



## **Russian destabilisation of Balkans rings alarm bells as EU leaders meet**

(Jennifer Rankin, 9 March 2017-The Guardian)

Top MEP David McAllister says bloc must be more visible in the region to counter Kremlin's growing influence

A train with a sign reading 'Kosovo is Serbia' was sent to Kosovo, plunging relations in the region into a crisis. Photograph: Oliver Bunic/AFP/Getty Images

The [European Union](#) needs to be more visible in the western Balkans to counter Russian attempts to destabilise the region, a leading MEP has said, as EU leaders gather for a summit in Brussels on Thursday.

“Geopolitics has returned to the Balkans,” said David McAllister, a German MEP and chair of the European parliament’s foreign affairs committee.

“We are seeing the growing Russian influence, we are seeing growing Turkish influence, the United States is a player, the European Union is a player, so there are different interests at stake,” he said.

But it was Russia’s role that he described as negative, citing the Kremlin’s suspected involvement in [a failed coup in Montenegro](#) and Moscow’s support for hardline nationalist leaders in the region.

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[Russia](#) was also exerting influence on political debate by organising anti-western, and anti-EU propaganda, McAllister said, especially in Serbian-language media outlets that promoted the Kremlin's world view, as well as "conspiracy theories and Serbian ultranationalism".

EU leaders will discuss the growing tension in the Balkans at the Brussels summit. According to a draft memo seen by the Guardian, the leaders will renew their promise that the door of membership remains open while stressing the importance of reforms and "good neighbourly relations".

Member states are divided over whether the summit communique should identify the "outside forces" carving out a bigger role in the region. Russia is a particular concern, but officials are also wary of Turkey's growing role.

"There is third country interference," one EU diplomat said.

EU diplomats are also worried about Balkan citizens heading to Iraq and Syria to fight for Islamic extremist groups. A disproportionately high number of Kosovans, Albanians and Bosnians have been fighting in Middle Eastern war zones, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.

Balkan countries were given the green light to begin the long road to EU membership in 2003, but progress has been mixed. [Croatia joined the EU in 2013](#), and Montenegro and Serbia have embarked on formal membership talks. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia are further behind in the process.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, visited the region last week, in an attempt to revive momentum towards EU integration. Speaking after her visit, she laid out her "profound concerns" but also optimism that all countries could eventually join the EU. "The Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played," Mogherini said.

Federica Mogherini visits Bosnia-Herzegovina. Her trip was also aimed at reassuring the region it had not been forgotten. While the EU has been rocked by one existential crisis after another, from [Brexit](#) to [Greek debt](#) to coping with

migrants and refugees, nationalist and [inter-ethnic tensions](#) have been bubbling away in the western Balkans.

In January, a Serbian train bearing signs reading “Kosovo is Serbian” was sent towards Kosovo, [plunging relations between the countries into a crisis](#). Meanwhile, Macedonia is [entrenched in an increasingly bitter political crisis](#) that has pitted neighbours against each other, and Montenegro was shaken by the assassination attempt against its pro-western prime minister last October. The failed coup has been linked to Russian authorities, although Moscow has denied any involvement.

Tensions have also flared in Bosnia, where the Bosnian-Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, is accused of flouting the 1995 peace agreement that ended a four-year civil war.

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McAllister disputed the view, held by some regional leaders, that the Balkans have been forgotten by Brussels but said it was time for the EU to increase its visibility. A recent poll showed Serbians were more likely to assume Russia was the country's biggest aid donor, rather than the EU, although the estimated €3bn (£2.6bn) received from Brussels since 2000 far exceeds sums from Moscow.

Citing [this poll](#), McAllister said the EU needed to increase its efforts “to make the European Union and its good work more visible in all the six western Balkan countries”.

The MEP was elected to lead the foreign affairs committee in January. In early April, MEPs are to vote on a resolution drafted by McAllister calling on Serbia to align its foreign policy to [Europe](#).

McAllister said he regretted that [Serbia](#) had not chosen to join in EU sanctions against Russia, although pointed to its support for UN peacekeeping operations. “Serbia will have to fully align its foreign policy with the European Union to become a member,” he said.