reENGAGE

Re-engaging with neighbours
in a state of war and geopolitical tensions

D5.1 Background paper

External actors' engagement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe

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BACKGROUND PAPER

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External actors' engagement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe

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SUMMARY

This study analyses the main interests and modes of engagement of the dominant EU's actual and potential competitors and other external actors in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. The paper specifically zooms on four such actors – Russia, China, Türkiye, and the U.S. – and outlines their long-term goals, their perceptions of the two regions in which they are involved, including their relations to the EU and each other, the tools they use to realise their interests, and the outlook for their future engagement. An underlying focus of the paper is on how these actors engage with hybrid regimes in the two regions and how they work with channels of political, economic, social or cultural influence, which might impact the horizontal and vertical trust among the populations. In conclusion, the study compares different interests and modes of engagement of the chosen external actors and highlights the need for nuanced understanding that these play in both regions.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has found itself in an increasingly contested environment in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. While Russia has openly embarked on a path to contest and challenge the regional order and the EU's role in it already in 2014 with its annexation of Crimea and doubled down on its revisionism with its aggression against Ukraine in 2022, new competitors have appeared in both regions in the past decade. This could be China with its promise of an alternative, Chinese-led international order backed by economic incentives and ability to sway local economic elites, Türkiye with its outreach to various substate communities, or, on a substantively lower scale, the U.S. under the Trump administration with its unilateral initiatives that counter long-time EU policy positions. Needlessly to say, while the EU has a range of policies and instruments to react to these challenges, it has struggled to make full use of them and support a meaningful change and sustainable democratic and rule of law reforms in the regional hybrid regimes (see Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Buras et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024).

This study aims to map this complex environment by analysing the basic interests of the EU's actual and potential competitors and other external actors, their long-term goals, their perceptions of the two regions in which they are involved, the tools they use to realize their interests, and the outlook for their future engagement. The four external actors examined here – Russia, China, Türkiye, and the U.S. - were chosen for the durability and extent of their role in the two regions and their potentially confrontational relationship with the EU. Although including the U.S. in the study might seem controversial as it usually acts in unison with the core EU interests, the experience with the previous Trump administration and the potential of a second Trump presidency warrants its inclusion. The second Trump administration might not turn the U.S. into an outright competitor and spoiler, but it might leave the EU with an important global player that does not necessarily share its preferences and interests on the key regional issues.

The analysis specifically builds on previous conceptual work done in the re-ENGAGE. In particular, it seeks to understand how the competing actors in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans engage with local hybrid regimes and societies in the region, how they target their sense of belonging, and in extension, the horizontal and vertical trust among the respective populations (see Osland et al. 2024; Giske et al. 2024). At the same time, it aims to provide background material for future studies, namely those focusing on foresight scenarios of external and

competing actors' involvement in the two regions and those focusing specifically on the reactions of local hybrid regimes and societies to external engagement.

The study proceeds by zooming in on the perceptions, interests, tools and modes of future engagement of the chosen external actors. First, it focuses on Russia as a key spoiler and aspiring hegemon in the European neighbourhood. Subsequently, it turns to China as the key economic partner of the EU and regional states but also a political competitor of the EU, Türkiye with its policy of balancing influence-building and relations with the key regional actors, and the U.S. with its policy of limited and reluctant involvement. The paper concludes with a brief comparison of these actors and the main modes of their involvement in the two regions.

Spoiler and Hegemon: Russia's Strategies in the EU Neighbourhood

Martin Laryš

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has left a group of "in-between" countries—Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Georgia, Moldova, and Serbia—caught in between Russia and the EU, building ties with the latter even as the former seeks to maintain its influence in these targeted states in what it considers an existential struggle with the 'collective West' (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024). It is tempting to think about Moscow's foreign policy as reducible to rational self-interest, a demand for "spheres of influence" articulated in a sober logic of security of a modern power (Mälksoo 2023; Oksamytna 2023). However, Russia should be rather viewed as an archaic power seeking an empire status through brute violence and colonial expansion in the neighboring countries driven by anti-Western resentment and an inferiority complex in relation to the West (Etkind 2023; Medvedev 2023; Oksamytna 2023). This translates into support for illiberal, anti-Western and often also separatist forces and the employment of actions seeking to undermine trust in the governing authorities as well as horizontal trust in the target countries.

For Putin's regime, foreign policy is an extension of its domestic policy, with domestic developments, such as the recent shift to a semi-totalitarian system, impacting its foreign policy strategy and goals (Kolesnikov, 2022; Domańska, 2023). The anti-Western resentment, combined with Russian exceptionalism, is a cornerstone of the regime, promoting a messianic vision of Russia as a great power

and a civilizationist state (Snegovaya, Kimmage, and McGlynn 2023). This translates into an aggressive foreign policy toolkit combining military power with the coercive use of economic (especially energy) ties and reaching out to anti-Western and conservative parts of local societies.

The core long-term interests and goals in the respective regions

For Russia, the 'collective West' is perceived as the primary security and existential threat, with its relationships to the two regions (the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus) shaped by their countries' ties with the EU, NATO, and the USA. The former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are constantly viewed by Moscow as its exclusive sphere of influence, which requires a defence against the 'collective West,' which Moscow accuses of supporting the so-called colour revolutions and imposing liberal values (see the chapter on the USA).

According to key figures in Putin's regime, such as Nikolai Patrushev or Yuriy Kovalchuk, these countries are seen as non-sovereign and considered either as part of the Russian orbit or as Western puppets in a zero-sum game (Milov 2022; Zygar 2024b). This imperial view has been constant in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this respect, the Gorbachev and Yeltsin era, though considered by some as the "normal" state of Russia, could be considered an exception rather than a norm. However, this period was not driven by a genuine belief in democracy but by Russia's economic and political weakness, which prevented it from fully asserting its great power and imperial ambitions. Many within Russia view this as a source of humiliation and a root cause of strong anti-Western resentment (Tsygankov, 2015; Kassymbekova and Marat 2022; Smith-Peter 2022; Akopov 2022). This is also connected with anti-western ultra-conservative values that have constantly been present in parts of Russian political thinking since the 19th century (Laruelle 2023).

Geography matters when distinguishing between Russian interests in these two regions. Moscow opposes pro-European and democratic forces in Eastern European and Caucasian countries. While Belarus and Azerbaijan remain authoritarian, and Georgia aligns more closely with Russia, the main battlegrounds for countering Western influence are Ukraine (in a literal sense) and Moldova and Armenia (in a figurative sense). However, Georgia and Armenia are far from the EU borders, while Moldova's two neighbours are Romania—a friendly EU country—and Ukraine, a fellow candidate for joining the union. The support of both neighbours has allowed Moldova to make the EU rather than Russia its leading gas supplier since

2022, and to begin accession negotiations with Brussels without suffering (so far) a major backlash from Russia (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024).

Moscow's agenda in the Western Balkans is aimed at obstructing EU and NATO efforts to integrate the region into their institutions as a spoiler, not at establishing Russia as a political, diplomatic, and economic hegemon as in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Thus, Russia sees the Western Balkans as yet another arena in greater competition with the USA and its allies (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024). The Western Balkans are not part of the area where Russia's vital national interests are at stake in its pursuit of its imperialist expansive policy. Russia's approach to the Balkans is, by and large, a function of its relations with the U.S. and Europe. Whenever Russia and the West are on a collision course, Moscow acts as a spoiler of Western initiatives in the region. Although Russia opposes the advancement of NATO expansion in the Balkans, it does not pragmatically expect the region's incorporation into its own organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019).

Moscow attempts to exploit the disillusionment with the EU and lack of trust in it among the societies in the region, particularly their disillusionment regarding the slow pace of enlargement, and enhance its anti-Western political projects, even though the EU is not seen as being at the same threat level as NATO. The Western Balkans, unlike the Eastern European Slavic Orthodox countries, have never been considered a part of the Russian identity and have never been part of the Russian empire. However, pan-Slavism and historical symbolism play a significant role in the way identities are framed, and even if they do not necessarily play a role in the formation of core Russian interests, they open a way for potential influence (Russell-Omaljev 2016). Russia has a history of being seen as 'the liberator' of the Orthodox Christians in the Balkans due to its role in the wars against the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and Russia often reminds its Balkan partners of these deep emotional ties. According to this narrative, Russia always comes to the rescue of Southern Slavs and Orthodox Christians, whoever the adversaries might be: the arrogant West, radical Islam, the Vatican, or godless liberalism (Bechev 2017, p. 3-4).

The main target groups and tools of the Russian influence

Russia engages with various local partners and clients, often channelling its support through proxies. This approach is typically driven by a blend of material and political interests in the target states (Avdaliani 2024). Moscow focuses on both state structures and societies in the Western Balkans and former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, making use of and actively supporting the regional hybrid regime structures. It has been seeking to gain influence in the studied countries by exploiting a range of existing political and social cleavages and targeting the trust in the government as well as trust in other (ethic or social) groups (see Osland et al. 2024; Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024). In particular, Russia emphasizes the following topics and works on the following societal cleavages in its strategy:

Socio-economic conditions: Russia's information warfare targets ordinary people by exploiting their existential fears regarding socio-economic conditions. This particularly affects those who feel they have been on the losing side of economic transitions and reforms and believe their governments have neglected them. These narratives fuel populism and anti-elitism, turning people against their governments and pro-Western actors. Pro-Russian political actors (e.g. those in Moldova) benefit from such sentiments and try to capitalize on them for votes and political power (De Waal, Bechev and Samorukov 2024; Całus 2024).

Anti-liberal and conservative values and beliefs: Moscow focuses on conservative segments of societies and supports political actors who amplify conservative beliefs among the population (Avdaliani 2024). Russia's turn to "traditional values" positioned Putin's regime as an international leader in the fight against progressive ideas, including LGBTQ rights and the so-called "gender ideology"—a derogatory catch-all term used to describe everything from abortion and sex-ed in schools to trans rights and same-sex marriage. Such a moral ultra-conservatism resonates in traditionally conservative societies (Edenborg 2022).

Ethnic cleavages: Moscow frequently works with local identitarian tensions and seeks to dissolve the trust of other ethnic and social groups. It incited a fear of Romanization in Transnistria, historically fuelled anti-Georgian sentiments in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and stirred anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Crimea and eastern Ukraine before 2014. In Moldova and Ukraine, however, the issue is more about cultural divisions—there was a Soviet nostalgia among the Russian speakers there, who felt insecure and lost in the post-Soviet transition, which made them receptive to paternalistic Russian propaganda (DeSisto and Pop-Eleches 2024; Koldomasov and Pylypenko 2024). In the Western Balkans,

Russia stokes nationalist feelings among the Orthodox populations against Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians to create chaos and destabilization, which would pose more problems for the EU and hinder the integration of these countries (Koldomasov and Pylypenko 2024).

Russia plays on these cleavages with a wide range of tools, which will be divided into diplomatic/political, information, military, economic, and intelligence tools in the following section.

The main tools of Russian influence

Diplomatic/Political Tools

On the diplomatic and political level, Russia provides diplomatic support and political favours to states central to its foreign policy goals. For instance, Moscow has supported Serbia diplomatically since the 1990s, opposed the international war crimes tribunals for Serbian leaders, and blocked the UN recognition of Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence. Russia has boosted its popularity by positioning itself as a defender of Serbian territorial integrity, while Serbia has been pursuing friendly relations with Russia as a foreign policy strategy that allows it to leverage its relations with the EU regarding Kosovo (McBride 2023; Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). Russia uses the opportunity to expand its presence while Serbia plays the card of Russian support to show the EU and the U.S. that it has an alternative (Metodieva 2019).

Russia has also used breakaway regions as political tools for political leverage over target states in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. However, their relevance has recently declined. The puppet 'people's republics' in eastern Ukraine were formally annexed by Russia in 2022, the Azerbaijani army seized Karabakh in 2020 and 2023, and the incumbent pro-Russian Georgian government controlled by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili has lessened Russia's need to use South Ossetia and Abkhazia against Tbilisi. The importance of Transnistria as a leverage also declined after Ukraine closed its borders with the region in 2022, which means its imports and exports are now fully controlled by Chișinău, which increases the Moldovan leverage (Gavin 2024; Całus 2023).

Aside from breakaway regions, Russia stokes pro-Russian sentiments and a lack of trust in regions that have a special identitarian status (yet remain under the control of central governments) and uses them to pressure the target states.

Gagauzia in Moldova and Republika Srpska (RS) in BiH are clear examples of this. Gagauzia has traditionally leaned towards Russia, and the Gagauz people, making up about 5 percent of Moldova's population, vote as a bloc for pro-Russian parties. Russia can exploit the Gagauzian autonomy to destabilize Moldova, potentially encouraging demands for increased autonomy to destabilize Chisinau further (Ibragimova 2024; Deen and Zweers 2022; Socor 2024). A similar situation on a larger scale exists in Republika Srpska (RS) in BiH. Russia has supported Bosnian Serb separatism, both officially through RS and informally through various cultural, religious, educational, and paramilitary groups. Russia has financed Milorad Dodik's election campaigns and is a major investor in RS, although it is not reflected in official statistics (McBride 2023; Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). With RS holding wide-ranging powers within the loose federation, the entity can act as a quasi-state and pursue its own external policies. For example, the RS veto has prevented BiH from joining the Western sanctions against Russia in response to the re-invasion of Ukraine. In addition, RS and its representatives can block decisions in central BiH institutions such as the cabinet and the federal parliament (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024).

In the social sphere, Russia acts through proxy actors, mostly Orthodox churches and anti-western ultra-nationalists (Laryš 2024). The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is a key ally in propagating ultra-conservative messages of the Kremlin and a key actor in connecting with conservative and religious parts of local populations. Several Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe are either directly affiliated with or have close relations with the ROC, which allows Moscow to bypass governments and local media to spread pro-Russian messages in hundreds of parishes. The Moldovan Orthodox Church is in direct communion with the ROC. The Georgian Orthodox Church is close to Russia (at least closer than much of the Georgian general public) and has taken a relatively soft position on the war as it tries to maintain relations with the ROC (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024; Lutsevych and Pasha 2024). Although the church is constitutionally separate from the Russian state, it has become a de facto bureaucratic structure dependent on the state (Zygar 2024b). The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) looks to the ROC to support its claims in Kosovo, which contains some of the holiest sites. Russian Orthodox charity groups, the largest of which is run by pro-Kremlin billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, operate in Serbia and throughout the Balkans, promoting the idea of a pan-Slavic civilization opposed to the West (McBride 2023). The SOC echoes many Russian narratives, thereby spreading ultra-conservative values, pro-Russian political viewpoints, Serb nationalism, and anti-Western agendas in Serbia,

Montenegro, and Republika Srpska in BiH (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). In these countries and regions, large parts of the populations are SOC members. On the other hand, these churches are not monolithic entities. For example, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) encompasses a wide range of perspectives, from Serbian ethnic nationalists to priests and congregations that hold much more liberal views on interethnic and interfaith relations.

Far-right and ultra-nationalist groups are among Russia's favourite vehicles for spreading its influence (Rekawek, Renard and Molas 2024). These groups align ideologically with the Putin regime's worldview and can destabilize and challenge the sovereignty of certain countries, particularly in the Western Balkans. This amplifies local tensions and historical grievances, fostering polarization and anti-Western sentiment (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). Putin's Russia leverages its far-right credentials in regions where Russia and Russian Orthodoxy have historically had a strong presence—such as Serbia, Georgia, and Moldova. Putin's far-right positioning is a form of statecraft, showcasing an alternative to democracy that disregards human rights and international law in favour of "traditional values" and hostility to progressive agendas. This strategy positions him as a figurehead for an informal international ultra-conservative alliance (Zygar 2024a; Luchenko 2024).

Russia actively interferes in other countries' elections by backing pro-Russian political parties and figures, portraying them as alternatives to what it labels as "illegitimate" governments, thus seeking to lower the trust in state and democratic processes. Two examples of such parties are the Oppositional Platform-For Life (OPZZh) in pre-2022 Ukraine and the (now banned) Shor Party in Moldova. As, at the time of writing of this paper, Georgia and Moldova prepare for their elections in 2024, the Russian propaganda in those countries is expected to intensify while employing anti-Western rhetoric to sway public opinion and diminish support for Ukraine (Luchenko 2024). Such contestation between pro-Russian and pro-Western parties, with Russia's involvement, was typical for Moldova in previous elections and for Ukraine prior to 2014.

Furthermore, Russia supports so-called "parties of peace," like the MAN party in Moldova led by Ion Ceban and the ruling Georgian Dream party. Despite their ostensibly pro-European stance, these parties advocate for maintaining neutral relations with Russia, even amid the re-invasion of Ukraine. In a policy indicative of the strategies of such parties, the Georgian Dream party has formally promoted EU accession while expanding various forms of cooperation with Russia,

merely paying lip service to the goal of joining the EU (Chedia 2024; Bechev 2024). In another example, in Armenia, Moscow funds pro-Russian opposition forces rallying around figures like the former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, aiming to destabilize the government by blaming it for conceding the territory in Karabakh to Azerbaijan (Shenkman 2023). Local Russian proxies in Moldova, led by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, have been buying votes, staging anti-government protests, running disinformation campaigns, and spawning a plethora of new political parties to promote a pro-Russian agenda. Moscow views the upcoming elections in 2024 and 2025 as an opportunity to thwart Moldova's EU ambitions and bring pro-Russian forces back to power (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024; Lutsevych and Pasha 2024).

Serbia's government under Aleksandar Vučić has become a key channel for Russian interests in the region and an important source of pro-Russia propaganda (Metodieva 2019). Additionally, Moscow extends its support to pro-Russian opposition movements in the Western Balkans, such as the For the Future of Montenegro movement led by Andrija Mandic and Milan Knežević, which secured a significant portion of votes in Montenegro's 2023 elections. Also, a considerable segment of the political landscape in Serbia has established robust connections with Russia, furthering its regional influence (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023).

Information

The most public manifestation of the confrontation between Russia and the West in the two targeted regions lies in the ideological sphere and Moscow's anti-Western information warfare. After 2022, Russia has focused more intensively on providing an alternative pole to the West and the United States' "global hegemon."

Russia targets governments pursuing pro-Western foreign policies or accused of doing so and seeks to undermine the public trust in them. Kremlin propaganda blames Nikol Pashinyan for Armenia's defeat by Azerbaijan in Karabakh, claiming that his alignment with the West has destabilized the South Caucasus. Moscow aims to tarnish Pashinyan's reputation, presenting him as an anti-Russian asset controlled by Washington (Shenkman 2023; Avetisyan 2023). In Moldova, despite the official ban on Russian state media, Moscow still manages to reach a wide audience by using the local networks of the pro-Russian Gagauzia autonomous region and social media. Moscow portrays Moldova's integration with the EU as a smokescreen for the country's absorption by Romania (Ibragimova 2024; De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024).

Russia accuses the EU and NATO of using empty promises of Euro-Atlantic integration to subdue the Orthodox nations and settle Balkan conflicts at their expense. The EU, Moscow insists, will make Serbia recognize Kosovo without granting any reciprocal concessions and will turn North Macedonia into a semi-Albanian state (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024). In another recent example, Moscow recently abolished visa requirements for Georgians. At the same time, the direct flights between the two states were restored in the belief that Moscow's greater engagement with Tbilisi would help undermine Georgia's EU candidate status (Krusch 2024).

Russian propaganda varies significantly across different contexts and populations, with varying degrees of receptivity. Although the anti-Western values and sentiments disseminated by Russia's information warfare are generally similar (but with a greater emphasis on religion in Orthodox countries), the tactics differ for each target state and each segment of society within these target states. The emphasis on "traditional values" and gender and LGBTQ+ issues, in particular, is designed to enlist the support of Orthodox conservative constituencies in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, often with the help of the local Orthodox churches and other conservative social actors (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov 2024, Wilkinson and Dekanosidze 2023).

Through its information warfare, Russia promotes anti-Western, anti-democratic, homophobic, and ultra-conservative values. The primary goals of these disinformation campaigns are to sow distrust in the West, democratic institutions, the EU, and NATO, thereby paving the way for pro-Russian radical populist political actors. Russia's information warfare questions the benefits of joining Western organizations, aims to weaken its opponents and seeks to fuel political, cultural, and ethnic conflicts within the targeted societies. In this respect, Russia incites chaos and seeks to leverage the resulting instability. This allows Moscow to exploit the EU's challenges, including the waves of migration, crime, and violence in its neighbouring regions (Fedyk 2021; Galeotti 2017).

Ukraine is the primary target of Russia's information warfare, which operates on two narrative tracks: one aimed at Western audiences and the other at domestic audiences. The narrative for Western audiences focuses on corruption (claiming that Ukraine is a corrupt failed state, and any assistance and funds for it will be embezzled) and "peace rhetoric" (arguing that Ukraine cannot win and an immediate peace, dictated by Moscow, is the only solution). For the audience in Ukraine, the narrative centres on the alleged illegitimacy of the Ukrainian

government and president, and persuading Ukrainians that Europeans will never accept them while Russia is ready to accept them as they are. A similar approach is applied to Moldova.

Anti-West/pro-Russia narratives resonating in the Western Balkans are facilitated by local networks of disinformation proxies (Metodieva 2019). Their central themes include portraying Russia as the defender of Christian-Orthodox traditional values, emphasizing a pan-Slavic link between Russia and the Western Balkans, criticizing the degeneration of the collective West, and using territorial integrity to support Serbia's position on Kosovo. These narratives resonate with some segments of society in the Western Balkans due to the identity links, the alignment with conservative values promoted by Putin's regime, and the disappointment with the EU integration process after what many perceive as 20 years in the EU 'waiting room' (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023).

However, these narratives are ineffective against Albanians and Bosnians, who see Russians as key allies of Serbian Orthodox nationalists in the Western Balkans. The West's backing of Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians has reduced the likelihood of anti-Western sentiment among these communities, which stands in contrast to the prevailing attitudes found among the Slavic Orthodox populations in the Western Balkans. Instead, Albania and Kosovo are frequent scapegoats in Russian propaganda, and are portrayed as instruments of the "Western masters" against Russia and its local allies, and as solely responsible for the destabilizing of the Balkans (Hysi 2024; Koldomasov and Pylypenko 2024). Nevertheless, there remains some fatigue in these countries concerning the ongoing EU enlargement process.

Military

The most recent display of Russia's military means is the re-invasion of Ukraine, which has triggered the most severe security crisis in Europe since World War II. Military means are the primary tools in Moscow's hegemonic policy regarding the former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, as they serve to ward off what it considers external threats, secure its regional supremacy, and limit the manoeuvrability of other actors. The re-invasion of Ukraine in 2022 aimed to showcase the return of a strong, hegemonic Russia with a privileged status in the former Soviet neighbourhood that is maintained through military aggression (de Waal 2024; Klein 2019). Russia's military presence is a key strategy for Moscow in these targeted countries, often resulting from wars where Russia had intervened

previously (e.g., Georgia, Moldova) or policies aimed at reducing the sovereignty of the targeted country (e.g., Armenia, Belarus). This strategy is supplemented by the Moscow-led CSTO, which is partly modelled on NATO. Despite its being based on the principle of mutual defence, the CSTO's support is highly arbitrary and based on Russian interests, as was the case in the intervention in Kazakhstan in 2022 and the non-intervention in other cases, such as the pogroms in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 or the war in Karabach in 2020 (Krivosheev 2024; Shenkman 2023; de Waal 2024).

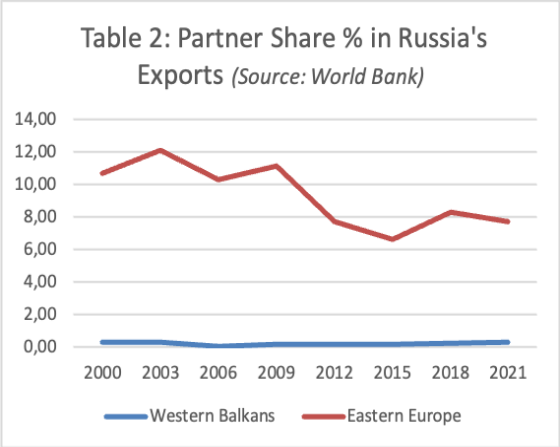
Other military means used by Russia include joint military exercises and arms supplies, notably those with Serbia (although Serbia has also participated in other exercises with NATO members and partners). The arms market involves more than just sales; it includes long-term contracts for servicing equipment and supplying components and spare parts, often under agreements made years prior. However, purchasing Russia's equipment ties the customers to Moscow in terms of security and politics. These activities are meant to demonstrate the military cooperation between Russia and Serbia, but their scope is limited. In general, non-CSTO member states in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans are reluctant to buy arms from Russia or conduct military exercises in cooperation with it.

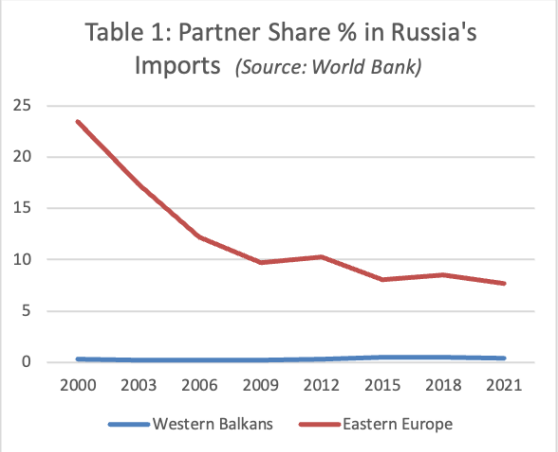
Some experts call the CSTO a zombie—an undead creature shambling around the former Soviet Union and lacking a pulse but continuing to go through the motions of still being alive (Ambrosio 2024). Meanwhile, Armenia has frozen its CSTO activities, and Pashinyan even threatened that Armenia would exit from the CSTO (Radio Liberty 2024). Thus, the integrationist policy, arms supply, and military exercises are relevant primarily for a few CSTO members (Belarus, Central Asian states) and, to a lesser extent, Serbia with its Janus-faced foreign policy.

Economics/Finances

Russia's primary tools in the economic sphere involve weaponizing economic and energy dependencies and promoting integrationist policies. A favoured tactic is leveraging other countries' gas dependency on Russia. Since the 2000s, Moscow has pressured post-Soviet countries to cede control of their gas infrastructure by using both incentives, such as gas price discounts, and threats, like trade bans or price hikes. For example, Moldova had been highly dependent on Russian energy, and amid Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine, Gazprom reduced the gas supplies to Moldova. By cutting the gas supply and increasing consumer prices, the Kremlin aimed to undermine Moldova's pro-EU leadership and boost support for pro-Russian alternatives (Litra 2023). However, Moldova has achieved independence

from Russian gas in 2023 and maintained it since then. In an opposing example, Armenia's economy, unlike Georgia's, is heavily reliant on Russia, as it imports Russian natural gas and has its power grid, distribution networks and nuclear plant as well as its key transport infrastructure controlled by Russia or pro-Russian oligarchs (Avetisyan 2023; Krivosheev 2024).





The Russian market's dominance is also evident in specific commodities, particularly in agriculture, and this position has been used for political gains, for example, in Moldova and Georgia. Russia employs state regulatory bodies, primarily *Roskomnadzor* and *Rosselkhoznadzor*, for political purposes, particularly to ban products from the targeted countries from accessing the Russian market (Svoboda, 2019). In late 2023, Russia banned imports of agricultural produce from Armenia and Moldova, supposedly on sanitary grounds (De Waal, Bechev, and Samorukov, 2024). Another significant tool in the economic sector is Russia's promotion of integrationist projects. Putin's first design for a regional economic organization was formalized as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015. The EAEU is criticized for being designed to serve Russia's interests, as its economic rationale is intertwined with security concerns, and Russia views the other members as an ideological and political buffer against the West (de Waal 2024).

In the Western Balkans, Russia maintains an economic influence, particularly in the energy sector. Russia supplies nearly all the gas imports for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Gazprom owning critical energy infrastructure there (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023). In May 2022, Serbia renegotiated a favourable three-year gas contract with Gazprom during the Ukraine war and the international sanctions on Russia, which helped Serbia resist the EU pressure to join the anti-Russian sanctions (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023; McBride, 2023). The new deal

links gas prices to crude oil and ranges between US$310 and US$408, which enables the Russian price to maintain its competitive position as one of Europe's lowest import prices.

In general, Russia has a weak economic footprint in the Western Balkans when compared with the EU, including in terms of direct investments. Considering Russia's limitations in delivering economic support, it seeks to leverage alternative low-cost or asymmetrical instruments of influence. Financial challenges restrict Russia's ability to provide substantial financial aid or large-scale investments in the way that the EU can provide grants or infrastructure projects. However, Russia compensates for these economic constraints by supplying cheap energy resources, such as oil and gas, to Serbia and RS while also relying on other tools of influence (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). Unlike the EU, Russian indirect financial support and aid, provided through cheap energy resources, comes without conditions related to reforms on the rule of law or good governance. The only requirement is that the recipient states' foreign policies align with Russia's geopolitical interests. Bieber and Tzifakis noted that Russia's economic involvement in the region should not be underestimated for three main reasons: It is frequently masked, as Russian capital flows are transferred through third countries; it is strategically focused and concentrated on a few key economic sectors (e.g., energy and banking), and the Russian state exerts substantial influence over the decisions of the countries' private corporations (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019).

In contrast to Eastern Europe or the South Caucasus, there is no evidence that the wealthiest oligarchs in the Western Balkans—such as Miroslav Mišković, Miodrag Kostić, Dejan Čakajac, or Petar Matijević and others—are openly involved in political affairs by leading and financing political parties or have publicly declared close ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Intelligence

Moscow targets state structures through the recruitment of high-ranking military and intelligence officers (both active and former) and other officials and authorities. For instance, Armenia has a network of "friends of Russia" embedded in various state structures, including the government, the parliament, the special services, and the Foreign Ministry (The Insider 2020b). Such operations are conducted by Russian intelligence agencies and the Russian President's Office for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Upravlenie prezidenta Rossii po*

mezhregionalnym i kulturnym svyazyam s zarubezhnymi stranami). Active and former intelligence officers staff this office.

By buying off these individuals and other relevant actors, Russian intelligence infiltrates and influences the targeted countries. They create and support influential informal groups, such as pro-Russian oligarchs and their political parties in Armenia and Moldova, and these groups are to pressure pro-Western governments (Wesolowsky 2022; Krivosheev 2024; The Insider 2020b; Kononczuk, Cenusa and Kakachia 2017; Galeotti 2019a; Shenkman 2023). However, to prevent pro-Western foreign policy shifts or integration with NATO and the EU, Russian intelligence services have allegedly planned coups in several countries, specifically Moldova, Armenia, and Montenegro (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023; McBride 2023).

Pro-Russian oligarchs have been an ideal Russian proxy actor for creating influence networks and lobbyist groups, and managing specific tasks, such as corrupting politicians, psychological operations, or political diversions. Politically powerful oligarchs are more typical for Eastern European and Caucasian countries than for the Western Balkans. Examples in this respect range from Armenia (the MP and leader of the Prosperous Armenia party Gagik Tsarukyan, the former president Robert Kocharyan) and Moldova (Ilon Shor) to pre-2022 Ukraine and Georgia with Bidzina Ivanishvili as the wealthiest and most powerful oligarch in the latter country (Krusch 2024).

Russia's view of other competing powers and the EU

Putin's regime perceives any engagement of the EU in its "exclusive sphere of influence" as a direct challenge and threat to Russia's interests, security, and even its very existence. The regime's elites simplify the intricate landscape of global politics by depicting it as a relentless competition among major powers (Milov 2022). They view Russia as an exceptional, autocratic, self-sustaining "state-civilization" with a unique historical mission consisting of protecting "traditional values" and promoting its own alleged superiority (Kragh and Umland, 2023; Genis, 2022). In this worldview, the EU embodies Russia's historical adversary, the "collective West," and the events in Ukraine are portrayed as just another chapter in this perpetual struggle between good (Russia) and evil (the "collective West") (Pynnöniemi and Parppei 2024; De Waal, Bechev and Samorukov 2024).

The EU is generally more popular than NATO in the 'contested countries' as in Serbia, BiH, Armenia, and Moldova only about 30% of all citizens want to join NATO, but up to 60% want to join the EU as the October 2024 referendum demonstrated. In Russia's view, however, it doesn't matter, as Moscow sees the EU as a vassal of the USA and NATO as an organization where the US, as the true global hegemon, dominates and the rest are the US 'satellites' (De Waal, Bechev and Samorukov 2024). Putin's inner circle views the EU's policy in the so-called 'near abroad' as anti-Russian plots posing an existential threat to Russia. It is related to Russia's inferiority complex in relation to the West, as it aspires to be in the "major league" but never succeeds (Schneider 2023; Volkov and Kolesnikov 2023). Furthermore, Putin's regime portrays the independent, sovereign, and pro-European Ukraine as another existential threat, accusing the West, including the EU, of using Ukraine as a tool to dismantle the Russian state. It is qualitatively different from the other targeted countries, as Russia does not challenge the distinct national identities of Georgians, Armenians, and, to some extent, Moldovans as it does that of Ukraine. While Russia expects these nations to be subservient, Moscow does not aim to erase their national identities or claim they are part of the Russian identity, and therefore the Russian perception of their relations with competing powers is different from that of the Ukrainian relations (Smith-Peter 2022).

This contrasts with the cases of China and Türkiye. Türkiye seeks to bolster its influence among selected states and communities in the Western Balkans and Azerbaijan, often specifically focusing on areas not central to Russia's interests. Russia does not openly challenge Türkiye's influence there. Similarly, China, as the only potential ally capable of significantly aiding Russia in overcoming the effects of the sanctions, is not contested by Russia in its efforts in the regions.

Outlook for future engagement

As Putin's regime tightens its grip, it is poised to adopt a more aggressive stance. While Putin was previously seen as an authoritarian and assertive yet rational leader, he now appears to have transitioned into a state of paranoia, exhibiting traits of a messianic dictator surrounded by like-minded individuals who reinforce his worldview. Violence has become ingrained in Russian society, permeating all levels of interpersonal relations and governmental policy, both domestically and internationally. That's why Russia's engagement in the two regions will likely be more intense, with even less regard for international law in the future.

Russia's entrenched 19th-century geopolitical mindset, characterized by an archaic and illiberal outlook, is expected to persist unless the country undergoes significant changes and abandons its imperial vision. In all likelihood, the Kremlin will persist in interfering in the political affairs of the targeted regions by funding pro-Russian parties, demonizing the EU and democratic values as threats, and accusing pro-European governments of dragging their countries into the war. Once the poster child for progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration and democracy, Georgia is a reminder that a country's 'progress' and pro-European development are neither linear nor inevitable (Niyex 2024). Pro-Russian forces may exploit socioeconomic challenges to gain traction in elections within these two regions, with the ultimate goal of internally destabilizing them, thwarting their integration with the EU, and removing pro-Western leaderships through upcoming elections, coups, or other means with the assistance of local proxies.

The future application of Russia's influence tools will largely depend on the outcome of its re-invasion of Ukraine. This outcome will shape Moscow's strategies and approaches towards its neighbouring countries, the Western Balkans, and the broader "collective West."

China: Economic partner, political competitor

Jan Švec

China's role in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans is driven by economic, political, and strategic interests. China's investments in the region are concentrated in strategic sectors like infrastructure, energy, and natural resources, often financed by loans from Chinese state-owned financial institutions. From a strategic perspective, China has focused on building new and alternative trade routes, such as the Thessaloniki-Budapest railway and the "Middle Corridor," which reduce its reliance on maritime routes to Europe. Access to strategic transport infrastructure, natural resources, and the energy sectors of the countries in the region provides China with important leverage that can be utilized for political and diplomatic aims, while they do not necessarily aim to target the respective societies and their sense of trust and belonging in the same way as Russia does it. However, the Chinese assets can be utilized in a larger geopolitical conflict, including for military purposes.

Chinese investments are realized and financed by Chinese state-aligned organizations and are often the results of high-level political negotiations. It might

be thus expected that they align with Beijing's global strategy. With investments and loans, China gains the loyalty of local elites, who benefit from the public support these investments might create but also through the related personal profit. Chinese investment projects were criticized for lacking transparency, potential corruption, their negative environmental impact, and infringement of labour rights, but often without much follow-up investigation or legal action.

Despite receiving considerable public attention, Chinese investments are still significantly lower than those of the EU. The EU and its member states provide more money than China in loans, aid, and private foreign direct investments (FDIs). Chinese investments, as opposed to the EU ones (Buras et al. 2024), are not tied to the conditions of sustainability, transparency and democracy and they do not seek to actively support democratization and rule of law. On the contrary, Chinese investors benefit from a regional deficit in trust and adjust to and reinforce regional neo-patrimonial structures and hybrid regimes (Giske, Bøås, and Rieker 2024; Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024). Thus, the local elites can prefer Chinese investments as they help them to acquire personal stakes and maintain the status quo. Public opinion polls and civil society responses show that China is not seen as a major preferred partner, unlike the EU. However, due to the weak institutions and extensive patronage networks in the region, the elite might support Chinese investments. In contrast, these are criticized by civil society and the wider public, in some cases widening the gap and decreasing the level of trust between the two. The relations with China, which depend primarily on personal relations, are considerably fragile. Many countries in the region reassess their cooperation with China due to unmet promises, increased awareness of the related risks, and a recent combination of countermeasures and better alternative options from the EU.

Long-term interests and goals

The role of China in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans stems from its economic interests, political interests and geostrategy. Many of China's regional investments are carried out under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013. While the original idea of the BRI was related to the original Silk Road and was focused on developing new China-Europe routes, it has gradually developed into a global strategy involving various types of investments. The BRI currently consists of hard infrastructure such as transportation and energy, as well

as alignment of policies and regulatory standards and people-to-people connections.

While it was officially presented as a project for global economic development, China gains many advantages, including political ones, from its existence. The BRI helps China to globally expand its influence, improve its international image (Liu and Ding 2024), globally diffuse its norms (Garlick and Qin 2023), gain political and diplomatic support, and acquire access to critical infrastructure and resources (Patey 2021, 120). Constructing alternative transport routes allows China to lower its dependency on maritime routes, which might be prone to disruption in the event of a natural disaster or a military conflict in the South China Sea (Patey 2021, 93). Furthermore, China can potentially utilize the BRI infrastructure for military purposes in the future (Patey 2021, 56).

The Balkans and Eastern Europe are important to China in several ways. First, China attempts to build alternative routes for delivering its goods to Europe, and these can lead through the region. Second, China gains access to the region's natural resources, including copper, ferroalloys, timber and corn (Krstinovska and Vuksanovic 2023, 5). Third, it expands the markets for its production, including manufactured goods, but also resources for infrastructural construction, thus partially addressing its overcapacity (Nugent and Lu 2021). Fourth, through the region, China acquires easier access to the EU market and gains related know how and experience (Krstinovska and Vuksanovic 2023, 5). Fifth, China attempts to improve its public image and coopt local elites, thus enhancing its soft power and build its network of trust and influence. It thus legitimizes its political regime and builds a basis for diplomatic support (Patey 2021, 91). China might also misuse the increased interdependence to force the countries to stand up against the West on controversial issues (Keaten 2021). As the countries in the region are on various levels of integration with the Western structures, including the EU and NATO, China benefits from the related access to these organizations. At the same time, it attempts to weaken the region's further alignment with the West by presenting incentives for cooperation with China and alternatives to cooperation with the West

Albania was the first Balkan country to develop a stronger relationship with communist China, after its split away from the Soviet Union in the early 1960s (Marku 2017). While the Chinese relationship with Albania worsened in the 1970s, China developed a new key friendship developed with Yugoslavia. After the conflicts in Yugoslavia erupted at the beginning of the 1990s, China continued its support for the Serb-dominated regime. The crucial moment for the mutual relations came

when NATO forces bombed Belgrade and hit the Chinese embassy, killing three Chinese citizens (Ponniah and Marinkovic 2019). Until now, Serbia remains the only one of the analysed countries whose ties with China reach beyond pragmatism and economic benefits, as they were formed with the narrative of a "shared victimhood" (Y. Zhou 2022). There is an evident sympathy towards Serbia in official Chinese discourse (Y. Zhou 2022). This "ironclad friendship", said Xi Jinping during his visit to Serbia in May 2024, was "forged with the blood of our compatriots" and will "stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples" (Xinhua 2024d). In Belgrade, Xi visited the China Cultural Center, built by China's government on the site of the collapsed embassy after the NATO bombing, together with a monument to the citizens killed in the bombing (Xinhua 2024a). On a diplomatic level, China serves as "the protector of Serbia's national sovereignty," standing against the independence of Kosovo, including in the UN (Mitrović 2023).

Tools of Chinese influence

Politics/diplomacy

China has successfully developed cooperation with current and former politicians and other influential individuals for cooperation, often making use of hybridity of local regimes. The motives for their cooperation with China are bolstering their popularity through increased investments and balancing the perceived dominance of the "West" but also personal gains. Chinese companies have proved to be efficient in understanding local patronage structures and taking advantage of weak social cohesion (Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024; Giske, Bøås, and Rieker 2024), including corrupting practices and establishing strong networks with local elites, who are prone to prefer Chinese investments even despite scandals and public criticism.

Leaders from Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina tend to support China, also due to their shared anti-Western sentiment. They keep active, regular ties with Chinese representatives and visit China (International Department CPC 2022). Serbia even established a special office for cooperation with Russia and China. It is the only country in the region visited by Xi Jinping. President Vucic publicly praised China and even attempted to speak Chinese (TV Studio B 2019). Except for Serbia, the high level political and diplomatic contacts between China and Eastern European countries are limited and conducted unequally, manifesting China's position as a dominant partner. Often, China's vice-ministerial

representatives meet with the corresponding countries' highest representatives. As in the case of other regions, many political interactions with China are realized through the International Liaison Department of the CCP (International Department CPC 2024). Despite their lack of formal positions in the governmental structures, representatives of the CCP are welcomed in the countries as legitimate representatives of China (Xinhua 2024c).

Eastern European politicians' meetings with China's highest representatives are typically held in China as side events to larger gatherings (Xinhua 2023b), which probably reflects a lack of dedication from the Chinese side. In 2019, China created the position of the special envoy for Eurasian Affairs, primarily in relation to the developing conflict in Ukraine. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the envoy served as China's nominal mediator in efforts to settle the conflict (Shumilin 2024).

Chinese actors made use of hybrid features of the Georgian state. The Chinese primarily have ties related to the circle of the former prime minister and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. In the past, this concerned the Chinese conglomerate CEFC, which directly coopted and paid the local elites, including former Georgian prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili (Standish and Pertaia 2023). As the company went bankrupt in 2020, its possessions were taken over by a company which is allegedly indirectly controlled by Ivanishvili (Pertaia and Wesolowsky 2024). In another example, a former Serbian minister of foreign affairs was also a consultant for the CEFC and founded a think-tank promoting China through events and publications (CIRSD 2024, Karásková et al. 2020).

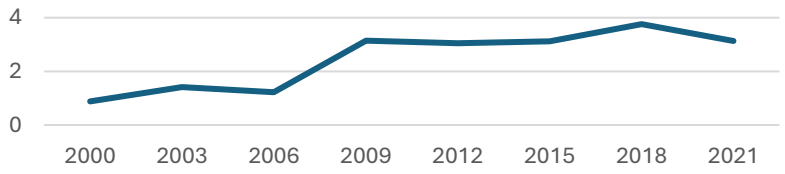
Economy and finances

The influence of China in the region is largely defined by its economic activities. First, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) receive contracts for huge transport and energy infrastructure deals financed mostly by loans from Chinese state-owned financial institutions, such as the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank). With these investments, China gets contracts for its construction companies and a market for its construction materials. The Chinese companies thus also acquire experience from a region close to the EU, which might be utilized for their further projects, including those in the EU itself, as was the case with the Peljesac Bridge in Croatia (Kirby 2022). Some of the projects realized in the region by Chinese companies are even financed by EU funds through the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or the European Investment Bank (EIB) (Xinhua 2023).

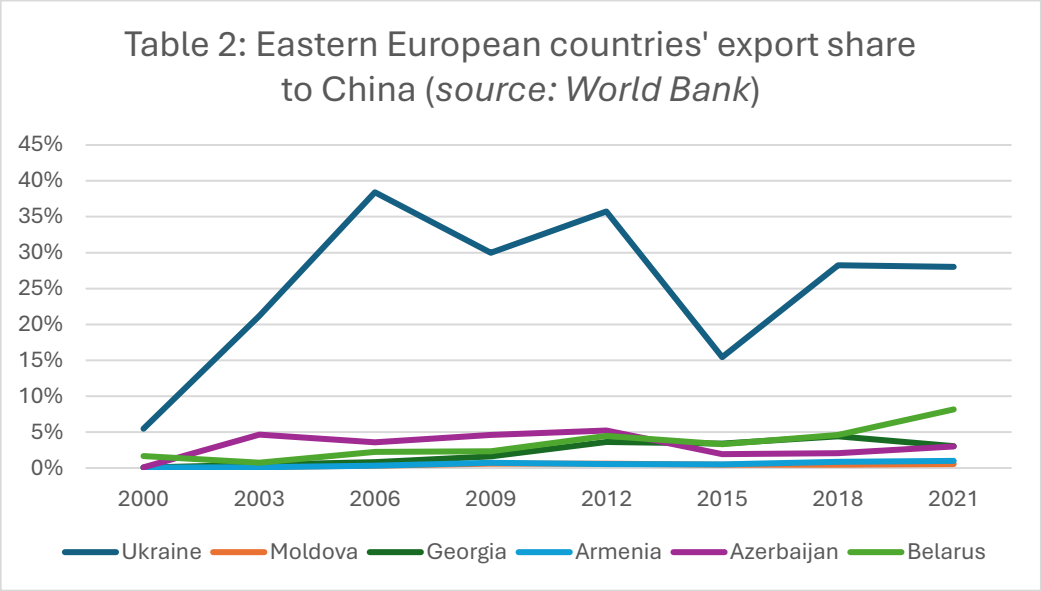
Second, Chinese SOEs and privately owned enterprises (POEs) invest in the mining industry and natural resources in the region. Despite the economic benefit, China thus gains access to important resources, including those for diversifying risks to its imports, but also those resources which are further imported into the EU (Krstinovska and Vuksanovic 2023), and might be potentially leveraged in the future. Third, Chinese POEs invest in local manufacturing and services. This is still conducted on a limited scale but the proposed plans for the BRI expect more investments in advanced and green technology (State Council 2023).

China is the second-largest trade partner in the Western Balkans but remains far behind the EU. China's share of the Western Balkans' exports has been increasing since 2000, but it remained below 4% in 2021 (see Table 1). China's share of imports in the Western Balkans is higher, yet it stayed below 12% in 2021. In comparison, the EU's share of the Western Balkans' exports was 81% and its share of imports was 58% in 2021 (Eurostat 2022).

Table 1: Western Balkans' Export Share to China (*source: World Bank)*



As shown in Table 2, apart from Ukraine, China remains a negligible export destination for Eastern European countries. Surprisingly, this includes Georgia, which exported less than 5% of its total goods to China in 2021. Trade with Belarus has been gradually increasing, but in 2021, exports to China still accounted for less than 10% of Belarus's total exports. Corn, iron ore, and sunflower oil were Ukraine's primary exports to China. However, following the onset of the war, the exports to China were reported to drop significantly, with some data suggesting that China accounted for less than 8% of Ukraine's exports in the first half of 2024 (TrendEconomy 2024).



Compared to the EU, the overall level of Chinese investment in the region is significantly lower. For example, the share of Chinese investments in Ukraine made up only 0.05% of Ukraine's total investments between 2010 and 2017 (Gerasymchuk and Poita 2018). Among the analysed countries, Serbia is the only one which receives most of its investments from China since 2022, after years of having a marginal role behind the EU and Russia (Xinhua 2024b). China invests primarily in infrastructure, energy and mining industries, with most of this money being provided through loans conditional on the participation of Chinese SOEs.

Unlike China, the EU links investment and aid to conditions relating to sustainability, transparency and democracy (Buras et al. 2024). This may lead local politicians, who are entangled in neo-patrimonial structures (Giske, Bøås, and Rieker 2024) and may wish to benefit personally from the deals, to prefer Chinese investments over the EU's funding. For example, the local company participating in the Chinese overhaul of the power plant in Montenegro was headed by the son of Montenegro's president, Milo Dukanovic (Krstinovska and Vuksanovic 2023).

Furthermore, most of the analysed countries receive negligible amount of FDIs from Chinese private-owned companies, but there are cases where the investments are more significant. One of the most important Chinese investments was that for the Linglong vehicle tire factory in Serbia (Krstinovska and Alexandris 2023). In Georgia, one Chinese company, Hualing Group, has a prominent role. Most of its investments are in the construction of hotels and resident buildings in Tbilisi, but the recipients also include the Kutaisi Free Industrial Zone and several timber processing factories (BasisBank 2021). Chinese private investments have been a focus of considerable public scrutiny and have also received criticism from the EU

for their negative environmental impact and inhumane labour conditions (European Parliament 2021). Nevertheless, China's ties with high representatives help to protect Chinese investments. When the European Parliament condemned the inhumane conditions of the workers building the Linglong factory, the Serbian Prime Minister referred to the criticism as being organized intentionally to sabotage Chinese investments (Associated Press 2021).

Infrastructure

From a geopolitical perspective, the most important transport infrastructure projects are those that form alternative routes for China's trade and serve to gain access to and control over crucial points. These are primarily the Thessaloniki Budapest railway and the "Middle Corridor" with the Anaklia Port. With Chinese investments, the first part of the Serbian railway between Belgrade and Novi Sad was completed in 2022 (Global Times 2024a). North Macedonia and Greece signed an agreement to join the project (RailTech 2023; Dimoski 2024). The railway should be a part of China's trade route from Asia to Europe, and it will pass through Greek ports. The Chinese state-owned giant COSCO already owns a majority share in the Greek port of Piraeus, the main entry point for Chinese goods to Europe, and a minority stake in the Budapest train terminal (Zeneli 2023).

The "Middle Corridor", linking China with Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and the Black Sea, should be an alternative to the traditional maritime route through the Strait of Malacca and the Red Sea. The Anaklia Port is being built by several Chinese companies, including the CRBC, and it will be owned at 49% by the Chinese Singaporean consortium (Standish and Chkareuli 2023b). However, the project is yet in an early stage of development with the future results unknown.

Chinese SOEs constructed several highways in the analysed regions, including those in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia. Most of these projects were financed with loans provided by Chinese financial institutions, and the contracts were won by Chinese state-owned conglomerates. The most infamous example is the construction of the A1 motorway in Montenegro, connecting the Adriatic Sea with Serbia, which, being one of the most expensive highways per kilometre in the world, significantly increased the country's debt (Krstinovska et al. 2023). However, there are also other examples of problematic projects. The highway between Kichevo and Ohrid, built by a Chinese company, is the largest and most expensive infrastructure project in North

Macedonia, with the contract criticised for its lack of transparency (Vangeli 2021). The contract for Banja Luka Prijedor highway in Republika Srpska was similarly criticised, as it included not only the construction costs, but also a concession to the Chinese company to operate the highway for 33 years, with the government paying it an annual fee (SPIN Info 2023). Despite the criticism, Chinese companies continue to win contracts for road construction in these countries, including for projects financed by EU funds (Xinhua 2023).

The Chinese infrastructure investments have been less frequent in most Eastern European countries. Moldova negotiated with Chinese companies to build a highway, but the project has not moved on (Harper 2021). Ukraine has not implemented any significant road or railway infrastructure projects with China's participation, and its negotiated projects have been halted after Russia's invasion. In Georgia, the Chinese attracted local elites connected to the influential oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his circle. Chinese companies won several contracts for infrastructural projects in Georgia, some of which are financed with EU loans (Standish and Chkareuli 2023a). The investments in Ukraine and Moldova primarily target food production and the related port infrastructure, thus enhancing China's food security. In 2015, Ukraine became the main supplier of corn to China. The main investor in this case is the state-owned COFCO, which also owns sunflower seed processing facilities, and invested in a port terminal in Mykolaiv on the Danube River (Gerasymchuk and Poita 2018). In 2015, the Chinese SOE signed a contract to operate a terminal in the Moldovan port of Giurgiulesti on the Danube River, which allowed for an increase in Moldova-China trade, including the trade in Moldovan food products (Davi 2020).

Energy and mining

Chinese companies are also involved in the energy sector and mining industry and have been at the forefront of several high-profile projects in the Western Balkans and Georgia. These projects have a similar modus operandi to that of infrastructural projects, and are mostly realized by Chinese SOEs and financed with Chinese loans. The first Chinese-backed energy projects in these countries included the hydropower plants (HPPs) in North Macedonia, Albania and Georgia in the early 2000s. In Serbia, Chinese companies have been involved in constructing a thermal power plant, and the operation of a coal mine, a steel mill, a copper and gold mine and a smelting plant (Jajcanin 2024). In Albania, a Chinese company acquired a stake in a joint venture operating copper mines and plants (Zeneli and Mejdini 2022). Chinese companies are the largest extractors of copper in both Albania and Serbia

(Krstinovska 2023), and the Chinese company Geo-Jade Petroleum produces 95% of Albania's crude oil, which accounts for more than one-tenth of its overall exports, and the company is allegedly also the largest employer in Albania (Zeneli and Mejdini 2022).

Even Chinese energy and natural resources investments met with criticism due to concerns about corruption and negative consequences. For example, the expansion of the coal mine in Serbia was contracted without a public tender, and allegedly no EIA was conducted (Just Finance 2023). In Serbian cities near Chinese-operated mines and processing plants, high levels of environmental pollution were reported, which led to several citizen protests (Krstinovska and Vuksanovic 2023). Also, several Chinese energy projects have been halted, probably also due to a backlash from the public, civil society and the EU (Zeneli and Mejdini 2022).

Aid

China's provision of grants to countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe is significantly lower than the aid provided by the EU. Between 2000 and 2020, China granted approximately 135 mil. EUR to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Krstinovska 2022). In comparison, the EU paid more than 5 billion EUR to these countries just between 2007 and 2020 (European Commission 2021). Despite their low relative significance, the Chinese projects often receive high media coverage, both locally and in Chinese media. They are often directed towards high-visibility sectors like healthcare, education, and cultural projects and are strategic tools for fostering goodwill, strengthening bilateral relations and developing trust in Chinese activities.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, China applied the so called "vaccine diplomacy" when it supplied vaccines and medical products to countries that had difficulties in obtaining Western medical supplies. While most of these supplies were sold, some were donated, and the latter included vaccines going to Moldova, Georgia and Montenegro (Xinhua 2021; Reuters 2021). Georgia received the largest support for dealing with the pandemic as the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) provided it with loans of 136m EUR (Brattberg et al. 2021). After the invasion of Ukraine, China promised to provide some humanitarian aid to Ukraine (AFP 2022) and smaller financial aid to Moldova for dealing with Ukrainian refugees (Moldpres 2022).

China might leverage these ties to influence countries' diplomatic and political stances. In June 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine withdrew their

signatures from the statement criticizing China's human rights abuses against Uyghurs allegedly after China's pressure on them related to a shipment of vaccines (Keaten 2021).

Information

China has been establishing links to the media sphere in the region, which allows Chinese narratives to permeate local discourses. In contrast to Russian information operations, Chinese influence over media narratives helps China to mitigate negative perceptions of itself, particularly regarding controversial issues such as human rights abuses or territorial disputes. China Radio International (CRI) broadcasts in the Albanian, Croatian, Serbian, Russian and Ukrainian languages. The China Global Television Network (CGTN) is available to local audiences in the English and Russian languages.

The cooperation between Chinese official media and local media is even more important. It allows the Chinese government to promote a positive image of China without the audience knowing that the content is being provided or paid for by China. The main news agencies, including public TV and radio stations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Ukraine, have agreements with Chinese media agencies to broadcast Chinese content (Komarcevic et al. 2024; Xinhua 2019a; X. Zhou 2017). Local journalists are regularly invited to China on organized paid trips (Fu 2024). Local organizations promoting cooperation with China issue pro-China content such as the magazine Glas Kine (The Voice of China), published by the Association of Bosnia-China Friendship (Boskin 2024).

Furthermore, several Confucius Institutes operate in the countries. Similarly to those in Western Europe, the institutes are established in cooperation between the Chinese Ministry of Education and local educational institutions, and their primary objective is to promote the Chinese culture and language. Three of these institutes are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with two of them being in Republika Srpska; otherwise, two institutes are in Serbia, one in Moldova, one in Albania, one in North Macedonia, one in Montenegro, four in Ukraine and two in Georgia. In addition to the institutes, there are the Chinese Cultural Centres, such as the one in Belgrade, whose aim is to promote Chinese culture (Xinhua 2024a). In addition to that, several agreements were signed on governmental and institutional levels regarding cooperation in education or research.

There are Chinese "Friendship Associations" in all the analysed countries, and they are often run either by China-affiliated subjects or by individuals with

business interests related to cooperating with China. These associations serve as pro-China lobbies within their respective countries and aim to influence local decision-makers and public opinion and create a favourable environment for Chinese investments. Under the auspices of these organizations, China-focused events or trips to China are organized for local journalists, businessmen, officials, and scholars (Brady and Higashi 2019). The associations are often headed by former local elites benefiting from cooperation with the Chinese. Chinese propaganda also utilizes marginal organizations with fancy titles, which are then cited by Chinese media (China Daily 2023). Local influential individuals can also serve well the Chinese propaganda on human rights. For example, a former grand mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the president of the Islamic community in Serbia visited Xinjiang and defended the CCP policies targeting Uyghurs there (Kesmer and Zvijerac 2023).

Military and security

The military and security cooperation between China and the analysed countries is limited as the latter countries are integrated within the Western security structures, with Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia being members of NATO, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Ukraine aspiring for membership. China has some level of military cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and North Macedonia, and it involves personnel training and supplying civilian equipment (InfoTag 2023; Krstinovska 2022; Xinhua 2019b).

Serbia is the only exception. In 2023, the Serbian defence minister expressed a willingness to increase his country's military cooperation with China, primarily in terms of acquiring military equipment. So far, Serbia has bought Chinese medium-range anti-aircraft missile systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (Hu and Fan 2023). Serbia also has a bilateral agreement with China, which allows Chinese policemen to conduct police patrols in Serbia, reportedly to protect Chinese tourists. Furthermore, an announced decision to allow mutual extraditions might lead to Chinese dissenters being legally persecuted in Serbia (Komarcevic et al. 2024).

Ukraine was a significant provider of military equipment to China before Russia's invasion, and its provisions included an aircraft carrier and two amphibious assault ships. Also, Chinese L 15 combat aircraft were fitted with Ukrainian engines manufactured by Motor Sich, which a Chinese company unsuccessfully attempted to acquire (Poita 2021). Between 2013 and 2018, China accounted for approximately

one-fifth of Ukrainian military equipment exports (Gerasymchuk and Poita 2018), but the military sales diminished after the invasion (Hasselbach 2024).

Regarding domestic security, at least 42 Serbian local governments have been developing digital surveillance infrastructure using Chinese technology. For example, the Safe City project by Huawei with thousands of cameras is being installed in Belgrade (Jovanovic 2023). In contrast, the USA successfully persuaded North Macedonia, Albania, Ukraine and Georgia to join the Clean Network initiative and reject Huawei as a potential builder of their 5G networks, although it is not clear how private CCTV and digital networks in these countries are equipped (Clean Network 2020).

Intelligence

While not officially acknowledged, considering the modus operandi of Chinese intelligence services, primarily the Ministry of State Security (MSS), intelligence operations involving China in the regions are likely conducted through business ties, think tanks, academic cooperations, and friendship associations (Joske 2022). As described later in this chapter, China has successfully developed cooperations with influential businessmen and current or former politicians, including through secret payments. However, the only publicly reported espionage case involving China happened in Ukraine, where some Chinese citizens were sentenced for espionage in the rocket and space industry (UNIAN 2020). Also, several cyberattacks in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been attributed to China (Mahmutovic and Hodzic 2022). Furthermore, in 2022, a UK government investigation revealed that China launched a series of cyberattacks on Ukrainian military and nuclear targets before Russia's invasion, which allegedly peaked on the day before the invasion (Milmo 2022).

The position towards the EU and other actors

China expands its regional influence, contesting the EU without directly attacking it. When Chinese representatives or official propaganda criticize their "enemies", they often smear the USA, NATO, or an undefined "West", but not the EU. European countries are described by the Chinese propaganda as being victims of the US "falling into the trap of the US' discourse" (Global Times 2024b). As for now, China seems to respect that the region is close to the EU and tries to work with that fact rather than attempting to replace the EU. The EU remains a major economic partner for China and an important entity for cooperation in many areas, including high-

tech and advanced research. Moreover, Chinese investment and trade activities in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe are directly linked to the EU. The EU is a primary market for the products of Chinese-owned companies, including oil from Albania and steel from Serbia. Economic activities in the countries give Chinese companies more favourable access to the EU market. Chinese state-owned companies participate actively in the contracts financed through the loans provided by the EU. However, China is in a worse position than the EU in terms of public support. None of the five Balkan countries perceive China as the most important ally (International Republican Institute 2024). Most respondents from all the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, would prefer trade cooperation with the EU (Zoric 2022).

China and Russia share a common interest in counterbalancing the Western influence in the region. While Russia has historical and cultural ties to it, particularly with Slavic and Orthodox Christian communities, China focuses primarily on economic diplomacy with it. China tends to conduct its relations with the region independently without any evident coordination with Russia. As for Türkiye, it balances between the West and China. While a NATO member, Türkiye announced that it wants to join the China-led, security-focused Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Hacaoglu and Kozok 2024) and the BRICS group (Vohra 2024). However, similarly to the case of Russia, there have been no signs of cooperation between China and Türkiye in the analysed region, except for several private joint ventures.

Outlook for future engagement

Many countries are currently going through a "sobering up" period in terms of their cooperation with China. This is mainly because many of the huge promises have not been fulfilled, and the investments made have not met expectations, while many problems have emerged, including corruption, non-transparency, extending of deadlines and environmental impacts. The most pro European countries, namely North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine, are reassessing their cooperation with China also due to security reasons, especially the security issues in sensitive areas. In some cases, for example, those of large infrastructure projects, the cooperation will continue because of the personal benefits for those involved, among other reasons, but it can be expected that even

with increasing EU awareness and activity, the cooperation in strategic sectors will rather weaken.

China's coercive approach is not paying off much either. The countries' stance towards China's human rights abuses has developed to China's disadvantage in recent years. In 2023, Moldova, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro already signed the statement criticizing the repression of Uyghurs, while only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Georgia abstained (Government of the UK 2023). The EU has recently been more active in countering China's regional influence. To compensate for China's investments, the EU has been offering more beneficial grants for strategic infrastructure projects. Within the Economic and Investment Plan, it plans to provide up to 9bn EUR in aid in the Western Balkans between 2021 and 2027 (WBIF 2021).

Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia are likely to seek further cooperation with China in the shorter term. Nevertheless, even in these states, as the above-mentioned polls show, the public would prefer economic cooperation with the EU, and the future direction will largely depend on the geopolitical situation and the preferences and personal benefits of the governing leaders. If the West, particularly the EU, is successful in improving its image among the Serbian elite and public, Serbia's ties to China will almost certainly weaken. As for Georgia, China's cooperation depends significantly on the personal involvement of Georgian politicians and businessmen. As Georgia is not strategically dependent on China and the public tends to favour the EU, the country's direction might shift swiftly as well.

Türkiye: Balancing Euro-Atlantic Aspirations with Regional Dynamics

Pelin Ayan Musil

Türkiye, a country with unfilled aspirations for EU membership and a 'disruptive' member of NATO, should be understood as an emerging influential actor in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. It presents the image of a reliable partner to the countries in both regions by showing an understanding of their concerns and grievances in their efforts to integrate further into the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Türkiye does not aim to provide an alternative to such aspirations, but it simply offers other agendas and domains of regional cooperation that do not necessarily

align with Western liberal norms and the EU harmonization process. Türkiye's own experience with the EU accession process, marked by disillusionment and an eventual shift away from liberal norms, has positioned this country in a paradoxical role, making it look like both a partner and a rival to the EU in both regions.

In the early 2000s, the Western Balkan and East European countries (specifically Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) shared a common foreign policy vision with Türkiye regarding EU membership. Türkiye had been granted an official candidacy status with the 1999 Helsinki decision and appeared closer to realizing that vision. Today, the situation resembles that of the early 2000s, but with Türkiye having exchanged roles with the countries in both regions. Since the second term of the Erdoğan government (from 2007 onwards), the EU-Türkiye relations have decelerated, and the Turkish democracy went through a speedy decline, which made the accession negotiations come to a standstill with no foreseeable potential for improvement. In contrast, in 2018, the European Commission renewed its attention to the Western Balkan region, offering these countries a 'credible enlargement perspective' (European Commission 2018). Later, the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 revived the EU enlargement discussion for both this region and Eastern Europe (Buras et al. 2024). Several countries in both regions have gained official candidacy status, and today, they are closer to EU membership than Türkiye. Türkiye's unsatisfactory experience with the EU accession process yet serves as a reminder to the new candidates in the two regions of just how realistic their accession goal may be. In this regard, it becomes reasonable for Türkiye to offer other forms of regional cooperation to the Western Balkans and the East European countries which do not necessarily comply with EU conditionality and liberal norms.

This chapter concludes that the inconsistencies in Türkiye's foreign policy behaviour do not downgrade the trust relationship that Türkiye has with these countries. They rather reflect the countries' own fragile and paradoxical realities. The increasing intensity of Türkiye's engagements with these regions turns it into an influential actor regardless of the self-contradictory content of the Turkish foreign policy vision.

Türkiye's long-term interests in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe

Türkiye's long-term interest in the Western Balkans intensified in 2010, right after its accession process to the EU stopped. This engagement coincides with Türkiye's own drift away from liberal norms and the Justice and Development Party's (AKP)

adoption of a more majoritarian form of governance during its reign. The ideas and ideologies that give meaning and direction to Türkiye's own 'majoritarian drift', namely the 'glory' of the Ottoman past, also influence its strategy to be a visible actor in this region. The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), the Yunus Emre Institute, the Directorate General of foundations that operate under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as well as the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) attached to the Office of the Presidency in Türkiye are the leading institutions that help spread neo-Ottoman ideas. These ideas highlight the cultural similarities between Türkiye and the Balkans (as well as other regions) due to their shared history (Volfová 2016, 493).

The neo-Ottomanist thinking includes the idea of reasserting Türkiye's influence by using the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in regions that used to be under its control. In the Western Balkans, it intertwines more with Islamic elements, whereas in Eastern Europe, it corresponds more to ethnic Turkishness to invoke Türkiye's role as a protector and supporter of the local communities. The neo-Ottoman vision helps Türkiye to pursue clientelistic relations and partnerships with the leaders of local communities, governorships and governments which share historical or cultural connections to the Ottoman Empire and it enables the establishment of Turkish influence in the regional hybrid regimes (Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024).

Türkiye's neo-Ottoman vision of inserting its influence in both regions is complemented by its active engagement in political conflicts. In the 1990s, Türkiye had taken part in multilateral peacekeeping operations in the Balkans through NATO. In the early 2000s, when Türkiye's aspiration to join the EU reached a peak, it started redefining its international identity from just being an important ally of the Euro-Atlantic institutions to being an emerging player in global affairs (Sofos 2023). Ironically, it was when the path toward EU accession came to a halt that this vision was reinforced. The successive AKP governments led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, without seeing the need to integrate into the EU, took up the mission of peacebuilding in the Balkans by providing a significant investment in order to be recognized as a mediator in conflicts, perceiving the EU as a potential rival in this field. The improvement and development in Türkiye's economic status in those years boosted Ankara's self-confidence in this mission.

For instance, Türkiye put efforts into creating peaceful relations between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and reducing the tensions within Bosnia-Herzegovina's tripartite presidency. This was manifested on 24 April 2010 with the

'Istanbul Declaration,' which represented one of the most important diplomatic events in the Balkans and positioned Türkiye as a key mediating power. Based on this declaration, the Bosnian and Serbian officials committed not to challenge each other's borders and integrity, which would endanger the stability in the region (Mulalic 2019). The Serbian-Bosnian-Turkish relations continued since then, despite a brief interruption between 2014 and 2018 due to Serbian concerns over Türkiye's recognition of Kosovo. In the moments of escalating internal tensions within Bosnia-Herzegovina's tripartite presidency, President Erdoğan often emerged as a politician trusted by both the Serbian and Bosniak sides, with a Turkish delegation receiving an invitation to mediate the talks (BalkanInsight 2021).

However, Türkiye did not put in enough effort to be highly direct and effective in mediating the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. In fact, Türkiye's support for Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and Turkish President Erdoğan's remark that 'Kosovo is Türkiye and Türkiye is Kosovo' in 2013 led to a certain disruption in the Turkish-Serbian relations (BalkanInsight 2013). Türkiye's support for Kosovo was firmly reflected in its military and political assistance. The question is, why did Türkiye not implement a strong mediating mechanism between Serbia and Kosovo as it did between Bosnia and Serbia? One reason can be attributed to the strong historical and cultural ties that exist between Turks and Kosovan Albanians. An independent Kosovo, as a close ally of Türkiye, could support its aspiration to become an influential actor more than a Kosovo that is integrated into Serbia. The second reason can be attributed to the fact that the main and largest US military base in the Balkans, Camp Bondsteel, is located in Kosovo (Dokmanović and Cvetićanin 2023, see also the chapter on the US). Such a strong U.S. presence in Kosovo possibly leads Ankara to carefully coordinate most of its moves with Washington when it comes to the Serbian-Kosovan conflict (The Arab Weekly 2023). Perhaps for this reason, Türkiye chooses to insert its influence by being more actively involved in NATO's KFOR (Kosovo Force), to be elaborated below, rather than by providing an image of itself as a strong independent mediator in this conflict.

Nevertheless, Türkiye does have some lukewarm mediating role in the Serbian-Kosovo conflict, even though it is not as prominent as the one seen in Bosnia-Serbia relations. The EU's fatigue in dealing with the tensions that have escalated between Kosovo and Serbia (2022-2024) has turned the attention to Türkiye as a potential mediator. Despite occasional tensions with Serbia, Türkiye, in general, shows an understanding of Serbian national interests. The two established

a cooperation in other fields—mostly economic—via 'agreeing to disagree on the Kosovo issue' (Kosovo Online 2024a). Particularly after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the recognition of Türkiye as a mediator in key conflicts within the Western Balkans certainly gives it prospects of filling the power vacuum that the EU cannot fill. The Western Balkan nations have been sharing common concerns about the possible chaos that Russia can provoke in the region in response to the Western support for Ukraine. Even though the war has made enlargement a priority issue on the EU's agenda, these countries are aware that the process is going to be time-consuming and will include potential delays (Braun et al. 2024; Buras et al. 2024). The latent and complex nature of the path toward EU membership hence provides an opportunity for Türkiye to become their alternative partner amidst growing concerns about Russian assertiveness in the region. For instance, they support Türkiye's cooperation with the EU in energy and the transition to renewable sources despite the EU's exclusion of Türkiye from the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (Balkan Think Tanks Convention III 2022).

Compared to its influence in the Western Balkans, Türkiye emerges rather as a 'hesitant power' in Eastern Europe (Ditrych 2024). This is due to the more assertive role that Russia plays in this region and Türkiye's historical position of supporting Azerbaijan at the expense of improving its relations with Armenia. Here, Georgia serves as a crucial transit country for oil, gas, and cargo transported via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route (Kogan 2024), while Ukraine is seen as an indispensable partner for Türkiye in the Black Sea, since it acts 'like a dam that prevents Russian pressure in the region' (Soylu 2022). In connection with this, Türkiye has consistently supported the territorial integrity of both states in response to the Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022). It recognized neither the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia nor Russia's annexation of Crimea (Republic of Türkiye 2023, 2024a). Today, it continues to militarily support Ukraine since the 2022 Russian aggression. Türkiye expresses support for Georgia and Ukraine's further integration into the Euro-Atlantic alliance at every opportunity. However, similarly to its approach towards Serbia, it has taken balancing steps toward Russia by avoiding endorsing the Western sanctions and fostering a culture of 'agreeing to disagree' with Russia on certain issues (Isachenko 2021). This is due to Türkiye's dependence on Russian gas and the need to maintain balanced relations with it due to divergent interests in other conflict zones, such as Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh (Ayan-Musil 2024).

With the current rise of European aspiration in Eastern Europe (notably in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), Türkiye aims to increase its influence over the Black Sea region, which connects Southeastern Europe with the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. It has made use of its strategy of balancing between Ukraine and Russia by implementing the Black Sea Grain Initiative under the auspices of the United Nations. Until Russia suspended its participation in the initiative in July 2023, this strategic channel delivered 33 million tons of grain during the war (Republic of Türkiye 2023). Türkiye respects the strong European aspiration of the East European countries but, lacking that aspiration itself, performs manoeuvres outside of the EU's influence. For instance, when the mutual cooperation on Europeanization between Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova (i.e., the Trio) faces a downturn, Türkiye steps in as an influential partner outside of the EU to intensify the social and economic cooperation between them and respond to their concerns (Makhanov 2022). Similarly, Türkiye aims to show its influence as a strong actor by engaging with the largest construction projects and providing military assistance to countries in conflict zones (Ditrych 2024).

Main Tools and Target Groups

In order to be perceived as a reliable partner and a strong country, Türkiye relies on a number of instruments. It sustains diplomatic ties by frequently organizing high-level diplomatic meetings with political elites and think-tank conventions with high-level experts, while it makes use of some of the features of regional hybrid regimes. Despite aiming to maintain the role of a mediator in political conflicts, it also exports military supplies, i.e., armed drones, to countries in conflict zones. Finally, it invests in developing its economic relations with these countries, including by supplying development aid to the main target groups and thus establishing its own networks of trust and influence.

Diplomacy

Türkiye maintains close bilateral relations with each Western Balkan country and does so at the highest diplomatic level. For instance, within the last decade (2014-2024), President Erdoğan visited Albania twice, Bosnia-Herzegovina five times, Montenegro once and Serbia three times (Zoric 2024). On the other hand, Türkiye established two trilateral cooperation formats: the one between Türkiye, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, on one hand, and the one between Türkiye, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, on the other; both of which aims at 'enhancing peace,

stability and prosperity in Bosnia-Herzegovina' and the whole Balkan region (Republic of Türkiye 2024b).

In global politics, Türkiye is known to play a balancing act, breaching NATO protocols to purchase the Russian S-400 missile defence system, delaying Sweden's NATO membership, and showing interest in joining BRICS and the Shangai Cooperation Organization. In the Western Balkans, we see a somewhat contradictory picture, with Türkiye taking a more pro-NATO position, and aligning with the pro-Western aspirations of most countries. As the countries in the region are joining NATO one by one, Türkiye supports their membership (Republic of Türkiye 2024c), while trying to raise its influence over the Serbia-Kosovo conflict through its own membership in NATO.

Another tool that Turkiye uses to reinforce its diplomatic influence in the Balkan region is the platform called the Balkan Think Tanks Convention - a gathering of think tanks focusing on political research in the Balkans. The Convention is instructive of Türkiye's approach to the Western Balkans as it aims to enhance dialogue and cooperation among think tanks in the Balkans and Türkiye, yet it also plays on shared grievances towards the EU and highlights Türkiye's leading role in the region. It is led by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a Turkish think tank closely linked to the AKP government (see, e.g., Balkan Think Tanks Convention III, 2022).

Turkish diplomatic relations with Eastern Europe are important, but the mechanisms and institutions are not as developed as those seen in the Western Balkans due to the Russian influence and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Türkiye has a strong record of bilateral relations with the countries in the region, except for Armenia (due to the legacy of the Armenian genocide). Still, in 2022 and 2023, some normalisation efforts between the governments were observed at international summits. In practice, Türkiye's main instruments of influence in this region are trade, development, and military support.

Unlike in the Western Balkans, Türkiye's membership in NATO does not play an evident 'contributive role' in Eastern Europe. Keen to maintain its balancing strategy regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Türkiye continues to support the idea of 'revitalizing the diplomatic process between the two sides,' maintaining cordial relations with Russia and supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity at the same time (Republic of Türkiye 2024d). This deviates from NATO's

firm and primary objective: to constrain, contest, and counter Russia's capabilities in the conflict through building long-term military assistance and training for Ukraine (NATO 2024). As part of the balancing strategy, Türkiye chooses to show its support for Ukraine's defence system bilaterally rather than by doing it explicitly through NATO. When it comes to discourse, ironically and yet again in a contrasting way, Türkiye does not hesitate to fully support Ukraine's aspirations to be a member of NATO.

This contrasts with the position of several other member countries and the U.S. who highlight the importance of 'timing' and 'conditions' in making Ukraine's entry possible (The Guardian 2023). This discourse can be interpreted as one of pragmatism, since it also acknowledges that Ukraine's NATO membership is unlikely in the near future due to the continuation of the war. Hence, it does not do any harm to be vocal in supporting it. For the sake of comparison, Türkiye is not as vocal about Georgia's NATO membership aspirations as it is about those of Ukraine. Here Türkiye pursues a hesitant strategy, trying not to confront Russia, which is against Georgia's NATO membership (Kogan 2023).

Military Support

In recent years, Türkiye's military support to the conflict zones in the Western Balkans and East European countries has steadily increased due to the improvement in its defence industry. Turkish-manufactured armed drones are gaining a growing share of the international market due to their cost, which is lower than those of competitors' products. Several accounts indicate that Türkiye's drone sales have raised the country's global profile, re-ensuring its middle power status (Kasapoğlu 2020, Outzen 2021). In Eastern Europe, Turkish drones played an important role in changing the balance of power within the ongoing conflicts. Ankara's supply of drones to Azerbaijan during the battle of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 helped Azerbaijan to recapture much of the territory it had lost to Armenian control in the 1990s. Ankara has also been an important drone supplier to Ukraine since Russia seized Crimea. On the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Presidents Zelensky and Erdoğan announced a co-production agreement for Turkish drones. This agreement is currently being implemented.

In the Western Balkans, Türkiye supplied drones to Kosovo, which, for a brief period, caused tensions in its relations with Serbia. Türkiye often responds to criticisms by the parties involved in the conflicts (i.e. Serbia and Russia) by suggesting that it is not responsible for how the drones are used. On one hand,

Türkiye is eager to preserve its strong ties with Belgrade concerning economic cooperation; on the other hand, being a staunch supporter of Kosovo's independence and territorial integrity, it is ahead of other donors providing drones and armoured vehicles to the KSF for establishing the Kosovo Army (Kosovo Online 2024b). As part of NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), which aims to normalize the Belgrade-Pristina relations, Türkiye aims to take the leading role in the alliance. Türkiye has had the second largest troop within KFOR (after Italy), and readily sent reinforcements to the mission, while a Turkish commander was appointed as a KFOR general in October 2023 following the escalation of the violent unrest in June of the same year (Kosovo Online 2023, NATO News 2023).

Economic Relations and Development Aid for the Main Target Groups

Over the last two decades, Türkiye has increased the volume of its economic trade with the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Particularly, their share in Türkiye's total exports has increased since the early 2000s while their share in Türkiye's total imports has remained more or less stable (see Tables 1 and 2). It is worth noting that in Eastern Europe, Ukraine constitutes the highest share (35 per cent), whereas in the Western Balkans, Serbia leads the other countries (49 per cent) in terms of shares of Türkiye's exports.

Table 1: Partner Share % in Türkiye's Exports *(Source: World Bank)*

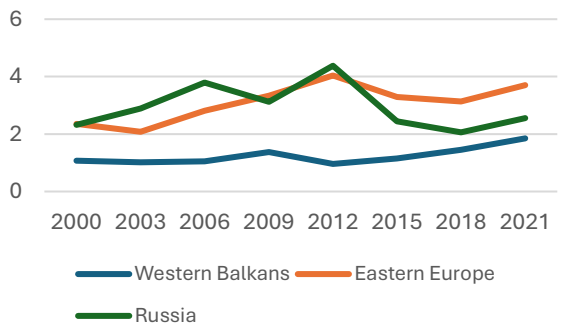
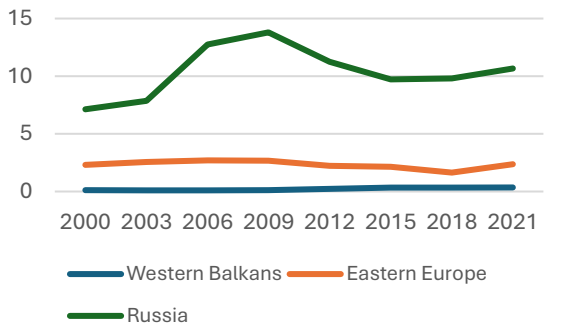


Table 2: Partner Share % in Türkiye's Imports *(Source: World Bank)*



On the other hand, Türkiye's dependence on Russia in terms of imports has increased within the same period (from 7.8 to 10.7 per cent of Türkiye's total imports). These numbers illuminate why Türkiye has been pursuing a balancing strategy vis-à-vis Serbia while lending support to Kosovo in the Western Balkans, and pursuing another balancing strategy vis-à-vis Russia while supporting Ukraine and Georgia's territorial integrity.

The Turkish government has been very active in providing development aid to its main target groups. Instrumentalizing a neo-Ottoman ideology, the Turkish government invests significantly in reviving the historical bonds with what it considers to be 'kin communities' in these regions (Alpan and Ozturk 2022) and thus also exploit some hybrid features of the local regimes. In this respect, the local communities, as well as their leaders, local governments, and political parties, constitute the key target groups for Türkiye in both regions. The outreach campaigns directed at the 'kin communities' in the Balkans include those aimed at Albanians and Bosniaks, who benefit from generously funded programs such as the Balkan Youth School, the Academy Rumeli project, and the Ottoman World Spring School. Through the cultural and youth exchange programs and pedagogical activities of these institutions, Türkiye attempts to 'instil in "kin-youth" a sense of cultural intimacy with a transborder Turkish nation' (Şenay 2022: 248).

While a shared religion is to serve one of the main ideational and trust bonds that Türkiye aims to create with communities in the Balkans, its ethnic identity—Turkishness—plays an important role for certain regions in Eastern Europe, and this is again linked to a neo-Ottoman vision. The autonomous region of Gagauzia in Moldova, populated by Orthodox Christian Turks, and Crimea, which includes Crimean Tatars, are among these regions. Gagauzia is viewed as part of the larger Turkic world by Türkiye and has a strong cultural and economic linkage with the country. In 2020, Türkiye opened a new consulate in its capital, Comrat. Türkiye's cultural and economic linkages with these regions bolster its credibility among what it considers 'kin communities,' who suffer from low levels of both 'vertical and horizontal trust' in their own states due to numerous ethnic and religious conflicts in recent history (Giske et al 2024). For instance, when President Erdoğan visits cities such as Tirana or Sarajevo, he is often greeted by large crowds of Muslim supporters.

TIKA (the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency)—an instrument for development aid—supplies funding for reaching out to such main target groups. Through this instrument, Türkiye has allocated about 18.5 per cent of its aid to the Balkans. Three of the countries receiving the most aid through the instrument have been Western Balkan countries, namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia (Demirtas 2015, 134). TIKA's activities in the region range from the restoration of monuments, schools, bridges and museums to providing technical equipment to hospitals. Among the most visible projects, TIKA contributed to the reconstruction of Mostar's Old Bridge in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was then

inscribed as a World Heritage Site and became a symbol of 'reconciliation' and 'peaceful coexistence' in the region (Aykaç 2022, 358). Since the start of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, TIKA has delivered food parcels to hundreds of families in Ukraine during the holy month of Ramadan, supplied generators to the areas that suffered from power cuts and established vocational training workshops for Muslim women living in Ukraine (TIKA 2024).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Türkiye was particularly active in both regions in terms of providing aid, which served to reconfirm its influence vis-à-vis Russia and the EU. For instance, TIKA contributed to the improvement of the resources of the Batumi Infectious Diseases Hospital in Georgia while supplying thousands of masks, gloves, and sanitizers to Moldova. During the period of the pandemic, Türkiye, as a candidate country to the EU, was engaged in high-level economic policy dialogues with the representatives of the EU institutions and the Western Balkans to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and create resilient economies (EEAS 2024). At the same time, the Turkish decision-makers did not hesitate to display a 'great country' image while providing aid to the Western Balkans through public funds or business elite networks (Demirtaş 2022).

Türkiye's view of other competing powers and the EU in the regions

Türkiye's socialization with the EU institutions and its official candidacy status (despite a stalled relationship with the EU) provides credibility to Türkiye in its relationship with the countries in both regions. Perhaps for this reason, at the discursive level, Türkiye frequently positions itself as a nation striving to firmly re-anchor itself within Europe (Euractiv 2024). Yet, today, the Turkish foreign policy goals cannot be described as being EU-oriented. They are more 'autonomy-based', and this feature reveals itself in a self-contradictory way in its foreign policy targeting both regions: While Türkiye understands and underlines the importance of having a strong linkage with the EU for these countries, it also aims to revive its influence there through remembering and actively reminding them of a neo-Ottoman heritage while instrumentalizing religion and the Turkish ethnic identity. As such, it is not an aggressive ideological alternative to the EU and the West more largely (as Russia portrays itself to be), but rather a player exploiting regional opportunities created by shared identitarian links and disillusionment with the EU.

Along with its balancing strategy vis-a-vis Russia, such strategies demonstrate how Türkiye nevertheless views the EU as a political rival in these

regions. This frequently results in tensions between Türkiye and the EU. More specifically, the construction of mosques and religious monuments in Muslim-majority regions raises controversy within the EU about 'the danger of Islamization' under Turkish influence. For instance, the construction of the Great Mosque in Tirana, commissioned by the Diyanet, which would be the biggest mosque in the Balkans, as well as the decision to construct the Central Mosque in Pristina, again financed by the Diyanet to mark the 10th anniversary of Kosovo's independence, triggered such debates during the EU-Western Balkans summit (Aykaç 2022: 370).

In addition to the EU, Russia is also seen as a rival to Türkiye in both regions. Like Türkiye, Russia utilizes historical and ideological motives to extend its influence in the Balkans (Vuksanovic 2023) and Eastern Europe (Coşkun 2024). In regard to Eastern Europe, for instance, Türkiye has consistently refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. At every opportunity, Türkiye highlights the situation of the Crimean Tatar Turks—a Turkic ethnic group native to Crimea—as a top priority, using it as a key rationale for pursuing diplomatic solutions to the war in Ukraine (Coffey 2021). Similarly, the hybrid threats Russia poses to the stability of the Balkans are emphasized in regional policy discussions hosted by Türkiye (Balkan Think Tanks Convention III, 2022). It is within this ongoing rivalry with Russia that Türkiye frequently emphasizes its support for the efforts of countries in both regions to become integrated into the Euro-Atlantic alliance and thus earns their trust.

All in all, the instruments and tools that Türkiye uses in both regions incorporate relatively inconsistent-looking values, having both religious and ethnic elements that highlight historical and cultural connections and a cautious pro-EU stance. Türkiye is aware of the strong Eurosceptic sentiments, concerns over a Russian threat in both regions as well as the lack of social cohesion in both regions due to pre-existing ethnic and religious conflicts. Within the critical juncture of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, it is yet very important to see that most governments in both regions desire to see a Türkiye that has more intense and credible relations with the EU. Perhaps this desire needs to be taken seriously by the EU in order to push Türkiye back toward a more pro-Western, pro-EU axis from its 'autonomy-seeking', 'balancing' strategy.

Outlook for Future Engagement

Türkiye has grown to be an assertive actor in the two regions, building new instruments and institutions to show its influence as a regional power by extending its cultural, economic, and diplomatic influence among both the target states and societies. Over the past two decades, the economic relations between these regions and Türkiye have intensified, with Türkiye investing and exporting more into them. Drawing on the concept of "kin communities" and the religious and ethnic ties of a "brotherhood" rooted in Neo-Ottomanism, Türkiye has also become a significant provider of development aid, making its presence felt during crises and times of need among the target communities. Türkiye's strategic use of historical connections and shared cultural ideas in this sense makes it a more skilful competitor compared to China in navigating regional politics. Its presence in mediating regional conflicts is strongly felt by both the governments and local communities involved. However, considering the available statistics on economic cooperation, i.e. the export and import shares, Türkiye's economic influence does not quite match China's widespread appeal. Still, the growing EU aspirations of the countries in both regions, accompanied by the difficulties faced in their EU integration processes and the Russian threat, elevate Türkiye to the position of a key player.

It is difficult to expect a significant change in the Turkish foreign policy behaviour toward these regions in the near future. The institutions have already been established and seem to work successfully for Turkish interests. Most importantly, they appeal to the lack of social cohesion in both regions, derived from their own religious and ethnic conflicts. This absence of horizontal and vertical trust, social cohesion, along with the Russian influence, has long prevented the establishment of strong democratic institutions and the rule of law in the regions, and instead created weak state capacity structures. As it is squeezed between pro-EU and pro-Russian alternatives both internally and in its neighbourly relations, it looks like Türkiye will continue to present itself as a third alternative to the divided communities in the region. It will continue to provide for itself the image of a strong and reliable partner that occasionally emphasises its pro-EU outlook but opens diplomatic channels of communication and get along with Russia in times of conflict.

Türkiye contrasts Russia in terms of providing support to the integration efforts of these regions with the Euro-Atlantic world. In fact, it is important to see that Türkiye's interests are more at odds with Russia than with the EU in both

regions. It does not view the Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine as legitimate. It also seeks to assert its influence in areas where Russia also aims to be dominant, such as Gagauzia in Moldova, Crimea, and the Serbian-Kosovan conflict but it does not aim to divide the societies in the manner that Russia does. Despite not actively pursuing EU accession and deviating from liberal-democratic norms, Türkiye is more inclined to align with the EU than with Russia if such a choice were necessary. The absence of a direct need to choose between the two powers, however, arguably enhances Türkiye's leverage in these regions.

The U.S.' Engagement in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans: A Reluctant Player with Limited Interests

Jan Daniel and Ondřej Ditrych

The United States has been an odd actor in both regions. While, over the past three decades, it lacked a well-defined strategic interest comparable to the Russian one, it nevertheless kept being involved in different ways in both regions, given its global standing and role in international security. In this respect, besides the moments of mutual disagreement (e.g. during the Trump administration) and the moments when the U.S. took a strong lead (e.g. during the various crises in the 1990s), the U.S. has not been a competing actor to the EU, and it was content to leave much of the role in regional affairs to the EU. However, the potential of a more unilateral and confrontational U.S. policy under the Trump administration warrants an overview of the past U.S. role in both regions.

The U.S. entered Eastern Europe after the Cold War without much foreknowledge or a strategy in place. In the 1990s, a period characterised by social "involution" (Burawoy 2001), political chaos, and violent ethnopolitical conflict in the region, the region was to be turned, to the greatest extent possible, into a space governed by strong and efficient states guided by liberal values and integrated into the global economy. In the 2000s, the drive for democratisation was reinforced by the neoconservative turn in U.S. foreign policy, which, together with the parallel consolidation of Putinism, prompted more contestation with Russia in Eastern Europe. That said, Eastern Europe remained on the periphery of the U.S.' geopolitical field of vision, and its dominant tools in the region were primarily political and economic. This changed dramatically with Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (February 2022-), when the U.S. decided to throw its weight more strongly behind

the Ukrainian defence to contain and roll back the Russian aggression against the country.

The (sub)region of the Western Balkans experienced several rising and failing waves of U.S. interest. While the 1990s in the region were defined by an active involvement policy on the part of the U.S. carried out in the name of liberal internationalism, the 2000s rather witnessed the U.S.' gradual move to more hands-off statebuilding, and distant support to the European and Trans-Atlantic integration efforts. Although the increased concerns about the Chinese and Russian influence on the Western peripheries and Trump's foreign policy adventurism have partially brought the US spotlight back on the region, the Western Balkans have remained on the periphery of the US interest. However, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reinforced the attention to the region in the framework of the great power competition and containing the Russian spoiler efforts.

Relying on its diplomatic, economic, and military tools as well as its integration into NATO, the U.S. has been engaging both the state institutions and (mostly liberal) parts of local societies in the two regions. The U.S. approach to the two regions has generally gone side by side with the EU's approach of liberal statebuilding. Since 2014 and even more strongly since 2022, the main driver of the U.S. involvement has been the competition with Russia. Given the widely diverging nature of the US engagement in both regions, they will be treated separately in the following text.

A History of Uneven Involvement: Key Strategic Goals of the U.S.

Limited Engagement in Eastern Neighbourhood

Left out of the post-WW1 US attempts to remodel the disintegrating European empires (Wolff 2020), the Eastern Neighbourhood truly and unexpectedly emerged on the map of U.S. foreign policy when Ukraine's referendum of December 1, 1991 dealt the final blow to the Soviet Union (Plokhy 2023). While the former USSR's fate was not to be that of a "Yugoslavia with nukes", the overwhelming immediate concern of the U.S. was to contain the proliferation of nuclear weapons and, more broadly, the proliferation of the instability emanating from the region and Russia itself. The U.S. interest in pacifying the conflicts was limited to diplomatic efforts – Washington thus became, e.g., one of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs steering the

Nagorno Karabakh peace process (1994-). However, its future engagement in the conflict was rather a function of broader geopolitical interests and lobbying by the parties of the conflict at home (Freeman and der Simonian 2023).

A shift in the perception of the region occurred in the latter 1990s. The publication of Zbygniew Brzezinski's influential Grand Chessboard (1997) made a powerful argument for the U.S. engagement (and denying the hegemony of another great power) in the broader region, and more importantly, there was the prospect of major oil and gas extraction in the region and the shipping of these resources from the Caspian Sea to Western markets (1994-). The related "contract of the century" over Caspian oil (Salpukas 2004), together with a network of new pipelines bypassing Russia and breaking its monopoly on Caspian hydrocarbons, was seen as a driver of stability for the region. For the first time, however, the U.S. interest was framed also in broader terms – those of economic profit and energy security for itself and the European allies. While new pipelines along the Southern corridor, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipeline, were built in the early 2000s, the potential for both stability and energy security did not meet the expectations. The secondary interest of containment to Iran, resulted in excluding the country from the contract and preventing the construction of a transit pipeline from Azerbaijan through Iran (Cornell 2003).

The neoconservative response to the Revolution of Roses (2003) in Georgia, the first of the "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, was yet another watershed moment. As the democratisation process that led to the Orange Revolution (2004) in Ukraine soon suffered from stagnation, Georgia was cast as a beacon of freedom in this part of the world, from where remaining Russian troops were to be withdrawn, among other similar problems. Mikheil Saakashvili, the country's leader, sought to capitalise on this sentiment as much as possible (Thornbugh 2009). However, the U.S.-Georgia relationship was not translated into direct military support for Georgia so that it could defend itself against Russian aggression (2008). The U.S. response to the later Revolution of Dignity, or Euromaidan, would follow a similar pattern – with the U.S. investing in civil society and democratisation programmes in the region where possible to create more friendly liberal governments, but not overcoming major local political obstacles where they existed. This placement of the region in the U.S. post-Cold-War strategy has been challenged by "cold warriors" in the administration as well as experienced Russia specialists but has remained a constant even with Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (2022).

The region's liberal reforms coupled with NATO (and EU) membership aspirations led, in the context of the consolidation of Putinism in Russia, to an aggravated contestation with Russia. It resulted in Moscow's illegal military intervention in Georgia (2008) and a de facto occupation of the separatist entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This contestation remains a defining feature of the relations and U.S. interests to this day. While the 2008 Russia-Georgia war did not check the NATO expansion, it was a product of the NATO failure to advance with the membership action plans for both Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit earlier that year, which emboldened the Kremlin (Khidasheli 2022). That being said, NATO at this time was still in an expeditionary stage and the dominant U.S. interest remained rather in the wider Middle East. The threat of Russia's revanchism and revisionism was not yet broadly recognised. NATO's core task of territorial defence only started to gain prominence in the strategic concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit (2010). Yet, at the same time, the Obama administration was still attempting to "reset" the relations with Russia in the context of the U.S. "pivot" to Asia (Clinton 2011). Nonetheless, the Kremlin's paranoia regarding the U.S.' hidden hand in support of emancipatory forces in the post-Soviet space (the supposedly original gibridnaya voyna (hybrid war) as coined by Valery Gerasimov; for a critical account see Galeotti 2019b) was only reinforced by the Bolotnaya protests (2011) following Putin's (re-)assumption of the presidential office.

This was the case even as the U.S. footprint remained limited. While the U.S. welcomed the Revolution of Dignity (2014) in Ukraine and supported the democratic forces that overthrew President Yanukovich, this rhetorical and political support did not herald a paradigm shift in terms of U.S. engagement either. The U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, which lost control over Crimea and was fighting for its territory in the Donbas, remained constrained during this period – demonstrating a clear asymmetry of interests between Washington and Moscow. The U.S. did not even participate in the Normandy format as the international diplomatic platform for dealing with the conflict. Not much changed with the Trump administration, which viewed the South Caucasus mostly through the prism of attempts to apply "maximum pressure" on Iran and Ukraine and also through the prism of U.S. domestic politics. That said, the administration approved lethal weapons shipments to Ukraine, albeit in small numbers (Marzalik and Toler 2018). However, in line with the previous approach of a limited footprint, it remained all but passive in the face of the Second Karabakh War (2020).

This approach has only partially changed since the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022. While steadily expanding the support over time despite Moscow's attempts to deter it, Washington has been imposing limits on Ukraine, namely on how the war is conducted in order to limit escalation risks. Notwithstanding the strategic attention paid to Ukraine and the robust assistance provided to Kyiv, Washington's interest has been limited to safeguarding Ukraine's independence and weakening Russia's capacity to wage a future war of aggression in the broader context of a great power rivalry in which the key challenge is seen as represented by the People's Republic of China. To that end, escalation risks have been carefully managed, at times producing frictions including both war tactics (e.g. deep targeting of Russian territories by supplied weapon systems) and objectives.

In sum, the U.S. interests have been and continue to be asymmetrical compared to Russia's. This has been the case despite the growing contestation in the 2000s and the Kremlin's understanding that it was confronted with a *vmeshatelstvo (interference)*, and later even a *gibridnaya voyna* (*hybrid war*) waged by the U.S. through the colour revolutions, which was seen as being intended to entrench the U.S. in the post-Soviet space and diminish Russia's influence (see the Chapter on Russia). On the contrary, however, the U.S. does not seek to benefit from the declining influence of Russia elsewhere in the post-Soviet space as a result of its war of aggression on Ukraine. Rather than pushing more assertively to marginalise Russia in the Eastern neighbourhood, Washington is more focused on sanctions evasion and, in the case of Georgia, countering democratic backsliding – to which it has responded by sanctioning Georgian Dream politicians as a part of what it announced as a more comprehensive review of relations with Georgia following the adoption of the "foreign agents" law.

At the time of writing of this paper, the U.S. is in the process of adopting a strategy for the wider Black Sea region, recognising its rising geopolitical importance but leaving most of the initiative in the South Caucasus to local powers (Dupuy 2024). Yet the Biden administration failed to produce the strategy in time, as requested by Congress. Furthermore, based on what is now known about its principal elements, the strategy, if it is indeed produced after all, will not represent a paradigm shift; instead, it will focus on increasing coordination between NATO and the EU, deepening economic ties, enhancing security assistance, and enhancing energy security and resilience. Moreover, the strategy's implementation, just as much as the support for Ukraine and, more broadly, the U.S. footprint and its form

in the Eastern Neighbourhood, will hinge on the outcome of the presidential election in November 2024.

Oscillating involvement in the Western Balkans

The Balkans had maintained a rich and complex position in the Western imagination for centuries (Hansen 2006; Todorova 1997); however, the Western Balkans as a defined regional entity entered the U.S. policy discourse in the 1990s in the context of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. In this period, the U.S. policy, and the public debate to which the policy was often reacting, was rather driven by the tensions between the Orientalising idea of ancient hatreds driving local violence (often based on rather simplistic evidence provided by journalistic accounts, such as Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*) and the perceived Western responsibility to react to the unfolding humanitarian crisis (Hansen 2006, see also Ramet 2005, ch. 10 for a detailed discussion on Western discourses). Moreover, throughout the 1990s (and in the following decades), the U.S. interests, policies, and responsibilities regarding the Western Balkans were also defined in an ongoing debate with (often deeply divided) European allies.

The resulting U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans in the 1990s has been described as a combination of reactive and half-hearted policies with short-term massive military and diplomatic involvement (Vujačić 2023). Such an approach defined the U.S. reaction to the war in Bosnia, which was also defined by its reluctance to intervene, its pressure for the subsequent NATO aerial campaign, and its diplomatic backing for the final negotiations of the Dayton Accords. A similar pattern then appeared in the US role in the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 with its push for the aerial military campaign against Serbian targets and its support for the resolution of the status of Kosovo. While the U.S. policies in the Western Balkans in the 1990s thus lacked any overarching strategic interest beyond short-term stabilization, especially the Kosovo campaign, an intervention carried out without the authorization of the UN Security Council, initiated an era of worsening relations with Russia (Forsberg and Herd 2015).

Since the mid-2000s, there has been an observable decrease in the U.S. involvement in the region. The dominant focus of U.S. diplomacy remained in the post-conflict spaces. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, U.S. diplomacy supported preserving the post-Dayton system and bringing the country into the NATO orbit in the framework of the Partnership for Peace, but it gradually ceded its main role to the EU. Regarding Kosovo, the U.S. politically backed the phasing out of the

international authority over Kosovo and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 while it continued to be involved militarily in the KFOR mission (Vujačić 2023; Hasić 2022). However, as the U.S. priorities shifted to the Middle East, the dominant approach of the U.S. to the region moved from an active role to sharing long-term statebuilding efforts with European states (Ruy and Conley 2021). In this vein, the U.S. has promoted and backed the enlargement of NATO and the EU to the region as the main instrument of regional stabilization.

This approach was only partially successful. While NATO's enlargement of the region progressed throughout the late 2000s and 2010s as Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia became members, the EU's enlargement remained, except in the case of Croatia, largely stalled. Occasional crisis diplomacy initiatives (e.g., in Macedonia and Albania) notwithstanding, the US engagement in the countries in this period was limited to low-level capacity-building of governmental institutions, civil society support, and security sector reform, including support for counter-terrorism initiatives. Despite these activities, the first half of the 2010s marked a low point of the US involvement in the region regarding strategic interests (Ruy and Conley 2021).

The US interest in the region was partially revived only in the second half of the decade with unilateral diplomatic initiatives of the Trump administration and increasing concerns about the great power competition and the influence of China and Russia in the region. Trump’s assertive push toward normalization between Serbia and Kosovo presents a clear example of such an approach. The resulting Washington Agreement concluded in 2020, deviated from the EU’s stance on the issue and linked the normalization to other priorities of Trump’s administration, such as the technological competition with China and the policy on Israel (Axyonova and Kartsonaki 2024). Other initiatives, such as the Open Balkan integration zone, received backing from the USA and a rather mixed reaction from the EU (Gaarmann 2022). The increased attention to the Western Balkans, defined by the focus on the Chinese and Russian influence in the region, continued under Biden’s administration, albeit arguably with more coordination with the EU (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Lidarev 2023).

In sum, the Western Balkan countries have been on the periphery of the U.S. strategic interest for most of the past three decades. Even in the 1990s, when the U.S. engagement in the region was arguably at its peak, it was rather short-term, reactive, and mostly interested in stabilization and settling the local conflicts. Apart from major crises, the U.S. was content to leave the region to the EU to deal with and

support its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures (Vujačić 2023). As many have argued, while the U.S. and the EU have paid lip service to the language of democratization in the region and invested in a liberal-leaning civil society there, they have been willing to work with the local strongmen and autocrats while prioritizing security and stability over democracy and the rule of law (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Ruy and Conley 2021). This approach has, in effect, translated into the establishment of the local hybrid regimes (Mishkova et al. 2024).

The core US interest, namely the region's stability, has remained constant, but since the mid-2010s, the geopolitical interest in containing the Chinese and Russian influence has increasingly gained prominence. The Western Balkans do not represent a key playing field in this respect as China lacks a meaningful military and economic presence there. Nevertheless, the Western Balkans play an important role in the wider project of the Belt and Road Initiative and attempts to enhance economic and political linkages between China and European markets (Zweers et al. 2020; see also the chapter on China). Containing and blocking the Chinese presence in the Western Balkans is thus perceived as a part of the global reaction to the growth of Chinese influence in the European peripheries and, eventually, Europe itself (Lindarev 2023; Tcherneva and Engjellushe 2021). The interest in containing the Russian influence has risen sharply since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, as Russia stoked tensions and conflicts in Bosnia and between Serbia and Kosovo. However, since Russia is more of a spoiler in the region than an actor with well-defined interests (see the chapter on Russia), the leading US interest in this respect intersects with the general focus on stabilization of the region.

The Toolkit

Although the U.S. has had a significant military footprint in the Western Balkans (in particular in Bosnia and Kosovo) and has been a crucial actor when it comes to supplying military equipment to Ukraine, the dominant tools it used in both regions have been *diplomatic* and partially *economic*. These tools have targeted the governments and (predominantly the liberal parts of the) civil societies in the two regions. By using the Freedom Support Act, the activities of USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other agencies and departmental funding, the U.S. aimed to create more favourable conditions for pursuing its interests in terms of support for liberal governance and strengthening the markets in the region. In this

vein, the U.S. agencies have funded programs to tackle corruption and enhance capacity building of national and local formal governance institutions, including election support and support for the rule of law. Besides this, the U.S. agencies also contributed to the humanitarian responses following major disasters and the fallout of regional wars. In most of these efforts, the U.S. followed the same engagement patterns as the EU, which assumed the position of the main 'Western' actor in periods of low U.S. interest. According to a blunt comparison of aid provided to the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe throughout the 2010s, the EU has consistently provided significantly higher quantities of development funding to each of the studied countries than the US (Conley and Ruy 2021, see also Foreignassistance.gov 2024). For all the studied countries in the region, the EU, China, and even Turkey are more important trading partners than the U.S.

At the same time, while the EU provided more overall aid to Ukraine than the U.S. and a number of member states contributed a larger % of their GDPs, U.S. aid has been indispensable for the Ukrainian war effort. The total budget authority to this day stands at 175 billion USD, with the actual aid to Ukraine being 106.9 billion USD (with the rest of the authorised funds remaining in the U.S.), which is divided into 69.8 billion USD in military assistance, 34.2 billion USD in budget support and 2.9 billion USD in humanitarian aid (Masters and Merrow 2024).

The *diplomatic toolbox* also includes security diplomacy, which was manifested more or less successfully in the periodic attempts to facilitate the peace processes in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Nagorno Karabakh – notably in the early 2000s, during the Key West meeting (2001) and recently ahead of Azerbaijan's resolving the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by force (2023). The toolbox has also encompassed sanctions as a means of coercive diplomacy. They were applied to Russia in response to the invasions of Ukraine and Belarus. Most recently, U.S. sanctions have been imposed on pro-Russia actors in the Western Balkans (Euractiv 2023), and also on Georgia's ruling elite in response to the democratic backsliding initiated by the current government. While in many cases, the U.S. has used the sanctions unilaterally (Euractiv 2021), especially in recent years, the EU and the U.S. also worked together through joint efforts in this regard.

In the *information domain*, the U.S. benefits from the longstanding and dominant position of English-language news and U.S.-based publications in the global information space, and the dedicated operations of RFE/RL and the Voice of America. However, the U.S. activity in this area has also covered support for independent media, training of local journalists, and the development of counter-

disinformation policies and programs. Moreover, the USA also benefits from its leading position in the global higher education sphere, with numerous channels of engagement with local societies in this respect, especially U.S.-funded scholarships and initiatives, such as the Fulbright programme.

The *military domain* has been an extremely important part of the U.S. engagement in both regions. The U.S.'s position in NATO predisposes it to steer the decisions of the Alliance and enables it to have multiple tools of engagement with Alliance members in the military area. Moreover, non-member countries in both regions have been involved with NATO in the Partnership for Peace or other partnership frameworks and provided with training and military equipment.

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (2022-) was a rupture that dramatically changed the previous pattern of U.S. engagement in Eastern Europe. Even before the invasion, the U.S. provided Ukraine with a high, albeit still limited, amount of military assistance. The aid included anti-tank weapons such as Javelins (Russell 2022), but its overall amount was determined by the scepticism in Washington about Ukraine's capability to defend itself – prompting Zelensky's criticism about the U.S. revealing the Kremlin's plans on the one hand but not doing enough to thwart them on the other (Plokhy 2023).

Since the February 2022 invasion, despite the delicate management of the escalation dynamics and the domestic political controversy in the U.S., Ukraine became the largest recipient of U.S. assistance – the first European country to occupy such a place since the Truman administration in the aftermath of WWII (Masters and Merrow 2024). Washington has provided Ukraine with a number of defence capabilities, including, among many others, Abrams tanks, advanced surveillance and radar systems, air defence, advanced missile systems such as HIMARS and ATACMS (and after hesitation, it allowed Ukraine to use the latter to target Russian territory at least in the Kharkiv theatre) and artillery shells (also controversially including cluster munitions). The U.S. has also mandated the expected deliveries of Dutch and Danish F-16s to Ukraine. It has been flying reconnaissance flights in the Black Sea and the wider region to support Ukraine's targeting of Russian offensive forces. As part of "Trump-proofing" efforts and in the context of the G7 Joint Declaration of Support of Ukraine (2023), in which other states have done so as well, the Biden administration concluded a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine (The White House 2024) in June 2024 that commits the U.S. to the support of Ukraine's credible defence and deterrence, including developing a defence industrial base over the long haul.

The military support has increased dramatically as a result of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (see above), and it remains a critical lifeline for maintaining Ukraine's defences. There has also been a close bilateral military cooperation between the U.S. and Georgia (a major contributor relative to its size to the U.S.-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan) through joint multinational exercises such as Agile Spirit and Noble Partner (now suspended due to democratic backsliding in the country) and military assistance, including through the Georgia Defence and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative (2021). Recently, the first and most symbolic military exercise held in cooperation between the U.S. and its partner countries, Eagle Partner, which concerns special forces, was also held in Armenia.

The U.S. has had a military presence in the Western Balkans since the 1990s, and it has managed to integrate at least some of the regional militaries into NATO command and control and planning structures. While the U.S. military deployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina concluded in 2004, the US has maintained several hundred of its troops in Kosovo in the KFOR mission since 1999 and operates the main NATO military camp and logistical hub in the country (Camp Bondsteel). Moreover, the US has been involved, in the framework of NATO or bilaterally, in numerous security system reform and military assistance projects in various Western Balkan countries, namely Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. The NATO member countries in the region, in particular, also employ some US-made weapons and military systems. Yet, the more advanced planned (and unrealized) military purchases have also drawn some controversy and played into the regional tensions between Serbia and its neighbours (Vuksanovic and Ignatijevic 2021).

The U.S.'s view of other competing powers and the EU

While the U.S. has mostly not had strong interests in the two regions, and it has been largely aligned with the EU goals and interests, its competition with other powers, namely Russia and China, was among the dominant U.S. strategic interests in the past decade. The steady slide into a conflict with Russia started throughout the 2000s and reached new heights after Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Therefore, at least under Biden's administration, containing Russian ambitions in Eastern Europe and its spoiling activities in the Western Balkans defined one of the main U.S. interests. In this respect, the U.S. acted more or less in unison with the EU, which at least the current U.S. administration still perceives as

the key actor that should be tasked with the stabilization of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Naturally, the mutual relations were more tense and occasionally confrontational during the previous Trump presidency, which did not shy away from unilateral and transactional policies towards Ukraine or Kosovo that were not coordinated with the EU and did not follow the same engagement logic.

China has been a rather new U.S. rival in both regions. Although it cannot match the level of the U.S., EU, or Russian presence and involvement in regional affairs, the U.S. perceives its activities through the lens of global strategic rivalry. As such, it invested in countering the Chinese presence in the infrastructural, information, and economic domains. In this respect, the U.S. and the EU have arguably seen less eye to eye here than in the Russian case, as some of the EU member states have perceived the Chinese activities in the Balkans and elsewhere in a less securitized and confrontational way than the U.S.

Looking to the future

The next U.S. administration and the amount of support it will be able or willing to provide for Ukraine is a key variable in assessing the future of the U.S. engagement with Eastern Europe. Should Kamala Harris be elected president, it is reasonable to expect the U.S. posture to remain broadly similar. However, the amount of military and macrofinancial assistance to Kyiv likely will not be maintained. This can harm Ukraine's defences unless it is offset by aid provided by the EU – an elusive prospect at present. In turn, Russia's advances in Ukraine can send further ripples across the region – with Moldova most notably feeling the increased insecurity – and encourage Moscow to step up its malign influence efforts. If Trump wins, he will likely seek to initiate talks with Vladimir Putin even before the inauguration. The outcome of these talks will constitute a possible bifurcation at another level. If the talks fail and Trump does not "deliver peace", he may lose interest in Europe – and even possibly hand over the portfolio to his vice president, who would pursue a more assertive isolationist policy. However, Trump could also seek to support Ukraine more assertively, irrespective of the escalation risks in this case. If a preliminary understanding on a compromise along the "land for peace" line is reached, however, Trump would likely push Ukraine and the European allies toward a "peace agreement". If forced through, this might result in the Eastern neighbourhood being under a stronger and potentially growing Russian influence and a decline of the already limited U.S. presence.

Leaving aside the likely constant attention to containing the Chinese influence in the areas of economy, technology, and infrastructure, the future of the US involvement in the region is partly connected to the one in Eastern Europe. Given the peripheral nature of the U.S. interest in the Western Balkans, the future development of the war in Ukraine and the US relations with Russia will decide whether containing the Russian interference in the Western Balkans will play any role in devising a U.S. interest in the region. Such an attention to Russia could be reasonably expected to last under a Democratic administration. This might then translate into increased diplomatic involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, further attention to the relations with Kosovo and Serbia, and a more EU-coordinated approach regarding diplomatic initiatives. Naturally, the Trump administration presents a less predictable picture. A potential deal with Russia and a disengagement from Eastern Europe might rather herald a decreasing strategic interest in the region and a return to an issue-oriented and transactional focus. In this scenario, there could be reasonable expectations of tensions and openly divergent priorities with the EU over contentious issues (such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo), and it opens questions about dedication to further investments in NATO and bolstering its presence in the Western Balkans.

Conclusion: Comparing and contrasting the roles of external actors

As this study documented, there is no shortage of external challenges to the EU's position in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. From the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which is justified in the name of the struggle against the "Collective West," to the Chinese companies acquiring stakes in regional infrastructural projects and key industries, Türkiye's outreach to kin communities and offers of an alternative to the EU membership and the U.S.' assertive unilateral diplomatic initiatives, the competition with the EU and contestation of its vision of regional order have taken multiple forms. Needless to add, they also have had a varying impact on the states in the two regions, from the Russian active challenge of democratization and support of regional hybridity to the U.S. support for liberal reforms and the rule of law, combined with a tacit acknowledgement of the practice of regional hybrid regimes. This conclusion summarises the main interests and the most important forms of involvement of the studied external actors and their strategies. Furthermore, it zooms in on how these actors target the states'

institutional structures in the two regions, how they work with hybrid regime structures, and how they engage with the respective societies (see Giske et al 2024).

While for Russia, Eastern Europe and, more specifically, Ukraine remains an area of extreme importance and a part of its broader imperial project, the Western Balkans, despite many declarations of Pan-Slavic and Orthodox solidarity, are rather on the sidelines of the Russian interest. As such, Russia is content with a limited spoiler role in the region while playing on local grievances and unresolved political conflicts, thus supporting the hybrid nature of regional regimes and disrupting the societal trust in the state and trust among different communities. Apart from the open war in Ukraine, the Russian goals translate into political and information support for separatist and nationalist forces as well as conservative and anti-Western political parties and movements. As such, Russia even actively targets the broader sense of trust and belonging in the countries it perceives as hostile or where it has a stronger political interest. Russia is comfortable working with different hybrid regimes, and it perceives pro-Western democratization movements and the potential strengthening of institutions and the rule of law as processes threatening its own ability to act in the given states and targeting Russian allies.

China lacks such a strong ideological interest in the studied regions, and it sees the Western Balkans rather as one of the arenas of its global strategy, which provides it with the connection between the Asian and European markets and potential inroads to the EU. Eastern Europe has been at the margins of its vision, with only a limited engagement in selected countries (e.g. Georgia). China has also been comfortable dealing with hybrid regimes in the region, yet it arguably has less interest in being involved in regional conflicts. Rather, it seeks to build its influence through economic means, investments and clientelist ties with local politicians and elites. China does not primarily aim to stoke tensions between different communities, societies and states, and thus, it does not actively target trust and social cohesion in the target countries. Instead, it invests in building its own image among the target populations and supporting trust in Chinese vision of global order.

Türkiye has opted for a different and diversified strategy, in some cases acting as a broker between opposing sides and offering its mediation services, while in other cases establishing pragmatic and clientelist partnerships with different hybrid regimes and its ‘kin communities’. Such an approach allows it to pursue economic or political interests when needed and contributes to broader Turkish economic and political goals. Similarly to the Chinese approach, Türkiye can also navigate the complex power games of hybrid regimes and does not push for institutional reform.

However, it has a more directed strategy when it comes to its focus on certain communities (ethnically Turkish and/or Muslim) and works on strengthening the bonds and trust relationships of these communities with Türkiye. This might not necessarily mean support for overt separatism. Still, it shows an approach focused on building clientelist links and alternative networks of trust and belonging beyond the respective national polities.

Finally, for the U.S., both regions were on the periphery of its interest for most of the past decade. However, both gained new importance in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing U.S. global competition with China. Although the U.S. has also been ready to accept a certain level of hybridity in the political regimes in both regions when aligning with the US interests, it has also promoted democratization and state-building initiatives to strengthen the basic governmental institutions and governance. Moreover, the U.S. has also actively promoted initiatives to enhance trust in (liberal) governmental institutions and (liberal) civil society, thus supporting the existing EU approaches.

This summary and comparison highlight the complex political and social environment that the EU faces in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. It is an environment that is defined not only by local hybridity but also by the involvement of different actors who are, in diverse ways, ready to work with local hybrid regimes. Some of the external actors are actively trying to keep the hybrid nature of local political orders in place, while others are able of making use of it, but not actively trying to disrupt the societal trust existing among the regional populations and states. If the EU wants to establish itself as an effective actor, it thus needs to be mindful of the different strategies of other external actors and the well-developed toolbox they have at their disposal.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).