

# **Relations between Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey: historical perspective and current status**

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## **Abstract**

Relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey are deeply rooted in historical, cultural and political ties. Both countries are full members of the Council of Europe and NATO. The Republic of North Macedonia has an embassy in Ankara and a consulate general in Istanbul. Turkey has an embassy in Skopje and a consulate general in Bitola. Due to historical, cultural and human relations, the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey have very close and friendly relations. Shortly after North Macedonia declared its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, Turkey recognized the sovereignty of the Republic of North Macedonia as one of the first countries. Bilateral relations were established on August 26, 1992. Also, the Turkish language is the official language in two municipalities, in addition to the Macedonian language, Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia also have good economic relations. There are several Turkish companies present in North Macedonia, especially TAV Aerodromi Holding and Sishecam. Both countries aspire to join the European Union. In the Republic of North Macedonia, there are 77,959 citizens declared as Turks, which represents 3.85% of the country's population. The Turks from North Macedonia serve as a bridge between the two countries and are part of the cooperation program in the field of culture.

**Keywords:** friendly, language, economy, culture, population.

## **1. Historical ties and Ottoman heritage between the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey**

Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire for more than 500 years, from the end of the 14th century until the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913. Before the conquest, the area of Macedonia was divided into various Serbian feudal principalities. Later, the region of Macedonia became part of the Ottoman province or Eyalet Rumelia. The name Rumelia (Turkish: Rumeli) means "Land of the Romans" in Turkish, referring to the lands conquered by the Ottoman Turks from the Byzantine Empire. The rule of Turkey with Macedonia left a lasting mark on the cultural and social

fabric of the region. The influence of the Ottoman era can still be seen today in the form of mosques, bridges, bazaars and other historical structures scattered throughout Macedonia. Many elements of Turkish culture, language and architecture remain in the daily life of people in the Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>1</sup>

The Ottoman Empire originated from a small emirate founded in the second half of the 13th century in northwestern Anatolia. By 1354 it had gained a foothold in Europe, and by 1362 Adrianopolis (present-day Edirne, Turkey) had fallen. From this base the power of this Turkish and Islamic state was constantly expanding. From a military point of view, the most significant defeat of the Serbian states occurred at the Battle of Maritsa River near Chernomen in 1371, but it was the defeat in 1389 of the combined army of Serbs, Albanians and Hungarians under Lazar. The Kosovo battle which is preserved in legend as symbolizing the submission of the Balkan Slavs to the "Ottoman yoke". Constantinople itself did not fall to the Ottoman Turks until 1453, but by the end of the 14th century the Macedonian region had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. Thus began what was in many respects the most stable period in Macedonian history, which lasted until the Turks were expelled from the region in 1913:<sup>2</sup>

- Half a millennium of contact with Turkey had a great impact on the language, food and many other aspects of everyday life in Macedonia. Within the empire, administrators, soldiers, merchants and artisans moved to pursue their professions. Where war, famine or disease left regions underpopulated, settlers were relocated elsewhere without regard to any connection between ethnicity and territory. With the system known as *devşirme* (the infamous "blood tax"), numerous Christian children were periodically recruited into the Turkish military and administration, where they were Islamized and deployed wherever their services were needed. For all these reasons, many Balkan cities have acquired a cosmopolitan atmosphere. This was especially the case in Macedonia during the 19th century, when, as the Serbian, Greek, and Bulgarian states began to assert their independence, many who associated themselves with Turkish rule moved to lands still held by the lofty gate.
- The economic legacy of Turkish rule is also important. During the expansionist phase of the empire, Turkish feudalism consisted mainly of the *timar* system of "tax farming", with local officials collecting revenue or supporting troops in the name of the sultan, but were not landowners. As the distinctive military aspects of the Ottoman order declined after the 18th century, these privileges were gradually transformed in some areas into the *chiflik* system, which more closely resembled land ownership. This process involved the secession of the peasantry from their traditional rights to the land and the corresponding creation of large estates cultivated on a commercial basis. The homestead thus provided the paradox of a population strongly influenced by Ottoman culture, yet bound in an increasingly oppressive economic subordination to Turkish landlords.

Ottoman Macedonia was a diverse and culturally rich area that included parts of present-day Greece, North Macedonia and Bulgaria. During Ottoman rule, Macedonia experienced a fusion of cultural influences, where religious and diverse ethnic communities coexisted. However, it has also faced periods of tension and conflict often rooted in ethnic and religious differences. The legacy of Ottoman Macedonia lives on in the cultural heritage, architecture and society of the

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica – Rumelia at Encyclopædia Britannica.com, (2024), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_Macedonia\\_under\\_the\\_Ottoman\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Macedonia_under_the_Ottoman_Empire).

<sup>2</sup> Fact-checked (2024) • Article History, Britannica, North Macedonia - Ottoman, Balkans, History | Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Macedonia/>.

region, depicting a historical past that continues to influence the identities and dynamics of modern times.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Relations between Turkey and the Republic of Macedonia after independence

Ankara recognized the Republic of Macedonia on February 6, 1992. On August 28, 1992 in London, Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin signed the protocol for establishing diplomatic relations with the Republic of Macedonia and in October, the appointment of ambassadors was announced. The Yugoslav ambassador in Ankara, Trajan Petrovski, was recalled on January 31, 1992, a few days after Turkey announced its imminent recognition of the Republic of Macedonia:<sup>4</sup>

- Isolated in the area with its tense or ambiguous relations with all its neighbors, suffering from a lack of international recognition and weakened by a difficult economic transition and a rather divided territorial ethnic composition, the Republic of Macedonia warmly welcomed this public support for its independence and its territorial integrity. Turkey and Macedonia as countries shared the same local enmities, especially with Greece, and Turkey seemed to be the only regional country responsible - and willing - to cooperate with Skopje. Bulgaria, which recognized Macedonia's independence as early as January 1992, has not extended this recognition to the "Macedonian nation", which is why Macedonian leaders fear that its intentions are rather ambiguous. Finally, by developing strong cooperation with Turkey, Macedonian leaders tried to balance the alleged hostile alliance between Serbia and Greece.
- As for Turkey, it has used the small republic's isolation to position it as a local partner. Most Balkan countries have mixed feelings towards the Turks, who are perceived as the successors of the Ottomans who dominated the area for several centuries. In this context, the very fact that Macedonian leaders did not hesitate to cooperate with Ankara (indeed, partly because they felt isolated) spoke for this partnership. Finally, Turkish analysts believed that preserving the country's stability was essential to avoid a general flare-up in the area and therefore should be supported in its quest for recognition.
- The first official visit abroad, always a very symbolic move, of President K. Gligorov, was in Turkey (in March 1992), and the president T. Ozal was the first head of a foreign state to visit Macedonia (in June 1993). Public statements made during official visits are always extremely cordial and the leaders of both countries regularly praise the excellence of their bilateral relations. Turkish leaders do not miss an opportunity to remind that they were one of the first countries to recognize Macedonian independence, moreover under its constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia". However, first or second, Turkey very quickly supported the independence of this country and acted in all international spheres to support its independence and territorial integrity. Turkey is still the only NATO member to recognize the "Republic of Macedonia" under this name and not as "FIROM" (causing the already familiar footnote "Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name" in all official NATO documents. ). Skopje appointed an ambassador to Turkey.
- The relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey have always been stable and stronger. The Turkish community here and our Macedonians living in Turkey

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<sup>3</sup> Ilerimun.Com, (2024), North Macedonia | DISEC - ILERIMUN <https://disec.ilerimun.com/.../north-macedonia>.

<sup>4</sup> ResearchGate, (2023), The republic of Macedonia and its recognition, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/>.

are like a cultural bridge between the two countries. Within the framework of the group entered into what was encountered by the Republic of Macedonia on its journey for inclusion in international organizations, Turkey's position has always been clear. In fact, it often shows different attitudes from other countries in supporting North Macedonia.

The deep-rooted historical, cultural and human ties between Turkey and Macedonia make our relations exceptional. Relations are based on solid foundations, continue to develop in all areas. Cooperation between the two countries is realized with an understanding that takes into account the stability, prosperity and progress of the Balkans. Macedonia and Turkey contribute to the development of regional cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, energy, transport, culture and education. As NATO allies, Turkey and Macedonia are strengthening joint efforts to face regional and international security challenges. The Macedonian Turkish community, which is one of the founding nations of North Macedonia, and the people in Turkey who have roots from North Macedonia, create a unique bridge of friendship and cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Economic relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia

The close relations and strong cooperation between Turkey and North Macedonia stem from their shared history and culture. Mutual high-level visits are held at regular and frequent intervals. Turkey is the first country to recognize North Macedonia with its constitutional name. Turkey is also the first country to appoint an ambassador to Skopje. Since its independence, Turkey has resolutely supported the territorial integrity, sovereignty and immutability of the borders of the Republic of North Macedonia. Turkey also supports the preservation of the unitary state structure of North Macedonia, as well as its multi-ethnic and multicultural character. Parallel to the development of relations between Turkey and North Macedonia, an increase in bilateral contacts and visits between the two countries is observed.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Economic Relations:** (million US Dollars)

<b>Years</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Export	413,18	408,83	412,85	698,24
Import	119,15	107,59	130,70	256,25
Total Trade Volume	532,33	516,42	543,55	954,49
Balance	+294,03	+301,24	+282,15	+441,98

Source: Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Relations between Türkiye and North Macedonia, (2023), <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey>.

- ✓ Main export items: citrus fruits, textile products, white goods, furniture, metal products, pharmaceutical products, plastic products, diesel oil, ceramic tiles.
- ✓ Main import items: iron and steel, synthetic textiles, bricks, metal products, rawhide, waste, auto spare parts, baby clothes.

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<sup>5</sup> 30 години дипломатски односи со Турција – историски врски, (2022), <https://time.mk/c/9d97e341e4/30-godini-diplomatski...>

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Relations between Türkiye and North Macedonia, (2023), <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey>.

- ✓ Despite the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, bilateral economic relations continue to improve. While our exports were \$408.8 million in 2019, they reached \$412.8 million in 2020 when the global epidemic broke out and \$543.55 million in 2021. By the end of 2022, the volume of our bilateral trade exceeded 700 million dollars. In 2023, our bilateral trade volume is expected to reach \$1 billion.
- ✓ Turkish companies in North Macedonia operate in sectors such as banking, construction, healthcare, airport management, education, textile and ready-made clothing, milk and dairy products, insurance, hotel management and tourism. The number of Turkish companies is about 100, and the total investment is 1.3 billion dollars. Türkiye is the seventh largest foreign investor in the country. Turkish companies employ about 5,000 people.
- ✓ Economic ties between Turkey and North Macedonia have strengthened in recent years. Turkey is one of North Macedonia's biggest trading partners, and the two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2006, which helped boost trade in sectors such as agriculture, construction and services.
- ✓ Turkey has also made significant investments in North Macedonia's infrastructure, and Turkish companies have assets in sectors such as energy, telecommunications and construction. This growing economic partnership has contributed to the development of both countries, with increased trade and investment flows between them.
- ✓ Turkey is ranked eighth in the volume of trade cooperation with North Macedonia in 2020, seventh in 2021 and sixth in the first half of 2022. This shows that there is a positive trend in increasing the volume of trade. As you know, Germany is in first place in terms of commercial cooperation. This cooperation is diversified in all areas. From aviation to all other sectors, there is no sector where there is no Turkish company.
- ✓ As the figures show, the economic shoulder will increase to one billion dollars, but it is believed that we can reach a trade volume of two billion dollars in the next five years.

The Republic of North Macedonia has very developed economic relations with Turkey, Turkish investments extend over the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the statistical agency, Turkey is in the top 10 countries with which our country has a high volume of trade. In terms of trade with our country, Turkey is in seventh place, after Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and China. When it comes to the trade ratio, the Republic of North Macedonia mostly imports from Turkey: machines and machine parts, plastics, cotton, vehicles, electrical and electronic equipment, etc. While it mainly exports iron and steel, stone, plaster, cement, etc.

Turkish companies in North Macedonia operate in many important economic sectors, such as: banking, construction, health, culture, airport management, education, textiles and ready-made clothing, insurance, hotel management and tourism. According to the data of the Ministry of Economy, Turkish investments in our country reach 557 million US dollars, with an increasing trend every year. In 2021 alone, Turkish investments reached a value of 66.65 million USD and 57.4 million USD in 9 months of 2022. But the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey says that the total amount of Turkish investments in RMV is 1.3 billion dollars.

North Macedonia and Turkey nurture a strong traditional partnership and friendship. The two countries cooperate very well within the framework of NATO, and a protocol for cooperation in the area of European integration has also been signed. Macedonia and Turkey have excellent economic cooperation and Turkey is constantly among Macedonia's most important trade

partners. The interest of North Macedonia is the promotion of economic cooperation and encouraging Turkish investments in the country.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Cultural and social relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia**

The Balkans can be defined as a region that was ruled by different cultures and civilizations and had different nations, religions and cultures. It is probably possible to see the effects of these multicultural and multinational structures on international politics and economics. In that sense, Macedonia is inevitably at an important point for Balkan and Ottoman history, and even for international politics. It is very possible to see the Turkish influence on Macedonia, which - for 542 years was ruled by the Ottomans.<sup>8</sup>

- When looking at the condensed political and economic relations between Macedonia and Turkey, the effect of the common cultural and historical heritage on regional and broad economic development and cooperation can be seen without great effort. From that point of view, the topic of discussion is the historical, sociological and cultural effect of the Ottoman Empire on sustainable and better economic relations. If we focus on the changing balance in Europe, as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia and developing approaches to Macedonia, Turkey's relations with Greece and other regional countries become very important, which are still operated in terms of development and maintenance.
- The Turkish minority in North Macedonia plays an essential role in strengthening the cultural ties between the two countries. The preservation of the Turkish language, traditions and customs in North Macedonia is proof of the lasting influence of the Ottoman period.
- Turkey supports cultural and educational initiatives in North Macedonia, including the construction of Turkish-language schools and cultural centers. These initiatives are aimed at maintaining the Turkish heritage and encouraging mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries.
- In addition, educational exchanges between Turkey and North Macedonia are common, with students from North Macedonia coming to Turkey for higher education and vice versa. This exchange of knowledge and experiences further strengthens the cultural ties between the two peoples.
- On the cultural level, several projects were implemented: conferences, concerts, film festivals, exhibitions, etc. were jointly organized. A symposium on Atatürk was organized by the University of Gazi (Ankara) and the University of Bitola in October 1998, a symposium on Turkish culture in Skopje was held in March 1998, a film was jointly financed, in 1995, the annual "Goce Days" were organized in Istanbul (with exhibitions, concerts, conferences) and so on. The Cooperation Agency opened an office in Skopje in May 1997. She participated in several conferences, financed the formation of statistics specialists, etc.

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<sup>7</sup> Makfax.Com.Mk, (2024), Гаши - Фидан: Северна Македонија и Турција, <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/gashi-fidan-severna>.

<sup>8</sup> ResearchGate, (2024), Turkey-Macedonia Relations from Cultural and Historical Perspective, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication>.

- Common values, deep-rooted history and human ties form the basis of mutual cooperation between the two countries, and that the Turkish community in Macedonia represents an important bridge for Turkey and North Macedonia.
- In recent years, Turkey has made numerous investments and donations, especially in education, health and with a special emphasis on culture. Taking into account the historical past between Turkey and the RSM, and even the Balkans as a whole, there is speculation in the public opinion in our country that the Turkish state is trying to restore the centuries-old influence in the Balkans.

## **5. Political and diplomatic relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia**

The Republic of Turkey has been providing consistent support to the Republic of Macedonia since independence in the early 90s of the last century. The friendly relations between the two countries are also reflected in the fruitful political cooperation, both at the bilateral level and at the multilateral level, within the framework of international organizations. The overall relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia are characterized by traditional friendship and partnership, and cooperation is dynamic at all levels. The intense and good political relations open space for even more intense economic cooperation and increased trade and investments between the two countries.

Turkey is a strong supporter of North Macedonia's aspirations to join the European Union (EU). Turkey's support for North Macedonia's membership in the European Union is also an essential aspect of their relationship. As a candidate country for EU membership, Turkey has actively supported North Macedonia's efforts to meet EU requirements, including in areas such as governance, rule of law and economic reforms.

The traditionally strong and friendly relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Turkey are characterized by the excellent bilateral project cooperation that takes place through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which has a wide range of activities and provides continuous support in the social-economic development of our country through numerous realized projects, significant due to their flexibility and orientation to results in the fields of education, health, administrative and social infrastructure, transport and agriculture.

## **6. Current situation and future prospects of the relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia**

The relations between North Macedonia and Turkey on a historical and political level are current issues because they are based on common geography and history, education, culture and nation building, common geopolitics and perspectives of what the common world could look like in the future. There is a conviction that the Balkans will be reunited, not only as a geographical entity, but also as a place of contact of civilizations, cultures and religions on a wider scale, where peace, security and prosperity will prevail. The Republic of North Macedonia is an example that coexistence can be built in these spaces, building a state and society with diversity, but in complementary unity

Relations between Turkey and the Republic of North Macedonia are characterized by mutual respect, cooperation and a common commitment to regional stability. The current partnership is

strong not only in the field of economy and trade, but also in diplomatic and security matters. Both countries are committed to working together to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the Balkans.

State institutions are doing everything in their power to facilitate economic cooperation, which is helped by geographical proximity, good infrastructural connectivity and direct flight routes between the two countries. There are mutual commitments of the two countries to increase the total trade and there is an expressed expectation for the expansion of the interest of Turkish companies in investing in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Turkey are linked by historical and cultural ties, and in this regard, expatriates represent a significant link in the strong friendship and fruitful cooperation between the two countries. The bilateral relationship between the two countries in the field of culture is generally characterized by the spirit of traditional friendship, mutual understanding, tolerance and active cooperation in all spheres of mutual interest and is expected to continue.

The government has several projects that will promote the activities of the Turkish community in the Republic of North Macedonia. One of them is the project for the construction of a new Turkish theater, with the performance of which the Turkish community will receive a theater building according to all world standards. A significant number of projects for the renovation and conservation of cultural buildings, mainly mosques and hammams, have been listed by this institution.

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