



## ***2023 REPORT***

JANUARY 2024

# CONTENTS

SUMMARY - Our year in review .....	2
CHINA-RELATED PROJECTS .....	3
Protecting and enhancing the enlargement process of the Western Balkans: where does China stand? .....	3
Countering Foreign Propaganda & Disinformation by Strengthening the Capacity of Media & Journalists.....	4
Western Balkans China Policy Team .....	4
EU RELATED PROJECTS.....	6
Connected we Can: Strengthening WB6 CSO-s agency in Economic and Investment Plan implementation.....	6
Building Better Together: Improving the Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects .....	7
Learning about the EU in high schools.....	8
WESTERN BALKANS RELATED PROJECTS .....	8
Channeling Southeast Europe 6 Civil Society contribution to the Common Regional Market (CRM).....	8
FSPI .....	8
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND CONSULTANCY ACTIVITIES.....	9
WE Barometer .....	9
EMBRACE: EMBRACing change – Overcoming Blockages and Advancing Democracy in the European Neighbourhood.....	9
Publications (a selection) .....	10
Public appearances (a selection).....	11
Podcasts and media appearances (a selection) .....	12

# SUMMARY - Our year in review

**In 2023, we continued to shine, excel and grow!**

**In terms of PUBLICATIONS, our experts...**

...published three original publications - one regional research paper, one toolkit for policymakers, one dataset

...coordinated and drafted one regional and one national study based on surveys

...co-authored eight publications with other think-tanks, partners and networks - two original research papers, one academic paper, one policy paper, two policy briefs and two articles

...coordinated the preparation of five advocacy plans and five policy memos

**In terms of EVENTS, our team...**

...organized four public events, two of them international

...delivered five trainings

...organized fourteen presentations in primary schools

...attended twelve international and two national events as speakers

...hosted and participated in thirteen advocacy meetings

**In terms of MEDIA, we...**

...were interviewed in eleven national and nine international outlets

...prepared and published seven videos summarizing and disseminating research findings

...spoke in four international podcasts

**Not less important:**

...our team got two new members

...we set up an international advisory board composed of four outstanding individuals in our area

...our academic paper was awarded at an international conference

...our work was quoted and quoted, by both researchers and journalists, to the point that it is difficult to keep track!

## CHINA-RELATED PROJECTS

### Protecting and enhancing the enlargement process of the Western Balkans: where does China stand?

With the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Skopje and the Wilfried Martens Center, this project was implemented between May and September 2023. The project focuses on the specific impact that Chinese activities have or could have on the Western Balkan countries' accession in different chapters of the acquis. It examined the dependencies and vulnerabilities of the five countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), but also the needs and ways to strengthen the countries' resilience in the EU accession process. The [research report](#) provides an assessment and classification of China's impact in each negotiating chapter. The report is structured according to the clusters of the new enlargement methodology. The analysis allows for comparisons to be made between countries and between areas, to reach meaningful conclusions about both China's approach, the domestic agency and other potentially important factors.



## Countering Foreign Propaganda & Disinformation by Strengthening the Capacity of Media & Journalists

Together with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, in August 2023, we started a project aimed to support media and journalists to tackle foreign disinformation, safeguard the media space against authoritarian propaganda and put forward reliable and objective contents and counter-narratives that could help citizens build an informed opinion. The project activities include awareness raising and capacity building through training delivery and direct support to journalists through mentoring to learn how and to practically develop objective and well-argued media contents to debunk Russian and Chinese propaganda and provide alternative and credible information sources. In November 2023, we organized three instructive and engaging training sessions for a total of 26 participants. The project, implemented with the support of the U.S. Embassy Grants Program, will continue until May 2024.



## Western Balkans China Policy Team

Supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, this project was launched in July 2023, coordinated by ESTIMA and implemented in cooperation with 4 partner organizations. The project will contribute to developing comprehensive and coherent China policies in the Western Balkan (WB) countries, considering China's increased presence and influence in the region and the potential risks it entails. The objective is to improve policy-making on China-related issues by assessing China's impact on governance systems, enhancing policy-makers capacity to understand China and deliver evidence-based policy interventions, as well as strengthen their cooperation with civil society on China-related matters. Additionally, the project aims to strengthen transparency and oversight over Chinese activities through civic engagement and

invigorated policy debate. The project combines awareness-raising, capacity building, and advocacy activities targeting policy makers, civil society organizations, and the general public.

The Western Balkans China Policy Team gathered in Ohrid for a regional workshop to discuss the activities it will develop in the next two years. Considering China's increased presence and influence in the region and the potential ensuing risks, the group will focus on developing comprehensive and coherent China policies in the Western Balkan (WB) countries. The workshop was led by Jens Bastian from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs - SWP and Ana Krstinovska president of the Macedonian think-tank Estima. The participants worked on planning the advocacy activities and started preparing their country specific policy plans.

The project will be coordinated by ESTIMA and implemented in cooperation with 4 partner organizations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia over a period of 24 months.



In the framework of the project, a video series has been launched, prepared by the partner organizations.

“What does the recent history of Chinese-Balkan relations teach us? From lavish visits by dignitaries in the past to strategic partnerships. Evolution in cultural exchange and attracting the public eye But what are we missing? Is it really all bells and whistles, or is there more beneath the shiny surface?”

Find these and many more answers in the Western Balkans China Policy Team video series on the following links:

[Is China's presence in the Western Balkans really a win-win?](#)

[What is the risk of Montenegro's credit exposure to China?](#)

[Hidden contracts, sensitive sectors risk and unsustainable debt](#)

# EU RELATED PROJECTS

## Connected we Can: Strengthening WB6 CSO-s agency in Economic and Investment Plan implementation

Supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the framework of the Smart Balkans project, we participate as partner organization in the implementation of this project that aims to increase the engagement of specialized CSOs and think tanks in the policy-making cycle and the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and its flagship projects.

In cooperation with the partner organisations from the region, we conducted a regional research and published a landmark empirical [Study](#) on the state of play of CSO&TT in the implementation of the EIP and of other large infrastructure projects (LIP) in WB6. The study, presented at the 2023 edition of the Tirana Connectivity Forum, aims to inform about the state of affairs of CSO&TT involvement and to facilitate their contribution to successful projects. To that effect, the study provides an innovative insight into the state of play of CSO&TT in the region that have been – or could be – active in the implementation of the EIP. It also provides an overview of their capacity, strengths, networking, opportunities, constraints and potential to exert impact on the infrastructure policy and project cycle.





# Building Better Together: Improving the Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects

In 2023 we wrapped up the project that we had been implementing since 2022 with the support of the French Embassy in Skopje. The project represented a pioneering effort to identify and flag shortcomings in the project cycle of large infrastructure projects, to open a public debate by launching a dialogue between CSOs, municipalities and central authorities (line institutions) and to provide policy recommendations. To that effect, we prepared a [Toolkit](#) that was presented during a one-day policy dialogue with the relevant authorities, local government units and CSOs. The Toolkit was also adapted into illustrations and disseminated in the form of infographics in order to reach a broader audience and make a lasting impression.





## **Learning about the EU in high schools**

The amazing and inspiring final [video](#) which presents the two-year long project activities was published.

## **WESTERN BALKANS RELATED PROJECTS**

### **Channeling Southeast Europe 6 Civil Society contribution to the Common Regional Market (CRM)**

With a grant provided by the German Federal Foreign Office, we partnered with CSOs from each SEE6 country to monitor and report on the progress in the implementation of CRM and its key areas, with focus on the three Mobility Agreements signed in Berlin in November 2022. The initiative also centered around assessing the CRM interaction with the Berlin Process and identifying entry points for specialized CSOs and think tanks into the SEE6 policy-making dynamics on CRM issues. The main project results were communicated to the target audience during the Tirana Connectivity Forum held on 18 and 19 September 2023.

### **FSPI**

This project aimed to support the revival of French language teaching in selected primary schools across the country. Combining entertaining activities for fifth-grade students and informative activities for their parents, in 2023 ESTIMA's team organized 14 events in primary schools.



# INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND CONSULTANCY ACTIVITIES

## WE Barometer

In the framework of the National Platform for Women Entrepreneurship, we continued our cooperation with the Foundation for Management and Industrial Research from Skopje and prepared the third Women Entrepreneurship Barometer in North Macedonia which can be accessed [here](#).

## EMBRACE: EMBRACIng change – Overcoming Blockages and Advancing Democracy in the European Neighbourhood

Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme, we are implementing the project as a local partner organization to ELIAMEP - the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy. The research project EMBRACE aims to respond to the counter-democracy trends after the coloured revolutions and the Arab Spring. It does so through an inter-disciplinary, multi-method and cross-regional assessment of both blockages to and drivers of democratisation in 12 case study countries across Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus, Western Balkans, Northern Africa and the Middle East. Together with 13 other international partner institutions we are

developing innovative policy tools to improve the European Union's capacity for democracy promotion, from above – through institution-building and collaboration with reform-minded elites, and from below – through engagement with civil society, social movements, and popular uprisings.

## Publications (a selection)

Ana Krstinovska and Ioannis Alexandris published a research paper for ELIAMEP on the [Chinese Direct Investments in South-East Europe: the Story behind the Numbers](#) - identifying the trends and patterns across 10 countries in the region.

Ana Krstinovska and Vuk Vuksanovic co-authored the research paper: [Win Some Lose Some: China's Involvement in the Extractive and Raw Materials Industries in the Western Balkans](#). The paper, commissioned by the European Greens - the Green group in the European Parliament through the CHOICE network - China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe was presented at a [round table](#) in the European Parliament in Brussels.



Two articles for the CHOICE network - [Could NATO Membership Be a Game-Changer for the Western Balkans Engagement with China?](#) and [China's Unexpected Impact on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#)

ESTIMA's own [China's development assistance dataset](#)

## Public appearances (a selection)

ELIAMEP's international conference on The EU Accession Perspectives of the Western Balkans in light of the War in Ukraine. Our president Ana Krstinovska was tasked with the moderating the session on geopolitics and the influence of external powers in the Western Balkans, which featured outstanding experts like Dimitar Bechev, Justyna Szczudlik and Srecko Latal.

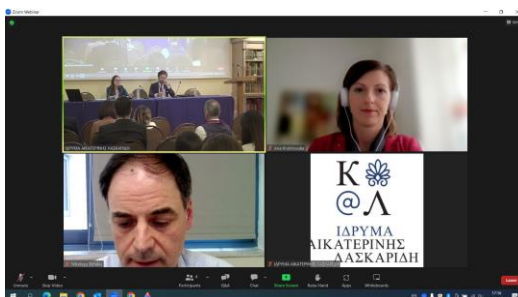


CEPA's online event: [Chinese Media Influence: Lessons Learned from Central and Eastern Europe](#)

Lecture on China's influence on the Western Balkans' EU accession at the Presidential Center for Political Education



Training for NDI on public policy



Lecture on China and EU in the Western Balkans at the doctoral school on CSDP at Piraeus University

## Podcasts and media appearances (a selection)

[Voice for CHOICE #28: China's Role in the Extractive Industries in the Western Balkans with Ana Krstinovska](#) (China Observers)

[Frankly Speaking - China's on-again off-again with the 17+1](#) (Friends of Europe)

[La Chine dans les Balkans](#) (Jean Jaurès - Balkan Observatory)

[The Western Balkans between the East and the West](#) (ELIAMEP)

[Video message](#) for CEPA's peace forum (Center for European Policy Analysis)

[Interview](#) for Euronews Albania on the Berlin Process and the politics of enlargement

[Statement](#) for Radio Free Europe on Chinese equipment installed in Serbia

[Debate show](#) on Alpha TV in light of the December EU Council meeting

[Interview](#) for TV24 on the European Commission's annual report