

## Working paper



# **D5.3: Fractured, Integrated, at War? Five Scenarios for the Geopolitical Futures of Western Balkans in 2035**



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:	<a href="https://re-engaging.eu/">https://re-engaging.eu/</a>
Document:	Working paper
Deliverable number:	D5.3
Deliverable title:	Fractured, Integrated, at War? Five Scenarios for the Geopolitical Futures of Western Balkans in 2035
Due date of deliverable:	31.12.2025
Actual submission date:	29.12.2025
Editors:	
Authors:	Asya Metodieva, Jan Daniel
Reviewers:	Pernille Rieker and Morten Bøås
Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	5
Work Package title:	Forecast and scenarios of external actors' engagement
Work Package leader:	IIR, Jan Daniel
Work Package participants:	IIR, NUPI, ICH, EUT, UNSA, EECMD, UESA MSU, CAS, SSSA
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	3
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	R
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	36
Keywords:	Western Balkans, Scenarios, EU enlargement, Great Powers Competition



## WORKING PAPER

# Fractured, Integrated, at War? Five Scenarios for the Geopolitical Futures of Western Balkans in 2035

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23 December 2025

## SUMMARY

This research paper presents five exploratory scenarios examining geopolitical developments in the Western Balkans over the next decade, with a particular emphasis on the evolving roles of external actors. Drawing on a collaborative research process and insights from the RE-ENGAGE project, the analysis maps interactions between regional regimes, the EU, and major external stakeholders. The scenarios are designed not to predict outcomes but to illuminate possible trajectories and enrich foreign policy discourse. The five scenarios explore: (1) US withdrawal from regional affairs, (2) increased Russian hostility and belligerence, (3) simultaneous Chinese and Russian disengagement, (4) global authoritarian triumph, and (5) renewed democratization drive. The conclusion of the paper then discusses the lessons the EU should draw from these scenarios.



## Introduction

Preparing for the future is never an easy task; however, the looming challenges that the EU faces at the end of 2025 seem particularly pressing, and the future appears to be particularly uncertain. From the unpredictable US, increasingly hostile to the EU, to Russia openly threatening Europe with war, the geopolitical environment in which the EU exists is worsening on all sides. This analysis aims to outline the contours of potential development in the Western Balkans, presenting five scenarios that provide a general picture of the geopolitical environment in the region over the upcoming decade. Following the objectives of RE-ENGAGE Work Package 5, the scenarios primarily focus on the geopolitics and role of external actors with a stake in regional politics.

The scenarios presented in this paper are exploratory in nature. Although they should remain within the realm of plausibility, they were constructed to highlight the diverse potential interactions between the regional regimes and the EU, as well as the main external actors active in the region. As such, the scenarios do not, per se, assess the likelihood of how the future might turn out, but they seek to make the future more legible by sketching possible trajectories, highlighting certain trends and their potential impact, and by doing so, enriching the foreign policy debate (Daniel and Ditrych 2024). Each scenario thus lists its core assumptions about the interests and capabilities of the involved actors and sketches a potential course of its activities, providing thus the general indicators to assess which trajectory seems to be materializing. Moreover, each scenario contains a “Wild Card,” a transformative low-probability, high-impact event that would alter the core logic and trajectory of the scenario. The Wild Cards, as conceived in this paper, are thus supposed to highlight the core assumptions of the respective scenario.

The scenarios were conceived at two online workshops<sup>1</sup> with members of the RE-ENGAGE consortium and invited experts from the Western Balkans, whose insights were critical in shaping the scenarios. The workshops took place in April and June 2025<sup>2</sup>. Based on these discussions, desk research, and research done in the rest of the RE-ENGAGE project (in particular, Daniel et al. 2024, Filipović, Lefdal, and Bøås

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Anna Jaskina for her logistical and communication support during these workshops.

<sup>2</sup> Each of the workshops was attended by about 12 experts, ranging from academics to think tankers and people involved in different capacities in regional social movements. We decided to keep their identities anonymous as we held the discussions under the Chatham House rules.

2025, Kapidžić et al. 2024, Hide and Xhaferaj 2025, Metodieva 2024, Mishkova et al. 2024, Repovac-Nikšić et al. 2025), we formulated and revised predetermined elements, key driving forces, and critical uncertainties (see Daniel and Ditrych 2024). The basic scenario plotlines and key images of the regional futures were constructed around these scenario building blocks and then discussed at the ECFR Annual Meeting in Warsaw in July 2025 and internally at the IIR Prague throughout the Autumn of 2025.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, this presents some limitations to this study, as it reflects the information and data available as of December 2025.

The paper lists the key factors shaping future developments and incorporates expectations about the responses of local actors. Our scenario-building framework consists of predetermined elements, which, by nature, are relatively certain trends and structural certainties that drive the scenarios forward and interact with one another. Critical uncertainties are then conceived as the key unknowns that will have an impact on how these scenarios unfold. These scenario building blocks were selected based on their differences, plausibility, and narrative consistency. Together, they are intended to illustrate contrasting future trajectories based on the shared predetermined elements.<sup>4</sup> During the scenario-building process, we deliberately focused on the main external actors and excluded several other potentially relevant players for the sake of simplicity and coherence. Similarly, we decided to consider the EU as a single actor and point out divergences between the member states and other relevant players only in cases where it is necessary for the logic of the scenario.

The paper proceeds as follows: we first introduce the key scenario building blocks and then continue with the five scenarios. The first scenario sketches the future regional environment following the US withdrawal from the regional affairs, the second maps the Western Balkans defined by the more hostile and belligerent Russia, the third scenario outlines the geopolitics of the withdrawal of both China and Russia from the region, and the fourth scenario assumes the conditions of the global triumph of authoritarianism. In contrast, the fifth scenario portrays a

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<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank in particular Jan Švec, Martin Laryš and Pelin Ayan Musil for their insights on the strategies and interests of the external powers. We also thank Sophie Guedet for thorough and constructive feedback on various part of the process.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the methodological process of scenario-building differs slightly from the parallel paper on the scenarios of Eastern Europe (Halás and Daniel 2025).

renewed push for democratization. In the conclusion of the paper, we discuss some of the policy recommendations for the EU, stemming from these scenarios.

## The key scenario building blocks

### Predetermined elements

1. **The nature of the international geopolitical order and relations of the main global powers** will define the geopolitical environment in the Western Balkans. This concerns the future of relations between the major global powers more broadly, beyond their involvement in the Western Balkans, as well as the future of the main international organizations and the shape of global governance. Although this factor represents a significant uncertainty, we consider the structural shift to a multipolar, competitive global order, characterized by spheres of influence of major global powers and opportunistic middle powers, as a predetermined element (see, e.g., Goddard and Newman 2025).
2. **The active and transformative Western engagement in the Western Balkans has been in decline** throughout the 2010s, starting with the first Obama administration and now being fully unfolded under the second Trump presidency (see Daniel et al 2024). The EU and US approaches to the region, often seen across the region as a source of ‘stabilitocracy’, prioritize security and stability over democratic reforms. The EU’s tolerance for local political actors has normalized authoritarian tendencies (Bieber 2018, Mishkova et al. 2024). This has hindered the region's potential to integrate into the EU. However, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has created a sense of urgency around the EU enlargement prospects, not only for Ukraine, but also for the Western Balkan countries.
3. **Political developments in Serbia** are of key importance for the future of the regional geopolitical order more broadly. Serbian role in multiple unstable areas across the region, including the political cohesion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the future of Republika Srpska, or the future of Kosovo, is crucial. The political establishment in Serbia sets trends that have been replicated by other politicians across the region, particularly Vučić’s strategy of balancing between Russia, China, and the West. At the same time, Serbia remains a significant regional political actor, proposing initiatives such as

the Open Balkans, which signal a willingness to act beyond traditional frameworks and relations with the EU.

4. The region continues to experience **economic decline and brain drain**, with youth emigration seen as a tipping-point risk. The popular trust in political institutions is relatively weak (Hide and Xhaferaj 2025, Repovac-Nikšić et al. 2025). Against this background, civil society and student protest movements have been recognized as fragile yet potentially transformative, especially in Serbia, with possible spillovers across the region (Filipović, Lefdal, and Bøås 2025).
5. There is a tendency towards **pragmatic, transactional foreign policies across the region**. This transactional foreign policy is coupled with a hybridity of political systems (Mishkova et al. 2024, Soyaltin-Colella 2023).

## Driving forces

1. **The EU enlargement and integration process** represents a crucial force in shaping the regional geopolitical environment in the Western Balkans, as it creates conditions for the political and economic development of regional states. The current geopolitical climate, shaped by the war in Ukraine, significantly transforms the integration trajectory (Tepšić 2024). The war has shifted the EU's focus towards immediate security concerns and the future of Eastern Europe, potentially deferring the enlargement initiative in the Western Balkans. However, as evidenced by the RE-ENGAGE studies on regional perceptions of external actors, there is a desire for the integration of at least some regional countries into the EU, and they are viewed favorably by the population (Hide and Xhaferaj 2025, Repovac-Nikšić et al. 2025).
2. **Persistent democratic backsliding and state capture** in some Western Balkan countries continue to undermine the rule of law, media freedom, and overall governance. This makes them vulnerable to external authoritarian influence and negatively affects EU integration prospects (Sørensen and Cappelletti 2023, Miskhova et al. 2024, Myftari 2025).
3. **Forms of engagement of the main EU's competing actors** will define the regional geopolitical environment. Turkey, Russia, and China are considered to a different degree pragmatic actors (see Daniel et al. 2024): Turkey leverages historical, religious, and ethnic ties opportunistically; Russia relies on energy dependencies in countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and maintains information operations and political connections that exploit and trigger useful nationalist sentiments. While Russia cannot

offer significant financial support, it enjoys popular and symbolic support in some countries. Meanwhile, China fills economic voids through infrastructure investments, supporting regime security, but without providing security guarantees. Its actions enable kleptocracy, while avoiding overt political entanglement. Both Turkey and China maintain pragmatic approaches to the Western Balkans. Turkey leverages historical, religious, and ethnic ties in the region not out of ideology, but to maximize strategic influence and economic gain. The future form and shape of this engagement will shape the regional geopolitical environment.

4. **The popular dissatisfaction**, as visible e.g., in the ‘faceless’ uprising in Serbia, demonstrates dissatisfaction with stabilitocracy and economic conditions in the respective countries. This uprising also demonstrates the ability to challenge the regime, but not necessarily a movement generating a coherent alternative political force. These trends take different forms in various countries, but the lack of trust in institutions and dissatisfaction with the economic performance are currently visible across the region and will drive future developments (Filipović, Lefdal, and Bøås 2025,, Hide and Xhaferaj 2025, Repovac-Nikšić et al. 2025).
5. **Some political elites in the Western Balkans feel an opportunity to question the cornerstones of the regional order** in the context of a power vacuum and loss of external interest. Previously established agreements – such as the Dayton Accords and steps towards Kosovo’s recognition – while initially sufficient to establish regional stability, could be losing legitimacy and serve as flashpoints for new conflicts. Local conflicts – e.g., the Kosovo-Serbia conflict remains frozen and threatens to escalate into broader regional instability, exacerbated by the divisions over the future of Kosovo (Hogić 2024).

## Critical Uncertainties

1. **The US presence and diplomatic leverage in the region** are among the central security guarantees. If the US presence in the region further diminishes or if it becomes hostile towards the EU, security guarantees will disappear. On the one hand, actors such as Russia, Turkey, China, or local autocrats may, in different ways, take advantage of the vacuum. On the other hand, a more hostile US might even directly act against EU interests in the region by supporting some of the illiberal, but pro-US, actors.

2. **The EU's strategic approach to the region**, particularly its willingness to shift from elite-level diplomacy towards direct engagement with grassroots democratic forces and civil society, will be decisive. However, this is far from certain, given many differences among the EU member states as well as the EU's record of engagement with the region (Buras et al 2024, Metodieva 2024). Moreover, the uneven pace of EU enlargement across the Western Balkans may present a critical uncertainty: accelerated progress for Montenegro and Albania, potentially leaving behind Serbia, Bosnia, or North Macedonia, may provoke political resentment and trigger regional instability.
3. **The capacity of grassroots democratic movements** to mobilize public support and sustain momentum amidst political pressure and external interference will determine their long-term impact on democratic development (Smith et al. 2003). In many instances of contemporary protests, protest movements can mobilize substantial popular support and even keep people in the streets for an extended period. However, they are unable to topple the incumbent regimes or build a sustainable political platform (Tufekci 2017).
4. **The EU's external relations with other geopolitical actors**, most importantly China, Russia, Turkey, as well as the US, will define the regional environment and shape regional economic dependencies and political alignments (Shoker 2022). A potential democratic transformation in Turkey would position it as a constructive regional force.
5. **The shape of the Russian regime** following the end of the war in Ukraine remains a critical uncertainty, which will have a major influence on the regional geopolitics. Whether Russia will experience some form of political transition following the end of Putin's rule and will seek to 'reset' relations with Europe, its regime will be tested by the malaise of the post-war economic slump and will have to refocus on internal issues, or it will come out of the war as even more hostile and defiant, the Russian factor will play a major role in regional geopolitics.

## Wild Cards

1. **A large-scale technological disruption** caused by a natural disaster and/or man-made sabotage, that would lead to widespread societal disruption and economic and governance collapse across the region. The Western Balkans are generally vulnerable to such an attack. Many countries in the region still

rely on outdated digital infrastructure and cybersecurity protocols, making their public administration, energy grids, financial systems, and communication networks susceptible to sophisticated breaches. The ongoing geopolitical competition for influence in the region, particularly concerning digital integration and sovereignty, further exacerbates this vulnerability. Meanwhile, China's investments in digital infrastructure (Hulkó et al., 2025) often fail to comply with industry security standards, raising the possibility of such disruption.

2. **Sudden regime change in Russia** resulting in a regime open to cooperation with the European states. While such a development does not necessarily lead to a fully democratic regime, it would transform Russia from a disruptive actor into a potentially constructive force in the broader European security architecture.
3. **End of AKP rule in Turkey** would transform Turkish foreign policy. While such a regime transition might take different directions, it would likely lead to renegotiations of Turkey's role in the region. In this scenario exercise, we assumed that a return to democracy and closer relations with the West, modelled after the political platforms of opposition figures, such as Ekrem İmamoğlu.
4. **A Chinese invasion of Taiwan** would trigger a **global economic crisis** and further destabilize the economies of the Western Balkans. Such a conflict would take international attention and resources away from the region, while potentially exacerbating international geopolitical competition (Trbojević, Jovanović, and Đurđević 2024).
5. **Regime collapse in Serbia** - this could lead to a power vacuum that escalates existing tensions, particularly regarding Kosovo, and fuels separatist movements in regions like Republika Srpska (Hansen, Popescu, and Gaub 2017; Tepšić 2024). Russia and China would likely seek to exploit such instability to further their strategic interests.

## Scenario 1: Western Balkans in The Post-American Era

The waning US interest in the Western Balkans is a trend that underlines in some way or another all of the scenarios. However, the form of the US withdrawal matters. In this scenario, the US remains nominally within NATO but reduces its

commitments to its European partners. This creates a security vacuum that other global powers, particularly China and Russia, are eager to fill. As Russia continues to be hostile towards Europe and eager to preserve its strategic assets in the European neighborhood, the geopolitical relationship between China, Turkey, and the EU will, aside from developments in the particular countries, likely influence regional geopolitics, potentially affecting the quality and scope of EU enlargement.

Scenario 1 posits that a complete U.S. disengagement from the Western Balkans leads to a more pragmatic, yet potentially less consistent, EU policy towards China in the region and beyond. This scenario leads to regional stagnation, increased fragility as different actors test the stability of conflict management frameworks and peace agreements, and a fragmented geopolitical landscape, with each Western Balkan state pursuing a multi-vectoral foreign policy without a clear path towards democratic consolidation or EU integration (Himmer and Rod 2022). Countries most affected by instability and the lack of US security guarantees are Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which grapple with longstanding political conflicts. Russia and China have already established footholds through investments and political partnerships in these countries, seeking to utilize these partnerships against their competitors.

This scenario is viewed not as a sudden break, but as a continuation of several existing trends. Key developments suggesting this trajectory include a reduction in U.S. financial aid or military and political support to the region, as well as a shift in U.S. foreign policy focus towards other global priorities. Simultaneously, an increase in Chinese infrastructure projects, as well as other forms of support, including the sale of advanced technologies and weapons, the growing economic dependency of Western Balkan countries on Chinese loans, and a more assertive Chinese diplomatic presence, could signal this shift. Evidence of the EU struggling to present a united front on critical issues in the region, alongside a pragmatic but perhaps inconsistent engagement with both U.S. and Chinese influence, is among other key features of this scenario.

What precisely does US disengagement entail for NATO's regional commitments? While the US would formally remain a NATO member and NATO continues to be tested elsewhere in the European neighbourhood by hostile Russia, its narrowed focus, reducing commitments, will create a security vacuum. This void of regional governance would be swiftly exploited by actors who have a clear interest in dismantling the security architecture of the Western Balkans, including the delicate peace in Kosovo and Bosnia. Some Serbian political factions may be counting on

continued US disengagement to challenge Kosovo's status. At the same time, figures like Milorad Dodik may simultaneously rely on US disengagement and court certain elements in the largely disinterested US administration, potentially leading to rapid secession in Bosnia and the unravelling of the existing security framework. The EU's response, particularly in the broader security context referring to the war in Ukraine, will be crucial.

In this scenario, Russia, despite being weakened by the years of war in Ukraine, actively seeks a role in the Western Balkans in the post-American era. Following the same line of behaviour as it has done in the past two decades, Moscow is, however, unable or unwilling to offer sustainable financial support or make major investments in the region. Instead, it continues to utilize some of the still-existing energy dependencies, networks of conservative, nationalist, and other ideologically aligned actors, as well as disinformation as key tools of influence. Its central goal is to ensure that EU enlargement occurs in a controlled manner and is slowed down by the perceived risks of the reawakening of frozen conflicts. Should domestic instability arise, such as moves towards political transition in Serbia, which could be unfavourable to Moscow, Russia would likely support further destabilization, including the delicate peace in Kosovo and Bosnia. Thus, Russia's actions in whichever regime in this scenario are characterized by opportunistic, low-cost destabilization tactics aimed at further weakening Western influence, rather than large-scale power projection. Russia is thus able to continue exploiting local conflicts to deepen popular frustration, while not being perceived favourably beyond Serbia and Republika Srpska.

Such a scenario would also present certain opportunities for Turkey. Turkey has already perceived the EU as a rival in the Western Balkans, particularly in the cultural/religious spheres, as well as in mediation efforts in regional conflicts. If the EU starts working more closely with China, Turkey would be eager to highlight the EU's perceived inconsistency or hypocrisy over its values and push the narrative that EU conditionality is weakening. In turn, Ankara would be ready to offer alternative forms of political and economic engagement that bypass EU norms.

Meanwhile, Chinese influence continues to expand. Despite popular objections and the questionable quality of many realized projects, China manages to achieve a certain level of control over key strategic and digital infrastructure and resource sectors in Serbia and Montenegro. The “no-questions-asked” development model directly competes with the EU, which nevertheless remains the dominant economic partner and supporter for the regional states. Balkan leaders use Chinese financing

to bypass democratic conditions tied to EU accession, often delaying or reversing reform commitments. At the same time, public backlash is growing, especially among younger, urban populations disillusioned with authoritarianism and environmental degradation associated with Chinese-backed projects, contributing to a lack of popular affinity with Beijing (Daniel et al. 2024; Hide and Xhaferaj 2025).

The relationship between China and the EU will influence the EU enlargement process, potentially affecting both its quality and scope (Shopov 2025). China's influence in the region may play a role in determining whether and how the Western Balkan countries proceed with membership or other forms of integration into EU institutions, as the more isolationist EU seeks to adjust to a new geopolitical and economic reality where the US is no longer a key partner. China, which has significant diplomatic leverage over Russia, weakened by the war in Ukraine, is willing to utilize it in crucial matters.

### 1.1 The Gray Zone: Pragmatic relation between China and the EU

If China and the EU cooperate, this will likely turn the Western Balkans into a gray zone in terms of compliance with rule-of-law standards and the degree of integration into the EU market. In terms of crude pragmatic politics, such a situation will be convenient for all sides, as sensitive issues and reforms will not be the focus. The EU and China will likely find common ground in maintaining a status quo that prioritizes economic stability and infrastructure investments over demanding democratic reforms (Forsberg and Herd 2015). Such development would be favoured also by Russia.

The Western Balkans may partially integrate into the EU, but complete membership for all the region's countries seems unlikely in this scenario. Political actors in the partially integrated states exploit this differentiated approach to delay democratic reforms. They argue that full membership is not a realistic prospect regardless of their efforts. This could empower autocrats and reinforce hybrid regimes, especially if external actors, such as China, continue to offer "no-questions-asked" financing and strategic investments that bypass EU conditionality.

This situation could empower autocratic tendencies in countries like Serbia and Montenegro, where China maintains business and political partnerships. However, the EU will still have conflicting identities regarding China - on the one hand, viewing it as a partner, and on the other, as a competitor and systemic rival. The

multiple roles assigned to China by the EU may lead to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to the Western Balkans. In this situation, the focus will be on immediate economic gains and continuing ‘stabilitocracy’ over long-term democratic consolidation (Brînză, Politi, and Li 2024).

Although China is not Turkey’s direct rival in the Balkans, its rising presence could limit Turkey’s own influence among “kin communities” and in the Muslim-majority areas. Turkey, following its own strategic interests, would likely welcome Chinese investment in the Balkans but dislikes its cooperation with the EU. Ankara would thus try to preserve space for its own normative and cultural agenda, without requiring rule-of-law standards, while being open to pragmatic cooperation to all sides of regional conflicts.

China supports the two-tier integration, as it will see it as a way to increase its economic access to the EU market. China uses its investments and partnerships to meet EU standards and will seek to avoid any political confrontation with the EU. This approach will allow China’s influence to grow, including in digital infrastructure. Such a development may become a concern for the EU, as it will challenge its vision on strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty (Hulkó, Kálmán, and Lapsánszky 2025). A situation in which Chinese technology becomes widely used in the Western Balkans will pose a potential long-term security risk for the EU, as it has been previously used for information collection and spying activities (Dolan 2025).

## 1.2 Western Balkans, once more, in a geopolitical turmoil

In a non-cooperative path, the EU’s enlargement in the Western Balkans will be challenged by geopolitical competition, with both the EU and China seeking influence (see also Metodieva, 2024). Here, the China-EU mutual hostility could be explained by the deepening China-Russia alliance. The EU is struggling to cope with the consequences of the war in Ukraine, while also maintaining internal cohesion. This leads Brussels to adopt a pragmatic, phased approach to Western Balkan integration, moving away from a full-membership path previously promised to all countries in the region.

However, the countries left in the “waiting room”, particularly Serbia, are increasingly turning towards alternative geopolitical alignments, including deeper engagement with China, especially given their existing economic ties and investments. Albania, in turn, navigates between China, Turkey, and the EU as it seeks to utilize its newly negotiated economic agreements with the EU. Thus, this

approach creates divisions among countries in the region and challenges regional stability (Dolan 2025).

Russia, Turkey, and China view the partial integration of the Western Balkans into the EU as an opportunity, seeking to intensify their economic, political, and media presence, especially in countries like Serbia, where they rely on pre-existing ties. Projects such as the revived Open Balkans initiative, financially supported by Chinese and Turkish funds, could become venues for Serbia's regional influence with China's support, without the need to aim for membership. The Open Balkans could expand under Serbian dominance, potentially bypassing EU conditionality. Nevertheless, domestic pro-EU and democratic resistance movements could limit Serbia's capacity to project regional influence and sustain its current foreign policy trajectory of balancing between great powers (Tzifakis and Vasdoka 2025). In this scenario, regional divides deepen between Serbia and more pro-Western-oriented states, such as Albania.

In this situation, Turkey increases its visibility in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, driven by both cultural diplomacy and strategic calculation. It increases its influence across the region, seeking foreign policy wins and capitalizing on the personal relationships to compensate for the domestic economic crisis. The regime increasingly lacks credibility at home, but in the Balkans, authoritarian regimes and parties that seek power rely on Turkey's support to justify tough policies against opposition and critical voices (Koppa 2021).

### Wild card: Who you gonna call when the lights go out

As the Western Balkans experience regional governance fragmentation, the reaction to disasters and large-scale disruptions, exacerbated by the episodes of extreme weather brought by regional effects of climate change, remains one of the key indicators of the relative roles of different actors. With the power outage and collapse of several key digital infrastructure systems, exacerbated by aging infrastructure and a combination of different technological standards, hitting several Western Balkan countries during the wave of extreme cold winter weather and heavy snowstorms, national actors scramble to offer meaningful support in both technological and humanitarian terms. This will create the need for international support to restore essential services and stability (Glasze et al. 2022).

While many states offer help and seek to insert themselves into the situation, the EU humanitarian and disaster response agencies and agencies of EU member states remain, in this context, crucial actors, ready to step in and capitalize on their longstanding involvement in such crises, as well as lessons learned from observing the maintenance of Ukrainian energy infrastructures. Such a move strengthens the EU's position among the populations of the Western Balkans and helps the EU build diplomatic capital in its relations with the regional actors.

## **Scenario 2: The shadow of the Bear**

The setting of this scenario is the recently finished war in Ukraine, in which Russia has gained territories but failed to achieve a decisive victory or settlement at the international level. In this post-Ukraine war geopolitical landscape, Russia advances its sphere of influence more forcefully than before, regardless of the regime in place (see Daniel et al. 2024).

The previous US disengagement from the Western Balkans, as outlined in Scenario 1, and the fragmentation within the EU, caused by divergences over relations with Russia and the US among member states, encourage Russia to leverage existing tensions in the region to further destabilize European cohesion and security as tensions flare in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Although NATO continues to exist and offers an important framework for coordinating military planning, it has lost much of its credibility due to the US's reluctance to react to lower-scale Russian provocations. The EU's past "stabilitocracy" approach (Buras, Dumoulin and Kelemendi 2024), which has enabled authoritarian tendencies and opened a space for external competitors, has solidified a "grey zone" where democratic norms are undermined, and state capture becomes prevalent.

In this context, Russia intensifies its tried and tested hybrid warfare tactics within the Western Balkans, including advanced AI-driven disinformation targeting EU credibility and regional governments opposed to Russia, as well as cyberattacks against central authorities and key critical infrastructure, alongside targeted strategic corruption aimed at strongmen within the regional hybrid regimes. This is coupled with support for secessionist movements, based on the experience in Ukraine's pre-invasion phase. Such actions will involve some form of overt or covert military support for state and informal authorities in Serbia, Kosovo, and BiH who actively oppose the EU and NATO. As the Russian opponents on the international

level scramble to put together a strong response, actors on the ground threaten to take forceful action against the secessionist movements. Since both locations border NATO members, any direct military actions will present a challenge for the faltering Alliance. As conflict escalates, Russia engages in a more direct intervention to "protect" its interests or those of its proxies. This involves the deployment of "peacekeeping" forces or the provision of advanced military aid that directly challenges the existing regional security architecture.

However, Russia's assertive moves might escalate the conflicts internationally. Any direct Russian challenge to the sovereignty or territorial integrity of a Western Balkan state could be met with a response from NATO, potentially bringing the US politically and diplomatically back to the region. Although Washington might be reluctant to commit a significant number of troops, it nevertheless does not favor the wider regional destabilization in the area where it invested significantly in the past and is willing to listen to arguments from some regional and European lobby groups.

Similarly, the Russian destabilization activities are not perceived favourably by the other regional powers. China, a key great power supporter of Russia, does not favour a region-wide destabilization that would threaten its assets, investments, and networks built over the past decades. Although Beijing understands Russian interests, it is not willing to provide significant support for armed destabilization and does not intend to utilize foreign policy tools in the region. Instead, it engages in diplomatic efforts to mediate the crisis.

Turkey voices even a stronger objection to Russian destabilization efforts as they often directly concern key Turkish allies in the region. While Turkey is unlikely to engage in direct military actions far from its borders, it will nevertheless leverage its diplomatic powers, intelligence capabilities, and covert military support to impose higher costs on Russian actions and coerce Russia into backing down. At the same time, Turkey is likely to utilize its diplomatic channels within NATO to pressure the other Allies to respond more forcefully to the crisis and provide support for the affected countries. However, mirroring the Turkish approach to the Ukrainian or Syrian conflict, Ankara would not break ties with Moscow. Instead, it would maintain controlled diplomatic communication, aiming to act as a crisis mediator while leveraging its other alliances (Balta and Bal 2025).

Although the flare-ups of the regional conflict may be contained by a combination of diplomatic efforts and enhanced deterrence, the region enters a phase of cold

stability, defined by preparations for another round of confrontation. Efforts to stabilize it through integration or support for local institution-building are thwarted as outside powers carefully guard their assets and keep each other in check, while local clients and populist politicians capitalize on regional polarization. Such a development also results in economic stagnation and continuation of outward emigration and brain drain.

### Wild card: Regime collapse in Serbia

The Russian destabilization efforts in the Western Balkans have created a situation where, due to the regional crisis and economic stagnation, some regimes have collapsed under the pressure of public dissatisfaction. While the original student movement in Serbia from the mid-2020s failed to achieve its goals, it sowed the seeds of social movements that ultimately led to the downfall of the Vučić-created cartel regime.

On the one hand, this weakens the network of pragmatic actors willing to cooperate with Russia in the region. On the other hand, a political transition occurring in the context of heightened geopolitical competition poses significant risks of further escalation in tensions with Kosovo, as different parties strive to position themselves on the Serbian political scene and appeal to various constituencies. At the same time, such a trajectory would initiate the renegotiation of politics and relations between different political groups and entities in BiH and elsewhere. While this development would present significant risks, it would present an opportunity for the EU to support a transition to a more durable regional arrangement.

### Scenario 3: No Dragon, No Bear

In this scenario, China and Russia reduce their interests and presence in the Western Balkans due to shifting priorities and constraints, both domestically and internationally. Russia does not have the resources to maintain consistent engagement in the region due to its focus on Eastern Europe and the need for consolidation following the destruction and expenses brought by the war in Ukraine. Simultaneously, Russia experiences a post-Putin transition. Even though the new Russian nationalist technocratic regime is interested in preserving the Russian great power status, the leadership's legitimacy is uncertain, and the domestic consensus around the war in Ukraine is in decline. This scenario manifests in a visible reduction

in Chinese interests and investments, particularly in infrastructure, due to a combination of regional backlash against previous Chinese projects, China's domestic economic challenges, and shifting international priorities resulting from worsening security conditions in Eastern Asia. While a sudden loss of Chinese interest is unlikely, the decrease in its attention to the region could have significant consequences. A vacuum left by Moscow and Beijing presents an opportunity for the EU to play a more transformative role in rule-of-law and democratic reforms, which would help Western Balkan countries accelerate their accession process.

For countries in the Western Balkans, the waning interest of China and Russia marks a crucial moment of reckoning for their foreign policy strategies. The networks of influence created by Russia, China, and Turkey, among others, combine both macro-level geopolitical strategies and micro-level interpersonal connections involving local elites (Kapidžić et al. 2024). A period of uncertainty and reconfiguration of Russia and China's geopolitical interests leads to a transitional situation, in which political 'middle-men' in the Balkans look for means to maintain their status at the local level.

On the one hand, the reduction of China's economic and Russia's influence weakens the bargaining position of local leaders. With reduced external patronage from the great powers, the inherent instability and corruption of hybrid regimes become more exposed, necessitating internal reforms that align with EU accession criteria. On the other hand, these alternatives may not necessarily align with European interests and might still involve some form of Russian connection. Moreover, even in a scenario of Russian instability, such as in the 1990s, the presence of Russian intelligence networks and informal connections persists, albeit in a more decentralized form. This signals that Russia is entirely out of the game. Russia's influence, particularly within Serbia and Montenegro, remains deep by exploiting societies' frustrations with the EU. The Serbian Orthodox Church continues to play a role in maintaining this influence, often demonstrating its ties through visits to Moscow. This environment is further complicated by the growing popularity of far-right geopolitical ideologies, which promote a vision of a world divided into spheres of influence (see Daniel et al. 2024). In this situation, to counter Russia's taking advantage of existing identity links, the EU must fundamentally shift its values-free approach and appeal to the dignity of ordinary citizens, especially in countries like Serbia.

Serbia is left with limited regime security guarantees, as Russian support is reduced to rhetorical backing and propaganda dissemination, aimed at maintaining a

symbolic presence. The regimes in Serbia and Republika Srpska weaken without Russian backing. Regarding Kosovo, the diminished Russian support could change the dynamics of its long-standing dispute with Serbia. Sensing their power diminishing, particularly pro-Russian figures could apply more evident or coercive tactics to secure their strategic positions in the region, while undermining countries' efforts to align with Western interests. The unpredictable geopolitical behavior of major players, such as Russia and China, poses a challenge to the EU. A shift from strategic engagement to an insurgent mode could, in fact, increase Russia's destabilization efforts. However, in the long term, it facilitates a gradual integration into the EU institutions (Jakimovska 2023). This opens avenues for new diplomatic solutions or increased pressure from the EU to normalize relations (Vučković and Radeljić 2024).

Meanwhile, other countries, such as Turkey, with its historical ties and economic presence, capitalize on this situation, potentially expanding their influence in areas where Russia and China had previously held a strong role - for example, in energy and infrastructure projects. A decline in Russia's capacity to destabilize Bosnia, Kosovo, or Montenegro would reduce Turkey's security concerns, improving Turkey's room to maneuver diplomatically. In this scenario, Turkey's role becomes increasingly important, particularly as a reflection of its own historical disillusionment with the EU. With Russia's influence waning, Turkey, which has often positioned itself as a counterweight to Russian power, now finds an opportunity to engage with the Balkan populations' frustrations with the EU integration process. However, Erdogan's Turkey would not be comfortable with a scenario in which the EU becomes too dominant. It would continue to present itself as a necessary actor in mediation, protect its bilateral channels, and try to minimize the EU's potential dominance in ideological space. Turkey might continue to benefit from a stagnating Balkan region, maintaining its influence while, on the surface, supporting the EU accession. Turkey's regime stability itself remains tied to various external factors, including its EU accession trajectory, the migration deal with the EU, the operational status of Russia's Turk Stream gas pipeline, and opportunities for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria.

The decline of Russian and Chinese influence may lead to a reduction in Western interest in the region, as the US and the EU still rely on the perceived threat posed by these actors. Such a development could lead to a more 'autonomous' Western Balkans, at least in terms of foreign policy, although economic ties remain solid. The absence of Russian and Chinese influence may prompt Serbian liberals to question

the necessity of compromising on projects like the Rio Tinto, while also leading Albanians in Kosovo to question the need for a continued NATO presence. More autonomous foreign policies in the Western Balkans, nevertheless, increase the possibility of disagreements with the EU and the West more generally. The EU's initial emphasis on enlargement, driven by the geopolitical momentum of the war in Ukraine, begins to wane. As the perceived external threats from China and Russia diminish, the urgency for enlargement in the Western Balkans disappears. This development undermines any future efforts towards democratic reforms in the region.

### **Wild card: Return to democracy on the Bosphorus**

The Turkish interests described in this scenario stem from the continuation of the current trend of assertive Turkish foreign policy, which was formed under Erdogan's leadership. However, if the Turkish regime undergoes a more radical transformation, where the current opposition assumes power, a more significant shift in Turkish policy could be expected.

Such a development would lead to a period of domestic turmoil, potentially paving the way for a more pro-European government, as offered by Turkish opposition figures, such as Ekrem İmamoğlu. That would still be guided by the primacy of national Turkish interest, but it might want to assume a more cooperative relationship with the EU. It is unlikely that Turkey would abandon its economic interests and networks in the Western Balkans and completely disengage from some of its societal networks, given that these are driven also by actors who might remain influential under the new regime. However, if Turkey demonstrates a genuine and sustained commitment to democratic principles, it could exert a profoundly positive influence over its Western Balkan partners, contributing to regional stability and alignment with European values in the vacuum left by Russia and China.

## **Scenario 4: The Global Authoritarian Turn Comes to Western Balkans**

In this scenario, the authoritarian wave across the Western Balkans is strengthened due to the decline of democracy and the rise of illiberal forces worldwide (Nord et al. 2025). While such development has impacted EU member states as well as many major players in international politics, Western Balkan countries are particularly

susceptible to this decline, given their developing democratic institutions and persistent vulnerabilities to external influences. The democratic reforms are reversed and authoritarian tendencies consolidated. This concerns not only countries, such as Serbia, where the authoritarian tendencies were already strongly visible in the mid-2020s, but also countries where democratic backsliding has proceeded on a slower pace (Mishkova et al. 2024). The disengagement of the US, which continues to prioritize the Asia-Pacific and Western Hemisphere over Eastern Europe, and the potential benefits of pragmatic deals with local strongmen, combined with EU enlargement fatigue, have led to the normalization of authoritarianism across the region and a persistently unresolved status of regional conflicts. While this contributes to regional instability, it does not necessarily mean an open conflict, as authoritarian leaders may be able to maintain a state of perpetual crisis without risking large-scale violence.

This scenario assumes a more defensive and inward-looking EU, consumed by its own problems and disagreements among member states. On the other hand, this scenario envisions diverse forms of support provided by Russia, China, and Turkey to the regional hybrid regimes, partially in line with current practices (see Daniel et al. 2024), partially significantly extended. This perspective also suggests a continuation of the more assertive US policy of the Second Trump administration on the global level. The shadow of authoritarianism now extends to the EU's core, as several countries consider closer ties with foreign autocratic powers, such as China or Russia, and strengthen connections with illiberal elements in the US and across the continent (Abrahamsen et al. 2024; Cheeseman, Bianchi, and Cyr 2025).

Clientelist investments, which connect foreign patrons with local clients, propaganda networks, and support for ruling elites, create a political ecosystem that solidifies the rule of regional oligarchies and supports the hybrid nature of regional regimes. The EU enlargement is no longer seen as a feasible and desirable political path, while the EU itself struggles to make its case in the Western Balkans, where several EU member states rather invest in their own interests and power games. This leads to a highly unpredictable and fragmented approach towards the Western Balkans. This inconsistent commitment from the EU and the US creates an environment in which Western Balkan countries experience periods of authoritarianism and engage in pragmatic, transactional relations with multiple foreign patrons.

Russia, which maintains cold and hostile relations with the EU and courts various successes with illiberal regimes among EU member states, capitalizes on the

fragmentation in the Western Balkans. Although Russia is itself able to use only a limited range of foreign policy tools, as it has not recovered from the economic and military losses in Ukraine, it paints the EU as impotent and presents itself as a guarantor of “Slavic Brotherhood”, “Conservative”, and “Orthodox World”, and a more reliable partner. Moscow itself leverages destabilization and fragmentation as a strategy, seeking to preserve and deepen its clientelist ties among diverse players in the regional hybrid regimes and providing limited diplomatic, military, and economic support to allied governments, political entities, political parties, and strongmen. While not all regional autocracies align strongly with Russia due to historical or ideological reasons, Moscow positions itself, thanks to its extensive network, as a player that needs to be included in any negotiations on future regional arrangements and can benefit from such a role.

China’s footprint in the Western Balkans deepens through major infrastructure investments enabled and backed by regional autocracies, digital surveillance, and long-term debt arrangements. Through the state-owned companies, China has become the dominant actor in strategic sectors, including highways, energy, digital networks, and mining. This strategy occasionally elicits public backlash; however, it benefits the select regime elites and their business sector cronies. Rather than promoting ideological influence, China’s strategy is to ensure economic gains that have political value and can be transformed into diplomatic capital when needed. As this makes China much more flexible and able to work with a wider variety of regimes than Russia, domestic elites become increasingly dependent on large Chinese-led initiatives. This economic trajectory of the Western Balkan countries reinforces kleptocratic tendencies and hinders progress on democratic reforms.

Turkey's actions reflect a delicate balancing act, as Ankara simultaneously engages with the EU for economic purposes while asserting its influence in the Western Balkans through a pragmatic, non-ideological foreign policy (Lindgaard 2024). Here, Turkey's ambitions in the region are aligned with those of Russia and China in supporting right-wing populist actors. However, Turkey's pragmatism, driven by economic interests, aims to project itself as a crucial safeguard for the region while maintaining ties with the EU. In essence, in Scenario 4, Turkey's ambitions are higher in terms of *actively shaping* the region alongside Russia and China by supporting authoritarian tendencies and actively competing with the other two powers, utilizing its own networks as well as its membership in NATO and ties with European states. In contrast, in Scenario 3, Turkey’s ambitions are also high, but they involve *filling a void* left by the other two powers. In this scenario, the trajectory

of the Western Balkans depends on broader geopolitical calculations between Russia and Turkey.

Furthermore, geopolitical security uncertainties disproportionately affect Western Balkan countries that are not NATO members or those pursuing alternative agendas, mostly Serbia. The US, after initial disengagement, ultimately does not wish to entirely abandon its security guarantees to these nations. NATO's framework, involving the US, the EU, and other member states, serves as one of the key platforms for maintaining geopolitical stability in the Western Balkans, particularly for members such as Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia. However, NATO gives up any pretences of connecting democracy and the rule of law with security and stability.

Nevertheless, this scenario also contains seeds of a potential political transformation. A long-term frustration with right-wing populist, conservative, nationalist authoritarians creates the conditions for the gradual emergence of radical opposition movements. While some of them may take the form of short-term uprisings, there may also be factors that create a staging ground for democratization processes. Such processes will be fragile and constantly on the brink if they fail to align with a bigger regional project and improve economic conditions for a wider population, potentially leading to a resurgence of authoritarianism. The cyclical pattern of populist regimes coming and going from power in the Western Balkans depends on their ability to respond to the crises of living standards and social tensions these create.

### [Wild Card: A transformation of the Russian regime](#)

As pro-democratic and populist anti-authoritarian uprisings sweep the Western Balkans, a similar process, driven by the economic problems that challenge the authoritarian social contract and struggles of Putin's succession, would lead to a transformation of the political order in Russia. While such development may not lead to a fully democratic regime, it could orient Russia inward toward internal reforms and transform Russia's role from a disruptive force that fosters authoritarianism to a neutral one, or even a constructive one that prioritizes stability within the European security architecture. This shift would directly remove a major external actor that is actively contributing to the "authoritarian wave and democratic decline" in the Western Balkans. In this case, the trajectory of Scenario 4 would undergo a fundamental shift, and regional authoritarian regimes would face a significant challenge driven by a sudden loss of external patronage. However, as

we discussed in Scenario 3, this does not mean that the Russian networks disappear overnight. Nevertheless, under the conditions created by this Wild Card, the local pro-Russian actors are left with a fraction of the support they have received and may also face Russia, which does not want to be a disruptive actor and utilize them for its own power games.

## **Scenario 5: A New Moment for Balkan Democracy**

This scenario assumes a renewed commitment from the EU and its external allies towards the Western Balkans. The EU membership remains a clear and feasible incentive in this scenario, and it is tacitly supported by the USA, which has moved beyond its MAGA phase. Although the USA does not wish to return to 1990s interventionism, it is now willing to at least diplomatically support the EU's efforts. In this renewed era of transatlantic cooperation, the EU continues to face foreign policy challenges and struggles with unified action, particularly in the realm of security. Ukraine is in a prolonged reconstruction phase, and even though Russia is significantly weakened, the relationship between Brussels and Moscow is far from being fully repaired.

Since the EU demonstrates a willingness to engage and provides a clear path for membership for the Western Balkan states, the influence of China and Russia is present, but not dominant. This is also helped by the fact that China is refocusing on other, more important regions. While it maintains an interest in shaping clientelist networks, it remains agnostic towards the nature of these regimes as long as they cooperate in the economic area and allow space for Chinese business. In contrast, Russia is dealing with domestic instability following the war in Ukraine and is unable and unwilling to make significant changes.

The EU understands better than before that working with governments alone is risky, as parties in power change and therefore their agendas. To increase the chance for democratic renewal, this time the EU is more open in supporting grassroots movements and civil society organisations. This encourages student activism and groups advocating for legal reforms. Revived NATO reinforces regional security to deter authoritarian tendencies, while the EU revises its enlargement policy. The “geopolitical turn” is no longer what defines the enlargement, but rather a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law.

This renewed, value-oriented approach coming from the West faces early resistance from status quo elites, such as those in Serbia, but gradually delivers results. In fact,

Serbia becomes a key point of change – its student protest movement gradually transforms into a credible political force that is able to establish a broad coalition across the society and, as such, challenges post-Yugoslav nationalist narratives, corruption, and state capture. This paves the way for a generational change in the politics of the Western Balkans. Bosnia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro advance rule-of-law reforms, and the EU's enthusiasm for these countries is back.

Turkey, even under Erdogan or a regime defined by figures following in his footsteps, does not seek to be a spoiler. Rather, it seeks to adapt to Western leadership, step back from geopolitical balancing in favour of economic cooperation, and work to maintain influence within a region where Washington and Brussels have reclaimed the initiative. Turkey thus positions itself as a complementary—not a rival—actor to the EU and the US, presenting its role as a country capable of communicating even with resistant political elites. Ankara could leverage ties with Serbia's leadership, its influence among Bosniak elites, and its growing economic presence to portray itself as a pragmatic mediator supporting Western-led stabilization efforts. Naturally, this also means that Turkey would seek pay-offs for such a constructive approach.

The EU regains lost legitimacy through consistent support for democratic actors. It further suspends support for projects linked to Chinese and Russian companies. Independent media and education become central to civil society's efforts to fight brain drain and political apathy among local populations. Russia continues to engage in disinformation campaigns, while China maintains limited business interests. However, their influence is under greater scrutiny than before, and there is increased public resistance.

However, this scenario faces scepticism due to potential domestic resistance from illiberal elites in Serbia and Republika Srpska, as well as internal divisions within the EU between far-right populist governments and more liberal-democratic member states. Ultimately, the EU's willingness to adapt its approach to emerging democratic movements in the Balkans is crucial. The question is whether the EU will seize this opportunity or miss it. Similar protest mechanisms, as seen in Serbia in 2025, have already emerged among students in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. However, the EU previously missed an opportunity in BiH by supporting stabilitocracy and prioritizing financial interests over democratic movements (the 2014 blockade movement in Sarajevo, see Kurtović 2015).

The more strategic question concerns the nature and extent of EU enlargement and its transformative impact. Stricter rule-of-law expectations may lead to resistance from local political elites, potentially resulting in a resurgence of anti-EU sentiments and further delays in the enlargement process. Moreover, since some countries, such as Albania and Montenegro, advance faster, this could create new grievances and political divisions. In this scenario, Albania and Montenegro are close to completing the accession process, while Serbia, BiH, and North Macedonia are still dealing with domestic political divisions and bilateral disputes. Given the historical vulnerabilities in these countries, the EU's engagement becomes central. This will not only help address uneven advancements on the EU path but also mitigate risks to regional stability.

### Wild card: Crisis in East Asia, Crisis in the Western Balkans

This scenario outlines some of the geopolitical conditions under which a turn to democracy in the Western Balkans might occur. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan, though geographically distant, would trigger a global economic crisis and fundamentally reorient the attention and resources of nearly all the major powers, particularly the US and the EU, away from the Western Balkans. The sense of urgency that a conflict in the Indo-Pacific would bring will limit the West's capacity and political will to effectively engage in or sustain a direct confrontation with Russia in the Western Balkans. In such a scenario, Russia would seize the opportunity to preserve its influence and gains, capitalizing on its networks in the region to pressure the EU and the West, which would be, in turn, forced to seek de-escalation. While China would be out of the picture, focusing on more pressing priorities, the global economy would face a deep crisis, which would deal a blow to democratic transitions, unable to provide a significant and rapid improvement in the quality of life. Meanwhile, local actors in the Western Balkans might seek new patrons or make desperate concessions in a rapidly changing geopolitical situation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations: Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

In this scenario analysis, we aimed to model the evolution of the geopolitical landscape over the next decade and how regional actors in the Western Balkans will respond to this evolution, or alternatively, how they themselves are contributing to

it. Based on the predetermined elements and relatively certain trends that we identified, it is evident that the EU's response must be flexible enough to account for different future trajectories and the challenges they bring.

Several general lessons can be gleaned from the scenario exercise, as well as insights from specific scenarios. The EU will, in any case, need to consider the role of its main competitors much more than in the past and balance its own principles and regulations with interests defined by the context of geopolitical rivalry. The EU must utilize strategic investments, engage with civil society and the broader population, and maintain open channels of communication with various actors to prepare itself and the Western Balkans for alternative future scenarios. The EU should also not underestimate the role of technical and humanitarian cooperation and preparedness, which in many cases may improve the EU's image among the population and strengthen its status. Furthermore, the EU will need to find ways to work with pragmatic and instrumental actors, such as Turkey, in a constructive manner through various forms of cooperation, while avoiding compromising its core interests and principles.

In scenarios characterized by U.S. disengagement and increased Chinese and Russian influence, or even increasingly assertive Russian actions, it would be beneficial for the EU to invest in democratic resilience and economic independence. This means support for civil society, independent media, and judicial reforms to counter authoritarian tendencies and state capture. Additionally, the EU should strategically invest in critical infrastructure, particularly in energy and digital sectors, to reduce dependence on non-EU sources and protect digital sovereignty. A deeper economic integration of the WB countries, both among themselves and with the EU Single Market, will make EU accession prospects more tangible. Such a step could prevent Serbia from achieving regional dominance and will overall limit the impact of alternative economic models offered by China, as well as those of other EU competitors.

On the other hand, should a scenario emerge in which China and Russia lose interest in the Western Balkans, the EU must be prepared to capitalize on this opportunity. The EU investments should accelerate the integration processes, without compromising support for democratic institutions. Increased financial assistance directly tied to transparent democratic progress and human rights protection would be a suitable policy to strengthen the WB countries' alignment with the EU.

Nevertheless, the EU should also consider preparing for a more autonomous Western Balkans, should the integration drive fail and regional authoritarian actors decide to turn away from the EU. As we aim to highlight, even in such a development, there is a potential for democratization driven by domestic actors. However, in these cases, the EU should be ready to face the consequences of its past support of stabilitocracy. This further underscores the necessity of engagement with the population, as highlighted in other RE-ENGAGE studies as well.

Finally, in a scenario of the renewed democratization push, the EU should invest in initiatives with the US that can have a positive impact on the Western Balkans. Joint programs for economic development, sustainable infrastructure, and regional security cooperation would reinforce shared democratic values. This re-engagement provides a platform to collectively address brain drain through supporting economic growth and making WB countries more attractive for their citizens.

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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).