

Compendium

1) Country reports

General Introduction to the Balkan region

It is not simple to give a definition of the Balkan region - or rather South East Europe, as it is more popularly known nowadays - either geographically or in a geopolitical sense.

The Balkans have both geographical and geopolitical significance. Geographically, it refers roughly to the region bounded by the Adriatic Sea, the Southern Carpathian Mountains, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. Geopolitically and even geohistorically, residing at the interface between the Orient and Occident, Christianity and Islam, the Balkans have remained a blank space on the map, throughout their centuries-old, turbulent history, which has witnessed the rise and fall of monarchies, dictatorships, communist social systems and democracies.

The Balkans have been described as the major crossroads between Europe and the Middle East and as a battle region between the major empires. The region has been depicted as a rich conglomerate of cultures and religions and as an ethnic and religious conflict zone. In recent years it has been viewed as both a critical security zone and as an unstable non-European periphery.

Geographical definition

In the broadest, geographical sense the Balkan Peninsula encompasses the area where there are today 10 states: Albania, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and five countries members of the former Yugoslavia – Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Slovenia.

Socio - economic studies of the Balkans frequently omit Greece and Turkey as countries that, unlike the other eight, are not countries in transition but have already been integrated for a long time in Western European political, economic and military

structures. Slovenia is also often omitted from this group - either for geographic reasons or from a cultural and economic point of view.

The actual geographical definition of the Balkans includes the countries Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia. The common geography places all of them in the south eastern part of Europe. Romania has a special status among the Balkan countries since it has different political and cultural features, which is why it belongs more to the Carpathian region.



Balkans: topography and borders. Source: GRID-Arendal Norway, 2000, Originator: Philippe Rakacewicz

The state of economy

Albania: poor and backward by European standards, Albania is making the difficult transition to a more modern open-market economy. The government has taken measures to curb violent crime and to revive economic activity and trade. The economy is bolstered by remittances from abroad of \$400-\$600 million annually, mostly from Greece and Italy. Agriculture, which accounts for half of GDP, is held back because of frequent drought and the need to modernize equipment and consolidate small plots of land. Severe energy shortages are forcing small firms out of business, increasing unemployment, scaring off foreign investors, and spurring inflation. The government plans to boost energy imports to relieve the shortages¹.

Agriculture – especially cattle breeding plays a central role in the countries economy (Vaso 1998, Kupke et al. 2000). Before its transition to a market economy in the early 1990s, Albania's industry contributed over 50% to the national GDP. Industrial production decreased sharply after the end of the period of state controlled economy to contribute only about 12% to the national GDP in 1998 (REC 2000a). Today, more than 50% of the GDP is attributed to the agricultural sector. Even if illegal employment is included 62 – 67 % of the Albanian population is estimated to live below the poverty line of US\$ 240 per month, for a family of four².

GDP real growth rate: 5% (2002) ; Inflation rate: 6% (2002).

Macedonia: at independence in November 1991, Macedonia was the least developed of the Yugoslav republics, producing a mere 5% of the total federal output of goods and services. The collapse of Yugoslavia ended transfer payments from the centre and eliminated advantages from inclusion in a de facto free trade area. An absence of infrastructure, UN sanctions on Yugoslavia, one of its largest markets, and a Greek economic embargo over a dispute about the country's constitutional name and flag hindered economic growth until 1996. GDP subsequently rose each year through 2000. However, the leadership's commitment to economic reform, free trade, and regional integration was undermined by the ethnic Albanian insurgency in 2001. The economy shrank 4,6 % because of decreased trade, intermittent border closures, increased deficit spending on security needs, and investor uncertainty.

¹ [Hwww.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/H](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/H)

² Medical and Aromatic Plants in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, BfN Skripten 91, 2003, p.21

Growth barely recovered in 2002. Unemployment at one third of the workforce remains a critical problem³.

GDP real growth rate: 0,3 % (2002); Population below poverty line: 24 % (2001); Inflation rate: 1,1 % (2002); Unemployment rate: 37 % (2002).

The Balkans are the natural “treasure chest” of Europe

The natural heritage in the Balkans is unique. Its geographical position on the crossroad of variable bio-geographical influences and the great number of ecologically different mosaic like habitats were preconditions for the extensive species diversity. The area is characteristic with its high number of rare, threatened and endemic plant and animal species⁴. It is also an important migratory route for many bird species.

During the glacial periods, great expanses of north and central Europe and the high mountains of the south were crushed under a thick layer of ice. Plants and animals became extinct, and the only species that survived were those that could escape to warmer southern areas and hide in suitable refuges. In the interglacial periods and in the post-glacial period after the last ice age, the climate grew more favourable and surviving species spread northwards again. Many, however, have not yet moved but continue to live on as relict plants or animals in more limited or wider areas of their former refuges in the Balkans⁵.

Albania is a Mediterranean country in the Balkan Peninsula. It has a high biodiversity considering the species, ecosystems and habitats. 756 vertebrate species are spread on the Albanian territory. The coastal wetlands and lakes represent important habitats for the wintering of migratory bird species. Mountainous ecosystems occupy most of the hinterland. The biodiversity in the western part of the country, bordering with Serbia, is also highly significant. It is a very important place of retreat (refugium) for the endangered populations of the big carnivorous, such as bear, wolf, and lynx. About 30% of all known European plant species occur in Albania; the Albania flora

⁴ W.Fremuth, "Balkan Green Belt": Euronature Background

⁵ also known as glacial relicts

counts about 3 200 vascular plant species, of them 27 species and 150 subspecies are endemic⁶.

Macedonia has rich and varied flora and fauna, because of its terrain and geographical location at one of Europe's geographical crossroads. It also has a number of endemic and relict species, including some of which are very rare (e.g., *Astragalus cerjavski* and *Tulipa mariane*; *Slavia jurisicii*, *Ferulago macedonia*, and *Sambucus deborensis*). Various climatic influences and relief forms on a relatively small territory result in the occurrence of 3 500 species of vascular plants, 485 species of vertebrates and 6 844 species of invertebrates. The variety of animal species is huge and includes 330 bird species and 78 mammal species; three of them are endemic: the Balkan mole, the Balkan pine vole, and the Balkan short-tailed mouse. The three glacial lakes, Ohrid, Prespa and Dojran, are very important, particularly for their rich biodiversity, their water resources, and their transboundary significance. Two endemic fish species were collected and determined from the Ohrid Lake: the Ohrid trout and the Ohrid bleak and one from the Dojran Lake: the Dojran roach.^{7,8}

⁶ [Hwww.unece.org/env/epr/studies/albania/H](http://www.unece.org/env/epr/studies/albania/H) - Biodiversity

⁷ [Hwww.rec.org/REC/Publications/CountryReports/Macedonia.PDF](http://www.rec.org/REC/Publications/CountryReports/Macedonia.PDF)H

⁸ [Hwww.unece.org/env/epr/studies/macedonia/H](http://www.unece.org/env/epr/studies/macedonia/H) - Biodiversity