

Politics

U.S. Chides EU Over Balkan Hopefuls Wooed by Russia and China

By [Misha Savic](#)

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The European Union risks losing credibility in its back yard as Russia and China strive to deepen their foothold in the Balkans as the bloc stalls in advancing membership talks with aspiring countries, a top U.S. State Department official said.

Six countries in the western Balkans have failed to progress in the EU accession process due, as in the case of North Macedonia, to objections from some members, while others have failed to implement sweeping democratic, economic and other reforms.

Now the region of 18 million people needs “real action” by the EU, acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Philip Reeker said at an international forum in North Macedonia.

“The credibility and thus the influence of the EU in this regard in the region is right now at a low point,” Reeker said. “We’re at a critical juncture, where the promise may no longer carry the same level of credibility unless real action follows and to make good on that commitment.”

He called for more investment and engagement to make the area “attractive to high-quality global investors, who can offer alternatives to the predatory overtures by Russia and the People’s Republic of China.”

Some EU states, especially in the bloc’s western core, are reluctant to move ahead with admitting new countries after the headaches of the last few rounds of enlargement -- from corruption concerns to money laundering scandals and challenges to the rule of law. Aspirant countries have made little progress in quelling those worries.

North Macedonia’s progress toward membership has also been held up by its EU-member neighbor, Bulgaria, over the name and origin of the country’s language and the two nations’ shared history. At an impasse, Brussels recently suggested starting negotiations just with Albania.

“Let’s not leave gaps in the effort because geopolitical competitors will move to fill them,” Reeker said. “The Russian Federation capitalizes on this region’s history of political and ethnic divisions, exploiting the region’s dependence on Russian energy and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, endemic corruption, weak rule of law and cybersecurity vulnerabilities.”

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