

EDITORIAL

Contemporary debates on politics and international relations in the Western Balkans

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In recent years, the Western Balkans region has witnessed a notable shift in power dynamics, as emergent powers have steadily increased their presence and influence. This development has significant implications for the internal affairs of the countries in the region and their aspirations towards European Union (EU) integration. As these emerging actors flex their muscles, it is crucial for both local leaders and EU policymakers to navigate this evolving landscape wisely and collaboratively.

The rise of emergent powers, such as China, Russia, and Turkey, in the Western Balkans has been marked by increased investments in infrastructure projects, economic cooperation, and diplomatic overtures. On one hand, these engagements have offered some tangible benefits to the region, providing much-needed foreign direct investment and infrastructure development. However, on the other hand, it has raised concerns about potential dependencies, lack of transparency, and possible erosion of democratic values. One of the key impacts of this growing influence is evident in the region's internal affairs. Local political elites have been

presented with new opportunities for patronage, often leading to complex webs of alliances and shifting loyalties.

This influence can also lead to political polarization, as external actors may support factions that align with their interests, further destabilizing the region. Furthermore, the influence of emergent powers may affect the region's overall stability. Traditional geopolitical rivalries between these actors can exacerbate existing tensions within and between the Western Balkan countries. The situation in the North Kosovo prove that. The risk of proxy conflicts and geopolitical maneuvering could hinder progress towards regional reconciliation, which remains a fundamental prerequisite for EU integration.

The Western Balkan countries' aspirations to join the European Union are profoundly impacted by these emergent powers' growing presence. For some nations, the allure of alternative investment and diplomatic support from these actors may undermine their commitment to EU integration.

The EU is engaged in taking proactive steps to strengthen its presence and support in the region, offering a compelling vision of integration that remains the most desirable option for the Western Balkan nations. By prioritizing investments in the Western Balkans, fostering transparent and accountable governance, and demonstrating tangible benefits of EU membership, the bloc can reassert its position as the most attractive partner for the region's progress and development. Thus, the region can move towards a more stable, prosperous, and harmonious future.

