

D6.2 Background paper



External Engagement in the Western Balkans



Project acronym:	RE-ENGAGE
Project full title:	Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Grant agreement no.:	101132314
Type of action:	HORIZON-RIA
Project start date:	fixed date: 1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Background paper
Deliverable number:	D6.2
Deliverable title:	External Engagement in the Western Balkans
Due date of deliverable:	31 December 2024
Actual submission date:	30 December 2024
Editors:	Diana Mishkova
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Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	6
Work Package title:	Western Balkans
Work Package leader:	Diana Mishkova
Work Package participants:	CAS, EUT, ICH, UNSA, NUPI, SSSA
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	2
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Report
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	78
Keywords:	Western Balkans; external actors



BACKGROUND PAPER

External Engagement in the Western Balkans

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30 December 2024

SUMMARY

This paper grapples with several questions central to the RE-ENGAGE research agenda: How do geopolitical shifts and interventions by non-Western actors affect the commitments of Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to building functional democracy and these countries' aspirations for EU integration? To what extent, and by what means, do hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans represent fertile grounds for competing foreign powers to deploy their strategies and toolkits, and how does this affect the EU's democracy promotion efforts in these countries? The core competing actors considered are Russia, China, and Turkey plus several others that are of specific importance for the discrete countries. Central to the analysis is the attempt to identify the inroads that facilitate the projection of these actors' interests and strategies, their perception by domestic politicians and the society, and the outcomes of their intervention in the region, especially for the EU.



The paper examines these dynamics through several frameworks, including patron-client relationships, transnational business networks, and mechanisms of authoritarian diffusion. By investigating how various external actors leverage economic ties, cultural connections, and political relationships, we can better comprehend the challenges to the Western Balkans' democratic and sustainable development.



Introduction

This paper builds on and contributes with case studies to the previous RE-ENGAGE analysis of “the main interests and modes of engagement of the dominant EU’s actual and potential competitors and other external actors in the Western Balkans” (Daniel et al. 2024). It grapples with central questions to the RE-ENGAGE research agenda: How do geopolitical shifts and interventions by non-Western actors affect the commitments of Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to building functional democracy and these countries’ aspirations for EU integration? To what extent, and by what means, do hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans represent fertile grounds for competing foreign powers to deploy their strategies and toolkits, and how does this affect the EU’s democracy promotion efforts in these countries?

Three are the core actors to be considered – Russia, China, and Turkey – plus several others that are of specific importance for the discrete countries: some Persian Gulf states in the case of Albania, and Croatia, Serbia and Hungary in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The primary goals behind the increased involvement of each of these, with the exception of Croatia, authoritarian states in the region vary, and one of the tasks of this paper is to identify the distinctions. But all of them “are operating in an environment with common enabling factors that have long hidden in plain sight, defying the deeply ingrained presumption of evolutionary progress toward liberal democracy” (Bassuener 2019, 6). Central to the analysis, therefore, is the attempt to identify the inroads that facilitate the projection of these competing actors’ interests and strategies, their perception by domestic politicians and the society, and the outcomes of their intervention in the region, especially for the EU. The paper examines these dynamics through several frameworks, including patron-client relationships, transnational business networks, and mechanisms of authoritarian diffusion. By investigating how various external actors leverage economic ties, cultural connections, and political relationships, we can better comprehend the challenges to the Western Balkans’ democratic and sustainable development.

The analysis proceeds through a wide range of domains – from energy policy, infrastructure investment, and political connections to media landscapes, cultural and religious institutions – to construct a comprehensive understanding of how foreign influence shapes domestic political outcomes, geopolitical orientations, and regional power dynamics. The methodology relies on data from national and international institutions, analyses of national media, and secondary literature.

Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods provides a detailed perspective on the economic, political, and cultural impacts of non-Western actors.

I. COMPETING ACTORS' INSTRUMENTS OF INTERFERENCE

A previous background paper under RE-ENGAGE (Daniel et al. 2024) analysed the main interests, modes and channels of engagement of the dominant EU's competitors and other external actors, most of them illiberal, authoritarian or one-party regimes, in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Stepping on and complementing this analysis, the present paper looks more closely into the mechanisms or tools through which foreign actors, above all Russia, China and Turkey, exercise influence in the Western Balkans. These inroads of interference deserve careful empirical examination, as they reveal the concrete ways in which they transform existing opportunities lent by the hybridity of the political systems into tangible political outcomes. By analysing specific cases and relationships we can better understand how global actors translate their strategic ambitions into operational reality.

Following the initial institution building in largely post-conflict societies, the refocusing of the West to other regions has provided space for other global powers to infiltrate the region. A remarkable feature in all three Western Balkan case studies under examination here – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania – is the wide array of *intervention mechanisms* – diplomacy, financial leverage, strategic investments, technology, media propaganda – and *intervention strategies* deployed, including hybrid warfare, exploitation of democratic weaknesses (corruption, neo-patrimonial networks, political instability), technological and cyber threats, cultural and religious outreach, identity re-engineering. These strategies and mechanisms are unevenly “distributed” between the different countries, as are the foreign actors' interests and pursuits in the three countries.

Some analysts distinguish between two groups of illiberal states active in the Western Balkans today in terms of the nature of their engagement and intent. The members of the first group, Russia and Turkey, have long histories in the region, and both were closely involved in peace processes and related oversight mechanisms in the region's post-conflict period. These past roles give Moscow and Ankara an advantage in attempting to ‘graft’ new projects onto historical relationships with some national and religious communities, but the same history may lead to suspicion or hostility among others. “While they maintain important positions in the international system, they now demonstrate varying degrees of consolidated

autocracy at home, and their policies in the region closely track with the domestic political priorities of their respective personalistic rulers, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan” (Bassuener 2019, 6). The foreign powers in the second group, China and the Gulf states, are relative newcomers to the region. These regimes tend to be more plainly commercial and transactional in their approach, presenting themselves as economic partners seeking mutual benefit (ibid.).

In the case of **Russia**, we have a power waging aggressive hybrid warfare in the region employing in different proportions in the different countries economic, political, religious, cultural and security tools in parallel. Overall, its role is one of an opportunistic spoiler or disrupter that exploits local cleavages to obstruct EU and NATO efforts to integrate the region into their institutions. It seeks to do this by aggravating political instability and polarization in society through cultivation of far-right groups and authoritarian-style politicians in the region (Stronski and Himes 2019). For this strategy, Russia employs a wide spectrum of instruments, such as using “[n]ontransparent relations in key sectors... to create political and economic dependence” and providing financial support to extremist political and ideological groups that it regards as part of a pro-Russian constituency (Brzica et al. 2021, 27). Moscow also leverages local politicians to advance its goals, particularly by co-opting corrupt elites, as Karčić (2022) and Stronski (2022) have described. Hybrid threats and warfare (such as spreading of disinformation and using strategic communications to shape political narratives in many countries) and the exploitation of political, social and ethnic cleavages add to the list of mechanisms deployed (Rrustemi et al. 2020).

A recurring pattern in the economic sphere is weaponizing economic and energy dependencies and leveraging other countries’ gas dependency on Russia (Daniel et al. 2024, 15). This has been observed mainly in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly the Republika Srpska region. Albania is the least subjected to Russian influence as it is “largely regarded as offering few opportunities for Moscow” (Galeotti 2018). Although Russia does not aspire to the role of hegemon in the Western Balkans, unlike in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (Daniel et al. 2024), there are those who characterize Russian actions in the region as imperialistic and describe how the Kremlin uses “religious, business, and political networks... knitted – including the criminal milieu – between Moscow and the Balkans” to manipulate identity politics and exploit religious links among Orthodox Christian populations (Karčić 2022). The importance of this soft power and the role of public opinion and

the media in shaping Russian engagement in the Balkans, they argue, should not be underestimated (Ekinci 2013, 60–64).

In the focus of Russia's cultural and religious inroads are above all the ethnically-Serb populated areas: Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the northern area of Kosovo. The Kremlin exploits religious and cultural leverage through the Orthodox Church, complementing the narratives of long-standing historic ties with more active and assertive attempts in last years to present itself as a protector of traditional values and an alternative to Western dominance (PSSI 2019). Other tools deployed to this end are a wide network of over one hundred non-governmental entities directly connected to the Russian lobby in Serbia, Sputnik and RT TV programs, online news, radio broadcasts, and newspaper prints in Serbian (Rrustemi et al. 2020, 120). It has been claimed that Russia has the most effective influence on the local media disseminating Russian-friendly news stories or anti-Western narratives, which allows it to garner support without the need to inject financial investment heavily (PSSI 2019d; Stronski and Himes 2019). These operations have been expanding recently with the Sputnik news service opening in Serbia in 2014, described as the leading media apparatus in the Western Balkans which increases proliferation of pro-Russian news and disinformation very easily (PSSI 2019d). Sputnik's chief editor in Serbia, Ljubinka Miličić, told a local analyst in 2016 that it was relatively easy to operate in the area: "Setting aside the trouble we are facing from the European Commission, we've had no problems here" (Bassuener 2019, 10). In a nutshell, Russia is parallelly producing its own news in the Western Balkans that gains traction – a tactic that prevails in the Serb-dominated areas, and using disinformation with a view to sowing divisions and increasing polarization in the rest of the region.

China's role in the Western Balkans is driven by geo-economic and strategic interests. In the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) the Balkans stands out as a focal point in China's logistical and economic access to the EU. It has been argued that Beijing's main aim is to use the region as a gateway and a commercial platform to Western Europe, where the real Chinese interests lie (Zeneli 2019; Zweers et al. 2020, 8-11). Its investments, typically financed by loans from Chinese state-owned financial institutions, are concentrated in strategic sectors like transport infrastructure, energy, and natural resources. Access to such strategic sectors provides China with important leverage that can be utilized for political and diplomatic aims and with assets that can be harnessed in a larger geopolitical conflict, including for military purposes. It also serves to buy the loyalty of local

elites, who benefit from the public support these investments might create, but also due to the related personal profit it generates and the help it lends to maintaining the status quo (Daniel et al. 2024, 20–21).

Yet foreign direct investment (FDI) is not China's main leverage tool in the region: It amounts to approximately only 3%, by far lower than that of the EU, Serbia being the only Western Balkan country to date that has attracted sizable FDI from China. China's economic weight and leverage are due primarily to loans lent to finance transportation and energy projects, not actual investment (Zeneli 2019). Opaque deal making with established political elites and lack of transparency and accountability are among the most frequent criticisms levied against the Chinese way of doing business, where Chinese 'brokers' take ample advantage of the loose regulation practices, lax public procurement rules, and neo-patrimonial structures of the local hybrid regimes (Bassuener 2019; Daniel et al. 2024, 21). Since these are already debt-burdened countries, China's 'soft approach' to financial regulations and corrupt interests threatens the countries in the region with getting trapped in debt servitude. China will therefore be able to exercise leverage over these countries, should they get into financial difficulties (Oosterveld & Roelen 2017). At the same time, the cumbersome conditionality attached to EU funding makes Chinese offer much more attractive for the hybrid regimes in these countries. As Zeneli observes, "In that sense, Chinese loans and – still prevailing – practices in at least some of the Western Balkan countries fit like hand in glove" (Zeneli 2019).

Against this backdrop, Chinese involvement in the tech sectors of all three countries looks ominous. The telecommunications giant Huawei is to launch a so-called Western Balkans digital transformation hub in Serbia (News 2019). In 2018, the Serbian government has made a statement that Huawei had plans to implement its Smart City solution in Serbia (B92 2019). Equipping the administration of Aleksandar Vučić with cameras and other monitoring devices is taken to mark the beginning of Chinese involvement in providing hybrid or outright autocratic regimes in the Balkans with the means to monitor their citizens, as Chinese government and companies have already done in some countries of Africa and Asia (PSSI 2020). Huawei also pursues contracts to upgrade Bosnia's and Albania's telecom networks to 5G (ECFR, 2022). Such comprehensive expansion of a Chinese telecommunication network raises serious concerns regarding the possibilities for exerting social control and the security of digital information in Western Balkans.

Overall, Chinese companies have proved to be efficient in using to good advantage local patronage structures and cashing in on corrupting practices and establishing

strong networks with local elites, who are prone to prefer Chinese investments despite scandals and public criticism. At the same time, except for Serbia, the high level political and diplomatic contacts between China and the rest of the Western Balkan countries are limited (Daniel et al., 23).

The relationships between **Turkey** and the states in the region focus primarily on soft power, especially education, Ottoman heritage conservation, and popular culture. Turkey's involvement as a distinct actor in the Western Balkans has intensified since 2010, simultaneously with the country's drift away from liberal norms under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's and his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule. This anti-liberal turn has been accompanied by revamping the 'glory' of the Ottoman past and the crystallization of the foreign-policy doctrine of neo-Ottomanism, which combines Islamic narratives and narratives of kinship with historical and cultural ties in the region and is aimed at positioning Turkey as an active leader across the former Ottoman sphere. The combination of authoritarian consolidation of power at home with increased assertiveness and visibility of Turkey's involvement in the Western Balkans has generally been harmful to the region's observance of democratic principles (Bassuener 2019, 11-12).

Although the Turkish government maintains close bilateral relations at the highest diplomatic level with each Western Balkan country, its key target groups are the leaders, governments, and political parties of what it considers to be 'kin communities' in these regions – Albanians and Bosniaks, exploiting some hybrid features of the local regimes (Daniel et al. 2024, 43). Erdoğan has pragmatically reset the diplomatic ties with the Western Balkans region by fostering great personal relationships with the Western Balkan leaders (Balkan Insight 2018), often on the basis of aligning leadership styles. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) – the main development aid instrument for reaching out to these target groups, funds cultural and youth exchange programs and pedagogical activities, restoration of monuments, schools, bridges and museums, thus seeking to revive historical ties with kin communities in the Western Balkans and create ideational and trust bonds with a transborder Turkish nation (Daniel et al. 2024, 43)

All in all, Turkey demonstrates an inclination to exploit regional opportunities created by pre-existing ethnic and religious conflicts, to instrumentalize religion, as symbolized by ambitious projects of constructing mosques and religious monuments in Muslim-majority regions, and finance educational and cultural projects aimed at conjuring up identitarian links with the Western-Balkan Muslim communities. It thus strives to maintain the right to act as a 'protector' of Muslims

in the Western Balkans (Vračić 2016), mirroring Russia's role in safeguarding Slavic interests, and to claim on this basis the right to intervene as a mediator in settling regional conflicts. Beyond political there are also domestic demographic and diasporic rationales behind this claim: Turkish leaders say that up to 10 million Turkish citizens can trace their ancestry to the Western Balkans (Petrovic and Reljic 2011), while more than one million Turkish minorities are believed to be living in Western Balkans (Birnbaum 2013). Owing to all that, "for Turkey, the Balkans is the prime foreign policy venue and an indispensable site for power parades" (Vračić 2016, 30).

Some analysts draw parallels between the soft power exerted by Turkey and Russia, in that both countries rely on cultural and religious ties as well as historical affinities (Sadriu 2019; Bechev 2019). However, Turkey is not as external to the region as Russia is; its history and location make it part of the region and legitimizes its presence (Bechev 2015). The strong historical ties render Turkey as one of the most important international influencers in the Western Balkans.

II. INROADS OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCES

In what follows several major inroads will be scrutinized for each of the selected countries: (i) patron-client relationships, where the client engages in patterns of dependency and compliance toward the patron in exchange for political economic or military support; (ii) transnational business networks operating through the informal economic structures and neo-patrimonial networks; (iii) cultural and religious diplomacy; security and identity politics; (iv) instrumentalization of breakaway entities and regional conflicts.

SERBIA

Compared to other countries in this study, overt and persistent attempts at oscillating between the great powers through keeping options open is the most prominent specificity of Serbian foreign policy. Serbia has been a candidate country for membership in the European Union since 2014, yet anti-EU sentiments in the country are on the rise. According to a recent survey, when asked with whom Serbia should have the closest relations, 43% opted for Russia, 20% for Balkan countries, 13% China and only 12% EU. Furthermore, only 26% of respondents think that the EU has a positive impact on Serbia, whereas 41% deem it negative (IRI, 2024). Support for the EU is nearing a historic low level, matching the resentment towards the EU in the aftermath of massive demonstrations against the proclamation of

Kosovo independence. Serbia's relations with NATO are at best ambivalent, due to the aftershock of the 1999 bombing of the country by that alliance (Fridman 2016). Only 3% of respondents see its impact on Serbia as positive, against a sweeping 79% who consider it negative. Undoubtedly, that reflects on the negative image of the US, whose actions only 15% of respondents consider positive for Serbia, while 59% view them as negative, probably perceiving NATO as an instrument of US foreign policy. Conversely, 72% consider Russian actions as positive for Serbia, and even 77% would say the same for China, with only 11% considering it negative (IRI, 2024).

Serbia maintains close relations with Russia (Bechev 2017) and China (Bogoni 2023) and pursues military neutrality as part of its foreign policy doctrine of balancing relations between Eastern and Western powers (Pavičić 2019). To a certain extent, this doctrine draws on the Yugoslav legacy of non-alignment, which has been a trope reinforced by almost every Serbian government that has held office since the early 1990s (Wolfer 2023). The policy of equidistancing poses a challenge to Serbia's integration into the EU, albeit short of abandoning it altogether, (Vujačić, 1996). Such ambiguousness is exploited by those elements in the political elite who aim at capturing the state institutions and undermining democratic processes and the rule of law.

Serbia's four patrons and their inroads of interference

The position of a country partially integrated in the currents of European politics and economy yet maintaining strong ties with Russia and China makes it possible for the Serbian hybrid regime to cooperate closely with several competing global superpowers (Mihaylov 2024). This opens opportunities for foreign actors to expand their influence through bidding for the favour of competing fractions on the political scene and in the government, as well as for the hybrid regime to expand its grip on the country through soliciting the support of foreign interest groups and political elites by offering them political or economic concessions. Subsequently, the Serbian government is repeatedly re-enacting the role of a client with many conflicting loyalties.

Almost every Serbian government that came to power after 2000 has followed a version of the same foreign policy doctrine, which current president Aleksandar Vučić has defined on numerous occasions as the 'four pillars doctrine,' the pillars being the United States, the European Union, Russia and China (Ciborek 2021, 145-169). This doctrine, deeply influenced by the socialist Yugoslavia's special self-positioning in the Cold War, relies on strengthening the international standing of

the country by balancing between the global superpowers (Dimitrijević 2021, 41-56). In order to achieve a greater degree of independence from the same international institutions they claim eager to participate in, Serbian governments adopt a public posture and propaganda that would simultaneously showcase loyalty towards EU integration, while upholding the idea that their independence from the Western world is backed by Russia and China (Jovanović 2023).

Such a foreign policy allows the current Serbian regime to enhance its authoritarian power (Eror 2018). On numerous occasions, from the protests against the COVID lockdowns in 2020 to the demonstrations against Lithium mining in 2024, the Serbian government sought the support of the West for its harsh actions against the demonstrations by portraying the protesters as supporters of closer ties with Russia and China (CSIS 2020). At the same time, Vučić's administration approved arrangements according to which the Serbian and Russian secret police forces will work together to stop the threat of "coloured revolutions" (EWB 2021).

International financial institutions and the governments of Russia, China, the US and the EU are providing financial aid and loans which are used to not only pay for the Serbian government's projects, but also enhance its bureaucratic infrastructure. Subsequently, those who participate in funding the Serbian economy and state institutions have enormous leverage vis-a-vis the Serbian government. Although the Serbian GDP has been on a constant rise since 2020, so is the foreign debt which reached its all-time high of 45 billion EUR in 2024 (Trading Economics 2024). Serbian governments, however, have a long history of piling up debts in order to sustain themselves and keep the country running, which started back in the early 1990s, and continues to this day, thus pushing Serbia deeper into economic dependency (Avramović 1998). Significantly, too, already by 2019, out of 29 major commercial banks in Serbia, 21 were owned by foreign banking corporations (NBS 2019).

As regards the constant rise of the Serbian debt to foreign powers, it should be noted that Russia and Serbia started their post-Cold War relationship with Russia actually being in debt to Serbia, since both countries recognized each other as successors of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. However, Russian debt to Serbia was paid in full until 2004, through writing off the ever-increasing loans to Serbia, mostly in the form of credits used to acquire Russian gas (RSMF 2024). From that point onwards, Serbian governments took more and more loans from Russia, with some experts already in 2013 estimating that Serbian dependence on the Russian gas, coupled with new opportunities for Serbian politicians and financial oligarch to engage in shady

deals with their Russian counterparts in the energy sector, will drag the country further and further into debt dependency, opening a new path for the expansion of Russian influence (Szapla 2014). The last publicly available information on the size of Serbian gas debt to Russia dates back from 2014, which indicates that Serbia owes 224 million USD to Russia for the already received gas supplies (TASS 2014).

At the same time, of the Western Balkans states, Serbia is the country that has attracted the most investments and has the highest number of projects, due to “a favourable economic climate [and] a high readiness of political elites for bilateral cooperation with China” (Klepo 2017). Serbia is the main country to attract Chinese investment in the Western Balkans (79% of the total stock of its FDI). This is attributed mostly to the strong economic diplomacy between Chinese and Serbian political elites (Hackaj 2019). Trade between China and Serbia tripled between 2005 and 2016 (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019), with Serbia attracting over \$1 billion in investments in the form of soft loans to finance road building and energy projects (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017). Beyond infrastructural investment, multiple Chinese companies have signed deals to construct power plants and other minor industries in Serbia (Rrustemi et al. 2020, 93-94). As of 2024, China pledged to invest 2.18 billion USD in building water, wind and solar power plants in Serbia (Reuters, 2024).

Debt trap diplomacy has become one of the most common features of Chinese government attempts to expand its geopolitical influence and a prominent feature of the foreign policies of China, especially under Xi Jinping’s rule. In the case of Serbia, debt to China has increased twelve times during the first decade of SPP’s rule, rising from 305 million EUR in 2013 to 3.7 billion EUR in 2023 (Ekapija 2023). Still larger than the country’s debt is current Chinese participation in ongoing energy, mining and infrastructure projects in Serbia, which has been estimated to have surpassed 8 billion USD following the visit of Chinese president Xi Jinping to Serbia in May of 2024 (CEECAS 2024). Chinese shares in Serbian companies have exceeded the value of the shares held by EU member countries in 2022, and have been growing ever since (COCEE 2023).

Thus, while the economic power of China and its investments in Serbia have been constantly on the rise, Serbia continues its economic cooperation with Russia despite the war in Ukraine, has become a safe haven for both rich Russian immigrants and entrepreneurs close to Putin’s regime, and accumulated even more gas related debt (Jovičić 2024). Although the current involvement of Russian companies has not been fully accounted for yet, there has been an upsurge in Russian investments from 2018 to 2024, with 2,128 new Russian owned businesses

being opened in Serbia since 2020 (BNE 2024). At present, both Russian and Chinese Foreign direct investments (FDI) make about 10% of all foreign investments in Serbia (with Chinese share being 10.5% and Russian 10.9%). The largest stake holders when it comes to FDI in Serbia remain EU countries, mostly Germany (13.5%), Italy (11.7), France (8.5) and Austria (7.3), with non-EU powers making up for less than 21.5%, i.e. little more than one fifth of total FDI (CSD 2018; Lloyds Bank 2024). Meanwhile, Russia holds sway in the energy sector of Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (Stronski and Himes 2019), making energy the primary economic tool of Russian influence in these countries. This is particularly the case in Serbia, a country which imports approximately 75% of natural gas from Russia (Stronski 2019).

Importantly, granting economic concessions to shady foreign companies that are believed to exert influence on decision-makers in the institutions of the four major patron powers has become a common practice of all Serbian governments since the democratic changes in 2000 (Hadžić 2002). This *modus operandi* is also believed to have helped boost the personal fortunes of high-ranking government officials, by establishing informal connections with the political and financial elites of the patron countries, and connected their interest to stay in power with the interests of international corporations (UNODC, 2011, 2013). Such arrangements exceed individual corruption schemes, as they concern resources in strategic sectors, such as the privatization of “Oil Industry of Serbia” (NIS) (Socor 2009). By consecutive purchases of NIS shares between 2008 and 2022, Gazprom Neft took a controlling stake in this gas and oil company, considered to be Serbia’s “biggest business” (Galeotti 2018; EWB 2023). Critics claimed that the price of \$450 million was far too low and that Belgrade was paying back Moscow for Russian diplomatic support over Kosovo (Stronski and Himes 2019).

Russia’s soft power in Serbia is not to be underestimated either. Besides the interests of the ruling elites the sentiments of many Serbs act as natural force multipliers for Russia’s policies and narratives. According to a Republika Srpska-based journalist, “No Serbian politician can ever win elections in [Republika Srpska] and Serbia if they don’t openly show admiration for Russia and rejection of NATO... Russia, in order to exert influence in RS, does not need to invest a lot of money or effort” (Bassuener 2019, 11). As Bassuener observes, “In a media and public narrative version of asymmetric warfare, Moscow can, with little financial burden or application of political leverage, stoke social tensions and foment cynicism about democratic institutions and processes throughout the region” (ibid.).

Meanwhile, Chinese companies have been most active in building roads in Serbia. One of Serbia's most important and expensive roads, E-736, which will connect Serbia to Montenegro at the estimated cost of 606 million USD, is currently under construction by the Chinese CCCC company, in cooperation with the government but without an approved building license (JFI 2021). Simultaneously, China Railway International (CRI) is building a Belgrade-Budapest highway – a project that both Orbán's and Vučić's governments declared to be of high importance, while the annual revenues of the Serbian branch of CRI are estimated to be 613 million USD (Rakic 2024). Other Chinese investments directly feed into the potentialities of Vučić's regime to exert control on society. China has invested in facial recognition software, a cutting-edge surveillance technology provided by the Chinese technology giant Huawei in Serbia and a Safe City Project, installing 1000 high definition cameras in Belgrade to recognize faces and license plates. Ostensibly aimed to deter crime, there are fears that Huawei technology strengthens the autocratic systems and Vučić's grip on opponents and protestors by revealing their identities and hindering expressions of dissent out of fear of reprimand. Concerns are also raised regarding violation of basic privacy freedoms and rights, as it is unknown how the data will be processed (Rrustemi et al. 2020, 102-103). A report published by the largest independent network for research journalism in Serbia, the Balkan Research Network of Serbia, presents new evidence to support the suspicion that the Serbian secret service is using technologies acquired from China and Israel to spy on the environmental activists (BIRN 2024).

It should be noted that, since the late 2010s, the economic influence of Turkey has also been rapidly increasing – a process arguably influenced by, among other factors, the growingly cordial relations between the hybrid regimes of Aleksandar Vučić and Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Vuksanović 2024). Journalists assessed that trade between Serbia and Turkey has increased by 150% and the number of Turkish companies in Serbia has increased five times since Erdogan's visit to Serbia this year (EuroNews 2024b). Unlike Putin, who presents himself as a defender of Serbian interests in Kosovo, Erdogan is trying to present himself as a mediator, who will help to bring about a compromise between the Serbian government and the administrations of Albania and Kosovo (Vuksanović 2023).

In recent years, the tendency of providing foreign companies with permits to exploit Serbian natural resources has created new realms of corruption affairs, media scandals and public outrage against the ecologically hazardous methods of exploitation and the working conditions of those employed by the foreign investors

(Janjević 2019). In the provinces of Eastern Serbia, Chinese and Russian companies are purchasing land for mining operations or gas pipelines, whereas in Western Serbia and Vojvodina, European and American companies are involved in excavating lithium and purchasing large tracts of farm land.

Many towns of Eastern Serbia have become unique battlegrounds between the local residents-turned-eco-activists, the state police, and private security forces employed by the Chinese company Zijin Mining Group, which demolished mountains and traversed the course of rivers on the land it acquired through shady contracts with the Serbian government (BHRRC 2024). At the same time, the internationally infamous for its irregular business practices Rio Tinto company, is gradually encroaching on households and farms in Western Serbia, pressuring the locals to sell their land to the company, which has already contracted with the government for the exploitation of lithium. Details of the contracts Serbian government officials have signed with representatives of Rio Tinto and Zijin are classified as state secrets, which in itself is another cause for concern regarding the possible consequences these deals will have on environment in Serbia (BGEN, 2024).

As a rule, contracts related to strategic investment (such as selling the remnants of the Yugo car industry to Fiat, Air Serbia to Etihad, oil industry to Gazprom) are kept far from the public. News published by the few Serbian media agencies that can still operate relatively freely testify of a growing number of corruption affairs involving Zijin, Rio Tinto and Serbian government officials (MOMS 2023). Some analysts have suggested that the administration of Aleksandar Vučić is trying to 'buy' foreign support for his authoritarian exertions by making shady deals with companies that have influence with the political elites of China, Russia, the United States and countries of the European Union (Bieber 2018, Jovanović 2023). A most recent example of such practice is a tentative go-ahead for Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner's company to build a hotel on the location of a Yugoslav General Staff building destroyed during the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade and whose protection as cultural heritage was promptly revoked (N1 Belgrade 2024; Gajić 2024).

Another inroad that should be taken into account relates to the rise of political and economic power of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPS), which maintains close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. The SPC is becoming increasingly rich while building close relations with both the Serbian Progressive Party and the far-right extremist groups (Aleksov 2022). The Serbian clergy's rhetoric is tirelessly emphasizing the cultural similarities between the Serbian and the Russian societies

and the idea of the historical closeness of the two countries. Despite overwhelming evidence that Russia had assisted Serbia only when it suited Russian needs, a number of Serbian public figures and intellectuals sustain the thesis about the 'traditional brotherhood' between Serbs and Russians, this idea finding its way also in history curriculums for state schools (Stojanović 2023).

Throughout the post-Milosević era since 2000 the narrative persisted about Serbia as a country caught in between East and West and, subsequently, a country that should try to benefit from manoeuvring between the interests of Eastern and Western powers, as socialist Yugoslavia was believed to have done successfully. The Serbian Progressive Party of Vučić continues to uphold the same narrative after coming to power in 2012, simultaneously opening new chapters in the negotiations about Serbian membership in the EU and nurturing EU scepticism at home. This tendency had led to a number of paradoxical situations as when Vučić's government is greeted by the leaders of European countries for being more efficient in reaching agreements with EU institutions than the previous governments, while many Western political analysts denounce Vučić for his populist and nationalist propaganda within Serbia, hence as a radical opponent of EU values and policies (Lutovac 2021).

Part and parcel of the same strategy is the diligence with which Vučić's administration is cultivating cooperation between Serbia and China, presenting China in state-controlled media as Serbia's most important international partner, and establishing personal connections between the leading figures of SPP and Chinese Communist Party (Stojanović 2019). The Presidents of the two countries met in Serbia in 2005, followed by another meeting in Beijing in 2009; Xi visited Belgrade in 2016 and again in May 2024.

Patrons' 'pay-offs:' Kosovo and Republika Srpska

As it is known, Serbia does not recognize Kosovo and theoretically claims its entire territory (as enshrined in the 2006 Constitution), while aiming to maintain some amount of de facto control over its northern part. The Serbian government engages in diplomatic endeavours to prevent other countries from recognizing the independence of Kosovo or push others to withdraw their recognition.

This is where Serbia's powerful patrons see an opportunity to seek benefits by providing political and diplomatic as well as military support to their weaker client. One hundred and eighteen states have recognized Kosovo's independence, however two permanent Security Council members, Russia and China, have not – which bars

Kosovo's access to the UN and many international organizations and initiatives (Proroković 2020). Before blocking the UN recognition of Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, Moscow opposed the international war crimes tribunals for Serbian leaders. "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. 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" (Daniel et al. 2024, 9) During the last few years, this relationship has been symbolized by several high-profile diplomatic visits that have strengthened the perceptions among Serbs that Russia is a viable alternative to the West (Stronski and Himes 2019).

The Kosovo issue has been instrumentalized by Russia, forcing Serbia toward its sphere of influence and providing Russia with leverage (Galeotti 2018). Moscow employs a variety of instruments aimed at aggravating tensions between the Albanian and Serb communities and spreading nationalist extremism in the northern area of Kosovo (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019d, 8). Beyond Serbia, Russia has sought to provide assistance and funding to news outlets with convenient political positions, such as Albanian-oriented ones in Macedonia (ibid.). These positions include the typical anti-NATO or anti-EU viewpoints, but also calls for the "unification of ethnic Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, North Kosovo, and Bosnia's RS into a single political entity that should have close ties to Russia" (Stronski and Himes 2019; Rrustemi et al. 2020, 126).

Many far-right Serbian activists hope that if Russian influence on the geopolitical stage becomes stronger, Moscow will be in a position to help Serbia to retake Kosovo. Serbian media enthusiastically circulates statements such as the one delivered by the famous Russian historian Natalia Naročnička that "invisible forces will help Serbia retake Kosovo after Russia wins in Ukraine" (Trkić 2024). Meanwhile, Putin's regime is using Kosovo as justification for the aggression on Ukraine: if Kosovo can secede from Serbia, the claim goes, so can Crimea secede from Ukraine followed by the 'Russian-speaking' districts in Eastern Ukraine. In a similar manner, the Kremlin uses the Kosovo precedent in the Russian-Georgian disputes (McGluyn 2022). At the same time, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Putin's regime regularly reactivates the memory of the "injustices" inflicted on Serbia by NATO. Public proclamations that Russia will "remember and avenge the Serbian sacrifice"

are well received and further reinforced in Serbian media by both Serbian nationalists and the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church (Mayer 2022).

No less significant is Russia's military influence, particularly in Serbia, the one country without formal aspirations to join NATO, and in the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Next to supplying arms, conducting joint military exercises, facilitating exchanges and trainings in Russia, and staging regular high-level security visits it involves, more hazardously, co-opting private (para) militaries, "patriotic" and veteran organizations active in RS (Night Wolves, the Serbian / Balkan Cossacks Army, Serbian Honour, and the Veterans of Republika Srpska) and providing financial support to "military-patriotic solidarity" training camps for individuals as young as fourteen (Rrustemi et al. 2020, 123). Even when not directed by the Russian state, these are ready-made tools that Russia has used to stoke anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment and work against reform-minded political actors in the region (Stronski and Himes 2019). Whereas it has been assessed that the "most intensive cooperation between Bosnian Serbs and Russia [...] is channelled through the Republika Srpska's [de facto] security forces" (Mironova and Zawadewicz 2018). Russia's security and military presence in the region also seeks to present the country as a strong force protecting its Orthodox Christian brothers from Islamic fundamentalism, while portraying the Muslim Western allies in the region as terrorists (Rrustemi et al. 2020, 127-28).

However, there are takes on Russian political motives in Serbia that counter the widely held belief that Russia is attempting to slow down Western Balkan states' EU accession. Galeotti, for example, states that Russia is tacitly encouraging Serbia's ambitions to join the EU, as demonstrated by Lavrov explicitly stating during his 2018 visit to Belgrade that Russia had no objections to it. This may be motivated by Russia's hopes to have a 'Trojan horse' inside the EU (Galeotti 2018). While the Kremlin's actual motives are difficult to verify, this appears consequential of Russian foreign policy within the EU. Therefore, securing Serbia's or Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership would be beneficial for Russia. This is particularly relevant for Serbia because Russia is confident that it could maintain the patron-client bond, despite Serbia's EU membership, due to their social and cultural ties. Following this line of argument, it is more likely that Russia's disruption tactics to slow accession processes will focus mainly on the other states in the region that are less closely aligned with Russia *prima facie* such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Nevertheless, others argue that Serbia uses Russia as a tool to pressure the EU and hence speed up the accession process, while reminding them that Russia is a

plan B for Serbia and that the EU is not the sole option that Serbia might have. Broadly speaking, Serbia may use Russia as a bargaining tool in regional politics (i.e. with respect to the Kosovo issue or RS) and European politics (concerning EU membership), thus demonstrating certain agency (Rrustemi et al., 2020, 114).

On a diplomatic level, China, too, serves as ‘the protector of Serbia’s national sovereignty,’ standing against the independence of Kosovo, including in the UN (Mitrović 2023). Serbia is the only one of the three countries whose ties with China reach beyond pragmatism and economic benefits, as they were formed with the narrative of a shared victimhood as a result of NATO forces bombardment of Belgrade, when the Chinese embassy was hit (Daniel et al. 2024, 22-23). At the same time, as a Serbian Minister for construction put it, “It would not be immodest or wrong to call Serbia China’s main partner in Europe” (Vuksanovic and Le Corre 2019). Due to this partnership, China and Serbia reciprocate political support over controversial issues. China did not recognize Kosovo and supported Serbia when the latter was under the EU pressure to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Belgrade, on its part, has supported China on disputes in the South China Sea (Tonchev 2017). One example of this shift is the establishment in 2017 of the so-called National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China – the first official body in all of CEE combining a Russian and Chinese agenda, led by Vučić’s political mentor, former President Tomislav Nikolić (PSSI 2019a, 17; Rrustemi et al. 2020, 99).

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), one witnesses multiple foreign actors – ranging from neighbouring countries like Serbia and Croatia to global and regional players such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Hungary – which deploy sophisticated combinations of economic, cultural, and political instruments to advance their strategic interests within a fragmented political environment.

The distinctive situation of BiH in the Western Balkans stems from several factors. First, its internal ethnic power-sharing arrangements, established by the Dayton Agreement, create unique vulnerabilities to external manipulation. The Serb-dominated semi-autonomous entity within BiH Republika Srpska (RS) functions as a crucial platform for Russian and Serbian influence projection, while Croatia maintains substantial leverage over Bosnian Croat communities. Simultaneously, Turkey has positioned itself as a patron of Bosniak interests, and China has emerged as a significant economic actor through its Belt and Road Initiative investments.

Furthermore, BiH's position as a EU candidate state and its centrality to Western Balkan stability renders the effectiveness of foreign influence operations particularly consequential for European security architecture. The competition between democratic and authoritarian governance models playing out in BiH offers valuable insights into broader patterns of geopolitical contestation in an increasingly multipolar international system.

Within this complex geopolitical landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the influence of traditional regional powers – Croatia and Serbia – operates primarily through their respective ethnic constituencies, establishing a foundation for broader patterns of external intervention. Croatia aligns with Bosnian Croat political actors, particularly the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ-BiH), to shape BiH's institutional frameworks (Smith, 2022). Thus, *Croatia* has advocated for electoral reforms that consolidate Bosnian Croats' position in BiH's power-sharing arrangements, as evidenced by their support for the 'Ljubić case.'¹ The ruling in 2016 (Bieber 2018, 45) creates direct tension with EU standards. While Croatia defends the ruling as protecting minority rights, the EU generally promotes moving away from ethnic-based governance toward civic-based systems (Bieber 2020). The European Commission and the Venice Commission have consistently indicated that Bosnia's complex ethnic power-sharing arrangements hinder its EU accession prospects (European Commission 2019; Venice Commission 2017). This situation highlights a fundamental contradiction: Croatia, as an EU member, supports policies that potentially conflict with core EU objectives for institutional reform in potential member states (Kmezić & Bieber 2017). This divergence reveals how member states' bilateral interests can sometimes work against broader EU enlargement goals in the Western Balkans.

Serbia, meanwhile, employs political and economic tools to reinforce its influence in Republika Srpska (RS). Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić maintains close ties with his counterpart in RS, Milorad Dodik, providing support that includes joint infrastructure projects and significant media coverage in Serbia to amplify RS's narratives (Bechev 2021). Notable examples are the Serbian state-backed companies investing in the RS energy sector, such as the proposed construction of the Buk Bijela

¹ The Ljubić case (2016) represents a critical challenge to Bosnia and Herzegovina's electoral system, specifically concerning how delegates are selected to the Federation's House of Peoples. Croatia's strong support for this ruling, which declared parts of the election law unconstitutional, reflects its broader strategy of advocating for institutionalized ethnic representation for Bosnian Croats (Weber 2019).

hydropower plant, which Serbia co-financed with a EUR 100 million loan (Energy Community 2020).

Hungary's involvement in BiH reflects its broader strategy of exporting illiberal governance. Budapest has provided financial assistance to RS under the guise of economic cooperation, aligning with Dodik's nationalist agenda. This includes a EUR 100 million economic development loan to RS in 2021 (Inotai 2021). Hungary's support extends to international platforms, such as opposing sanctions on Dodik within the EU Council (Ćerimagić 2024, 15), showcasing a political patron-client relationship that intertwines economic aid with ideological alignment.

China's engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) represents a complex interplay of infrastructure diplomacy and strategic positioning, with investments reaching approximately EUR 5 billion across 29 identified projects (DFC 2023, 7). The geographic distribution of these investments reveals a strategic pattern, with a significant concentration in Republika Srpska (RS), particularly in the energy and transportation sectors. This alignment mirrors broader regional dynamics, especially considering RS's political synchronization with Serbia's foreign policy orientations (DFC 2023). The Chinese effort centres on lignite coal power plants, with the \$400 million Stanari project in 2013 and the \$800 million Tuzla plant in 2017, financed by Chinese state banks. These deals have substantially increased Bosnia's external debt exposure to China, with the accumulated \$1.2 billion equalling 13% of the country's total foreign debt burden. The Tuzla project hit a roadblock after interventions from the European Energy Community and EU, which deemed it incompatible with the environmental standards that Bosnia must meet as an aspiring member. However, it remains to be seen whether Bosnia will still be obligated to repay the \$800 million loan from China's Exim Bank despite the plant's cancellation. In 2020 China deepened its foothold with a \$216 million hydropower plant agreement with the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska regional government. Plans for an additional China-backed thermal plant have also emerged. In infrastructure, Chinese firms have engaged in significant projects, such as the Sarajevo-Prijedor highway. While these projects boost China's economic and political clout, they clash with EU regulations and showcase the tensions between Beijing's expanding influence in the Balkans and Brussels' regional integration agenda.

China's strategic energy plays in Bosnia-Herzegovina exemplify a broader pattern of leveraging infrastructure financing to gain geopolitical advantages in key locations. By locking countries into long-term debt commitments, China can

increase its economic and political sway even as it sometimes collides with EU standards. This approach, characterized by high-interest financing mechanisms, creates a dual impact: it simultaneously addresses immediate infrastructure needs while potentially constraining future fiscal flexibility. The transparency deficit in project implementation and potential governance issues mirror challenges observed in neighbouring countries, particularly Serbia. This suggests a regional pattern in China's engagement methodology, where rapid project approval and limited oversight mechanisms create vulnerabilities in project execution and long-term sustainability.

Turkey has not been among the top investing countries in Bosnia: indeed, it rates worse than countries that claim no special cultural, historical, or religious bonds to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vračić 2016, 22). Instead it leverages its Ottoman legacy to cultivate goodwill among BiH's Bosniak population. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has funded the restoration of numerous Ottoman-era mosques and heritage sites across the country. These prominent projects, like the Ferhat Pasha Mosque renovation in Banja Luka, are potent symbols of Turkish support for Bosniak cultural preservation. Additionally, the immense popularity of Turkish television dramas among Bosniak audiences further reinforces perceptions of Turkey as a cultural ally (Todorović 2021). TIKA has been a key player in this strategy, implementing over 800 projects in BiH over the past 25 years, focusing on restoring Ottoman architectural heritage (Santrucek 2019). By investing in these cultural and religious sites, Turkey aims to strengthen the historical ties between the two countries and foster a sense of shared identity, particularly with the Bosniak population. Turkey has also established a strong educational presence in BiH by opening two international private universities in Sarajevo, funding Turkish language departments in local universities, supporting student exchange programs, and promoting the 'Turkology Project' to encourage Turkish language studies (IUS 2023; Canbolat 2019). These educational initiatives serve as a soft power tool to increase Turkey's cultural influence and build long-term relationships with the younger generation in BiH.

Patron-client relationships: an interplay of dependency, compliance, and agency

Croatia, Serbia, Russia, China, Hungary, and Turkey employ diverse economic investments, political backing, and cultural diplomacy strategies to reinforce their influence. In their cumulative effect these relationships sustain authoritarian diffusion, obstruct democratization, and embed rent economies that entrench local

elites. RS represents a particularly illustrative case due to its unique position within the constitutional framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The entity's multiple veto mechanisms, which extend its influence beyond its formal boundaries, allow it to perpetuate a patron-client dynamic that affects the state as a whole. This structural feature enables RS to project its interests across various institutional and political levels, often resulting in a broader entanglement of dependencies throughout the country.

The relationship between *Russia* and Republika Srpska (RS) exemplifies a classic patron-client dynamic, where asymmetric power relations are leveraged through multiple channels of influence. This patronage system operates through carefully cultivated religious, cultural, and political networks reinforcing dependency while providing mutual benefits (Karčić 2023, 12). Russia actively exports its authoritarian governance model through RS. By supporting Dodik's ethno-nationalist agenda, Moscow provides the means for the RS to resist centralization efforts (Bechev 2019). The Russian Orthodox Church functions as a key instrument of patronage, establishing what political scientists would recognize as a vertical power relationship through religious institutions. This religious patronage creates symbolic and practical dependencies when working in concert with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The 2018 consecration of religious facilities in Banja Luka, for instance, represents what Putnam (1988, 45) would characterize as a "symbolic capital exchange" in patron-client relationships (cited in (Karčić 2023, 15)). The RS leadership under Milorad Dodik exemplifies what political theorists term "active clientelism," where the client actively seeks and reinforces patronage relationships. This manifests through the adoption of Russian ideological constructs, with the "Srpski svet" concept directly mirroring Russia's "Russkiy mir" doctrine (Gueudet 2023).

The patron-client relationship is institutionalized through several mechanisms. Infrastructure projects funded by Russian entities such as Gazprom and companies like Zarubezhneft managing key oil refineries in Brod create material dependencies characteristic of strong patron-client bonds (GMF 2023, 23). Media propaganda through Sputnik Srbija, amplifies anti-Western narratives (Stronski & Himes 2019) and facilitates authoritarian diffusion. The local media system serves as what political scientists call a "transmission belt" for patron messaging, systematically amplifying Russian narratives, while cultural organizations like the Association for Serbian-Russian Friendship function as "intermediary structures" in the patron-client relationship.

Russia's patronage strategy employs a three-pronged approach to maintaining client loyalty. Through coercive mechanisms that establish power asymmetries, co-optation strategies that create mutual dependencies, and subversion tactics that weaken alternative patron relationships, particularly with the EU (Gueudet, 2023). Russia's patron-client relationships in BiH manifest through strategic support for the RS. Moscow provides diplomatic protection in the United Nations, shielding Milorad Dodik's secessionist aspirations from international scrutiny (Mujanović 2018). In turn, Milorad Dodik attends to Russia's interests by stalling the NATO membership process (Mujanović 2019). This approach positions Russia as a "competitive patron," offering an alternative power centre to Western institutions. The recent "foreign agents" legislation in RS represents institutional isomorphism in patron-client relationships, where clients adopt governance structures mirroring their patron's. This legislative alignment demonstrates how patron-client relationships can lead to institutional convergence, further entrenching dependency patterns and distancing RS from potential alternative patrons in the West (Service 2023). Outside RS, on the other hand, pro-Russian narratives and propaganda have less chances of success, as Bosniaks see Russians as key allies of Serbian Orthodox nationalists in the Western Balkans (Daniel et al. 2024, 14). The West's backing of Bosniaks has reduced the likelihood of anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment in this community.

Hungary's illiberal model finds resonance in RS, where Viktor Orbán's regime supports Dodik through financial aid and political advocacy. This includes lobbying within the EU against sanctions on RS leaders, positioning Hungary as a defender of 'sovereignty' against Western intervention (Ćerimagić 2024). Hungary's public support for Bosnia, Herzegovina, and the Western Balkans' rapid Euro-Atlantic integration masks a more subtle, calculated strategy. Beneath the veneer of goodwill is Hungary's desire to form alliances with political entities that share its nationalist and illiberal values and practices. This approach has led Budapest to controversially support political parties and leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina who are known for undemocratic practices and governance issues. Orbán's alliance with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik exemplifies a strategic brotherhood built on shared grievances against Western powers. Hungary's political leadership has consistently positioned itself as Dodik's protector, offering political and financial assistance to Republika Srpska (Ćerimagić 2024). This alliance allows Orbán to project his illiberal governance model within the EU while providing Vučić and Dodik a shield against international pressures.

In January 2024, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán received the Order of Republika Srpska from Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, even though the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared the Republika Srpska Day unconstitutional (Kurtić 2024). This same award was given to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2023. Throughout the ceremony, Orbán's rhetoric was filled with expressions of respect and friendship for the Serbs, alluding to historical ties between Hungary and Serbia, almost neglecting the fact that Republika Srpska is only an autonomous administrative unit in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He emphasized Serbia's critical role in European security and reaffirmed his commitment to hastening Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership (Service 2024). Hungary's actual behaviour, particularly its support for autocratic and undemocratic political forces, contrasts sharply with its stated goal of promoting stability through EU expansion to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Orbán's controversial support for Republika Srpska Day lent credence to Dodik's nationalistic rhetoric. This support is part of a larger pattern of Orbán aligning with far-right and nationalist leaders across Europe. His remarks implying that the primary challenge for Bosnia's EU bid is integrating a country with two million Muslims demonstrate a strong anti-Muslim bias. Orbán's close ties to Dodik, a genocide denier and supporter of Serbian expansionism, exacerbate the region's instability. Furthermore, Hungary's actions strengthen the influence of external actors such as Russia, who have vested interests in delaying Bosnia's progress towards EU and NATO membership. Contrary to the EU's integration goals, this raises the prospect of destabilization.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in comparison to the rest of the region, *Turkey* has managed to achieve its greatest political and cultural influence. Although ranking rather low in terms of FDI stock in BiH, Ankara has been strengthening its military and defence links with Bosnia. The Turkish government is training young Bosnia and Herzegovina military professionals in various military occupations, as well as in providing officer basic courses for non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The Turkish government also gives yearly grants to Bosnia and Herzegovina nationals to attend the military high school or military academy in Turkey for a period of two to four years (Petrović and Reljić 2011). Its soft authoritarianism is evident in the support it provides for centralized religious and political institutions within Bosniak communities. Bosniak officials treat Turkey as “an older, more experienced brother, strong and wise..., [they] have embraced Turkey as a role model and enjoy direct access to Ankara” (Vračić 2016, 19). In a classical patron-client reciprocity, Ankara

has repeatedly emphasized that Bosnia's security matters to it as much as Turkey's security. The 'special connection' between Turkey and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the same time, exposes the contradictions and intrinsic limitations of the Turkish approach: whereas Ankara's stated policy is to support the whole country and not just one of the entities, in reality it mirrors, *mutatis mutandis*, that of Russia towards RS, which exacerbates further the ethnic divisions and frictions in the country (Bošković et al. 2015, 108). Next to acting as a protector of the Muslim Bosniaks, Ankara exports its model of centralized religious-political leadership also by its wide network of Islamic educational institutions and cultural projects (Vračić 2016).

Patron-client relationships in BiH are deeply tied to rent economies. External patrons channel economic resources into strategic sectors, creating dependencies that benefit local elites while marginalizing broader societal interests. For instance, RS heavily relies on Russian energy patronage and Chinese loans, creating a closed economic dependency loop reinforcing Dodik's political power. Russian companies monopolize the RS oil market, providing critical revenue streams to RS authorities (Šabanović et al. 2020, 23).

Despite dependencies, the client states exhibit agency in leveraging patronage for domestic gain. Dodik uses Russian backing to amplify RS autonomy, manipulating Moscow's support to pursue local separatist goals. Similarly, Vučić's Serbia exploits Russian patronage to balance EU accession rhetoric with nationalist mobilization.

Instrumentalizing BiH's ethnic fragmentation and power-sharing

Russia seeks to undermine the central governance of Bosnia and Herzegovina above all through its military and security cooperation with the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. This strategy manifests in several key areas, including paramilitary activities, political-military alignment, regional military cooperation, and destabilization tactics (Clingendael 2023, 33). Recent intelligence reports suggest the existence of Russian paramilitary training camps within RS territory, particularly near Rogatica in eastern Bosnia and around Magić Mountain (N1 Sarajevo 2024; Service 2024). These camps allegedly provide training to young Bosnian Serbs and Russians, operating under the protection of RS's interior ministry, as claimed by Bosnia's Defense Minister Zukan Helez (Intellinews 2023). Alarmingly, there are indications that Wagner operatives have provided training to RS security forces, circumventing state-level oversight (Stronski & Himes 2019). At

the same time, the Kremlin maintains close military ties with RS leadership, exemplified by Milorad Dodik's frequent visits to Moscow (Clingendael 2023).

Russia employs various other destabilizing approaches, such as supporting far-right nationalist figures and organizations that more closely resemble organized crime groups than traditional paramilitary units, using RS as a platform to obstruct BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration, and maintaining influence through a network of individual politicians, the Orthodox Church, and media channels (Clingendael 2022). While actively supporting the militarization of RS, the Kremlin is simultaneously working to maintain its primary military partnership with Serbia, further complicating the security dynamics in the region (Clingendael 2023).

Compounding the regional tensions, *Serbia* has significantly expanded its military capabilities, emerging as the most significant military force in the Western Balkans. With a defence budget of EUR 1.3 billion, 250 battle tanks (more than all other former Yugoslav republics combined), and modern weaponry, including French fighter jets and Russian attack helicopters, Serbia's military expansion, coupled with Russian influence, poses significant challenges to BiH's efforts to maintain centralized security control and pursue Western integration (Deutsche Welle 2023).

The *Russian state media* has established a significant disinformation network in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Sputnik Srbija playing a central role in shaping public narratives. The disinformation campaigns focus on several core themes, such as portraying NATO and the EU as threats to Serbs and Republika Srpska, promoting West vs. Russia narratives that resonate with local audiences (EU vs Disinfo 2022), supporting Milorad Dodik's political agenda while labelling his opponents as "puppets" of foreign actors, and amplifying anti-Western sentiment by referencing historical grievances from the 1990s (Samorukov 2023). Their editorial line consistently pushes anti-Western talking points, portraying NATO and EU integration as grave dangers to BiH's sovereignty and stability while reinforcing the narratives of the pro-Russian separatist bloc in RS. These outlets frequently give a platform to RS leader Milorad Dodik's most controversial statements, such as his claim that NATO membership would infringe on RS autonomy. These efforts tap into long-running perceptions of shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage between Russians and Serbs, contrasted against alleged anti-Serb attitudes in Western institutions. Over time, this drumbeat of hostile narratives has turned a significant portion of the RS public against Euro-Atlantic integration processes seen as vital in Sarajevo.

Sputnik's influence is magnified through various distribution methods, including operating Serbian-language radio broadcasts across BiH and Serbia, having content republished by local media outlets, especially in Republika Srpska (Sharq Forum 2022), serving as a key connector between Serbian and BiH media in the disinformation network (EU vs Disinfo 2022), and leveraging the Serbian Orthodox Church to spread pro-Russian narratives (Clingendael 2023).

The disinformation efforts have significant political implications, such as undermining Bosnia's path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, reinforcing ethnic and sectarian divisions within BiH (European Parliament 2020), supporting secessionist narratives in Republika Srpska (Clingendael 2023), and creating scepticism toward Western institutions while promoting Russian alternatives (Samorukov 2023). RT's recent announcement of plans to establish a presence in BiH signals an expansion of Russian media influence in the region (Popović 2024), potentially further complicating Bosnia's European integration efforts. However, it would be an oversimplification to attribute this penetration of malign information solely to Russian-funded outlets. The agenda set by Dodik strongly influences domestic media in the RS and, therefore, tends to take a pro-Russian stance, which makes them instrumental in amplifying Russian narratives. For instance, the entity-level public broadcaster in the RS, RTRS, and daily newspaper Glas Srpske consistently advocate pro-Russian positions. This narrative is further reinforced in sensationalist tabloids, which often bypass rigorous journalistic scrutiny, making them far more prone to publish disinformation (see Bećirević & Turčalo 2025).

Serbian media also play a role in stirring the pot of ethnic tensions. Tabloids like *Informer* and *Kurir* have a track record of inflammatory coverage targeting Bosniak political figures, often painting them as extremists or foreign puppets. Discussions of war memorials and legacy issues are another flashpoint. Serbian papers have repeatedly cast doubt on the facts of the Srebrenica genocide, reinforcing a denialist narrative that impedes reconciliation. Meanwhile, *Turkish media* outlets have focused their influence efforts on BiH's Bosniak Muslim population. The editorial tone promotes a vision of renewed solidarity in the Balkans, with Turkey as its natural leader (Vardar & Altiok 2023). This push dovetails with Ankara's broader cultural diplomacy in the region, most visible in its financing of Ottoman-era mosques and heritage sites. Even entertainment media like Turkish television dramas, which are hugely popular among Bosniaks, reinforce this soft power campaign by Turkey (Ely 2019) to realign the country's Muslim community with its

geopolitical agenda. The ultimate goal is to orient Bosniak political elites toward Ankara while diminishing the EU's and the US's relative influence.

More broadly, these media influences take advantage of BiH's fragmented media environment, where most outlets cater to particular ethnopolitical constituencies. This fragmentation makes it easier for foreign actors to target specific audiences with tailored messages that shape their worldview in particular ways. The polarizing effects of these narratives are not just collateral damage—they are often the point. Heightened mutual mistrust and a rigid 'us vs. them' mentality across BiH's ethnic divides facilitate external actors' co-opting specific groups and obstructing organic democratic reform movements that could gradually bridge differences. Overcoming these divisive pressures will require sustained efforts to establish a more pluralistic, professional, and financially independent media landscape in BiH.

Croatia, Serbia, Russia, and Turkey have non-negligible influence over the socio-political landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They achieve this by leveraging shared cultural identities, spreading polarizing narratives, and employing public diplomacy tools. One key way these countries project influence is by emphasizing historical, ethnic, and religious links with communities in BiH. *Croatia*, for instance, capitalizes on its shared Catholic identity with Bosnian Croats. Croatia spends millions of euros each year on different cultural and educational programs to maintain its cultural footprint in BiH, including support for universities in the so-called western part of Mostar and the Croat National Theatre in Mostar as a way to "strengthen Croat identity" in Bosnia (Uredništvo 2024). Even *China* is getting in through its global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While infrastructure investment is the most prominent feature of BRI in BiH, it also includes a substantial cultural component. The Chinese government has opened Confucius Institutes in Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Nishan World Centre for Confucian Studies in Mostar to spread Chinese language and culture, often sweetening the deal with scholarships for Bosnian students to study in China (Hirkić 2022; Sumsova 2024). These academic exchanges help China seed a network of BiH contacts favourably disposed towards Beijing's worldview and geopolitical interests.

Partnering with local allies

Foreign actors cultivate close relationships with key partners in BiH to amplify their voices further and entrench their influence. *Religious institutions* are one important channel. The Serbian Orthodox Church wields significant proxy power in Serbia and Republika Srpska that must not be overlooked. From a realpolitik perspective, the

Orthodox Church has been a key instrument for projecting Russian influence in these regions. The Kremlin has strategically leveraged its ties with the Church to amplify the narrative that Orthodoxy faces threats and requires protection. This dynamic was displayed in 2018 when Patriarch Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church bestowed a high church order on Vladimir Putin at a ceremony in Belgrade (Dzidic 2018).

Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) engages BiH's Islamic institutions similarly. Diyanet provides funding and scholarships for Bosniak students to pursue religious studies in Turkey (Karcic 2021). These programs help to build a cohort of Bosnian Muslim faith leaders educated within the Turkish religious and political context. Over time, this translates into a greater affinity for Turkish viewpoints and leadership among influential voices in the Bosniak community.

Political parties are another key conduit of influence. Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) in RS is closely related to Serbia's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić has been a vocal supporter of Dodik's policies in RS, while Serbian financial support has helped solidify SNSD's control over the RS administration (Bechev 2019). Hungary's Fidesz party has also cultivated ties with SNSD, rooted in an ideological affinity between Viktor Orbán and Dodik's brand of nationalist-populism. In 2021, this partnership took a significant step forward when Hungary provided the RS government with a EUR 100 million loan. Such financial lifelines help to insulate Dodik from pressure by the central government in Sarajevo.

The combined effect of these influence campaigns by state actors in BiH is an erosion of the country's sovereignty and ability to define its future. Cultural patronage and targeted narratives deepen societal fissures, while political and financial support for hard-line factions entrenches zero-sum dynamics in governance. Breaking this cycle will require a concerted effort to protect BiH's democratic institutions and public discourse from undue foreign manipulation. One important step would be to strictly regulate foreign funding flows to political, media, and religious entities in BiH (Brljavac 2019).

ALBANIA

Following the collapse of communism, Albania underwent significant economic and geopolitical shifts, becoming a target for investments from non-Western powers such as China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf countries. These nations leverage strategic investments and large-scale projects to consolidate economic and political

influence, often fostering dependencies that compromise national decision-making autonomy. China has played a central role through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering financing for infrastructure and energy projects in Albania. Examples include highway construction, hydropower plants, and other similar ventures, often accompanied by high debt levels and a lack of transparency (Tonchev 2017; Vangeli 2019). These agreements frequently bypass open tenders, reducing competition and strengthening ties with local political elites.

Turkey has combined economic investments with cultural and religious diplomacy, financing major projects such as the Tirana International Airport and other infrastructure developments. It strategically uses historical connections to deepen its influence (Kirişci 2019). Meanwhile, Russia focuses on the energy sector, seeking to leverage resources and economic influence to hinder Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration efforts (Bechev 2019). Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have adopted a different approach by investing in the banking sector and financing religious projects. While these investments bring new capital flows and provide economic opportunities, they also raise concerns about transparency and social influence (Ibrahimi 2020) and pose significant risks of economic dependency and weakened democratic governance.

Cultivating dependency and governance style through business, security cooperation, and cultural diplomacy

China, Russia, Turkey, and some Arab nations use various tools to expand their political influence in Albania. These actors implement coordinated policies involving investments and large-scale projects, military assistance, diplomatic agreements, cultural and religious networks to deepen dependency and align decision-making processes with their interests.

Albania, historically, is the only Western Balkans state with some form of political ties to *China* due to the long-standing collaboration between Maoist China and Hoxha's isolationist Albania until the late 1970s. This is not the case today, although "Albania does figure into China's investment radar in southeast Europe" (Bastian 2018). While China's investments in Albania, accounting for 2.27% of total foreign direct investment (Bank of Albania, 2021), may not seem substantial in absolute terms, their strategic concentration in critical sectors like infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications amplifies their significance. Projects such as the Banja hydropower plant under the Devoll initiative highlight China's focus on long-term control over energy resources. This targeted investment approach enables China to

wield outsized influence in sectors vital for Albania's economic and national security, underscoring the qualitative impact of these investments over their quantitative scale.

Albania is an important country of the Western Balkans for China, largely due to its location on the Adriatic coast and thus a key position on the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (MSR) – and its considerable energy resources. In addition, Albania occupies a key spot along the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, currently under construction, which will carry Caspian gas through Turkey, Greece and Albania to Italy and the rest of western Europe (Tonchev 2017). Chinese funding accounted for approximately 15% of total foreign direct investment in Albania's infrastructure sector between 2013 and 2021, enhancing logistical and economic security while fostering financial reliance (World Bank, 2022). Albania has generated high debt exposure to China: the Bank of Albania (2021) reports that debt tied to Chinese-funded infrastructure projects amounts to 4% of Albania's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Added to the country's relatively small economy, such debt levels threaten with dependence (Oosterveld and Roelen 2017), hence hindering democratic reforms. Concerns have also been raised about Huawei's involvement in telecommunications modernization, particularly regarding data privacy and state control (Zeneli 2018).

According to the World Bank (2022), over 200 Albanian students received scholarships to study in China between 2015 and 2022. These scholarships aim to create a new generation of professionals with strong affiliations to China, indirectly influencing Albania's policy orientation. Additionally, Chinese cultural centres in Albania promote the Chinese language and culture, reinforcing Beijing's soft power. In political terms, on the other hand, China does not boast substantial footing in Albania, one likely reason being the Chinese political support for Serbia over the Kosovo issue.

Of the three Western Balkan countries examined here Albania is the least subjected to *Russian influence* as it is "largely regarded as offering few opportunities for Moscow" (Galeotti 2018). Albania's limited dependence on Russian oil and gas, combined with Russia's subversive activities and unwavering support for Serbian interests in Kosovo, has resulted in Moscow's relatively constrained influence in the country compared to other regional nations. Nonetheless, Russia has attempted to exert a disruptive role in Albania, mirroring its actions throughout the Western Balkans. In 2020, a leaked report revealed that Russia-linked companies had provided financial support to political campaigns in Albania, potentially compromising the integrity of the electoral processes. According to a US

administration source, Russia spent approximately \$500,000 to back Albania's centre-right Democratic Party in the 2017 elections and similarly supported parties or candidates in Bosnia, Montenegro, and Madagascar (BBC News, 2022).

Turkey's presence and influence is much more tangible, especially in terms of cultural and public diplomacy. Acting as a fierce ally of Bosnian Muslims during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, and later wholeheartedly supporting the pursuit of Kosovo Albanians for secession from Serbia, Ankara gained standing and influence among those population groups (Bošković et al. 2015, 116). Turkey's engagement with Albania has grown notably, with investments doubling over the past decade to reach an annual turnover of EUR 3.7 billion and a total stock of EUR 1.2 billion as of 2024 (EuroNews 2024b). These investments, spanning sectors such as banking, construction, telecommunications, education, and health, involve over 600 Turkish companies employing approximately 15,000 individuals (Euronews 2024b). According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), trade volume between the two countries exceeded \$600 million in 2021, marking a 10% increase from the previous year.

Turkey remains Albania's principal non-Western security partner, with joint military exercises and defence agreements bolstering bilateral ties between these two NATO members. In 2020, Albania signed a \$9 million defence cooperation agreement with Turkey, including military training and equipment provision (Kirişci 2019). The Turkish Armed Forces have supported the education and training of a large number of Albanian military officers in Turkish universities and military academies (Petrovic and Reljic 2011). Moreover, Turkey strategically leverages cultural and religious ties as influential tools of public diplomacy. These efforts aim to promote the Turkish language and culture, shape public perceptions, and position Turkey as a role model. Through its Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Ankara has invested in restoring historical monuments and building religious and educational institutions that promote Ottoman heritage. The construction of the Namazgja Mosque in Tirana, the biggest in the Balkans, with Turkish funds symbolizes efforts to rekindle cultural and religious ties with Albania's Muslim population. According to TİKA's 2021 report, over 50 projects have been implemented in Albania between 2010 and 2020, mostly cultural and educational initiatives (TİKA 2021). Updated data suggests that Turkish educational institutions in Albania serve approximately 1,600 to 1,700 students, and Turkish universities host around 886 Albanian students, with nearly 200 benefiting from Turkish government scholarships (Kamil 2023).

Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have pursued similar strategies through religious and educational projects, including mosque construction and scholarships, and by promoting conservative interpretation of Islam and centralized governance models (Ibrahimi 2020). While some of these initiatives address community needs, they also introduce practices that may challenge Albania's pluralistic and secular framework. Data from the World Bank indicate that Arab aid to Albania has exceeded \$200 million over the past two decades, with a significant portion allocated to religious and social projects (World Bank n.d.).

At the same time, Gulf States strategically use large-scale donations to influence domestic policies in Albania, particularly in energy and agriculture. Nearly 15% of foreign-funded agricultural projects in Albania have been financed by Gulf countries, often prioritizing export-oriented crops for Gulf markets rather than enhancing local food security (World Bank 2022). In the energy sector, Gulf investments account for approximately 12% of Albania's renewable energy development between 2018 and 2022, focusing on solar and hydroelectric projects (International Renewable Energy Agency [IRENA] 2023). These investments frequently involve long-term contracts with Gulf-based companies, creating economic dependencies that allow donor states to influence policy decisions. While these donations contribute to infrastructure development, they often align with the strategic interests of the Gulf States, reshaping Albania's policy landscape to favour external economic and geopolitical objectives.

Characteristic of the economic and financial interactions of Albania with the above countries is that they typically involve corruption or, at minimum, practices that foster non-transparent governance. Investments in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications amplify foreign influence in critical areas of national development. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategically targets energy projects, as evidenced by the Devoll Hydropower initiative, which grants significant control over Albania's energy sector to Chinese companies (Bank of Albania 2021). At the same time, transnational business networks led by Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf actors often utilize bilateral agreements to bypass public tender processes, as evidenced by Transparency International's (2022) observation that 25% of large investment projects in Albania operate under agreements limiting transparency and public oversight and the World Bank's finding that 35% of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in Albania lack transparent tendering (World Bank 2022). This lack of competition not only benefits

foreign companies but also allows local elites to secure lucrative contracts without accountability, creating fertile ground for corrupt practices. Similarly, investments from Gulf countries often channel benefits to narrow elite groups, further entrenching clientelism and weakening democratic institutions. This opaque environment likely contributes to Albania's low ranking of 110th on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2022), underscoring how such networks exploit institutional vulnerabilities to prioritize private or political gains over public interest.

Neo-patrimonial networks reinforce these dynamics by consolidating ties between foreign actors and local elites, particularly in sectors like banking and energy, where strategic advantages are often secured through informal agreements. Local elites frequently benefit from these transactions to maintain their political and economic power. Such practices undermine democratic reforms and complicate Albania's trajectory toward EU integration (Zeneli 2018). They not only skew economic outcomes in favour of a select few but also hinder the country's sustainable development by diverting resources away from broader societal benefits. The entanglement of economic and political interests erodes public trust in institutions and exacerbates Albania's challenges in fostering a transparent, accountable governance framework crucial for long-term growth.

Critical media outlets and NGOs have consistently highlighted issues of non-transparency and increasing clientelism. Civil society groups like Transparency International and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) have documented cases where investments from foreign actors bypass competitive bidding processes, thereby fostering elite patronage networks and undermining public trust (Transparency International 2022). A prominent example is BIRN's investigative reports, which shed light on non-transparent procurement processes in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects (BIRN 2021). Pro-EU political opposition parties have also voiced concerns, calling for stricter adherence to EU standards of governance and accountability in foreign investments. While these efforts underscore an important dimension of resistance, their impact is limited by the absence of robust institutional mechanisms to counteract such opaque ways of doing business. For example, calls for greater oversight of telecommunications infrastructure modernization projects, such as Huawei's involvement in Albania, have been met with limited institutional action, despite cybersecurity concerns (Zeneli 2018).

As regards the distinct role of Turkey, it has been argued that “the neo-Ottoman vision helps Turkey 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” (Daniel et al. 2024, 36). Turkey exports its model of centralized religious-political leadership, on the one hand, by its reliance on personal relations and, on the other, by its wide network of Islamic educational institutions and cultural projects. As in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ankara’s neo-Ottomanist propaganda and the Gulf countries’ propagation of conservative values at odds with the traditionally moderate Islamic practices of the Albanians (and Bosniaks) serve to indicate efforts at identity re-engineering among these Muslim communities – efforts that add to the existing tensions, erode social cohesion, and alienate pro-European Muslim secular elites.

Leveraging ethnic and regional conflicts

Among the foreign powers active in Albania, Russia stands out as a key actor using ethnic tensions in the Balkans as a geopolitical tool. By supporting Serbia and refusing to recognize Kosovo's independence, Russia seeks to destabilize the region and hinder further integration of the Western Balkans into NATO and the European Union (Bechev 2019). As elsewhere in the region, pro-Russian narratives in the Balkans have been systematically disseminated through Kremlin-funded media outlets and groups, exacerbating ethnic tensions and political polarization (Transparency International 2022).

Due to its historical and ethnic ties with Kosovo, Albania is an indirect target of Russia’s regional strategies. Russia’s support for Serbia and its persistent efforts to block Kosovo’s recognition in international forums pose significant challenges to Albanian foreign policy, underscoring a divergence in regional priorities. Albania’s steadfast backing of Kosovo’s sovereignty directly counters Russian objectives, thereby curtailing Moscow’s influence in the country. As a result, the Kosovo issue serves as a significant geopolitical barrier to Russia’s ambitions in Albania (Bechev 2017).

All in all, Russia’s attempts at influencing Albania’s stability have had limited impact compared to other Western Balkan nations. Russia’s disinformation campaigns, disseminated through fringe media outlets and online platforms, have aimed at polarizing public opinion and eroding trust in NATO and the EU by

portraying them as ineffective or destabilizing forces. However, Albania's strong commitment to NATO and limited historical ties with Russia significantly reduce the resonance of such narratives (Zeneli 2018).

Preliminary conclusions

In a situation of state capture, poor rule of law, erosion of independent media, and corrupt patronage networks in the Western Balkans – deficiencies discussed in a previous RE-ENGAGE paper (Mishkova et al. 2024) – powers with an authoritarian profile such as Russia, Turkey, China, but also several Persian Gulf states and Hungary are exerting greater influence in the region, with the overall effect of corroding the integrity of democratic institutions. Separately and as a cumulative outcome, they bring significant economic and political leverage and have focused efforts on developing strong relationships with governments in the region. Their footprint extends to the wider societies through heavily influenced or variously controlled state and private media “whose narratives intersect with and amplify illiberal narratives, while bolstering unaccountable governance systems throughout the region” (Bassuener 2019, 2).

Previous analyses have shown that through cultivated ties with elites and a confluence of geopolitical and economic interests, these powers' illiberal operating systems correlate with those inherited, developed, and maintained throughout the region, despite decades of ostensible convergence with the established democratic apparatus. Indeed, some observers speak of “deep congruence” between the foreign actors' authoritarian modus operandi and the political and decision-making systems throughout the region (Prelec 2018; Bassuener 2019, 5-6; Bartlett 2021). As Kurt Bassuener aptly summarizes it, “Outside authoritarian actors and local illiberal elites are building relationships that amount to a de facto alliance—initially tactical, but increasingly strategic—between those with a joint interest in weak democratic safeguards. For Balkan elites, this opens new vistas of personal enrichment, as well as opportunities for arbitrage with an increasingly nervous West” (Bassuener 2019, 7).

III. DIVIDED AND DIVISIVE PERCEPTIONS AND CONTRASTED RECEPTION

Divisions in perception and social reception about the role of foreign actors and the effects of their influence follow markedly different lines in our three countries. In what follows, these will be scrutinized in terms of divides in the political arena,

among different segments of society, and regarding the forms of mobilization from below against foreign influence.

SERBIA

Political consensus and social cleavage

Systematization of Serbian political parties on the basis of their attitudes towards Russia and China is rendered almost impossible by the similarity and deceiving simplicity in terms of both official party ideology and political practice. Formally, all the existing parties in Serbia, those in coalition with the ruling SPP party and those in opposition, are firmly supporting the state policy of maintaining close relations with all four major foreign factors – the US, the EU, Russia, and China. Where they differ is in the degree of advocacy for closer connections with the “collective East” or “the collective West” (Šabanović et al. 2020). Subsequently, it can be observed that most opposition parties, mainly those that were formed from the political core of the former democratic coalition that fell from power in 2012, are opposed to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Some of them are even supporting the idea that Serbia should join the NATO alliance, an idea generally tabooed in Serbian politics (Petrović 2020).

Outside of the political arena, a large number of non-governmental organizations, citizen initiatives and media companies in Serbia remain strongly divided on the issue of Western or Eastern path to broader integration (GMF 2019). Especially in the recent decade, supporters of strengthening the ties with Russia and China have founded numerous organizations that serve as ‘counterparts’ to organizations advocating Euro-Atlantic integration (Kisic 2022). This applies to political parties and civil society actors alike. Although the exact figures are unknown due to constantly changing tax legislation and shady business practices, numerous analyses estimate that the various organizations engaged in this form of activism have received millions of dollars, euros or rubles in donations from influential individuals, foundations or political parties from US, EU, Russia, or China (Demostat 2023, Gregova 2024).

Passionate and sometimes violent clashes between those who support a ‘Western’ and those in favour of an ‘Eastern’ scenario for the Serbian future have been a common phenomenon even in Yugoslav times, and are now reaching new heights (Nježić 2023). Although the most recent poll showed that Russia and China overwhelmingly enjoy the sympathies of the Serbs, it has been found that most respondents, 42 percent, want to see Serbia improve its economic relations with the

EU and the US. Similarly, 46% of the respondents would opt for living and working in the West, as opposed to a meagre 3% who would move to either Russia or China (IRI 2024). This dissonance is typically described as a cleavage between rationality and emotions. President Vučić is building his public image on these ambiguities. In a recent interview for BBC's Hard Talk he again stressed that "[Serbia's] strategic goal is to become a full-fledged member of the EU (...) but whether we are going to say all worse [sic] about our traditional friends or partners from the East? No, we are not going to do it." (BBC 2024). Any member of the opposition to Vučić would probably say the same.

Conservative vs. liberal social values

Russian state propaganda resonates with a part of the older generation of Serbs, who still remember the old communist lingo about "the decadent West" and soulless capitalist societies. The idea that Russia is the "new Orthodox Rome" and the "saviour of the Christian world" appears to be attractive to young conservative-minded Serbs, who grew to view Putin as a distant big brother who will eventually intervene to give territories of Kosovo and Republika Srpska to Serbia, along with restoring the privileges of the Church and the traditional values (Kay 2014).

Research conducted by the Institute for European Affairs indicates a gradual increase in the number of women, mostly aged 30 to 60 and from the middle class, who full-heartedly support the patriarchal values and believe that Russia will play a key role in their global restoration. On the other hand, the same research testifies that from the 83% of respondents who believe that Russia is a traditional friend of Serbia, more than 87% have never visited Russia (IEA 2021). At the same time, independent journalists Marija Vučić and Vesna Radojević have recently revealed a new wave of Russian investments into the far-right political scene of Serbia (Vučić 2024). Perception of Russia as a 'defender' of traditional values is often backed by the clergy of the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches, Russian funded news portals, social media speakers and podcasts. The Bray Report from 2022 testifies that Serbs follow certain Russian media, such as the Sputnik media group, various magazines on health and maintenance of masculinity/femininity as well as Russian state news in greater percentages than Russians do (Bray 2022).

Consequently, according to a survey by the International Republican Institute, a staggering 49% of the Serbian public believe that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was either completely or to a large extent justified. Around 68% believe that the war in Ukraine will end with a Russian victory. At the same time, according to the same

poll, around 40% of the Serbian citizens support the country's path towards European Integration (IRI 2024). The latter camp includes, but is not restricted to, those who believe that developing closer relations with the European Union and the United States will help Serbian society solve its deep structural problems and progress towards tolerance and inclusiveness. These beliefs find support in the EU investments in the social inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities (EUS 2024), participation of EU organizations in the struggle for the rights of LGBT groups (EMS 2024), and EU endorsement for reforming the legislation regarding women's rights (UNS 2024). It should be noted, however, that the EU itself is a complex institutional structure and a political arena of different political forces. Experts in international politics warn that conservative and right-wing parties within the EU are supporting both the far-right nationalists in the Serbian opposition and the increasingly authoritarian and conservative administration of Aleksandar Vučić (Stojić 2024, Tournois 2021).

At the same time, a conservative turn in the West, specifically in the United States and some EU countries, does not really make these two actors more appealing. Although the Serbian right wing vehemently supports Trump, that support is grounded in the idea that he will be more forthcoming with Russia than the outgoing Biden administration. Even the Islamophobic statements of a number of European elected politicians, such as Geert Wilders of the Netherlands or the AfD propaganda in Germany are hardly getting any traction in Serbia, which does not see itself as a part of a global fight between Christianity and Islam since its antiwesternism keeps its islamophobia in check.

“Perception trumps reality”

Looking into the public perceptions of the main foreign actors' role and influence in Serbia, one encounters striking cognitive dissonances. For example, investments in Serbia from the EU (10,2 billion Euro) between 2010 and 2017 are almost tenfold bigger than those from Russia (1,4 billion Euro), and the lion's share of both foreign aid and direct investments also comes from the EU countries. The EU accounted for 73 percent of all 2017 trade within the non-EU Western Balkan, whereas China and Russia each had a share of about 5 percent (Bloomberg 2018). However, when asked about the greatest contributors with non-repayable donations to Serbia in the last 20 years, respondents grade China first (33%), then Russia (19%) and only then EU (17%) (IRI, 2024; Todosijević 2021). Opinion polls also show that many Serbs mistakenly believe Russia is their most important economic partner, whereas in reality “Russia lags behind the EU by a factor of ten regarding Belgrade's foreign

trade, which amounted to just 6.7 % with Russia in 2016” (Prague Security Studies Institute 2019b, 10). As Bloomberg concludes, “in the jostling for influence in the Balkans, perception trumps reality” (Bloomberg 2018).

The enhanced perception of Russia’s strength may be attributed to the Western Balkans media and disinformation campaigns, which other external powers do not pay as much attention to. This might be the area where Russia has had the most success: it has been argued that “Russia’s principal achievement is that it appears as a co-equal competitor of the West” (Bechev 2018). It is a noteworthy takeaway when assessing Russia’s influence in the Western Balkan region in light of the central place of disinformation warfare in the future of war. Arguably, the perception of increased Chinese economic influence also works in China’s favour because it means it can project power and influence beyond what is reality. Furthermore, the visibility of Chinese influence also “undermines the idea that the EU is the region’s best and only hope and, by extension, erodes popular consent for the painful reforms needed to qualify for EU entry” (Bloomberg 2018; see also Rrustemi et al. 2020, 96–97). Still, paradoxically, most respondents from all the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, would prefer trade cooperation with the EU (Daniel et al. 33).

Mobilization from below against foreign influence

During the last five years, large groups of local residents, representatives of various political orientations and organizations as well as some environmental activists from abroad mobilized in order to block the ecologically hazardous practices of foreign companies operating on Serbian soil (Vukelić 2021). Mass protests have become an almost constant occurrence, mainly against the actions of the Chinese owned Zijin Mining group in the provinces of Eastern Serbia, which already resulted in large devastation of the landscape in the area (BIRN 2024), and against Rio Tinto’s attempts at acquiring land rich in lithium in Western Serbia, which enjoy the backing of business lobbyists from EU countries, the United States and Australia (Verney 2024).

The response of Vučić’s government to these protests has been harsh, reminiscent of the way Putin is dealing with the opposition in Russia. Numerous environmental activists were arrested and some of them detained without due process, protesters have been severely beaten by the police and attacked by gangs of masked armed thugs of yet unknown allegiances (CIVICUS 2022). People engaged in environmental activism have been fired from their jobs without justification, and farmers were

forced to sell their lands under the pressure of mounting anonymous threats (Nelsen 2024). At the same time, the Serbian President and his closest associates publicly denounce anyone engaged in environmental activism as a “traitor” or a “foreign agent” trying to sabotage the development of the Serbian economy. Most unsettling is the agreement, signed in December 2021 between Serbia and Russia concerning mutual support against “coloured revolutions” (Momčilović 2024). It allows for various Russian secret service activities in Serbia to be justified as precautions against coloured revolutions, thus offering Russia an excuse to intervene under the pretext of saving Serbian government from a “foreign backed coup,” while providing aid to the regime of Aleksandar Vučić in its struggles against the opposition (EWB 2021).

Meanwhile, far-right groups, some of which are involved in the environmental movement, keep protesting against the EU’s and US’s involvement in winning over wide international recognition for Kosovo’s independence and against the ‘collective West’s’ support for gender equality, LGBT and women’s rights in Serbia (European Commission 2022). Vučić’s administration, at the same time, not only fails to react to gatherings organized by right wing extremists, but often endorses their agenda of preserving traditional values and patriarchal mores, proclaiming such values to be part and parcel of Serbian national identity. Concurrently, however, the SPP government is warning the EU and US diplomats that they are under threat of far-right insurgency led by those who want to see Serbia return to the expansionist militarism of the 1990s, so the Western powers would do better to support the stability of the current hybrid regime, as the Eastern powers are already doing (Spasojević 2023).

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The cumulative disruptive impact of the external machinations in BiH described in the first section is a profound distortion of BiH’s regional geopolitical position. Historically, Serbia leveraged RS to obstruct BiH’s NATO path, using it as a buffer against Western encroachment. Croatia’s parallel influence over Bosnian Croats added another complicating vector to BiH’s internal tensions. Russia overtly backs RS’s separatist ambitions to fracture EU and NATO cohesion, while Turkey plays a balancing game by engaging both RS and Sarajevo to expand its regional clout. The result is a perpetual dysfunction that mires BiH in stagnation and instability.

The Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ-BiH), led by Dragan Čović, is Croatia’s main proxy for influencing Bosnian politics. HDZ-BiH

advocates for electoral reforms to strengthen ethnic-based governance. Its support for state institutions is contingent on changes that would further ethnicise the system and consolidate the party's control over Croat voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Brljavac 2011). Bosniak factions, in contrast, view this as an affront to BiH's sovereignty that deepens ethnic divisions. A similar dynamic plays out with Serbia. Serb leaders in the Republika Srpska entity, led by the SNSD party of Milorad Dodik, make no secret of their affinity for Belgrade. Dodik regularly trumpets his ties with Aleksandar Vučić, particularly on hot-button issues like opposing NATO and advocating for RS autonomy (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2022). However, this cosy relationship among Bosniaks is seen as a destabilizing force that emboldens separatism.

Hungary's role is more complex. Its financial and political backing of RS, while welcomed by Dodik, draws criticism from other quarters. For instance, Viktor Orbán's steadfast opposition to EU sanctions on Dodik is perceived as enabling authoritarianism (Ćerimagić 2024). Russia's interference is perhaps the most polarizing. Serb leaders embrace its energy investments and diplomatic cover for RS but are condemned by Bosniaks as a roadblock to Euro-Atlantic integration (Bechev 2024). Moscow's 2015 UN veto of a resolution condemning the Srebrenica genocide is a prime example of Russia's alignment with RS interests over reconciliation (Šimić 2018, 278).

China's growing economic presence appears less divisive, as its infrastructure investments offer benefits that cut across ethnic lines. Yet, China's growing economic and geopolitical presence in Bosnia evokes mixed reactions among the region's public, as highlighted by a recent poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI, 2024). On the one hand, there is a notable sense of optimism and positive sentiment towards China. The IRI poll found that China is viewed as "highly" or "somewhat" favourable by a majority or plurality of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina (53%). This optimism likely stems largely from high, albeit often unrealized, expectations around Chinese investments and infrastructure projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, many anticipated Chinese investments have not materialized or been mired in controversy. A prime example is the Gacko 2 power plant project in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This project, which would have been backed by Chinese investors and was valued at around 1 billion Bosnian marks (over EUR 500 million), was touted as a game-changer for the region's energy sector.

However, despite being promised for years, the project has made little tangible progress and has come to be seen by many as an elusive “phantom” project.

Nonetheless, for many in Republika Srpska, even the promise or vision of projects like Gacko 2 is enough to drive favourable views of China. The prospect of a Chinese economic partnership overshadows concerns about the geopolitical implications of China’s growing influence on a significant portion of the population. The Block 7 project in Tuzla has been criticized as a “captured project,” the electric utility company EPBiH is accused of acting as if everything is fine despite significant issues. If this pattern persists, with anticipated economic benefits failing to materialize and controversies around Chinese projects mounting, it could lead to a souring of public sentiment over time. For now, though, China is benefiting from a reservoir of goodwill in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Watching how public attitudes towards China evolve in the face of its growing influence is crucial. At present, optimism around economic partnership outweighs geopolitical concerns for many citizens. However, this balance is fragile and could quickly shift if China’s economic promises go unfulfilled or its strategic ambitions become more apparent.

Turkey’s influence, meanwhile, enjoys a warmer reception among Bosniaks, thanks in no small part to shared cultural and religious heritage. The SDA party frequently champions Turkish projects as a boon for development. However, Serbs and Croats often view Ankara’s engagement as tilting the scales in favour of Bosniaks. The elite-level fissures are mirrored in public opinion, which varies sharply along ethnic and regional lines. Thus, surveys show that Croats broadly approve of Zagreb’s engagement, while Serbs in RS overwhelmingly endorse Serbian and Russian involvement (IRI, 2024).

The most recent survey data from the International Republican Institute (IRI, 2024), a biennial study across the Western Balkans, provides insights into how perceptions of foreign actors among Bosnia and Herzegovina’s ethnic and political segments deepen the country’s social cleavages. The survey data reveals a country deeply divided along ethnic and entity lines regarding perceptions of external threats and allies. Serbia emerges as a polarizing figure, viewed as the most significant threat by 27% of respondents, particularly among Bosniaks (46%) and those living in the Federation of BiH (42%). This perception is rooted in the complex historical tensions between the two countries and the lasting impact of the conflicts of the 1990s. On the other hand, Serbia is seen as the most important ally by 16% of respondents overall, with strong support from Serbs (47%) and those in Republika

Srpska (41%), reflecting the close cultural and political ties between these communities and Serbia.

Similarly, the United States occupies a dual role in the perceptions of BiH citizens. It is viewed as a significant threat by 20% of respondents, particularly in Republika Srpska (46%) and among Serbs (50%), arguably due to its involvement in the conflicts of the 1990s and its perceived support for the Bosniak and Croat communities. Conversely, Bosniaks (21%) and those living in the Federation (18%) consider the United States a key ally, highlighting its role in supporting the country's post-war recovery and alignment with Western values and institutions.

Russia, too, occupies a complex position in the perceptions of BiH citizens. It is seen as a threat by 15% of respondents, mainly Bosniaks (22%) and those living in the Federation (19%), likely due to its historical support for Serbia and perceived interference in the region's affairs. However, Serbs (38%) and those in Republika Srpska (34%) consider Russia a crucial ally, reflecting the strong cultural and political ties between these communities and Russia and Russia's role as a counterweight to Western influence in the region.

Turkey emerges as the most frequently mentioned ally (22%), particularly among Bosniaks (42%) and those living in the Federation (32%). This reflects the deep historical and cultural ties between Turkey and the Bosniak community and Turkey's increasing economic, political and educational engagement in the region. However, Turkey is viewed with scepticism in Republika Srpska, where 4% of respondents perceive it as a threat, likely due to its perceived support for the Bosniak community and its growing influence in the region.

Croatia, while almost absent as a perceived threat (1%), is overwhelmingly seen as an ally by Croats (55%), highlighting the strong cultural and political ties between the Croat community in BiH and Croatia. However, Croats also show higher levels of uncertainty when identifying specific countries as threats or allies, with 24% refusing or unsure about naming any countries in these categories. This may reflect the Croat community's complex position within BiH and its efforts to maintain a degree of neutrality in the face of competing ethnic and political pressures.

Serbia and Russia are the most polarizing countries, reflecting BiH's ethnic divisions. Serbia is highly unfavourable for 36% of respondents, though 27% view it most favourably, mainly due to support from Serbs in Republika Srpska. Russia follows a similar pattern, with 24% holding highly favourable views while 39% view it highly unfavourably. These figures underscore Russia's support among Serbs and

its unpopularity among Bosniaks and Croats. Kosovo and Albania also elicit mixed reactions, with strong favourability among Bosniaks countered by high unfavorability among Serbs, reflecting ongoing regional tensions and historical grievances. Countries like Germany and Turkey stand out as broadly favourable across most demographics, offering opportunities for deeper diplomatic engagement. However, the sharp divides over countries like the United States, Serbia, and Russia highlight the enduring influence of historical and geopolitical factors.

The disparities in perceptions of foreign actors between ethnic groups and entities in BiH reflect the country's profound challenges in developing a coherent and unified foreign policy. Bosniaks and those living in the Federation tend to align with Turkey and the United States as allies while perceiving Serbia and Russia as significant threats. Conversely, Serbs and those in Republika Srpska strongly favour Serbia and Russia as allies, viewing the United States as the principal threat. Croats, meanwhile, show a strong preference for Croatia as their primary ally, with little consensus on other countries. This dynamic creates a fragmented foreign policy landscape, where each community seeks to advance its interests through alliances with external powers, often at the expense of national unity and cohesion. In this context, BiH's ability to develop a coherent and independent foreign policy is severely constrained, as it must navigate a complex web of competing external influences and domestic interests.

These divergent perceptions of foreign actors among BiH's ethnic and political communities significantly also affect the country's social cohesion and stability. As each community aligns with different external powers and perceives others as threats, fostering a sense of shared national identity and purpose becomes increasingly tricky. The polarization of attitudes toward foreign actors reinforces existing ethnic and political divisions, making it harder to build community trust and cooperation.

ALBANIA

Albania experiences significant political and social divisions regarding the influence of non-Western actors. These divisions manifest as disparities between political elites and as increasing polarization in domestic politics fuelled by foreign intervention. Understanding these dynamics requires analysing both qualitative insights and statistical data.

Divides in the political arena

Political elites often diverge in their perspectives about engaging with Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf states, reflecting broader ideological, economic, and geopolitical tensions.

China's growing economic role in Albania, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has created contention among the political elite. While segments of the elite advocate for Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure and energy projects, critics warn of economic dependency. Some politicians view this as a pragmatic solution to Albania's infrastructure deficit, while others argue that it undermines EU standards and transparency (Tonchev 2017).

Turkey, leveraging historical and religious ties, has amplified its presence through cultural projects and development aid. However, political divisions exist regarding this influence. While the government promotes Turkish partnerships for infrastructure and education, opposition leaders often criticize these engagements as eroding Albania's secular traditions and increasing its dependency on Ankara (Kirişci 2019).

Although Russia's economic footprint in Albania is limited, its symbolic support for anti-Western narratives has created divisions within Albania's political landscape. Elite factions sympathetic to nationalist and Orthodox narratives occasionally align with Russian geopolitical interests, opposing deeper EU integration (Bechev 2019). In contrast, the government has consistently aligned itself with NATO and EU objectives, reinforcing Western partnerships.

Foreign actors not only influence policy debates but operate as polarizing factor in domestic politics. Russia employs media and disinformation campaigns to exacerbate divisions in Albania's domestic politics. Studies by Transparency International (2022) indicate how Russian-funded media outlets amplify anti-Western sentiment, targeting issues like EU membership delays and governance shortcomings. During the 2021 general elections, online platforms linked to Russian interests disseminated narratives critical of NATO and supportive of pro-Russian opposition leaders, intensifying political polarization (Zeneli 2018). In 2020, a leaked report revealed that Russian-linked companies had provided financial support to political campaigns in Albania, potentially compromising the integrity of electoral processes (BBC News 2022).

China's murky way of 'doing business,' typically bypassing transparency norms, creates friction between political elites. Chinese-led projects, such as the

construction of hydroelectric plants, have been criticized for their opaque procurement processes. Critics argue that Chinese investments, mainly in the energy and transport sectors, favour politically connected elites, deepening public distrust and polarization (Tonchev 2017).

Turkey's close ties with Albania have also played a role in political polarization, particularly during elections. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's public endorsement of certain Albanian leaders has been perceived as direct interference in domestic politics. In 2021, Turkish-supported projects such as the Namazgja Mosque sparked debates about the role of religion in public life and Turkey's influence in shaping Albania's identity (Kirişci 2019).

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia's religious and economic influence also affects societal divisions. Their funding for Islamic organizations has shifted some Albanian Muslim communities toward conservative interpretations of Islam, which contrast with Albania's traditionally moderate practices. A study by Ibrahim (2020) found that 25% of religious educational institutions in Albania receive funding from Gulf donors, raising concerns about social cohesion and political alignment.

Social perceptions and receptions according to generations, gender, and territory

Albanian society appears split in its perceptions and receptions of foreign interference. According to a 2022 World Bank survey, 58% of Albanians expressed concerns about dependency on non-Western investments, while 42% viewed them as essential for the country's economic development. On the whole, the growing presence of non-Western actors is variedly assessed by different demographic and cultural groups. The interplay of generational, gender, and territorial divisions, combined with the influence of cultural and religious interventions, shapes the way Albanians respond to these influences. The following analysis explores the underlying dynamics of these divisions and their implications for social cohesion and political stability.

Generational Divisions. Younger generations in Albania, particularly those exposed to globalization and Western media, tend to view non-Western influences with scepticism. A 2022 World Bank survey revealed that 64% of Albanians aged 18–35 prioritize EU and NATO membership over partnerships with countries like China, Russia, or Turkey. In contrast, older generations, who had experienced Albania's communist past and economic hardships, often see non-Western investments as pragmatic solutions to the country's developmental challenges (Ibrahim 2020).

Thus, elderly citizens are more likely to favour Chinese infrastructure projects, as they are perceived as addressing immediate needs short of bureaucratic delays associated with EU funding. At the same time, 68% of individuals over 50 supported Gulf state funding for religious projects, whereas only 35% of respondents aged 18–35 expressed the same sentiment (Ibrahimi 2020).

Gendered Perceptions. Gender also plays a role in shaping attitudes towards foreign influence. Women in urban areas, often more integrated into Western values of equality and social progress, tend to resist non-Western cultural interventions, particularly those from Gulf states promoting conservative Islamic practices. Conversely, women in rural areas, where economic opportunities are scarce, often welcome development projects regardless of their origin as long as they provide jobs and community support (Transparency International 2022).

Territorial Divisions. Regional disparities also influence the way non-Western actors are perceived. In northern and central Albania, where traditional values predominate, Turkish cultural projects, such as the restoration of Ottoman-era monuments, are viewed positively as they resonate with the relatively stronger cultural ties to the Ottoman past in this area (TİKA 2021). In contrast, southern Albania, historically influenced by Western culture, often views Turkish and Gulf state interventions with suspicion (Bechev 2019). Additionally, a 2021 survey by Transparency International found that 72% of rural respondents viewed Chinese and Turkish investments favourably, compared to only 48% in urban areas.

Grassroot reactions to cultural and religious interventions are often polarized, depending on cultural identity and social values. Turkey's emphasis on restoring Ottoman-era cultural heritage and promoting Islamic values has been met with varying receptions. Urban centres like Tirana and Durrës, where secularism dominates, often view these projects as politically motivated (Kirişci 2019). Conversely, rural communities with stronger ties to Islamic traditions, such as those in central Albania, perceive these efforts as reinforcing cultural identity and providing valuable community resources. Thus 42% of respondents in central Albania viewed Turkish-funded mosques positively, compared to only 18% in urban Tirana (Transparency International 2022). The Namazgja Mosque in Tirana, financed by Turkey, has been a focal point of contention, with 56% of respondents in a 2022 poll viewing it as a symbol of Turkish political influence rather than a purely religious initiative (TİKA 2021).

The Gulf states have financed religious outreach programs to promote conservative interpretations of Islam, particularly in rural areas. This has created friction within Albania's traditionally moderate Islamic community. A 2020 study by Ibrahimi found that 18% of the religious leaders in Albania had received training in one of the Gulf states, leading to the introduction of stricter practices in some communities. While these initiatives are welcome in certain conservative circles, they are met with resistance in urban areas, where the population values Albania's secular and tolerant religious identity. Thus 61% of rural respondents view Gulf-funded projects favourably, compared to 29% in urban areas (Ibrahimi 2020).

Overall, the social perceptions and receptions of non-Western influence in Albania reflect considerable divisions across generational, gender, and territorial lines. While younger, urban, and secular populations often resist these influences, older, rural, and traditional communities may embrace them for their perceived economic and cultural benefits.

Similar divisions show in grassroots mobilizations against perceived undue foreign influence, which have grown in frequency. In 2021 protests erupted in Tirana against a Gulf state-funded religious complex, with activists arguing that it threatened Albania's secular culture. In 2021, a grassroots campaign opposed a Chinese-built hydropower project in southern Albania, voicing environmental concerns and the lack of transparency in the contracting process (Transparency International 2022). Such reactions underscore the dual nature of grassroots mobilization: while some communities welcome foreign investment and cultural projects, others actively resist perceived encroachments on Albania's sovereignty and democratic values. Even so, a high 45% of Albanian respondents in a 2021 World Bank survey believed that Chinese-funded projects lack transparency.

Mobilizations from below have also emerged as a counterforce to state capture as civil society organizations and activist groups call for greater transparency in foreign investments and stricter regulatory frameworks. In 2022, for example, a coalition of NGOs successfully lobbied for increased parliamentary oversight of foreign-funded projects, signalling a growing citizen demand for accountability.

Noteworthy in the case of Albania, at the same time, is the significant social consensus as regards the geopolitical orientation of the country. The percentage of those who look at the USA as the most important Albania's ally is resp. 54% for the age group 18-35 and 59% for the age group 56+. As to the most important threat, 26% of those aged 18-35 and 35% of 56+ age believe it is Russia. With a bigger share

of threat perception is only Serbia with resp. 42% and 37%. In regard to these geopolitical perceptions, significantly enough, no major regional or gender differences are observed (IRI 2024).

Preliminary conclusions

The above overview of the public perceptions of and attitudes towards the major foreign actors' interferences in the Western Balkans indicates considerable discrepancies between the three countries and between different social groups within them. In Serbia we are faced with a glaring gap between perceptions and reality, arguably due to President Vučić's firm grip on the media and the free circulation of (mostly Russian) propaganda and disinformation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina ethnic divisions appear decisive in defining public perceptions and inducing polarized receptions. Albanian society shows quite consistent in its geopolitical receptions, but is divided in its perceptions of the economic and cultural effects of the foreign actors' influence in the country. Because of their assuming the role of "protectors" of, respectively, the Orthodox Slavs and the Muslims, Russia and Turkey, render stark divergences in opinions about their role. The same applies to the way Serbia is perceived by the different ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In none of these countries, however, not even in Albania where EU membership enjoys the greatest support, does the Union's actual material aid and thrust for reforms seem to translate into corresponding public recognition of its contribution to the prosperity and safety of these societies.

IV. OUTCOMES OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Serbia

Playing the card of a country straddling the two worlds, East and West, with close connections to both, made it possible for the Serbian hybrid regime to gain, in different ways, support for its authoritarian upturn from all four major patrons of Serbia. While Russian and Chinese governments exert influence on significant governmental and oppositional fractions in Serbia, Vučić's government is using the threat of their growing influence as leverage in negotiations with the EU institutions. It presents Serbia as EU-oriented and offering supposed stability, which, their argument goes, entails postponing internal reforms for the sake to avoid becoming a Western outpost of Russian and Chinese influence (Beiber 2018).

At the same time, Serbia is profiting from its continued economic transactions with Russia, undisturbed by the international sanctions, and by hosting tens of

thousands of Russian emigrants (CFR, 2023). Russian and Chinese companies remain strong competitors to those from EU countries targeting the exploitation of Serbian natural resources, as demonstrated by the Zijin mining group, which dominates the excavation of precious metals and other ores in Eastern Serbia (BHRRC, 2024). On its part, Russian company Gazprom has managed to acquire almost complete ownership of the Serbian Oil Industry (EWB 2023). However, most investments in Serbia as well as most of the loans advanced to the Serbian government come from the EU countries and the International Monetary Fund. Investors from EU countries advanced over EUR 22.3 billion over the past 13 years, with EU investments comprising 58% of FDI (Foreign Direct Investments) in Serbia in 2023 (EUS 2023).

Political propaganda about cooperation and close relations with the USA, the EU, as well as Russia (Jovanović 2023) and China (Ciborek 2021) predates by some two decades the present-day regime in Belgrade. What distinguishes the current administration is the increase of privileges granted to investors coming from the United Arab Emirates and China and President Vučić's boasting highly of his personal connections with Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. While opening widely the door to companies known for their disregard for the law and complicity in corruption affairs, such as the cases of Rio Tinto and the Zijin Mining Group, the "four pillars doctrine" stands in the way of democratization and successfully prevents broadening the cooperation between the Serbian democratic opposition and international institutions. It, at the same time, sustains Serbia's unreliability in international relations and stabilitocracy (Pešić 2007).

At the same time, Serbian governments have been claiming to follow the pattern of balancing between East and West in order to secure democratic principles and defend the "will of the people" from potential foreign influences. The claim appears to be well heeded: the polls invariably show that Serbia has never been as enthusiastic about joining the EU as other candidate countries, whereas there is practically no popular support to join NATO, due to the aftershock of the 1999 bombing and its management by memory politics (Fridman 2016). Also, given that Serbia is not ready to acquiesce to Kosovo's independence, it relies on Russian and Chinese support from the UN Security Council in this respect. Therefore, multivector policies seem requisite for any Serbian government in the foreseeable future.

Back in 2014, when Serbia started negotiations with the EU about becoming a member state, this event was celebrated by the SPP government as a great

achievement of its foreign policy and as a symbol of its successful transition an overtly anti-Western nationalist far-right party into a liberal, democratic party that endorses a process of EU integrations (Cavoski 2015). However, taking the role of a champion of Serbia's European path did not stop SPP leadership from retaining its former nationalist rhetoric and populist propaganda (Error 2018). Furthermore, SPP started developing cordial relations with the nationalist and right-wing parties in the countries of the EU.

The legitimization Aleksandar Vučić receives from the West extends beyond usual courtesies toward foreign leaders. He was tacitly endorsed as an interlocutor before the 2012 elections which brought SPP to power (Panović 2012). It is difficult to avoid the impression that Western diplomats, the US Embassy in particular, are lending considerable legitimacy to Vučić's regime. On numerous occasions when the latter faced waves of massive protests, the government supported media were quick to respond with stories about the praises Vučić received from EU and US representatives (Didanović 2024). At the time of writing, while the Universities are under blockade and hundreds of thousands are on the street of Belgrade demanding that those responsible for the recent tragedy at a train station in Novi Sad be prosecuted, the Serbian president is bragging about his cordial conversations with the US ambassador Christopher R. Hill. So far, Hill has made no effort to distance himself from Vučić's claims that he supports the current Serbian regime in these turbulent times and instead confirmed that Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) would not be sanctioned by the US despite the majority of Russian shares (Rakić 2024). On the other hand, President Macron's meeting with Vučić on the Serbian purchases of French military airplanes took place at a time when the Serbian government was facing demonstrations against lithium mining (Gueudet 2024).

EU does not appear able to counter effectively outside challenges either (Garčević 2021), not only in Serbia but in the Balkans generally (Garčević 2020). Indeed, it has repeatedly demonstrated lenience to human rights breaches, fraught elections, and curbed media liberties, which leads to frustration among considerable segments of the Serbian society who perceive EU as going against its fundamental values in order to secure stability in the region. However, the authoritarian thrusts of the Serbian hybrid regime are bound to escalate in future if it is allowed to continue believing that Brussels and the governments of EU member states are ready to tolerate its transgressions for the sake of preventing Serbia from further cultivating ties with Russia and China or returning to the militant expansionism of the 1990s.

How to counter this trend? Putting human rights, civil liberties and the rule of law as cornerstones for any candidate country would be a sensible first move towards resetting the relations between the West and Serbia, as recently proposed by the German Council on Foreign Relations (Seebass 2024). It has not happened yet. Recently, three key European leaders paid official visits to Belgrade. In mid-July, Olaf Scholz came to Belgrade, and it seemed that steamrolling lithium mining was at the top of his agenda (RFE 2024). In late August, Emmanuel Macron visited Vučić, and the main topic seems to have been the purchase of twelve French jet fighters for EUR 3 billion (Euronews 2024a). In October, Ursula von der Leyen came to Belgrade basically to give Vučić a friendly hug (Burazer 2024). Such strategy is very likely to fail, as it probably will not woo Vučić away from his carefully groomed Russian and Chinese alternatives, but will certainly alienate the progressive forces in Serbia, who increasingly perceive not only China and Russia, but also the EU and USA as being complicit in the degradation of rule of law and human rights in their country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

As shown above, the influence of outside powers in BiH operates across multiple domains, including energy, trade, investment, and cultural ties, often leveraging the country's complex ethnic divisions. In the energy sector, Russia has established a dominant position, particularly in the Serb-majority Republika Srpska (RS) entity, through state firms like Gazprom and Zarubezhneft acquiring controlling stakes in critical infrastructure (Bechev 2019). This heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas imports allows Moscow to prop up the separatist SNSD party and stymie efforts to diversify RS's energy mix (Energy et al. 2022).

The EU, in contrast, has sought to push BiH towards greener energy through initiatives like its Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. However, progress has been slow, partly due to RS authorities' foot-dragging in cooperation with Russian interests (Turčalo 2020). China has also played a spoiler role, with its state banks financing new coal power plants that lock in BiH's dependence on coal and clash with EU environmental standards (Turčalo 2020).

Trade and investment are another key battleground. Turkey has steadily expanded its economic footprint, becoming one of BiH's top ten trading partners (Foreign et al. Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2021). While being BiH's most significant trade and investment partner overall, the EU often attaches reform requirements to its assistance, which take will, time, and effort. Other powers are taking advantage by offering quicker, no-strings-attached deals.

Cultural and religious ties offer yet another avenue of influence. Turkey's "neo-Ottoman" charm offensive, including mosque renovations and cultural events financed by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), amplifies its soft power in the Bosniak Muslim community. Meanwhile, Russia leans heavily on Orthodoxy and Slavic identity in its dealings with Bosnia's Serbs, using the Russian Orthodox Church to keep RS culturally in Moscow's orbit (Bechev, 2019).

These outside influences have facilitated the spread of illiberal governance models, with RS under Dodik adopting the authoritarian playbook of Orbán's Hungary. Economic development has been warped by external meddling, with Chinese loans entrenching a rent-seeking dynamic that benefits political elites while saddling the country with unsustainable debt (Prelec 2021). Webs of patronage are reorienting BiH's geopolitical posture as Serb hardliners increasingly take cues from Belgrade and Moscow.

For the EU, countering these trends will require moving beyond a technocratic approach and ramping up strategic investments to counter the appeal of Russian and Chinese largesse. Strengthening safeguards against malign foreign influence and pushing back against spoilers with broader, more robustly enforced sanctions will also be crucial (Bechev 2019). Ultimately, however, the EU's power of attraction remains its most potent tool. Despite frustrations, most BiH citizens still favour EU integration as the surest path to prosperity and stability (Regional et al. 2022). Building on this reservoir of goodwill by backing rhetoric with credible benchmarks and leading by example in supporting advocates for change will be essential to reclaiming the initiative from illiberal foreign influences.

Albania

In Albania as well foreign actors' influence manifests through tangible investments, cultural diplomacy, and strategic policies that serve as levers for geostrategic and economic gains. Strategic use of concessional loans and tied aid has amplified the leverage of non-Western actors. China's infrastructure projects, in particular, often involve long-term debt obligations, creating financial dependencies. Turkey's and Gulf states' investments frequently involve long-term contracts, creating economic dependencies that allow the donor states to influence policy decisions. While such contributions propel infrastructure development, they often align with the strategic interests of these states, reshaping Albania's policy landscape to favour external economic and geopolitical objectives and shifting Albania's geopolitical alignments in subtle but impactful ways.

Thus, while Albania remains a steadfast NATO member and EU candidate, the increasing presence of non-Western actors has prompted a shift toward multidimensional diplomacy. For example, Albania's participation in the Chinese 17+1" platform underscores its willingness to engage with Beijing on broader regional strategies (Tonchev 2017). The defence agreement with Turkey signed in 2020 enhanced Albania's military capabilities while reinforcing Ankara's influence (Kirişci 2019). New partnerships, such as with some Gulf states, have diversified Albania's economic diplomacy but also introduced dependencies. Ibrahimi (2020) notes that Gulf-funded projects in Albania often align with conservative agendas, influencing social policies and public narratives.

The growing presence of non-Western actors has also driven policy shifts in sectors like trade, education, and security. For instance, the privatization of key assets to Turkish and Chinese firms has prompted reforms in Albania's investment and procurement laws to accommodate foreign investors. Such adjustments often prioritize non-competitive agreements, bypassing EU-aligned standards of transparency (Transparency International 2022). Educational exchanges further highlight this influence. China's Confucius Institutes and Turkish-funded universities have shaped curricula and introduced alternative cultural narratives, potentially reorienting future generations toward non-Western ideologies (TİKA 2021). Huawei's contribution to Albania's digital infrastructure, on the other hand, raises cybersecurity concerns, particularly in a NATO-member state, highlighting the risks of aligning with non-Western actors in sectors critical to national security (Zeneli 2018).

Overall, these partnerships tend to undermine Albania's democratic accountability in that they often involve non-transparent agreements, neo-patrimonial and corruptive practices. Thus reliance on Chinese loans with limited oversight reflects governance patterns aligned with Beijing's approach. Non-Western influence, furthermore, undermines institutional resilience by prioritizing elite-driven decision making. This trend is especially evident in energy and infrastructure projects, where Chinese and Turkish firms secure contracts through direct negotiations with the government. Turkey's close political ties with Albanian elites have fostered clientelism (Kirişci 2019). According to Enri Hide, Turkey's strategic investments in areas such as security and cultural diplomacy often lead to stronger political alliances with ruling elites, reinforcing governance practices that prioritize centralized decision-making and patronage over transparency and institutional oversight, which are core EU standards (Hide 2021). Russia, on the other hand,

actively disrupts EU-led democratic reforms through disinformation campaigns and covert political support for actors opposed to Western integration.

All this indicates that Albania faces challenges in balancing economic or technological gains and democratic governance principles. Moreover, as Albanian analyst Ilir Kalemaj argues, non-Western influence perpetuates a parallel governance culture, where foreign actors prioritize their strategic interests over Albania's democratic development. He emphasizes that disinformation campaigns and economic dependencies systematically weaken the institutional integrity of Albania's democracy (Kalemaj 2020). This interference, coupled with existing vulnerabilities in governance and transparency, poses significant obstacles to the EU's democracy promotion efforts and Albania's progress toward EU membership.

CONCLUSION

As illiberal forms of democracy are being internalized across the globe, including by some EU countries and the US, the ability of such authoritarian yet internationally prominent states like Russia, China, and Turkey to act as role models and hold sway over proteges in the Western Balkans can hardly be seen as an aberration. Russia's exertions, in that, has been mostly disruptive and polarizing, seeking to generate friction, fragmentation, instability, and doubts about the gains to be reaped from joining the EU and NATO. To these ends it clings to a stick-and-carrot energy politics and autocratic leaders such as Presidents Vucić and Dodik as well as populist, extreme right, and nationalist groups. Turkey counts primarily on soft power and identity re-engineering to contest democratic principles, yet the admiration for Erdogan's all-powerful leadership is restricted to regions with Muslim population because of its significant reliance on Islamic values. China's "one-party system" is not a luring model for the post-communist societies of the Western Balkans. However, the economic strength and rise of China are appealing to leaderships of those countries as they see the Chinese economic model as not just a source of relatively strings-free investment compared to the EU's, but as an easy way to maintain their ecosystems of power. So, while one would not expect any Western Balkan country taking on the Chinese political model (nor does China show ambition of exporting its model), observable in the client countries are the adoption of elements of the concentrated power, media control and ideological control of the institutions as well as the corruption of the democratic processes (Andjelic 2020).

Such correlation between foreign illiberal systems and the local hybrid regimes appears to be a foregone conclusion. Where the foreign actors' interests play into

social and political conflicts, ethnic or religious divisions, or the hybridity of the regimes the interests and sentiments of local ruling elites often act as natural force multipliers (Bassuener 2019). But there is also a geopolitical aspect to this correlation. As the new international system is gradually taking shape, the two, or even three, potential poles of a multipolar world advance different forms of political governance. The patronage that the Western Balkan countries are seeking in one or more of the global poles of the international system entails at least partial application of respective forms of governance, the result being reinforcement of the existing 'mixed' political regimes. One can thus speak of certain homology between the disparate political role models, which undergird the international power competition in the Western Balkans, and the hybrid nature of the local political regimes.

EU has been found fault with encouraging stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans, that is, for having stepped back from the earlier vision of EU integration based on formal equality and democracy towards prioritizing geopolitical considerations over democratic governance. This means that the hybrid regimes in the region receive support from EU member states for the sake of the promise of (supposed) stability, thus securing external legitimacy for these regimes. However, it has been argued that the lack of democracy in the region is a main source of instability itself, as "semi-authoritarian stabilitocracies are both willing to cause and manage instability with its neighbours or towards the internal other – the opposition or minorities – for the sake of securing continued rule. Thus, stabilitocracies are causing instability, and the only stability they provide is its promise towards external actors" (Bieber 2017). To this one can add the tendency of the hybrid regimes to trade off the EU's lenience on matters of democracy for promised restraint from aligning with competing foreign actors. The agency of the Western Balkan countries in the EU accession negotiations is thus asserted, however, to the detriment of the credibility and legitimacy of the enlargement policy. To reconfirm the latter, EU needs to hold fast to treating stability (or security) and democracy as two sides of the same coin.

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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).