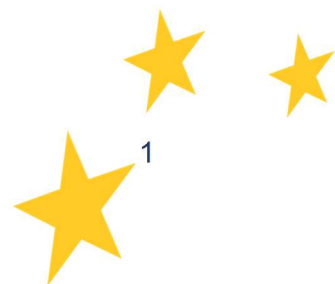




**THE EU, CHINA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS:  
THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER INTEGRATION**

**ONLINE PAPER 1**



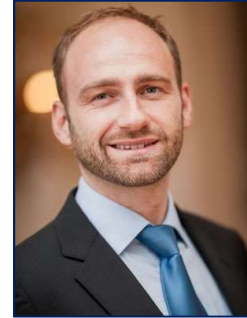
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## Abstract

The context of EU enlargement has changed fundamentally since the Eastern enlargement rounds of the early 2000s. On the one hand, enlargement has become politicized domestically. While Eastern enlargement was a broadly technocratic and meritocratic process based on a permissive public consensus, it is now constrained and contested by adverse public opinion, populist mobilization, cultural framing and bilateral disputes. On the other hand, enlargement has turned into a matter of geopolitical competition. Currently, we can observe a wave of autocratization and heightened competition between the EU, Russia, Turkey and China in Southeast Europe, as well as a deep crisis of EU governance, both internally and externally.

In the meantime, China has become the most prominent third actor in the Western Balkans, being much more present than Russia or Turkey, the traditional partners for the region. China's relations with the Western Balkan countries should be viewed in 3 dimensions. The first dimension is its bilateral relations, through which China has dedicated itself to developing friendly relationship with the Western Balkan countries. The second dimension is evident in China-CEEC relations, that is the so-called 17+1 framework which can serve as a complimentary mechanism alongside bilateral relations. The third dimension is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where the BRI focuses on trade, investment, connectivity and people-to-people exchange. After Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the Belt and Road Initiative at the end of 2013, the 17+1 has been integrated into the BRI and this move raised significant concern in Brussels.

China's approach with loans and construction work on infrastructural projects in the Western Balkans has been widely welcomed and its acceptance both by the regional leaders and by citizens has surprised everybody. That is why China's active policy in this region has, to some degree, made the EU suspicious of Beijing's intentions, which may undermine the EU's coherence in policymaking on China. There are two groups of reasons for concern: the political and the technical. The political concerns are connected with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the obligation of candidates for EU membership to progressively align with common decisions regarding their geostrategic relationship with China, and new developments with the US. Technically, the obligation to accept and implement the EU *acquis* will need to bring more transparency in public procurement, more stringent environmental rules, and respect for Intellectual property rights (IPR), which might put those countries that are on the path to the EU on a collision course with China.

Since the launch of the ambitious Belt and Road initiative, China has been constantly called out for its so-called "debt trap diplomacy" schemes, referring to Chinese involvement in costly infrastructure financing throughout the weak economic systems of the developing world. The situation around public debt in Montenegro has become an extremely debatable topic, as recent infrastructure project financed by the Chinese Exim Bank have led to mounting debt. On the other hand, underinvestment in the infrastructure sector is a chronic problem in the West Balkans, and thus China's entry in the region may partially contribute to finding solutions to the problem. In this regard, China's involvement could be seen as compatible with the interests of the Western Balkan countries, and even perhaps with the interests of the European Union.

**Key words:** EU, China, Western Balkan, geopolitics, enlargement, infrastructure.