

THE BALKANS: NEITHER THE BACKYARD OF EU NOR THE PLAYGROUND OF ANY COUNTRY - DAILY SABAH - 24.10.2018

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Blog No: 64
31.10.2018

Daily Sabah (24 October 2018)

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The Balkans is not a frequently used term in the European Union context. For the EU, the Balkans mostly means Western Balkans; a term with no historical roots and fabricated for a divisive political agenda. In early 1990s, the Western countries, and specifically the EU countries as a group, had decided to transform the Balkan region ontologically, starting with its name. In line with this decision, they divided the Balkans into regions. According to the EU; Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece (since they are EU members) are not part of the Balkans anymore. In this sense, they are part of Europe, a term that is itself subject to interpretations based on various political agendas. On the other hand, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia comprise what the EU calls the "Western Balkans" region. When confronted with this term, the question that inevitably comes up is; well, who compromises the Eastern Balkans? It seems that Turkey is by its lonesome self the Eastern Balkans, although this is strangely never explicitly stated.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the word Balkan is a Turkish word meaning mountain. The term Western Balkans, meanwhile, disregards the sociological and historical facts of the Balkans, destroys its integrity and tries purposefully to exclude a certain country, Turkey, from the Balkans, hence from Europe. From my perspective, the term Western Balkans is a misnomer. It represents an attempt to balkanize the Balkans, as in, it is an attempt to fragment an already fragmented region tragically full of historical and current rivalries and animosities.

As I had elaborated in my article titled Half-Hearted EU Enlargement in the Balkans (Daily Sabah 14 May 2018), the EU Commission adopted in February 2018 a strategy under the title of A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. The strategy considers the enlargement policy as part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the EU by 2025. It also presented the enlargement package in the European Parliament in Strasbourg and declared the Commissions recommendation that the EU Council opens accession negotiations with certain Western Balkans countries. Furthermore, it made specific recommendations concerning certain other countries of the said region.

Some reports and analysis consider the Western Balkans region as the southern backyard of Europe, while others refer to the Western Balkans as the playground of non-Western countries trying to increase their influence in the region. This approach is not limited to press reports or political analyses.

We witness the same understanding in the official statements of influential EU leaders. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech to the European Parliament on 17 April, ruled out any expansion of the European Union in the context of Western Balkans until the Union is reformed. However, he also stated; I dont want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia.

Another more recent example is the statement of German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in the Bundestag on 12 September. During his speech, he reportedly stated that China could replace the EU as a major player in the Western Balkans. He also expressed the view that "It's important that we offer these [Western Balkan] countries a European perspective, and a reliable one, because they're otherwise turning to other countries, such as China, which are already ready and don't have the values we have."

In addition to these statements made by EU leaders, the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) has published on 3 September 2018 its Chaillot Paper No. 147 titled Balkan futures - Three Scenarios for 2025. EUISS website describes the Chaillot Papers as the Institute's flagship publication written by external experts as well as the Institutes Senior Analysts, and based on collective work or individual research, they deal with all subjects of current relevance to the Unions security. We understand from its title that said Chaillot Paper was prepared to shed light on the possible security situation in the Balkans by 2025, which was defined as a target date for strengthening the EU. Accordingly, the Executive Summary section of the Paper asks the following question: What will the Western Balkans look like in 2025? What is most interesting and striking in

the Paper is that it refers to disruptive external actors in the Western Balkans as one of the game changers in the said region. The paper tries to explain the game changers in the region and asks the following question: Several other external actors are actively working against the goal of liberal reform in the region. Will the Western Balkan states be able to mitigate these potentially disruptive influences, represented mainly by Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States?

It is quiet hair raising to see such a serious accusation against Turkey in a paper prepared under the responsibility of one of the institutions of the EU dealing with the security studies. One would expect that the said Chaillot Paper provides proper justifications for its accusation. However, this is not the case. According to the Paper, Turkey is a disruptive external actor for the Western Balkans because it; a) supports Bosnia-Herzegovina becoming a NATO member, b) supports Kosovos independence, c) encourages NATO to invite Macedonia to join the Alliance, d) initiates trilateral meetings between Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, e) enjoys positive reception among the citizens of Western Balkan countries and, f) is respected by the young Serbian people. The Paper thus nonsensically argues that Turkey is a disruptive external actor because it promotes friendliness, cooperation, stability, and security in the region. After thorough examination, it becomes apparent that the Paper fails to provide any rationale for why Turkey should be designated as a disruptive external actor.

It is very deplorable to read such an unprofessional assessment in the flagship publication of the European Union Institute for Security Studies. In my opinion, EUISS owes a correction for naming Turkey as one of the disruptive external actors in the Balkans without providing any proper justification.

The recent assessments and views expressed in the publications, strategies, and statements of the EU institutions and leaders leads me to the following conclusion: the EUs interest in the Balkans has been prompted mostly by fears about the roles of other countries in the region. If this is the case, this interest represents the old spheres of influence understanding of European powers colonial expansion into Africa and Asia in the past centuries.

The Balkans is an integral part of Europe. The EU should not consider the Balkans only as part of a sphere of influence game. It should respect the historical, social, cultural integrity of the region. In this respect, it should be underlined that Turkey is not simply a geographically Balkan country, but has been socially and culturally been part of this geography for centuries. Turkey is not an outside power vying for dominance in the region, it is instead a Balkan country focused on cultivating its ties with fellow Balkan countries and on furthering the regions development and maintaining its integrity. Turkey has never explicitly or implicitly showcased a rivalry mentality with any other country regarding this region. Nor has anyone been able to demonstrate how Turkeys initiatives represent a danger for the Balkans. Insisting on reading Turkey as an outside power with a negative influence on the Balkans demonstrates a poor understanding not only of Turkey but of the Balkans as a whole.

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**Photo: Daily Sabah*

https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2018/10/25/the-balkans-neither-the-backyard-of-the-eu-nor-the-playground-of-any-country

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To cite this article: Teoman Ertuğrul TULUN. 2026. "THE BALKANS: NEITHER THE BACKYARD OF EU NOR THE PLAYGROUND OF ANY COUNTRY - DAILY SABAH - 24.10.2018." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Blog No.2018 / 64. October 31. Accessed November 20, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/Blog/THE-BALKANS-NEITHER-THE-BACKYARD-OF-EU-NOR-THE-PLAYGROUND-OF-ANY-COUNTRY-DAILY-SABAH-24-10-2018

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