

## **D4.2 The EU's mechanisms for countering the influence of competing external actors**



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## POLICY PAPER

**The EU's Perception of Competing External Actors in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood**Asya  
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## SUMMARY

Almost three years into the war in Ukraine, the EU enlargement remains central to the EU's efforts for resilience and stability in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. In a fast-changing geopolitical situation, the EU's threat perception of external actors depends on their behavior regarding the EU integration of these regions. Russia uses disruption tactics to destabilize and obstruct EU integration efforts by exploiting local political dynamics. China, on the other hand, seeks to create long-term dependencies through development models, offering alternatives to EU integration. The EU recognizes these influences but perceives China as a lesser immediate threat than Russia.

This paper reviews the attitudes of EU officials regarding competing external actors with a focus on Russia and China. It argues that the choice of 'multi-vector' foreign policy made by some candidate states will continue to be a challenge for the EU integration. The EU accession process seeks to address key vulnerabilities such as corruption and weakened rule of law based on the assumption that this will make society more resilient to external threats. Yet local countries have an agency over the foreign policy partnerships they choose. The EU's countering efforts can only be effective if local governments choose to cooperate in connection with their shared geopolitical values.

## INTRODUCTION

The influence of external geopolitical actors represents a challenge to the EU's enlargement strategy in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. Russia has been leading a policy of disruption, while China focuses on creating long-term dependencies in countries that have prospects of becoming members of the EU. Despite patterns of influence that can be attributed to each of these actors, their individual relationships with countries in both regions differ based on the susceptibility of local governments.

The EU is aware that Russia and China pursue their strategic interests in both regions. The EU does not see EU-aspiring countries' cooperations with China as an immediate threat, yet there is an understanding that a more comprehensive long-term strategy in this regard must address the potential risks of these partnerships. Meanwhile, Russia remains a major source of disruption; thus, geopolitical friendships with Russia are carefully assessed by the EU, especially those of candidate states.

The accelerated enlargement discussions with candidate countries reinforce the view that their integration is essential for a resilient European neighbourhood and a resilient Europe. Ukraine is already a candidate country, yet with an active conflict on its territory and without full control over it. Both Georgia and Moldova aim for membership, but they face the challenge of pro-Russian separatist regions within their borders.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Georgia is in a phase of democratic backsliding and

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<sup>1</sup> These are Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Transnistria in Moldova.

increasingly aligns its domestic and foreign policies with Russia's interest in the region.<sup>2</sup> Similar trends affect “older” candidate states like Serbia, where Russian interests have been institutionalized through cooperation in key areas such as energy, security, and foreign policy.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the urgent need for the EU to actively engage in the Western Balkans to counter the external influence that could destabilize the countries and undermine the EU enlargement efforts. Previously, the EU had been criticized for its limited political presence in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. The EU's perceived political absence has created opportunities for other influential powers, including Russia, Türkiye, and China.

Russia and China have been the two most significant non-Western players taking advantage of the “Western distraction” (Vuksanović 2022). However, they differ in their interests and, therefore, also in their approaches. Russia acts as a spoiler seeking to obstruct and gain a leverage over the West, while China is a challenger with newly developed interests in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood that manifest as a development model perceived as an alternative to the EU.

Meanwhile, the internal dynamics within the EU create vulnerabilities in the ways external actors are countered. Hungary's foreign policy, especially during the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU, has re-legitimized Russia as a geopolitical partner, which weakens the EU's geopolitical consensus following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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<sup>2</sup> In November 2024, the government of Georgia announced that it is putting on hold its accession negotiations with the EU for four years.

The key lens that guides this study is *resilience* to external actors that may negatively affect attempts at democratisation or work to destabilise already existing democratic institutions and norms (Giske, Bøås, and Rieker 2024). The paper is linked to previous studies under the RE-ENGAGE project. It also builds on an analysis of external actors' engagement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe (Daniel et al. 2024). While this previous study extensively looked at the strategies of four external actors, this paper is zooming in on two key players, namely Russia and China. The reason is that these two external powers were mentioned by interviewees as the greatest concerns for the EU. The paper also refers to the policies and instruments studied in a background study of the EU's democracy promotion toolkit (Buras et al. 2024).

This policy paper analyses the attitudes and perceptions of a set of EU officials and diplomats who were interviewed in September–October 2024. The interviewees were asked to engage with two key topics – the first one is external actors from the EU's point of view; the second concerns the EU's countermeasures and their effectiveness. The latter set of questions allowed for criticisms of the EU strategic responses and identified areas for improvement. The EU officials shared their views on the perceived influence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, as well as offering solutions for the problem of countering these influences more effectively.

Two other external actors, Türkiye and the United States, are in the focus of the RE-ENGAGE project, yet this paper pays less attention to them, as the EU does not perceive them as bringing significant obstacles to its engagement with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. There is, however, an awareness among the interviewed EU officials that Türkiye has a strong economic and cultural

presence in some of the WB countries that is often paired with Türkiye's own drift away from liberal norms (Musil 2024).

The U.S. has been largely aligned with the EU goals and interests, while competing with other powers, namely Russia and China (Daniel and Ditych 2024). Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the partnership between the EU and the U.S. has become even more essential, yet there are concerns among EU officials about the future engagement of the US in Eastern Europe under the second Trump administration.

The paper continues with a discussion of the EU strategic response to the external actors and a reflection on the effectiveness of the existing measures. Afterwards, it reviews the key elements of Russia and China's strategies and, further, the EU's perception of these external actors and their actions. This part is then followed by the key findings and conclusion.

## THE EU'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL ACTORS

In the geopolitical framework before the war, most of the tools and measures discussed in this section had already been in place. They are a function of the EU strategic interest in the neighbouring regions. Some of them have been consistent, while others required a triggering moment like the war in Ukraine to become more tangible. As attitudes and policies are interlinked and could change over time, the EU's toolkit used to counter external actors is a function of how these players are being perceived by EU officials and diplomats.

The EU enlargement policy has been a value-based offer designed to enable reforms, strengthen institutions of the candidate states and therefore make them resilient to exploitation by external actors (Buras et al. 2024). The EU's strategic response is

built around the idea of bringing the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood closer to the EU, either through a membership in the long run, or through a **strategic partnership and strategic agreements** that can have a more immediate impact on the relations with the countries in both regions. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has urged the EU to foster closer ties with them through Association Agreements and Stabilization and Association Agreements. These frameworks are designed to help the two regions integrate economically and politically with the EU and, moreover, to provide a clear alternative to dependencies and a clientelist reliance on Russia and China, among other non-EU actors.

**Foreign policy alignment** is described in the fundamentals as an expectation (not an obligation) for the EU candidate states; however, this formulation belongs to a political context that is fundamentally different from the one of today.<sup>3</sup> The fundamentals do not formally mandate alignment with the EU's foreign policy as a prerequisite. However, the principle of unanimity, where all member states must agree on a new country joining the EU, implies an expectation of alignment. Some member states closely monitor whether candidate countries support the EU's foreign policy positions before endorsing their membership.

The EU further provides **financial assistance** to both regions. This happens through tools like the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) of the EU. This funding is meant to support reforms and economic development, and thus reduce reliance on financial aid from external powers. In the Western Balkans, the EU uses the IPA III to support reforms in

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<sup>3</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.



important sectors such as the judiciary and public administration and thus directly help countries in their accession paths.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's aggression has led to unprecedented levels of support in terms of macro-financial aid for Ukraine. Since the outbreak of the war, the EU and its member states have provided around 122 billion euro in support for Ukraine (European Council 2024). The Ukraine Facility provides for up to 50 billion euro of stable financing in grants and loans to support Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction, and modernization over the period from 2024 to 2027.<sup>5</sup> Up to 32 billion euro are meant to support the reforms and investments set out in the "Ukraine plan" (European Council 2024). On a smaller scale, in the Eastern Neighborhood, tools such as the ENI has been used to fund projects such as the EU4 Business Initiative and thus support small and medium-sized initiatives in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, among others.

**The rule of law and democracy promotion** is key to how the EU tries to limit external actors' influence (Buras et al. 2024). Since non-EU actors often benefit from vulnerabilities in the political and judicial systems, the EU seeks to block the avenues through which external actors might exert influence through corrupt practices and clientelist networks. One example is the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) in Kosovo, which focuses on strengthening legal institutions and building anti-corruption policies (EULEX 2024).

The rule of law and democracy promotion often faces the challenges of democratic backsliding and hybrid regimes, both internally and externally (Buras et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024). Candidate states such as Serbia have become stabilitocracies,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2022, €14.2 billion was allocated for the Western Balkans and Turkey under IPA III.

<sup>5</sup> As of 11 November 2024, €15.6 billion have been disbursed under the Ukraine Facility.

and Georgia is currently stepping away from the EU path, while member states such as Hungary challenge the consensus on countering external influences.

The EU's approach to rule of law and democracy promotion has been under scrutiny for what is seen as a lack of consistency. In October 2022, the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Her messages to the government in Serbia were criticized as ill-prepared (Majstorović 2022). On Twitter, von der Leyen stated that "Serbia is well advanced on its EU path", while according to the 2022 Country Report by the European Commission, the country is only "moderately prepared", and this conclusion has not changed since 2016. This gap between political discourse and real progress has been criticized for harming the vision of the EU enlargement as a reform-driven process.

Another aspect of the EU's approach to external influences, particularly from Russia, is **energy diversification initiatives**. Since 2014 and even before then, the EU has been promoting energy diversification, especially in new member states and those that aspire to join the EU. The dependencies on Russian energy supplies in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood have been used by Russia to project and maintain its influence. After Russia's energy blackmailing in 2013-2014 and especially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU has been investing more in infrastructure to facilitate energy imports from different sources.

In the Western Balkans, the EU supports the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which brings gas from Azerbaijan to Southern Europe and thus reduces the dependence on Russia. The WB countries are also part of the EU's Energy Community, which helps

them integrate into the EU energy market.<sup>6</sup> Through the Ukraine Energy Support Fund, the EU supports Ukraine's energy resilience, which is key in the ongoing war with Russia. The Fund provides critical assistance in repairing infrastructure and restoring energy systems that have been targets of attacks (Energy Community 2024). Meanwhile, in Moldova, the EU supports projects to link the country's energy grid with Romania's and thus enables it to receive energy from the EU instead of solely from Russian suppliers.<sup>7</sup>

A key aspect of the EU's strategy to counter external actors in the two regions is the enhanced **security and defence cooperation** in response to security threats, particularly from Russia. The scale of the military assistance provided to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility has demonstrated the new scale of the EU's resistance against external actors. The EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM) secures individual, collective and specialized training for Ukraine's armed forces (European Council 2024). The EU further launched a plan to accelerate the joint procurement of ammunition and missiles and their delivery to Ukraine. In June 2024, the EU and Ukraine signed joint security commitments that aim to help Ukraine to defend itself against Russia, resist destabilisation efforts and deter aggression in the future (European Council 2024).

The EU has further invested in a security cooperation with the Western Balkans, providing military mobility support, backing hard security capabilities, and advancing the enlargement process itself to address resource constraints in the WB

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<sup>6</sup> Between February and May 2023, the European Commission disbursed €450 million to the Western Balkans partners, thus delivering on the Energy Support Package for the region.

<sup>7</sup> The Iași-Ungheni gas pipeline connects Moldova with the Romanian gas network.

region. These efforts aim to gradually align the WB countries with EU norms and lessen their susceptibility to influence from Russia.

NATO already has a solid presence in the Balkans through its members. The cooperation between NATO and the EU throughout CEE, especially in the area of enhancing military mobility, benefits the WB, as it secures the possibility of rapid deployment and coordination in times of war in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) includes civilian and military missions that support countries in stabilizing their security environment. The EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been strengthened following the war in Ukraine and seeks to ensure a safe and secure environment, particularly amid pressure from external geopolitical players. Through the European Peace Facility, the EU has provided equipment and supplies to support the WB. This fund is designed to contribute to their resilience against external threats.

Given the magnitude of disinformation campaigns, the EU has increased its **counter-disinformation efforts**, notably through the European External Action Service (EEAS). The East StratCom Task Force and the Western Balkans Task Force monitor and counter disinformation from non-EU actors, with a focus on Russia. These departments provide factual counter-narratives and raise awareness in the two regions.

In the Eastern Partnership countries, the EU's Task Force and especially its EUvsDisinfo initiative actively counter Russian disinformation campaigns that

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<sup>8</sup> To give two examples of regional security programs in this regard, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and the European Instrument for Stability and Peace (IcSP) fund various security-related initiatives in the WB, including law enforcement and counterterrorism capacity building.

focus on spreading misleading narratives about the war in Ukraine or the EU itself. In the WB, the EU actively support media and civil society organisations through initiatives like the “Media Freedom Rapid Response” to promote independent journalism, but also to counter pro-Russian propaganda. Despite these efforts, the EU voice in many of the candidate states remains largely challenged by pro-Russian narratives, as pointed out by some of the interviewees.

Another tool used by the EU to counter external actors is **sanctions**. While the EU has a history of applying sanctions against malign actors, the sanction packages against Russia demonstrated that it could apply this approach rather quickly and on a large scale.

The EU has imposed sanctions on individuals and entities for whom/which there is evidence that they undermine[d] regional stability, particularly Russian actors involved in Ukraine but also those involved in the Western Balkans (Eur-Lex 2024). Sanctions serve as a tool to deter actions that threaten the EU’s neighbours, and reinforce the EU’s stance against malign foreign influences. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU applied sanctions targeting Russian officials and entities with influence on political processes in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries that are also closely linked to the conflict.

Previously, the EU imposed sanctions on Serbian entities involved in supporting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the sanction regime has been instrumental in demonstrating that local countries’ aspirations to join the EU are incompatible with

support for malign external actions. Additionally, the EU has imposed restrictions on individuals that arguably undermine the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The variety of actions applied by the EU shows its strategic use of multifaceted approaches to counter external influences. The next section reviews the key points of the Russian and Chinese strategies regarding the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

## STRATEGIES OF THE RUSSIAN AND CHINESE ENGAGEMENT

This section summarizes the key aspects of the Russian and Chinese strategies that have been discussed in detail in previous RE-ENGAGE papers (Daniel et al. 2024). The purpose is to see if there are any discrepancies or differences between the behavior of these external actors and the EU's perception of their actions.

The external actors' strategies for and influence in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood vary regionally and from one country to another. What Russia and China have in common in this regard is that they capitalize on regional vulnerabilities, such as institutional weaknesses, economic challenges, ethnic divisions, and historical ties, to cultivate their influence, often directly challenging the EU interests (Bechev 2020; Burazer 2020). While Russia pursues a policy of disruption, China's presence is mostly evident in its controversial large-scale infrastructure investments, which create the image of long-lasting partnerships with the local countries (Wouter et al. 2020).

The EU is the dominant political and economic power in the WB but for the region's citizens the EU integration is associated with challenging convergence criteria, the expectation of reforms, and an inability to fulfill accession requirements (Jaćimović,

Deichmann, and Tianping 2023). Because the candidate countries in both the WB and the Eastern Neighbourhood face instability risks of various degrees, from economic hardship and democratic backsliding to bilateral disputes with neighbouring countries, such vulnerabilities are easily exploited by Russia and China. Thus, the 'alternatives' presented by external powers often favor speed over sustainability. Local political elites often face no obstacles in justifying partnerships with Russia and China, but this comes at the expense of the EU image.

### Economic influence and exploitation of economic challenges

Russia and China differ greatly in their economic footprints in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood. China's approach to these regions is part of its global strategy that involves investments by Chinese state-aligned entities negotiated at a high political level in the targeted states (Švec 2024). The key tools of the Chinese strategy - investments and loans - create opportunities for China to gain the loyalty of local politicians who benefit from the public support these tools might create, as well as through the related personal profits (Švec 2024).

The Chinese economic footprint is significantly lower than that of the EU investments in the two regions, yet partnerships with China are often preferred as they cause large infrastructure projects to be realized fast and, regardless of their sustainability, help local political elites sustain their power. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially presented as a project for global economic development, helped China expand its political and economic influence, improve its international image and acquire access to critical infrastructure and resources (Švec 2024), especially in countries with weak institutional resilience and politically captured rule of law. Thus, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood provide good

conditions for China to build alternative routes for delivering goods to Europe, while creating investment dependencies on the way.

However, China's expansionist approach does not include direct confrontation with the EU, and neither does it aim at disrupting the EU integration efforts in the two regions. On the contrary, China has an interest in maintaining partnerships with countries which at some point down the road will become members of the EU.

In the Western Balkans, China has gained influence through infrastructure projects, such as the Belgrade–Budapest railway, and technology, notably the surveillance systems in a part of Serbia (Jovanovic 2023). Serbia maintains strong economic and political ties with Russia and China. Meanwhile, the country is an EU candidate state and receives substantial financial assistance from the EU that aims at supporting economic development and judicial reform, among other sectors. While the Chinese economic presence is growing also in Albania, its influence there remains limited due to the country's strong pro-European orientation.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, China shows an interest in Ukrainian agriculture and infrastructure, which raises concerns about economic dependencies in the post-war rebuilding and recovery of Ukraine. Just before the full-scale invasion, in 2021, Zelensky's government signed a partnership agreement with China and joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but it was put on hold because of the war (Šebok 2021; Mendez, Forcadell, and Horiachko 2022). Yet the door for Chinese investments in strategically important infrastructure may reopen after the conflict. While the EU is the key stakeholder in planning the reconstruction of Ukraine, China may want to continue in growing its economic footprint in the country and potentially put the



country at odds with key European priorities (Tenzer 2021). This possibility is a part of the EU's analysis of China's behaviour in the region:

“The EU has made it very clear that it wants to play a role in the reconstruction of Ukraine. This process and the EU accession are interlinked, and it makes sense to rebuild infrastructure that is already in line with the EU rules and norms. The advantage of making use of these synergies is a strong message that we've sent to Ukraine. Of course, if Ukraine decides otherwise in the future, this will be a legitimate choice of Ukraine; we are not dictating to them, but a very large part of the population supports the EU path. So it will be very difficult for a government to go against that.” – EU official

Looking at Russia's economic footprint, the picture is less ambitious, as it mostly focuses on maintaining energy dependencies. This is the case of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the WB, and Georgia and Moldova in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Daniel et al. 2024). Unlike Georgia, Moldova has been successful in reducing its reliance on Russian markets. However, Moldova is still a target of Russian influence, particularly through Transnistria, where Russian troops and economic ties sustain separatist tendencies. The country remains heavily reliant on Russian energy, a key vulnerability that Russia exploits to maintain its control in the region, as seen during the recent energy crises.

Russia's Gazprom dominates the gas and oil markets in Serbia and BiH by providing the countries with imports and access to critical infrastructure (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; Brkić 2024). Only three months into the war in Ukraine, Serbia renegotiated a favourable three-year gas contract with Russia, while refusing to apply economic sanctions in line with the EU's foreign policy. Apart from energy, Russia remains

limited in delivering economic support to or investing in the region, and instead relies on its low-cost political influence through clientelist networks.

### Exploitation of political and institutional weaknesses

Both Russia and China exploit the weak institutions in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. For example, the unresolved dispute over the independence of Kosovo limits Serbia's progress on the EU path but allows the country to 'balance' between cooperations with multiple external actors. Russia is aware that Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war context presents unique obstacles to the EU integration of the country and thus uses the political stagnation to maintain its influence there, particularly in Republika Srpska. On the other hand, Ukraine is in a situation that enables it to advance EU aligned policies while fighting a war. Despite the EU's assistance and efforts to promote rule of law, reforms and anti-corruption measures in the countries, their implementation remains a serious challenge. This sustains vulnerabilities that are easily exploited by Russia.

### Geopolitical disruption

The previous paper, as a part of the RE-ENGAGE project, shows that both Russia and China see the "collective West" as an enemy, yet they differ greatly in the way they approach regions with a strong geopolitical competition. China avoids posing any immediate security or political threats and does not refer to the EU as a hostile force, but its economic ambitions may cause geopolitical shifts in the long run. Meanwhile, Russia has constructed a sense of a security and existential threat based on the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood countries' relations with the EU, NATO and the USA (Daniel et al. 2024). The strongest evidence of this is the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Georgia, Russia's presence has been strong, lately using

governmental channels. In the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia's military forces disrupt Georgia's territorial integrity.

Russia's strategy for the WB is a strategy of disruption of the EU and NATO expansion, while its ambitions regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood include territorial demands and an expected geopolitical dominance that it would gain through regime changes with installations of pro-Russian governments. The strategy of geopolitical disruption in the WB is also facilitated by local political dynamics. For instance, the government of Serbia exploits the rivalry between Russia and the EU to maintain its domestic control and maximize political and economic benefits. The Serbian establishment seeks to balance domestic and foreign policy interests, and thus win the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbian citizens.

However, the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine has created challenges to Serbia's discursive balancing between its aspirations to join the EU and its friendly relations with Russia. Serbian political elites have capitalized on both the war in Ukraine and the dispute with Kosovo to show the West, first, that Serbia has alternatives; second, that being on friendly terms with Russia has been at the very heart of Serbian foreign policy; and, finally, that these relations serve the best interest of the Serbian people. Yet the war in Ukraine changed the geopolitical situation and a friendship with Russia started to require additional justification, especially from an EU candidate state (Dufalla and Metodieva 2024). Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia in relation to the war in Ukraine remains a point of tension in the EU-Serbia relations.

## Public perception and soft power

Both Russia and China are seeking to present themselves as friendly and reliable geopolitical partners. In contrast to the EU's approach, which is often seen as slow and reform-heavy, China emphasizes speed and visible outcomes and thus maintains the image of an effective and reliable partner. Among the themes used by Russia in this regard are the countries' shared history, and the Slavic and Orthodox heritage (Vukasović and Stojadinović 2023; Suslov, Čejka, and Đorđević 2023). Although such identity and historical ties may play a secondary role in foreign policy, they have a role in creating and maintaining collective memories (Ejduš 2022), as well as creating space for attachment to values.

In countries where Russia manages to maintain this image, the relationship with the EU is rationalized, emotionless, and seen as a question of strategic interests, not necessarily values (Dufalla and Metodieva 2024).

## THE EU'S PERCEPTION OF RUSSIA AND CHINA'S INFLUENCE

The collected data indicates several key trends concerning Russian and Chinese influences in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. The two regions are seen as vulnerable "grey zones" which face a potential destabilization. The sense of urgency brought by the war in Ukraine has made the EU more aware of Russia's unpredictability. A dominant theme in the interviews is that candidate states have an agency to decide on their partnerships with geopolitical powers. Therefore, influences from Russia and China are not seen as entirely top-down processes of interference.

The success of the EU in countering foreign malign influences largely depends on the active commitment of candidate states to the European accession, which is seen

ultimately as a geopolitical choice and a choice of “values of democracy and the rule of law” (“2024 Enlargement Package” 2024). If some of the states prioritized their partnerships with Russia or China, the EU would lack mechanisms to effectively counter their presence.

The EU’s strategic response points to a combination of conditionality-based engagement, economic assistance, and diplomatic efforts to foster alignment with EU values and policies. However, the influence of Russia and China challenges the EU’s long-term goals, especially those regarding Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where internal divisions and economic dependencies provide fertile ground for non-EU actors.

Some candidate states pursue a strategy of maintaining good relations with multiple external geopolitical actors (the EU, the US, Russia, China, Turkey). Among others, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia show a simultaneous receptiveness to the Chinese and Russian engagements and try to balance their geopolitical friendships.

This reflects an opportunistic approach, and also points to the need for the EU to make a stronger case for why full integration with the EU is more beneficial than this “multi-vector” policy. Serbia, for instance, continues to prioritize its ties with Russia despite its EU integration prospects. The EU’s offer is not recognized as a compelling alternative by the political elite. The conditionality for alignment with EU values makes the enlargement process appear less attractive to hybrid regimes; however, this cannot be an argument for the EU to apply a looser approach to candidate states. Nevertheless, as one of the interviewees states, the EU could make

it clearer that the pursuit of a multi-vector foreign policy by some countries aspiring to join the EU puts the consensus around enlargement at risk:

“Unlike the existing and difficult-to-break links between Russia and countries in its ‘sphere of influence’ during the Soviet Era, cooperation with today’s Russia in many cases is a strategic foreign policy choice made by countries that simultaneously aspire to join the EU.” – EU official

From the EU’s point of view, candidate states have an agency in this process and by actively choosing such partnerships, they may delay their EU membership. Some WB countries emphasize their cooperations with China and Russia as a leverage point in their relationships with the EU. At the same time, both Russia and China treat the WB as the EU's "soft belly," exploiting the region's vulnerabilities, such as corruption and political instability, to foster dependencies that could be harmful in the long run. Some of the EU officials interviewed for this paper are critical of how the EU addresses these systemic problems. Tolerating stabilitocratic tendencies opens the region to further external manipulations and may weaken the EU’s resilience on the way of these countries eventually joining the bloc.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia’s destabilizing efforts represent the biggest challenge to the EU. Countering this influence is at the core of the EU’s approach to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The EU’s support for Ukraine in the war against Russia will have to continue along with more in-depth debates about issues that have to be overcome in the post-war period so that Ukraine could reach the EU membership in a realistic timeframe. This also means that the EU must work towards closing the “gap” between a political rhetoric of promises, on one hand,

and objectives that are tied to conditionality and long-standing reforms on the other:

“Now what needs to be explained to Ukrainians that there won't be a shortcut in terms of conditions and conditionality. Specific concessions should be made but conditions must be fulfilled. Ukraine has worked better on some conditions under the pressure of war than before, in the EU's assessment. There is also a sense of urgency in the administration; it is seen as a once-in-a-lifetime chance that they must use now or it may not happen again.” – EU official

From Brussels' point of view, internal divisions within the EU have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the EU's measures to counter external influences. For example, not everybody agrees with extending the sanctions against Russia. The approach of some EU countries, but mostly Hungary, to Ukraine delays the EU responses to the war.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the events of 2014 in Ukraine, in 2022 Russia used the “minority protection” claim to start a war. This argument was also used by Hungary's government to claim that the Hungarian minority in Ukraine is disadvantaged. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been accusing Ukraine of infringing upon the rights of ethnic Hungarians who live in Transcarpathia to speak their native language in education and public administration (Marchaud 2024). Such political misuse of the war situation creates challenges to the EU unity and the unanimity principle, which has arguably limited the EU's influence, yet has not managed to stop it, according to one of the interviewees:

“If we change the rules with a more pragmatic approach and qualified majority decisions, this will make us faster and make us

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

move. Having said this, we have already moved quite a lot – an effect of the war is that the EU has become a military player through our European Peace Facility and through direct activities and a lot of missions which did not exist before; the EU now has a defence commissioner.” – EU official

The EU’s response to the war in Ukraine demonstrates that the bloc is adaptable to changes in external actors’ behaviour. While the war has strengthened the EU’s role as a geopolitical actor and the consensus around the enlargement process, Russia and China’s strategies also evolve. Therefore, the strategy of bringing the Eastern Neighbourhood countries as close as possible to the EU requires an even more active engagement with the region through the existing agreements with each country. This also means that the EU should pay attention to changes in external actors’ intentions and demonstrate consistency in protecting its interests in both the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.

### The Western Balkans

As security is a key dimension of the EU Enlargement agenda, the interviewees point out that Russia and China represent various forms of threats. The European Commission and the EU member states recognize security as a reason to accelerate the enlargement process and the risks of delaying it may create additional security vulnerabilities. Thus, there is a consensus among the interviewees that a failure to advance the enlargement may not only deepen existing security concerns in the WB and the Eastern Neighbourhood but also indirectly threaten the EU’s own stability:<sup>10</sup>

“There are moments of overlap when similar narratives are used by multiple malign external actors. For example, with the full-

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<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.



scale invasion of Ukraine, both Russian and Chinese outlets would provide similar narratives about the ‘crisis’ in Ukraine.” – EU official

In the EU’s assessment, the purpose of Russia in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood is to establish and maintain areas where it would control local leaders of security, while preventing the EU accession process from moving forward.<sup>11</sup> To do so, Russia uses hybrid threats, political interventions, and media. Russia is successful in exploiting identity and culture, as well as energy dependencies, while Russian propaganda fuels anti-EU moods (Mishkova et al. 2024).

Russia’s presence in the WB means weakening the idea of an EU-oriented future of the WB that would depend on economic and security integration. While the NATO members in the Western Balkans have made a decisive pro-Western geopolitical choice, the openness of countries like Serbia to various forms of cooperation with external geopolitical powers limits what the EU can offer as countering mechanisms and policies.<sup>12</sup> Serbia chose not to impose sanctions on Russia or align its foreign policy with the EU following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In Kosovo and BiH, sanctions have been adopted at a state level; however, no anti-Russia measures have been implemented in Republika Srpska.

In the EU’s assessment, Russia poses security risks in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and less so in Albania. While Russia is unlikely to pursue an open front in the region due to NATO’s presence, it is determined to exert influence through military cooperation, support for political parties, intelligence operations, and

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<sup>11</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

paramilitary movements. The EU monitors activities that show Russia's strategic objective, namely to destabilize the region and counter the EU and NATO's presence without a direct military confrontation.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike other parts of the region, the Russian influence in Serbia is seen as institutionalized through official channels, reflecting not merely external pressure but a formal cooperation between the two countries. This is evident in various agreements between Serbia and Russia, such as those signed between their Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. Additionally, the Russian-Serbian humanitarian centre in Nis, often considered a hub for Russian intelligence, is another example that points to the nature of the cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade.

Additionally, Serbia facilitates Russian activities related to the war in Ukraine, allowing Russian operatives to operate through the Russian embassy in Belgrade. Some of them are declared *personae non gratae* in EU countries. This cooperation is further reinforced by the close ties between the Serbian and Russian Orthodox churches, both of which are linked to the central governments. Furthermore, Serbia hosts a substantial Russian diaspora and refuses to enforce the EU sanctions on Russia. What further contributes to this cooperation is the public discourse. As part of it, the Serbian pro-governmental media amplifies Russian narratives, including disinformation about the war in Ukraine. It further propagates a sense of mutual interests rather than a mere top-down influence.<sup>14</sup> This is evident from the following statement by an EU official:

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<sup>13</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

“For other actors that are not Russia, the desire to polarize societies is much lower. [Other external powers] focus more on promoting their self-image and reputation. [...] This is the case of Türkiye and the People’s Republic of China [...] These are low-intensity information operations compared to Russia’s efforts to create space for confrontation within local societies.” – EU official

The partnership with Russia aligns with Serbia’s ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy, which prioritizes a balanced relationship with multiple geopolitical powers, including the EU, the U.S., Russia, China, and Turkey, to maximize national benefits.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, however, complicates efforts to align the country’s policies with the expectations of the EU.

The institutionalization of the cooperation with Russia generally presents challenges for the EU enlargement efforts. A similar, yet more limited influence is evident in Republika Srpska (RS), where the cooperation with Russia manifests in relation to energy, police trainings, and financial assistance. RS’s capacity to further advance its partnership with Russia is constrained by its limited autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Russian influence in the rest of the WB countries is described as a malign foreign presence that is rather low-cost and limited.<sup>16</sup> Unlike in Serbia, in the rest of the region, Russia does not deploy substantial resources, and the WB countries seem open to leveraging any opportunities without committing to a serious long-term engagement with Russia. In these countries, the Russian influence primarily takes the form of disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks. Such methods are part of the arsenals of other external powers, as evident from the

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<sup>15</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

cyber-attack on Albania allegedly conducted by Iran in 2022 (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency 2022).

Despite these activities, the threats posed by Russia in the WB are not seen as existential to the EU.<sup>17</sup> They exploit the vulnerabilities of local societies and governments and aim to disrupt without any realistic hope or ambition of installing pro-Russian governments or creating Russian-aligned satellites, as seen from Russia's efforts in Georgia and Ukraine, among others.

In a way, Russia seems to acknowledge that the WB are outside its sphere of influence.<sup>18</sup> Thus, its strategy for them is limited to encouraging a “multi-vector” foreign policy, as well as fostering anti-EU sentiments, and keeping these countries outside of the EU for as long as possible. By doing so, Russia treats the region as an entry spot to counter “the West”, especially in the WB countries that are part of NATO, where Russia has been seeking to establish and maintain a web of agents and connections to potentially access NATO classified information.<sup>19</sup>

The Russian influence in the WB is mostly concentrated in Serbia, while the Chinese influence is more widespread, and it affects multiple countries in the region. This influence, primarily economic, is also the result of deliberate choices made by these states, as it fosters dependencies on Chinese financing and investments.<sup>20</sup> Decisions to cooperate with China are often driven by endemic corruption and vulnerabilities within these countries, as well as the temptation of low-cost financing for projects

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

that, while politically attractive, often lack a robust economic viability (Stojkovski et al. 2021).

China is seen by the interviewees as pursuing the establishment of client states in the WB. China's goal is to create dependency and thus it is in its interest that the WB countries become members of the EU as soon as possible. However, some of the tools it uses are quite destructive and foster corruption, which directly harms the enlargement process. On the other hand, it needs countries that are positively oriented towards Russia, and thus, Serbia is becoming a key partner for China in the region.

The Chinese influence in the WB, on the other hand, is predominantly economic and it is manifested through investments and partnerships. China looks at the region primarily as a market for its own exports and a window into Western European markets. This strategy is carefully followed by the EU without the need to take immediate actions:

“In all the WB countries there is a receptiveness to Chinese investments without following the EU rules on public procurement, anti-money laundering, corruption, etc. Now China is also present in the arms supplies, especially in Serbia, which is also a way to create dependencies and disrupt NATO expansion and security integration with the EU.” – EU official

In May 2024, China and the EU candidate Serbia signed an agreement to build a “shared future”, making the country the first in Europe to agree on such a document with Beijing (Stojanovic and Gec 2024). While the WB regional market represents less than 1% of the European market with less than 18 million consumers and a GDP of 126 billion euro in 2021, China pursues a rapid investment expansion in the region, with 122 projects totalling a value of 30 billion euro (BIRN 2021; Zeneli 2023).

The WB have been used as a “testing ground” for many Chinese infrastructure projects in Europe. For example, the Pupin Bridge in Serbia built by the China Road and Bridge Cooperation in 2014 was the first investment of this kind in Europe (Zeneli 2023).<sup>21</sup> These investments are seen as concerning by the EU:

“These long-term investments cause these countries to be in debt with China, which will allow China to gain leverage over their political decisions. In this sense, the Chinese strategy is more interesting than the Russian one, which is simply about disruption.” – EU official

Despite these investments, the EU does not consider the cooperations between the WB countries and China destabilizing.<sup>22</sup> The Chinese influence in the WB leverages the vulnerabilities of the region, as it is driven by a long-term strategic approach that contrasts with Russia’s more immediate and disruptive tactics. China views the region as a “soft underbelly” of the EU, aiming to create long-term economic dependencies that could secure its influence within the EU once these countries achieve membership.<sup>23</sup>

The EU has tolerated the Chinese influence to some degree and lacks a proactive strategy to reduce it, particularly given the small sizes of these countries. Despite being criticized for allowing Russians and Chinese to expand their presence in the region, the Western Balkan countries are not formally expected to cease ties with external geopolitical powers while making progress on the European path. However,

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<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the first railway project in Europe by a Chinese state-owned enterprise (that used funds from the EU) was the 10 km segment of the Kolasin–Kos railway implemented by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) in 2017 (Zeneli 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

not having a full compliance with the CFSP, which is the case of Serbia, for example, shows how maintaining ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy can interfere with strategic geopolitical choices such as the EU membership.<sup>24</sup>

## The Eastern Neighbourhood

In the pre-existing context before the war in Ukraine, the Russian influence manifested through a more strategic propaganda that has intensified starting from mid-2000 with the second term of Vladimir Putin. The EU’s monitoring shows that since then, the information strategy of Russia has become more aggressive and more directed to influence political decisions in neighbouring countries.<sup>25</sup> The notion of the ‘near abroad’ has shaped Russia’s behaviour in regard to the region for years, sending the message that ‘these are our countries, and they belong to us’. Most of Russia’s neighbours in the region did not disintegrate from Russia, but the war in Ukraine has created a space for them, while they still dealt with Russia, to seek a replacement of this relationship by strengthening partnerships with other actors, including the EU (De Waal 2024). The EU has been encouraging cooperation with these countries to counter Russia’s influence in the region but not imposing anything on them, only pursuing cooperations with those that aspire to join the EU and have a desire to work with the bloc:<sup>26</sup>

“The promise of the EU engagement has particular effects on Russia. An example from the past: When the EU negotiated the Association Agreements in 2013, the [then] president of Armenia was convinced by Putin not to continue with this decision. Some argue that the reason for Russia starting the first part of the war

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<sup>24</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

[against Ukraine] in 2014 was the Association Agreement and we believe that it bothered them very much.” – EU official

Some of the interviewees assess the EU’s policy instruments towards these countries as not being entirely effective.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, however, the EU’s presence in Ukraine is seen as rather successful and reform-oriented, as most of the population had indicated a desire to move towards a Western course long before the war. Similarly, Moldova and Georgia have been overwhelmingly pro-European in their political orientation for over 15 years, which once again manifested in the November 2024 protests against the Georgian government, which decided to suspend the EU accession talks until 2028 (Al Jazeera 2024). Meanwhile, the membership perspective offered to Moldova has already shown effects in terms of a desire for progress and reforms (Rainford 2024). The visa liberalization for all three countries, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, has been a very concrete deliverable of the Eastern Partnership that has positively influenced people’s views on the EU (European Commission 2024).

The institutions established by the EU to counter Russian propaganda (e.g. the East StratCom Task Force) have not been able to fully stop the “machinery and investments” that Russia has employed for disinformation campaigns across the region.<sup>28</sup> Various pro-Russian narratives have been persistent at political and economic levels across the region – for instance that Russian gas and energy sources are cheaper, safer, and more reliable. One such narrative that affects the region but also EU countries is the anti-migration narrative, and nationalistic rhetoric is heavily promoted as well. A key geopolitical narrative is that Russia is a good friend

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<sup>27</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.



and the cooperations with the US and the EU are failing. In the Eastern Neighbourhood countries such messages mix with a post-Soviet nostalgia for the “good old times”.<sup>29</sup>

When asked about the key challenges that limit the EU’s efforts to counter the Russian influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the interviewees point to several. First, there is the scale and severity of Russian propaganda operations. Second, there has been a change of methods – hybrid threats have become much more widespread than before, and Russia’s interventions are becoming more settled and sophisticated and not so obvious – for example, supporting political parties or businessmen in some countries that, on paper, are not necessarily pro-Russian but rather anti-European and anti-Western (Lozovsky et al. 2024). This contributes to Russia’s strategy of pushing away the Western presence in the region.

The Georgian Dream party is another example of an indirect Russian influence. It was not so obvious to the EU that the party would radically change its course by promoting Russia-inspired legislation (foreign agent law, anti-LGBTQI measures, etc.). These actors indicate efforts from Russia to separate Georgia from the EU path at a time when a chance to advance the negotiations for EU membership accrued. This is an important sign because these anti-liberal policies have been pursued by the Georgian Dream party only recently, starting in 2022 following the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Author’s interview data, Brussels, September 2024.

## CONCLUSION

Among the four external competing powers in the focus of the RE-ENGAGE project, this paper zoomed in on the EU's perceptions and attitudes regarding **Russia and China as the key “challengers” of the EU interests** in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. The analysis stressed the link between perceptions and policies that shape the strategic response of the EU.

There are three key findings as the outcome of this study. First, the EU perceives **Russia as an immediate threat** in the Eastern Neighbourhood and less so in the Western Balkans. China's actions in both regions do not represent a security concern, but a long-term economic one since **Beijing can undermine the resilience of the bloc** and its candidate states. Finally, the EU seeks to oppose the narrative of the top-down influence of external actors and stresses the agency of local countries choosing multi-vector foreign policies. By engaging in partnerships with China and Russia, candidate states risk weakening the consensus on EU enlargement.

The war in Ukraine has forced the EU to take a more assertive stance combining economic and military aid with sanctions against Russia. While the EU has been quite successful in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, there has been a failure to deter Russia's influence in candidate states like Serbia. For the EU to effectively counter the external influence, it must continue offering these countries viable alternatives that would make them commit to the European integration. While the EU offers clear geopolitical and economic alternatives to these countries' reliance on external actors, it has to enhance its public diplomacy efforts to communicate this message. At the same time, the EU should be more active in

mediating bilateral and internal disputes across both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Regarding Ukraine, the EU is preparing to play a leading role in the reconstruction effort, but this should also mean providing an alternative to Chinese capital and securing Ukraine's path to the EU membership. Not having a pro-active approach to countering the Chinese influence, creates vulnerabilities for the EU and the regions that are in the focus of the enlargement. The new European Commission may need to increase its focus on supporting cybersecurity and energy independence in these countries and help them become more resilient.

The EU should turn the enlargement process into an appealing and tangible offer, but not at the cost of reforms. The EU's political discourse that encourages the candidate states when real reforms are missing is often interpreted by local political elites as a possibility for shortcuts to the EU membership, which is something that must be avoided by the bloc. Given the lack of progress in the past that has permitted the growth of stabilitocracies and state capture, the renewed interest of the EU in the enlargement should balance the EU's **political messaging of hope with the procedural realities** of the accession. This is necessary for securing an effective enlargement process which will possibly limit the interest of local countries in geopolitical and business partnerships with competing external actors.

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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 an unexpected unity and resolve in regard to it by adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, and 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 producing 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 of six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia &

Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).