



HEAD OFFICE  
10 Rue du Commerce  
1000 Brussels, Belgium  
+32 2 285 41 63  
yepp@epp.eu

## **Political influence from third actors at the enlargement process in the Western Balkans**

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### **Recognising that:**

1. At the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki 2003, the EU reiterated its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries: The future of the Balkans is within the European Union<sup>1</sup>.
2. Geographically, the six Western Balkan countries are not located on the European periphery, but are surrounded by the EU and form an “inner courtyard”.
3. The YEPP Council on April 24, 2021 called for alternative arrangements aiming at integrating non-member Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries into European Union structures, albeit the path to full membership is a lengthy and, in many cases, complicated procedure.
4. The influence of the external actors Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States in the Western Balkans are increasing. These actors are using different toolboxes and approaches, all of which counteract the EU's aspirations. Starting points are, for example: religion, (social) media and propaganda, cultural and educational projects, the cooperation or establishment of political parties, support during the Covid-19 pandemic, infrastructure development and the financing of construction projects.
5. This targeted and destructive influence is causing public disintegration of the approval for EU accession and thus a European way of life to begin to decline - and this in a region where deepened EU integration has been waiting for years and decades.
6. Although the EU is substantially investing in the Western Balkans, it has a problem with its narrative; Comprehension and perception of the importance, as well as development potential that European integration efforts have for the development of Western Balkan countries has not been fully recognized by the broader public nor by the political leaders in the region.
7. Many problems in the Western Balkans can quickly spread to the EU. It is important that the EU remains the most important actor in the region and the beacon of stability towards which all the Western Balkan countries can look up to.

### **Acknowledging that:**

1. Russia's aim is to sabotage EU accession efforts. In the process, anti-Western narratives are being increasingly generated via media portals, disrupting European interests in the region. It offers no credible



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economic and social counter-model, but manages to paralyse necessary reforms by influencing public opinion.

2. Chinese influence is not taking place via media, but rather through diplomatic channels. China sees the Western Balkans as a “backdoor” to the EU and a way to exercise influence on it. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is violating environmental standards, leading some states to high debt and fostering corruption.
3. The relations between Turkey and the European Union are influencing relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans. The greater the skepticism within the EU about enlargement, the more influence Turkey has. Turkey is culturally connected with the region – it funds cultural heritage programs, is renovating monuments and mosques and even establishes or supports its own political parties.
4. The influence of the Gulf States on civil society is increasing at an alarming rate. Religious institutions are built, often in competition with Turkey. The fundamentalist and sometimes extremist interpretation of Islam affects local communities, causing distrust in Western partners and aspirations for the EU. It differs from the practice of Islam, which has thrived here for centuries in coexistence with other religions. Religious freedom must not be touched.
5. The rising influence of external actors is a consequence of the EU’s shortcomings to utilize its position as the most important economic partner for the region.
6. The path to full membership in the European Union is a lengthy and, in many cases, complicated procedure. Being a credible neighbour is in the vital interest of the EU. Initiating alternative arrangements aiming at integrating non-member Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries into European Union structures serves such a strategic purpose.

#### **YEPP calls on:**

1. Member states to recognize that there is competition for supremacy in the Western Balkans; Russia remains a familiar rival for Europe, whereas China and Gulf States represent a rising concern whose activities require close monitoring, preparedness, as well as development of resilience and preventive measures.
1. Member states to keep Enlargement Policy high on the agenda. Further deepening and strengthening of European cooperation strengthens the European Union as a community of states with the same goals and values.
2. The European Commission to expand Erasmus+ programs between universities and other institutions in the WB6 and EU.



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3. The European Commission and member states to promote its work and its successes in a better way and also work on its narrative, counteracting hybrid warfare from third influences.
4. The European Commission to become a strategic goal that European companies and consortia are involved in large infrastructure projects and not allow other hostile actors and strategic adversaries to take precedence.
5. Member states Not to support political figures who, while bringing stability, pursue increasingly authoritarian, illiberal policies in the Western Balkans. Despite keeping the region at peace, these are highly corrupt, lack democratic values and ignore European standards.
6. The European Commission, member states and EPP to continue and improve existing good practices of the European Neighborhood Policy, aiming at stronger cooperation with the non - member WB6 and Eastern Partnership countries.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES\\_03\\_163](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163)