

“Global Actors in the Western Balkans”

EU Info Centre, Kralja Milana 7, Belgrade
17 June 2019, 11:00 – 14:30

Powered by the **European Fund for the Balkans**

The rationale of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has been changing during the last couple of years. The consolidation of stability and the full implementation of liberal political and economic reforms are no longer the principal (or the sole) arguments cited to make the case for the region’s EU accession. European decision-makers have been increasingly claiming that the EU should move on to contain the negative influence in the Western Balkans of other external actors, namely, Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf countries. Those actors’ engagement extends from economic investment, particularly in large-scale infrastructure, to political support for governments and parties, as well as active media engagement. Beyond that, there has been more clandestine and covert engagement, often the subject of intense speculation. The EU considers itself involved, against its will, in a traditional geopolitical game of influence in a European periphery where its competitors allegedly strive to redefine the rules of the game, to the disadvantage of the region and the EU.

The net effect of this shift in discourse is the resurfacing of EU enlargement of the Western Balkans on the European political agenda. The Commission published last year a new enlargement strategy document to reinvigorate the process. It qualified the Western Balkans EU integration as a “geostrategic investment” and put forward a best-case scenario for the accession of Serbia and Montenegro by 2025. The European Council followed suit and discussed the region’s EU accession after a four-year-long pause (from 2014 to 2018) in which the Western Balkans had emerged only in debates about security challenges to Europe.

While the renewed EU interest in the Western Balkans is without doubt positive, it rests on several myths and misconceptions. Between the view of regional governments, who often perceive this plethora of external involvement as a boon to a region suffering from Western neglect and much reduced foreign investments following the global economic crisis, and the view that a sinister threat emanates from all engagement by non-Western actors, a more nuanced understanding has to emerge. The panel seeks to take a sober look at the different key non-Western actors and their impact in the Western Balkans.

The event will present the latest BiEPAG Policy Brief “The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options” and the academic background study “The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2020) having Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis as editors, and BiEPAG members as contributors to the study.

Agenda

11.00-11.45 Welcome remarks

- **Aleksandra Tomanić**, Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans

Presentation of the Book "The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries"

- **Florian Bieber**, Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz, Austria

Presentation of the Policy Brief "The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options"

- **Nikolaos Tzifakis**, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of the Peloponnese, Corinth

11.45-13.00 Regional Trends

Chair: **Florian Bieber**

- Serbia, **Marko Kmezić**, Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz, Austria
- North Macedonia, **Zoran Nechev**, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis", Skopje, North Macedonia
- Montenegro, **Jovana Marović**, Politikon, Podgorica, Montenegro

13.00-13.15 Coffee Break

13.15-14.30 External Actors

Chair: **Nikola Burazer**, European Western Balkans, Belgrade, Serbia

- UAE, **Tena Prelec**, London School of Economics, London, UK
- China, **Anastas Vangeli**, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland
- Turkey: **Sabina Pačariz**, Queen Mary University of London, UK