



WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS: WAYS FORWARD IN ANALYZING EXTERNAL ACTORS' INFLUENCE

ONLINE PUBLIC EVENTS – A DRAFT PROGRAM

What are the most recent configurations of non-European external influence in the Western Balkans? How do domestic elites and institutions in the Western Balkans respond to geopolitical pressures from non-European powers? Is there a local 'demand' for such influence and what are its sources? What are the incentives of domestic elites? What is 'malign' about non-European external influence and what role do elite competition, corruption and state capture, identity politics and European integration play in the process of welcoming or repelling foreign influence?

The 18-month long project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence” of the Prague Security Studies Institute investigates these questions. The project incorporates in-depth analyses that go beyond existing research on the issue and thus contribute to a better understanding of various aspects and mechanisms of foreign presences in the Western Balkans, particularly Russian, Chinese and Turkish. The findings of the studies written within this framework will be presented in two online debates that aim to shed new light on the activities of foreign actors in the region.

Being traditionally viewed as a gateway to the EU, which it aspires to join but with still distant membership prospects, the Western Balkans currently remain isolated within the geopolitical space of the EU at the crossroads of competing external actors' interests. Russia, with its increasingly antagonistic relations with the West, has been exploiting its subversive potential, and Turkey has been carrying out an ambitious foreign policy in this region of their traditional interest, while China's economic and political engagement in the Balkans has been steadily growing. In this context, coupled with democratic backsliding in most Western Balkans countries (confirmed by the 2020 Freedom House and European Commission reports) and the uncertain credibility of the EU's future enlargement processes, maintaining the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the region has become a significant challenge for Western policymakers. The project's goal has therefore been of utmost relevance for the current debates among various experts and for policy responses coming from the EU and its member states' representatives, as well as the incoming Joe Biden administration.

The online public debates aim to elaborate on the project's most important findings and make them available to a wider audience. The first event will focus on the previously neglected area of domestic responses and the 'reception side' of external influences in the Western Balkan countries, which is shown to be a key element of the puzzle. The second event will explore the essential question of to what extent non-Western engagements are harmful to the region, going beyond the simple dichotomy between 'bad' influence of Eastern powers and 'good' dominance of the West in the region.



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Debate 1: Pleading for European integration, but welcoming non-European influence? Domestic demand for non-European external influence in the Western Balkans

Date: March 9, 2021

Time: 18:00 – 19:30 CET

Analyses and reports on external influences in the Western Balkans typically investigate activities by Russian, Chinese or Turkish state actors, companies, official representatives or other stakeholders, while little attention has been put on the domestic responses to these actors' presences. The studies, written within the framework of this project, however, attest to the need for refocusing attention on the local dimension of external influences, as the 'demand side' on the part of the ruling elites and other stakeholders crucially shapes the field of action and also visibility of foreign engagements. The debate will explore the following questions: How do local political actors perceive the presence and activity of external actors? How do they use it for their own purposes and internal power struggles? What narratives and framing strategies do they apply to capitalize on foreign actors' presences? Which methods can be used to analyze the domestic aspects of foreign influence?

Moderator: **Senada Šelo Šabić**, Senior Research Associate at Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO)

Speakers:

- **Tena Prelec**, Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations (DPIR), University of Oxford, and a Research Associate at LSEE-Research on South Eastern Europe, LSE
- **Martin Naunov**, PhD student in Political Science at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill
- **Ognjan Denkovski**, Junior Lecturer at the University of Amsterdam, Department of Communication Science and a Research Associate at the Global Disinformation Index
- **Stefan Jojić**, PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Studies, University of Belgrade
- **Stefan Vladisavljev**, Program Coordinator at the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence

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Debate 2: What is 'malign' about external influence in the Western Balkans? Unpacking the role of non-Western powers

Date: March 15, 2021

Time: 18:00 – 19:30 CET

Russian, Chinese and Turkish activities in the Western Balkans have recently become predominantly labelled as 'malign' in Western expert and policymaking circles. Yet viewing the non-Western actors' presence as inherently harmful and malign simplifies a complex reality and does not bring the understanding necessary for increasing the resilience of Western Balkan societies to real risks involved and for the drafting of EU or US responses. The debate thus aims to unpack the issue of the harmfulness of Russian, Chinese and Turkish activities, asking the following questions: To which extent, where and how does their presence cause negative impacts? What specifically makes it malign - does it rest in these actors' strategy and intentions or rather in their conduct and interaction with local ruling elites? Does their approach differ from that of Western countries, and in what ways? To what extent is foreign non-Western influence harmful to the countries' long-term goal of joining the EU? What role do non-state actors play and how can it be conceptualized?

Moderator: **Ioannis Armakolas**, Head of the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and Assistant Professor in Comparative Politics of South East Europe at the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, University of Macedonia

Speakers:

- **Anastas Vangeli**, Research Fellow at the EU*Asia Institute at the ESSCA School of Management, and an Adjunct Professor at ESSCA's Shanghai Campus.
- **Srećko Latal**, Regional Editor at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
- **Gentiola Madhi**, Researcher and Political Analyst

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