority in Vojvodina, a Bulgarian one in eastern Serbia (the Western Outlands), a Vlach one in the Timok valley, a Bosniak one in Sandzak and an Albanian one in the Presevo valley.

Istanbul and the surrounded areas in the European part of Turkey has a remaining Greek minority.

See also

- For statistical analysis of geo-political assignment in U.S. news coverage: John Hickman and Jonathan Trapp, "Reporting Romania: A Content Analysis of *The New York Times* Coverage." *East European Quarterly*. Vol. 32, Issue 3, pp 395-409.
- History of the Balkans
 - Historical regions of the Balkan Peninsula
- Balkan languages
 - Balkan linguistic union
- Orient Express

External links

- Balkan History by Steven W. Sowards (<http://www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/>)
- U.S. Department of Energy Analysis Brief (<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/balkans.html>)
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Balkan Report (<http://www.rferl.org/balkan-report/>)
- Southeast European Times (<http://www.balkantimes.com/>)
- Balkanalysis.com (<http://www.balkanalysis.com/>)
- SEEurope.net (<http://www.seeurope.net/>)
- The Centre for South East European Studies (<http://www.csees.net/>)
- Civilitas Research (<http://www.civilitasresearch.org/>)

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