

# GEO-POWER-EU

Empowering  
the Geopolitical EU  
in the Eastern Neighbourhood  
and the Western Balkans:  
A Baseline Study



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## **GEO-POWER-EU: EMPOWERING THE GEOPOLITICAL EU IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: (1) proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; (2) examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; (3) assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; (4) offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; (5) exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and (6) proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle.

More about the project: <https://geo-power.eu>

### PURPOSE AND OUTLINE OF THE DELIVERABLE

Through this baseline study, we will provide the state of the art and begin to outline the conceptual groundwork for the rest of the WPs to build upon. The study is intentionally lengthy as it will provide a bibliographical reference point for potential consultation throughout the

course of the initiative. The consortium also anticipates that many other relevant and insightful references will be identified as work continues.

**The first chapter will take stock of the scholarship that has been produced concerning the EU Enlargement and EaP policies.** In the analysis of both policies, more in-depth analysis will be presented for the challenges related to the democratic consolidation, economic convergence, and security alignment. The task will concentrate on the main policy choices and the implementation record of these policies and on the adequacy of the policy instruments which the EU has used in these policy sectors.

**The second chapter will analyse from a historical perspective geopolitical competition in the two regions.** Its aim is to unveil the aims and ambitions that global actors (Russia, China and the U.S) and a regional actor (Turkey) have advanced over time in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood. After the review of the historical engagement of these 4 major actors in both regions ('Engagement'), we will present how they described the reasons for engagement and their evolving strategies ('Framing'). Moreover, the task will take stock of the scholarly debate on the emerging geopolitical competition.

**The third chapter will perform a review of the state of the art in the debate on EU CFSP/CSDP policies and instruments** with an emphasis on deficiencies in the development of EU strategic autonomy and defence cooperation. It starts with the mapping of themes used to develop the EU's foreign policy and security agency and proceeds with the explanation of 3 components of the EU actorness (coherence, capacity and context). This conceptual framework is then tested on the case of the EU reactions after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Finally, in the last section we will summarize the findings of the earlier sections and provide the **outline of a conceptual framework for the next stages of the project.** After so many years of engagement in the region it has become clear that many assumptions have taken on the character of theology. They are widely believed without being closely scrutinized. By contrast, this research will provide an opportunity to rethink some of these assumptions to determine whether or not they remain valid or require updating to have a real and positive impact on policy.

## EU ENLARGEMENT AND EAP POLICIES

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### INTRODUCTION

**The EU's enlargement and Eastern neighborhood policies need to be revised to align with a new geopolitical vision for the Western Balkans and the Eastern partner countries.** EU enlargement has emerged as one of the key tools for achieving stability and consolidating democracy, becoming a key mechanism in redefining the European space and its security. With each round of enlargement, the EU was transformed in various ways, and Europe's geographic and political boundaries were reshaped. Widening and deepening have been two inseparable parallel processes in European integration. While these transformations have brought some undisputed benefits, it has also presented challenges.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought the EU to a substantial redefinition of its priorities: which Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, termed "the EU's geopolitical awakening." The Union made joint decisions that would have been unthinkable a few months before the invasion. Such decisions included the joint purchase of weapons through the recently established European Peace Facility, the imposition of wide-ranging sanctions on Russia, and the initiation of efforts to drastically reduce reliance on Russian energy. In October 2024, the EU adopted a new sanctions regime in response to hybrid threats from Russia.

The EU has expanded its geopolitical influence beyond its immediate external borders, especially towards the Western Balkans<sup>1</sup> and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries.<sup>2</sup> In June 2022, the European Commission recommended, and the European Council granted Ukraine and Moldova (and, later, Georgia) a candidate status. Within a few months, in December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with both countries. In addition, Albania and North Macedonia were greenlighted to launch accession negotiations, whereas the European Council decided in March 2024 to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. These actions manifested the "strategic convergence" of EU members on the seriousness of the Russian military threat in Europe (Balfour, 2022). However, if the EU had appeared undecided and reluctant to act when faced with such a direct challenge to the global normative and security order, the ramifications for the future of EU cohesion – not to mention enlargement – would have been enormous. The Russian aggression on Ukraine had been propelled mainly by the latter's commitment to align and integrate with the EU institutionally

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<sup>1</sup> The Western Balkans consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia.

<sup>2</sup> The Eastern Partnership countries are the following: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.



and normatively. In this regard, the war in Ukraine provided a hard “reality check” for the EU’s foreign and security policy; so far, the EU member-states succeeded in their cooperation and resolve (Maurer, Whitman, and Wright, 2022: 219-220).

Connecting enlargement to the Western Balkans and the “Associated Trio” countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) became a priority to the EU, but new challenges are looming. Major differences among EU member states on the way ahead (e.g. on the sequence of internal reforms and enlargement) demonstrate the limits of the intra-EU consensus. The consensus is threatened by the ascent to government or the rise of electoral influence of political leaders in Eastern Europe who are less convinced of the need for a united EU front against Russia (e.g., the rise of such leaders earlier in Hungary and Bulgaria, more recently in Romania).

Trump’s victory in the presidential election in the US has created considerable uncertainty for the future EU-US relations as well as the future international geopolitical order. Furthermore, the consolidation of the Georgian Dream Party’s rule in Tbilisi and the decision to suspend accession talks with the EU until 2028 demonstrates new challenges for potential dialogue with local elites in targeted countries. Will the EU be able to advance decisively on its deepening and widening? Or will internal differences in the EU (and local dynamics in the targeted countries) cause a stalemate?

The following chapters will first analyse the historical trajectory of the complex relationship between the EU and its neighboring countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership over the last twenty years. In the analysis of effects of the accession process in the Western Balkans, more in-depth analysis will cover the challenges of democratic consolidation, economic convergence and security provision. This analysis will conclude with the overview of major initiatives for reform of the accession process for the purpose of speeding it up, as well of the initiatives aimed to deepen reforms within the EU first, before widening its membership. The analysis of the Eastern Partnership questions the nature of this endeavor as a transformative and geopolitical undertaking, assesses the effectiveness of trade agreements as a basis of relationship and the transformation of the policy since the invasion of Ukraine.

## OVERVIEW OF THE ACCESSION PROCESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS (WB)

The EU's approach to the Western Balkans has been similar to that adopted for the Central and Eastern European countries since 2003. As the Thessaloniki Declaration of June 2003 stated, the future of the Western Balkans was in the EU. The road to EU membership for Western Balkan countries has been long and complicated. With the exception of Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013, no other interested country has attained membership. While other ex-socialist countries from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) took between 8 and 11 years to join the EU from the date of application (Table 1), some WB countries, like North Macedonia, have been waiting for about 20 years and have just started accession negotiations at the same time as

being faced with yet more blockages. The other three negotiating countries are Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania, with the former two negotiating for over a decade with no end in sight. Bosnia and Herzegovina, meanwhile, only achieved candidate status 8 years after applying, and is in the situation of a conditional opening of accession negotiations. (Table 2).

**TABLE 1 / Timeline of applications for EU membership and EU accession in CEE**

Country	Date of application for EU membership	Beginning of accession negotiations	Date of EU accession	Years between application and accession
Hungary	31 March 1994	31 March 1998	1 May 2004	10
Poland	5 April 1994	31 March 1998	1 May 2004	10
Romania	22 June 1995	15 February 2000	1 January 2007	11.5
Slovakia	27 June 1995	15 February 2000	1 May 2004	9
Latvia	13 October 1995	15 February 2000	1 May 2004	8.5
Estonia	24 November 1995	31 March 1998	1 May 2004	8.5
Lithuania	8 December 1995	15 February 2000	1 May 2004	8.5
Bulgaria	14 December 1995	15 February 2000	1 January 2007	11
Czechia	17 January 1996	31 March 1998	1 May 2004	8
Slovenia	10 June 1996	31 March 1998	1 May 2004	8
Croatia	21 February 2003	3 October 2005	1 July 2013	10

*Source: Taken from Jovanović et al., 2022, based on CVCE.EU*

**TABLE 2 / Timeline of applications for EU membership and waiting times for the Western Balkan countries**

Country	Date of application for EU membership	Beginning of accession negotiations	Years since application for EU membership
Albania	28 April 2009	19 July 2022	15.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	15 February 2016	21 March 2024 (conditioned)	8.1
Kosovo	15 December 2022	Not yet	2
Montenegro	15 December 2008	29 June 2012	16
North Macedonia	22 March 2004	19 July 2022	18.3
Serbia	22 December 2009	21 January 2014	15

*Source: Taken from Jovanović et al., 2022, and updated with more recent information.*

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, remarked in August 2023 that the EU should be ready to enlarge by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2023). Similar promises

were made by the former Commission President Juncker in his State of the Union speech of September 2017 and followed by the Credible enlargement perspective and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans Communication in which the perspective of 2025 was given to the “most advanced” countries (European Commission, 2018).

However, despite the original expectations, the EU's enlargement policy toward the WB has been in a perpetual state of stagnation over the last decade. Paradoxically, more than thirty years have passed since the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, and regional instability persists and periodically produces tensions and violence in the region. Moreover, while all WB countries have made smaller or larger steps forward in the long process of institutional preparation, they have been in a state of accelerated democratic backsliding, reversal, or retreat from previously made reforms (Freedom House, 2024). At a declaratory level, Western Balkan countries remain committed to their EU accession perspective. Yet the prospect of EU membership no longer induces their compliance with EU-prescribed reforms. Admittedly, the EU has not consistently employed accession conditionality, thus, it had compromised its credibility (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020). It has frequently changed its requirements from interested countries. At the same time, it has sometimes utilized the promise of membership to pronounce demands in domains that did not relate to the accession process *per se* (Tzifakis, 2012). In addition, EU conditionality on economic reforms (e.g., privatizations in Serbia) has unintentionally facilitated the consolidation of state capture by authoritarian-minded regimes (Richter and Wunsch, 2020; Perry et al., 2021). Crucially, the entrenchment of “enlargement fatigue” in many EU societies (verging on “enlargement resistance” according to Economides, 2020) and the exploitation of the process by certain EU members for the advancement of their national preferences (so-called “creeping nationalization” of the enlargement policy – see Balfour and Stratulat, 2015; Hillion 2010), has shaken the interested countries’ belief in their accession perspective. As shown below, different analysts underline some aspects of the above arguments more than others.

It became clearer in recent years that the EU accession process is insufficient on its own to propel deep and irreversible reforms in the WB. Several explanations for this failure have been articulated. Scholars and analysts advanced domestic as well as external factors as explanations — from contextual particularities of the WB states and state capture by incumbent elites to design flaws in the EU’s enlargement policy and the diminishing credibility of the accession promise (Tzifakis, 2012; Bieber, 2020; Sotiropoulos, 2023). At the same time, most authors concur that it is **the *interplay between internal and external factors that produces specific outcomes***. Nevertheless, the domestic/external division is analytically useful in discussing various theories of why the EU accession process has not induced reform in the region.

**Explanations primarily focusing on domestic factors** were advanced by scholars including Freyburg and Richter (2010), who point to “**legacies of ethnic conflict**” and “**national identities**” whose confluence slowed down compliance with EU conditionality (such as war crimes prosecutions in the case of Croatia, the focus of Freyburg and Richter). This, the authors argue, is a critical difference with the process of the Central and Eastern European countries which joined the EU in 2004, where conditionality was largely effective.

Others including Richter and Wunsch (2020) see a powerful explanation in **state capture**, which they define as “processes whereby state institutions and intermediary actors, such as political parties or parliaments, become hijacked or infiltrated by clientelist networks who lend their informal ways of decision making, including corrupt practices, a formal mantle.” However, their explanation straddles the domestic/external divide since **state capture is made possible or even incentivized by EU pressure for simultaneous economic and political reforms and the legitimization of corrupt elites** by “formal progress towards membership and high-level interactions with EU and member state officials.” Keil (2018) makes a similar argument but stresses that state capture refers not only to the hijacking of the institutions of the state by private interests but also “clientelism at the top”, whereby, according to Sotiropoulos (2023), persistent incumbent political elites undertake a “selective distribution of spoils of large economic value to preferred business entrepreneurs” (Sotiropoulos, 2023: 169 and 175). Perry et al. (2021) identify an interplay among internal and external actors to detail how the financial and reputational benefits of the EU and other Western actors can actually feed into support for those actors who seek to maintain and strengthen state capture.

Authors including Florian Bieber and **the “stabilitocracy” school** focus on the externally conditioned nature of democratization in the Western Balkans, and in particular the political and policy choices made by the EU. They attribute the failure of EU-induced reform mainly to the **EU’s lending legitimacy to regimes with significant democratic deficiencies** in exchange for the promise of stability. By privileging “stability” over other concerns such as democratization, the EU’s policies and actions have inadvertently supported semi-authoritarian regimes in the region, above all in Serbia since 2012 and in Montenegro between 2006-2020. The term was first used by Pavlović (2016) in a piece about Montenegro and gained swift acceptance with Kmezić and Bieber (2017) and Elbasani and Šelo Šabić (2017). Its fullest articulation was expressed in Bieber (2020). In turn, the external legitimization of “stabilitocrats” by the EU has not only increased “accession fatigue” in the societies of interested countries, but it has also alienated the EU from the pro-European reform-oriented parts of their civil society (Stratulat et al., 2020). Sotiropoulos (2023) provides a sympathetic but critical interpretation, blending the “stabilitocracy” explanation with “state capture from the top” and other features of the WB6 for a comprehensive explanation of the stalled democratization drive in the region.

Some authors also point to the diminishing credibility of the EU’s accession promise thanks to **post-2004 “enlargement fatigue”** (Gordon, 2009). This sentiment began to build after the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 French and Dutch referendums, reflecting a growing reluctance within some EU member states to pursue further expansion. After Croatia joined the EU in 2013 the enlargement process effectively stalled, which was reflected by then-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s enlargement “pause” speech in 2014 and the French veto of North Macedonia’s accession talks in 2019. Some argue that this has been due to the increasing reluctance of many EU members to welcome the Western Balkan countries (O’Brennan, 2014; Tcherneva, 2023).

The second external reason for slow progress is that **the higher number of conditions presented to WB countries** reflected disappointment with the performance of countries

admitted in 2004/07 and legitimate concerns about their ability to strengthen rather than weaken the Union (Bechev, 2022; EBRD, 2024). The main reason for this is that the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans has been fundamentally different from the strategy towards what has become EU-CEE. While the EU's approach for the CEE/SEE-11 countries revolved around meeting accession criteria on a country-by-country basis (the so-called “regatta” principle), the strategy for the Western Balkans placed much greater emphasis on fostering regional cooperation and integration as a prerequisite for EU membership. This difference arose as the Western Balkans needed not just support for political and economic transition but also faced unique challenges, including state-building, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. Hence, the emphasis on regional cooperation

The third flaw of Enlargement to the Western Balkans so far is a succession of **bilateral vetoes by member states** which have slowed down the accession process (Bechev, 2022). The Macedonian question is a main example of the EU's hopes clashing with the realities of its policies. After a long name dispute with Greece, finally, with the Prespa Agreements of 2018, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia took the official name of North Macedonia in 2019 and joined NATO in 2020. Nevertheless, the problems for Skopje are still ongoing because immediately afterwards, Sofia articulated a series of demands not related to the Copenhagen criteria which include constitutional changes and many others, thus vetoing accession negotiations with the EU. The EU-mediated solution led by France acknowledged Bulgaria's demands and made them part of North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations framework, complicating further the country's European integration. All of these points lead to a dynamic of member states wielding their influence to pursue narrow national agendas at the expense of advancing a merit-based EU enlargement policy. As a result, people in the Western Balkans have increasingly perceived the delays in the process as an indication of a lack of genuine interest in the EU about the region. This popular disappointment in applicant countries has been termed ‘(pre-)accession fatigue’.

At the same time, **the worsening of geopolitical issues** is exposing the EU on a double front in the WB and EaP countries. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU moved quickly to give Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia an accession perspective. While the WB countries welcomed this decision, they nevertheless felt resentful that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia quickly fulfilled criteria that by comparison had taken the WB many years. In addition, the confluence of a technical “merit-based” process with a “geopolitical approach” generates unrealistic expectations for all interested countries. For some EU members, the approval of the Associated Trio's European perspective was an act of symbolic politics.

Russia's two military invasions in Ukraine (in 2014 and again in 2022) have reopened (if they were ever closed) long-lasting political agendas and appetites in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The issue of self-determination is once again proving to be a reliable bargaining tool. Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska (RS), the BiH entity carved out during the war and predominantly populated by Serbs (although with pockets of non-Serb returnees), has for years threatened secession. This is Dodik's tactic to maintain party control through fear and to shore up his support against legal challenges and corruption allegations. While he has long been able to

point to cases like Kosovo and Montenegro as examples of small states that held referendums for independence, this took on a new tone following the Russian full scale invasion of Ukraine. A key question to be considered is why Dodik's threats and worn-out playbook still yields results.

In the case of Kosovo, the EU is still deadlocked in a complex mediation between Belgrade and Pristina, trying to convince Serbia to fully normalize relations with its former province in exchange for a rapid accession (EU in Serbia, 2022). However, the uncertainties of the EU, starting with the non-recognition of Kosovo by five member states, have weakened Brussels' negotiating power with Belgrade, effectively leaving the whole region in limbo.

Stabilizing the Western Balkans is crucial, be it through normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, ensuring the functionality of the Bosnian state through the constructive participation of all three constituent peoples and other citizens in state institutions, or resolving tensions between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

However, underlying all this is the need to support independent institutions capable of tackling endemic corruption and restricting the kleptocracy in WBs that is incompatible with EU membership, let alone a democratic future. This has remained an essential priority for the EU, at least nominally. Yet further enlargement will not be possible for as long as insufficient substantive progress is made in this respect.

## THE FAILURE TO CONSOLIDATE DEMOCRACY

Western Balkan countries have made limited progress in democratization, with some even experiencing backsliding in the quality of their democracies. The gradual decline of democracy across the world started in the mid-2000s (Diamond, 2015), when democracies in the Western Balkans had just left behind ethnic conflict and economic hardship. Conflict, hardship, and endemic institutional corruption had been associated with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and transition from state socialism. In other words, without being fully consolidated, the democratic regimes of Western Balkans faced new challenges that affected democracies across the world in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mouzelis and Sotiropoulos, 2024). Such challenges included the rise and global diffusion of authoritarian models of political organization (Russia, China) as well as models of illiberal democracy (Hungary since 2010, Poland in 2015-2023), the spread of misinformation and fake news, and the electoral ascent of far-right populist parties.

These challenges combined with the enlargement fatigue that affected European integration and the diminishing US diplomatic interest (and security investment) in the Western Balkan region. Thus, a new political space, a political opportunity, was created in the Western Balkans for populist political elites to win national elections and colonize institutions assigned to protect liberal democracy from authoritarian encroachment (the justice system, mass media, and civic associations). Meanwhile, business elites proceeded to capture public policy sectors (e.g., energy, urban development) and tailor them to their profit-making interests.

In short, liberal democratic institutions as well as administrative authorities were deflected from their original purposes, outlined in the post-socialist democratic constitutions that had been adopted after 1989 in Western Balkan democracies. Political regimes in the region were recognized as stabilitocracies rather than democracies (Pavlović, 2017).

In view of the above, it is not surprising that international assessments of democracy in the Western Balkans have shown long-term trends of stagnation or decline of democracy. Although these various assessments rely on debatable quantitative measurements of democratic performance over time in each country, there is a broad tentative conclusion:

Freedom House's annual assessment of democracy indicates that there is backsliding of democracy in many regions, including the Western Balkans. Based on the latest counting of "freedom scores", which was the year 2024, on the scale 0-100 (where 0 is the lowest score and 100 the highest), the score of WB countries ranges from 51 (Bosnia-Herzegovina) to 69 (Montenegro). All countries scored lower in 2024 than 2023, with the exception of Montenegro. Over the last decade Freedom House scores were stagnant or declining in most Western Balkan countries. By comparison, in 2024 all East European countries had scores that ranged from 80 upwards (Freedom House, various years), with the exception of Hungary (score: 65). Further on, while Freedom House dubs most East European countries "free", it dubs all Western Balkan countries only "partly free".

The World Bank's Global Governance Indicators include a pertinent indicator, "Voice and Accountability". It measures the "perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media" (World Bank, various years). The latest measurement was done in 2023. The World Bank ranks countries at percentiles: the higher the percentile assigned to a country, the larger the number of countries that perform worse than the country in question. Except for Montenegro, which in 2023 was ranked in the 58<sup>th</sup> percentile, all other Western Balkan countries were ranked below that mark. The worst case was Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was ranked in the 38<sup>th</sup> percentile, roughly meaning that among all countries of the world only 38 percent perform worse than Bosnia-Herzegovina in terms of voice and accountability. Bosnia-Herzegovina had declined to that low level at least since 2013, but the most visible declining trend between 2013-2023 was observed in Serbia (World Bank, various years). The same trends are shown in other similar assessments, such as those of "Varieties of Democracy" (V-Dem) and the "Economist Intelligence Unit" (EUI).

In addition to the quantitative data trends indicating democratic backsliding in the WB, qualitative data also sheds light on aspects of democratic underperformance in each country in the region. For example, EU reports highlight specific challenges faced by each country.

The Enlargement Package, adopted by the European Commission on 30 October 2024, is cautiously optimistic about the development of democracy in Western Balkan countries (European Commission, 2024a). Based on the remarks of the European Commission and recent literature on democracy in the Western Balkans (Bieber et al., 2020; Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020;

Milačić, 2022; Sotiropoulos, 2023), the following observations can be made about each Western Balkan country:

**Montenegro** has developed into a more or less fully operational democracy, although there has been frequent government instability. Montenegro has enhanced the quality of its democracy, even though the rule of law implementation and the functioning of the judiciary leave a lot to be desired.

**Serbia** is a defective democracy that increasingly resembles a “competitive authoritarian” regime. There are recurring problems with rule of law implementation, freedom of the media, and pressures on civil society, particularly when dissent is expressed against the government which, in addition, has not made progress in limiting the manipulation of information and the dissemination of disinformation.

**Albania** leads a democratic life but underperforms in major pillars of democracy, other than the conduct of elections. Pillars that are fragile in Albania include the rule of law and law enforcement, the fight against corruption and organized crime, the implementation of media freedom and property rights, and the rights of minorities.

The fundamental operations of democracy, such as the conduct of elections and a stable functioning of parliament, are consolidated in **North Macedonia**. Yet it still needs to address issues related to the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

**Kosovo** has made progress toward democratization but continues to face challenges with the rule of law, transparency of public administration, and the protection of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the Kosovo-Serbia relations remain tense, while the integration of the Serbs residing in North Kosovo into the country’s political system has not been achieved.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** has enacted legislation on integrity of the judiciary, anti-money laundering, and conflict of interest. However, concerns remain, particularly regarding Republika Srpska, which is evolving into a “competitive authoritarian regime” while periodically challenging the country’s territorial integrity and signaling the possibility of secession.

Lastly, major protest movements since 2014 have focused less on a pro-European agenda and more on combating corruption and enhancing civil society’s role in political life, signaling a detachment of domestic democratization efforts from the EU’s active influence. This shift partly reflects the disillusionment of pro-European civil society with the EU’s transformative power. Additionally, the EU’s push to secure lithium for its green transition, particularly through exploitation in Serbia, has sparked widespread protests over anticipated social and environmental costs. The EU’s silence in response to the Serbian government’s repressive actions has led to criticism that it is enabling a form of “*green autocracy*” (Drakula, 2024).

These regional trends prompt reflection on several key assumptions: the linearity of democratic transition, the link between economic and political liberalization, and whether EU enlargement



effectively drives the Western Balkans toward the reforms needed for European integration without weakening the EU itself. Alternatively, they raise the question of whether regional elites perceive the enlargement process and its instruments (predominantly, the pre-accession financial assistance) as tools to advance their own domestic and regional agendas.

## THE CHALLENGE OF ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE

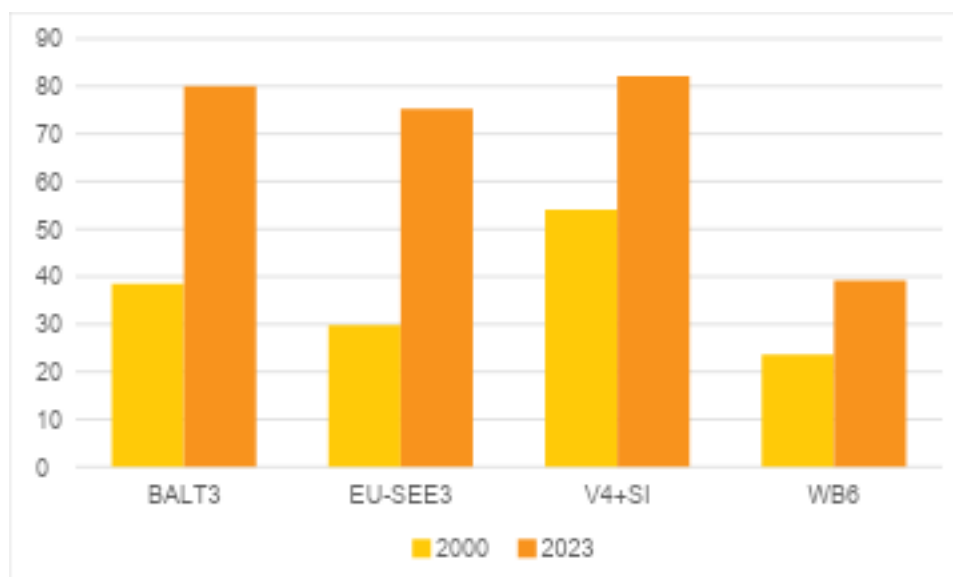
The EU's main approach in the region was based on the belief that economic interdependence within the region would help to reduce conflict, drawing inspiration from the post-World War II reconciliation of France and Germany, and bearing in mind the turbulent recent past of the Western Balkans, marred by numerous conflicts following the fall of socialism in the region in 1989-1991. Therefore, the EU initiated and supported a number of the initiatives for improved regional cooperation and integration including the following:

- **Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs):** These aimed to boost intraregional investment among the Western Balkan economies.
- **Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and CEFTA:** The Western Balkans signed a series of bilateral FTAs, starting in 2002, with the aim to increase intraregional trade. In 2007, these FTAs were consolidated under the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), creating a regional free trade zone that also includes Moldova. Originally formed in 1992 by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia to support their transition to market economies, CEFTA was restructured to accommodate the Western Balkans as its original members joined the EU.
- **Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs):** SAAs have aligned Western Balkan economies more closely with the EU by reducing trade barriers and encouraging investment, leading to a positive impact on exports.
- **South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) and Transport Community:** SEETO, established in 2004, aimed to improve transport networks in the region. In 2017, the Transport Community Treaty replaced SEETO to implement EU standards, improving network efficiency and safety.
- **Energy Community:** Founded in 2006, the Energy Community was designed to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU's energy market by promoting regional cooperation on energy infrastructure and market reforms.
- **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):** Launched in 2008, it operates as a coordinating structure for cooperation among South-East European countries, including also the European Commission and other donor countries.

- **Western Balkan Investment Framework (WBIF):** With funding from EU grants, loans from international financial institutions (such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), and contributions from bilateral donors, the WBIF supports large-scale infrastructure projects in the region, focusing on transport, energy, and digital sectors.
- **Berlin Process, MAP-REA, and Common Regional Market (CRM):** The Berlin Process, launched in 2014, promotes regional cooperation, infrastructure development, and political dialogue. The Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP-REA), introduced in 2017 as part of the Berlin Process, aimed to remove barriers to the movement of goods, services, capital, and skilled labour. The CRM, endorsed in 2020, further extended these efforts. A New CRM Action Plan 2.0 2025-2028 was agreed on at the 2024 Berlin Process Summit in Berlin.

Still, despite all these initiatives, progress in the Western Balkan economies has been modest; in fact across many indices there has been regression. Regional economic integration, as measured by intra-regional trade and investment, remains limited (Jovanović et al., 2022), and convergence with the EU has been extremely slow. While the other regions of CESEE—the Baltic states, the Visegrad countries plus Slovenia, and the Southeast European EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania)—have reached around 80% of the EU's GDP per capita (in PPP) on average, the Western Balkans still linger below 40% (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1 / GDP per capita, in purchasing power standards, as % of EU27 level**



*Note: BALT3 stands for the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), EU-SEE3 for the Southeast European EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania), V4+SI for the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) plus Slovenia, and WB6 for the Western Balkan economies.*

*Source: wiiw CESEE Visual Data Explorer*

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**The failure of these initiatives to significantly improve regional economic integration** can be attributed to several factors. First, the region is economically small, with a combined GDP roughly equivalent to that of Slovakia. This limited potential made the incentives for politicians to invest serious political capital in regional integration efforts almost non-existent, despite linguistic and cultural ties across many of the countries.

Second, political elites in the region have shown little genuine interest in fostering regional cooperation. Their focus has always been on EU accession and integration, rather than regional initiatives. The legacy of recent conflicts, still evident today in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and the intermittent tensions within Bosnia and Herzegovina, remains too burdensome to ignore. These issues cannot be resolved solely via 'change through trade'. This has prevented the political leadership of the Western Balkans from fully embracing the concept of regional integration. They have often viewed these initiatives as imposed from abroad, which made them reluctant to commit the necessary political capital to make the initiatives truly effective. One can reasonably ponder the environment in which the prospective members of a club felt that they were in a position where they could complain about membership requirements, rather than work to make the reforms and build popular support for such reforms.

Third, successful economic integration depends on strong, functioning institutions—something the Western Balkans never had since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Poor governance standards and weak institutions have undermined the potential for these initiatives to be fully realised. Finally, there are limits to the potential of trade between these countries.

Minor adjustments introduced by the EU, such as the revised enlargement methodology of 2020 and the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) from the same year, have done little to change the situation, as they were superficial, merely cosmetic improvements to a fundamentally flawed framework. The failure of the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans became clear to everyone, including the EU itself, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a response, in 2023, the European Commission introduced the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, designed to accelerate the region's integration with the EU. The plan seeks to provide some of the benefits of EU membership to the region before full accession, aiming to boost economic growth and speed up socio-economic convergence.

The plan is built on four pillars: 1) Strengthening the region's economic links with the EU's single market; 2) Boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans through the Common Regional Market; 3) Offering additional financial assistance to support integration efforts and incentivise fundamental reforms, including those related to the fundamentals cluster; and 4) Increasing financial assistance to support the reforms through a Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, serving as the "stick" to the "carrot" of financial aid. These pillars appear to be exactly what the Western Balkans need to achieve faster growth, economic convergence with the EU, and social progress. However, on closer inspection, they lack

substance, fail to address the core issues in each area, and do not tackle the critical shortcomings of previous assistance packages (Jovanović, 2024).

The main problem with the first pillar, on access to the EU Single Market, is that it focuses on irrelevant areas and overlooks the main problems that people and companies from the Western Balkans have when accessing the EU market - the regulatory and procedural complexities for working and exporting to the EU. The main problem of the second pillar, on the CRM, is that it has been around for some time and has failed to make any bigger impact, because it neglects the unresolved political disputes and political agendas in the region. Regarding the third pillar, the problem is simply that the allocated funding is too small to incentivise meaningful reforms – only 20% of the existing EU funding for the region, which serves more like an indexation for inflation, than like a meaningful increase in support. And the problem with the fourth pillar is that the strict conditionality of reforms, when combined with insufficient financial incentives, is unlikely to motivate significant political change, and can even backfire. Thus, despite its good intentions, the Plan is unlikely to bring about any substantial change, and the existing economic, social, institutional, and political challenges in the Western Balkans will persist. To achieve more meaningful progress, a more ambitious strategy is required—one that includes much bolder measures.

Taken together this economic data is sobering. It also leads to questions about the assumption that economic liberalization would be accompanied by political liberalization, and that open markets and broader integration into European and global trade structures would truly strengthen internal domestic economic dynamics, or weaken them in the face of much larger external economies and race to the bottom production and labor costs.

### THE ENLARGEMENT-SECURITY NEXUS: EXTENDING SECURITY GUARANTEES?

Answers to this question to date represent a sort of Rorschach test on the risk assessments of those questioned, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the time of writing (in anticipation of the second Trump administration in the US), these answers may remain static, but on shaky ground. The value of the NATO Article 5 security guarantee has never been more simultaneously challenged (by Russia – and by extension, its allies), desired (by countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and perhaps still Georgia – who see its value), and doubted (by current members of the Alliance) (Binnendijk et al., 2024).

There are hurdles in the road of East European and Balkan countries that want to join NATO and/or the EU. Since 1999, when the first former Warsaw Pact states entered NATO, Alliance membership has come to be seen as the first and more easily cleared of the two membership hurdles. Compared to the European Union's voluminous *acquis communautaire* of established EU law, procedures, and processes, NATO's membership process is demanding but relatively

simple. The Alliance's newest members – Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020) – remain in the EU membership anteroom (Zorić, 2024).

This paradigm may shift as NATO has ever fewer gaps in the Western Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia – which does not seek membership) and the contours of an impending Trump presidency take shape (Panero, 2023; Bassuener, 2017). Moscow's disposition toward Western Balkan states' NATO (and EU) aspirations has become increasingly hostile since its initiation of war with Ukraine with its seizure of Crimea in early 2014 (Reuters, 2014). Moscow's posture is even more aggressive toward those former Soviet neighbors inclined to seek security in NATO. The path toward NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, supported by the Bush administration, was sidetracked in 2008 at the insistence of Germany (Williamson, 2008). For Ukraine, popular support for NATO membership only became a majority phenomenon only in 2021 – seven years into war with Russia (Anisimova, 2023).

In Moldova, which has yet to declare intent to seek NATO membership, popular support may be lacking, unlike in the case of EU membership, which was backed by a narrow majority in a referendum in October 2024. In the Moldovan referendum 50.4% of voters (as opposed to 49.7%) voted in favor of amending the Moldovan Constitution to include the wish of Moldovan citizens for EU membership.

In Georgia there was a different political development. Following the contested election results in October 2024, in which the ruling, Russia-friendly Georgian Dream party coalition claimed victory, NATO membership is not even being pursued, and the EU membership bid seems less likely to proceed, even though pro-EU protests against the Georgian Dream coalition shook Georgia in early December 2024. In view of the above neither EU membership nor NATO membership seem achievable for Moldova or Georgia in the short- or medium- run. As for Ukraine, Kyiv's demand for security guarantees as part of a negotiated settlement to end nearly three years of war with Russia may well involve NATO. This is certainly the understandable goal of Ukraine's democratic spectrum.

On whether EU membership confers security guarantees, despite the Union having previously formulated the Western European Union (1954-2011) and its Common Foreign and Security Policy, the practical answer at present is no. The EU can call upon NATO for material support of its own operations through the Berlin-plus arrangements. But the Union has no equivalent of NATO's Article 5; nor does the Union have a military force, although EU Rapid Deployment Forces (5,000 troops) are expected to be ready by 2025, while the "Multinational Joint Headquarters Ulm" is in place and can provide support in the form of military-strategic expertise and planning capacities (European Union External Action 2024b). French President Emmanuel Macron has long advocated "strategic autonomy" for the EU (including infamously calling NATO "brain dead" in an interview – see *The Economist*, 2019), which has hitherto been resisted by frontline states in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Nordics and the wider "Hanseatic" members of the EU and Alliance – including heavyweight Germany. Their argument has rested upon the fact that devoting relatively thin EU resources outside NATO simultaneously generates a rift with primary security guarantor the US as well as scattering these resources.

However, European members of NATO (as well as Canada) may well find themselves having to contemplate alternatives for their own defense, should the incoming Trump administration adopt the isolationist policies long sketched out by Trump himself, both in office and on the campaign trail. While the EU's economic productivity far outstrips Russia's, the disparity in fielded conventional and nuclear capabilities is yawning (Spatafora, 2024). In the immediate term, the security guarantee that the EU (or even Western Europe, including the UK) could provide to countries outside its contemporary membership would likely need to be nuclear – meaning reliant on France's *Force de Frappe*. As the EU scrambles to develop autonomous defense capabilities (including industrial production and logistical capacity), one might imagine some members questioning sharing it with newcomers in the foreseeable future.

On the flipside, a strong argument could be made that Ukraine's battle-proven combat capabilities would constitute more of an asset than a drain to the EU (or NATO). This would hold true if Ukraine was given more air defense and deep strike capabilities behind which it could not only defend population centers, but defense production. Furthermore, bringing in Ukraine (and Moldova) would extend the EU's defensive frontier far east of its current border.

### SHOULD THE ACCESSION PROCESS BE REFORMED?

The slow-down of EU accession and accession-related reforms in the Western Balkans over the past several years prompted a number of scholars and policy analysts to articulate proposals on how to reinvigorate the process, in particular once the European Commission's adopted a revised accession methodology (European Commission, 2020) that has proven inadequate to the task.

Many of these proposals center on the notion of a “phased” or “staged” accession articulated in the revised methodology – the idea that sufficient progress on reform priorities should lead to “[c]loser integration of the country with the European Union, work for accelerated integration and ‘phasing-in’ to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU Programmes.” (European Commission, 2020). At the same time, the revised methodology also stressed the need for “more decisive measures proportionally sanctioning any serious or prolonged stagnation or even backsliding” (European Commission, 2020) – another point taken up by many of the subsequent proposals (although not in any meaningful form actually applied in practice to date). The idea is to replace the current “in or out” accession process with articulated stages that would provide incentives gradually, in lockstep with the achievement of interim conditions.

The most comprehensive and detailed proposal for a redesigned accession process is the **“staged accession” model** developed by the Centre for European Policy Studies (Brussels) and the European Policy Centre (Belgrade) and published in October 2021 (Emerson et al., 2021), with an update published in August 2023 (Mihajlović et al., 2023). Building on the Commission's revised methodology, the model seeks to replace a binary concept of membership with four stages, each with increasing benefits for candidate countries in order to support steady progress while keeping a firm focus on the fundamentals of rule of law, functioning of democratic

institutions, and public administration reform. The aim of the model is to create “a merit-based and predictable process, which will guarantee more reforms are rewarded with more benefits, while stagnation and backsliding are met with appropriate measures and reversibility in the integration process” (Mihajlović et al., 2023).

The staged accession model has gained considerable support among member states’ governments, but it has also drawn a number of objections. Critics argued that it could turn into gatekeeping, leading to a multi-speed Europe in the long term, or be repurposed as an alternative to full EU membership (Stratulat, 2023). A report by a team of Bruegel authors (Darvas et al., 2024) discusses the main elements of the revised methodology and the proposals that build on it with a view to their relevance for Ukraine’s accession process, concluding that the four stages of Milena Mihajlović et al. (2023) might not be appropriate for Ukraine in light of its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU and “geopolitical imperatives.”

The European Stability Initiative (ESI) has advocated granting full access to the EU Single Market—allowing the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people—conditional on meeting key requirements such as respect for human rights and the rule of law (ESI, 2022). It also remains unclear why candidate countries that meet the Copenhagen criteria and have cleared the main hurdle to accession under the current methodology – the fundamentals – would be content merely with integration into the single market and the four freedoms, as advocated for example by ESI (2022).

Along similar lines, Buras and Lang (2022) suggest that the EU should propose a **‘Partnership for Enlargement’** to the interested countries that will revolve around three pillars: integration into the single market and Ukraine’s reconstruction; energy security and green energy transition; and political and security cooperation. Delevic and Prelec (2020) argued that a **horizontal (sectoral) approach** – offering concrete benefits at an earlier stage and thus being better able to reward meaningful progress – would make for a “flatter, faster and fairer” EU integration trajectory.

The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies has proposed **granting the Western Balkan economies immediate and full access to the EU budget**. This would significantly increase the financial support the region receives from the EU—by 2-3 times—which could have a substantial impact on economic growth and accelerate convergence. Moreover, it would send a strong signal that the EU remains committed to the region, helping to counter rising euroscepticism. At the same time, the costs for existing EU members, in terms of their increased contributions to the EU budget, would be minimal—below 0.05% of GDP, even for the largest contributors, such as Germany (Grievesson, et al., 2020; Jovanović et al., 2022). The recent experiences of Croatia and Romania with the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) clearly demonstrate the positive impact of EU funds on economic growth and development. As two of the largest recipients of RRF funds relative to their GDP, both countries became very fast growing economies in Europe after the pandemic. By 2023, they had reached 75% and 79% of



the EU's average per capita income, up from around 68% in 2019. A final strand of thinking focuses on the lack of economic convergence between the EU and the WB, prompting calls for integrating the WB in the EU's European Semester (Darvas, 2023) but also informing the European Commission's Growth Plan for the WB adopted in November 2023.

### SHOULD THE EU REFORM BEFORE ENLARGING?

Anxieties about the European Union's capacity to absorb new member states emerged at key points in the history of European integration, for example in the run-up to the accession of Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1980s. The academic literature (Pollak, Schmidt 2024), the policy community, and political leaders all advanced their own versions of the argument that in order to “widen,” the EU had to “deepen,” and that the former had to follow the latter. These anxieties have centered on the need to reform EU institutions, in particular the size of the European Parliament and the European Commission, ensuring that they are not bloated and gridlocked, and that decision-making procedures keep a balance between inclusiveness and efficiency, so that EU organs eventually make meaningful policy choices (e.g, through the expansion of qualified majority voting in the Council). Reform ideas also concerned the size of the EU budget and its main priorities, in particular cohesion and agricultural funding. The EU's “absorption capacity” was seen as so critical as to be turned into a key principle of the EU's enlargement policy. It became one of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria – the only condition that is the EU's to fulfil. Ukraine's EU candidacy has revived this debate (Emerson, 2022): its eventual accession would overwhelm the EU's agricultural budget and have a significant impact on cohesion funding as well, although von Ondarza (2022) suggests that the impact on majority decision-making in the Council of the EU would be relatively modest. The EU's absorption capacity has therefore again moved center-stage, in contrast with projected enlargement into the Western Balkans.

A certain consensus has emerged in recent years both among scholars and in the policy community that widening and deepening can, in principle, go hand in hand (Kelemen et al., 2014). Among the most recent and authoritative investigations of the matter is a report by a group of experts commissioned by the French and German governments (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023) which lays out certain EU/internal reforms that could be undertaken without treaty change but concluding that “the more challenging route of treaty revision” should be taken for “for reasons of democratic legitimacy, transparency, coherence and ambition of change” (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023: 35). The main avenue would run through a Convention or an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) but alternative scenarios are also considered (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023: 38). The report is also skeptical of internal and external differentiation, pointing out that it creates institutional and normative complexity and has clear limits (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023: 38), but suggesting that its cautious use, for example through opt-outs to treaty revisions, could resolve blockages (for a critical review of the report and its policy recommendations, see Parkes, 2023).



The Franco-German proposal, however, has to be viewed against a backdrop of considerable member state resistance to Treaty change, as it became clear following the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe (Lehne, 2022). At the same time, as Lehne (2023) points out, the major developments in the EU's set-up have taken place independently of enlargement and are the result of internal, political dynamics. For example, while the expanded use of majority voting was indeed debated in connection with enlargement, the breakthrough came thanks to unconnected integration projects such as the internal market and justice and home affairs. "In moving forward in the direction of widening or deepening, the EU seems to respond to the dominant external or internal challenges of the moment," Lehne concludes. The fate of Ukraine may well pose such a challenge.

### THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP (EaP)

The birth of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) as the eastern dimension of EU's Neighbourhood Policy and its launch in Prague, in May 2009, created a new level of cooperation between the EU and six countries of the east European space (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The EaP did not emerge in a policy vacuum but it was preceded by a net of bilateral policies built on Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) concluded in the 1990s between the EU and all countries in the region. Moreover, a multilateral policy, the Black Sea Synergy (BSS), was launched in Kyiv in February 2008 with the aim of promoting regional cooperation.

The emergence of the EaP was necessitated by a) the EU's statutory obligation, as Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the EU shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming at establishing an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation, b) the eastern enlargement challenge where, on the one hand, the prospect of EU enlargement with EaP countries was closed at that time, while on the other hand, some of EU's eastern neighbours had strong EU membership aspirations (and in particular the issue of Ukraine's EU path), c) the new security environment following Russia's war in Georgia in August 2008 which called for EU's geopolitical awakening. Undoubtedly, the 2008 conflict in Georgia contributed to the acceleration of European initiatives in its Eastern neighbourhood, which since their emergence originated as reactive policies in response to the assertiveness of the Russian Federation. Subsequent political crises and increasing competition with Russian-led regional integration platforms, such as the Eurasian Economic Community (2010-14) which developed into the Eurasian Economic Union (from 2014), then rendered this format of cooperation insufficient to meet the challenges posed by Russian hard power, as would later be confirmed by Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution (or Revolution of Dignity): A movement that

arose in November 2013 in the aftermath of then Ukrainian President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU within the institutional framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Although the EaP was expedited by the Russo-Georgian war, it was neither conceived nor developed as a security tool to address any of the conflicts in the region. Furthermore, it has repeatedly been stressed by EU officials that the EaP “is not directed against anyone” (Council of the European Union, 2021, para. 6). As Alexander Baunov (2015) points out, paradoxically, the Russian Federation viewed the Eastern Partnership as a political platform whose “only real goal” was to “divide post-Soviet Europe into what is Russia and what is not”. Along the same lines, as Akchurina and Della Sala (2018) point out, the 2004 enlargement saw the European Union include members who see their becoming part of the “West” as a guarantee of non-return under the Russian sphere of influence. On the other hand, the Eastern Partnership, once deprived of a clear prospect of integration for the affiliated countries, gradually ended up becoming a platform for cooperation whose only real goal seemed to be to divide post-Soviet Europe “into what is Russia and what is not”.

The “Ukraine Crisis” arising in 2013-14 was a watershed for the Union's own Neighbourhood policy that led to the latter's revision in 2015 (European Commission, 2015b). Not surprisingly, the emphasis on stabilisation and resilience prevailed significantly in the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and was again reiterated in the report drafted three years after the publication of the Global Strategy, in which a “dual-track” policy to be pursued towards Russia was advocated (European Union External Action, 2019).

This change of pace in EU policies was the result of a long-lasting process preceding the 2014 crisis itself, which instead brought to light its profound impact on the broader European geopolitical space. On the one hand, the dynamics of the first decade of the 21st century, with the two phases of enlargement to the East, had created great expectations in the Neighbourhood - expectations that sometimes led to the so-called coloured revolutions in the region (Gerlach, 2014) throughout the 2000s - based on a strong confidence in the process of Europeanisation. On the other hand, this confidence was often undermined in recent years by the very format of cooperation envisaged within the Eastern Partnership, which did not guarantee clear prospects of a possible accession into the European Union for the partner countries (Rakutiene, 2018). It is no coincidence that in the last decade the major protest movements in the post-Soviet space did not have a strong geopolitical character: suffice it to think of what has happened in Belarus since August 2020, following the disputed presidential elections that saw the re-election of Aljaksandr Lukašenka; or think the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 - where, rather than being pro-European or pro-Western demonstrations, those of recent years are protest movements aimed at fighting corruption and increasing civil society participation in the political life of the

respective countries, thus detaching the process of domestic democratization from the active leverage of the European Union (Chernyshova, 2020).

Despite the accumulation of security and stability challenges in the region, the EaP maintained its initial approach, building on civilian and normative tools, while it acquired a stronger project-based approach excluding any security dimension. Thus, the “20 deliverables for 2020” agenda adopted at the 2017 EaP Summit did not mark a turning point but it was presented as a work plan aiming to deliver “tangible results” in four priority areas - connectivity, society, governance, and economy. The update of the EaP in 2020 (European Commission, 2024g), which was the result of extensive consultations, continued on the “project-based” approach and identified ten targets setting post-2020 priorities setting the “resilience” of the partner countries as the overarching goal. It was the second, full-scale, Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that brought about two fundamental challenges for the EaP. First, it questioned the normative approach of the EaP in the Eastern Neighbourhood and second it reopened the accession perspective. The diversification of the potential outcomes of the European integration process among the six states participating in the Eastern Partnership - as confirmed by the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova first, and Georgia, later - and the symmetrical hardening of the EU's position towards the Russian Federation have raised the need of renewing EU's neighbourhood policies.

Russia remains an important competitor in the European Neighbourhood and, in particular, the Eastern Partnership countries, which still remain at the crossroads between the Russian- and EU-led competitive integration processes. However, the dynamics prior to the beginning of the new phase of the conflict in Ukraine starting in 2022 also hinted at the potential adoption of new strategies and cooperative approaches within the region. One only has to think of the role of Armenia, which had joined the Eurasian Economic Union in October 2014, effectively blocking the Association Agreement negotiations with the European Union. In contrast, in 2017 Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the Union, testifying to the possibility of pursuing both integration paths, after the identification of strategies and pathways calibrated to individual cases (Markedonov, 2017). At the same time it should be noted that CEPA is a cooperation mechanism but it does not provide for a deep free trade arrangement or integration between parties.

Recent initiatives, aimed at activating new policies in the European Neighbourhood, are emblematically subordinated to the need for a joint reaction to the Russian Federation's actions in Ukraine: this move highlighted once again Russia's isolation and a renewed priority of the Eastern Neighbourhood in the process of rethinking global European integration policies (Sapir, 2022), but paradoxically revealed once again the absence of a long-term strategy and the gradual fragmentation of the Eastern Partnership as a platform for coherent cooperation.

In a similar vein, the Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions entitled "The Future of the Eastern Partnership from a Local and Regional Perspective", adopted on 15 March 2023, notes "the urgent need for the EU to support more firmly the free and democratic path of the countries in the EU neighbourhood" and emphasises that "the most powerful long-term European response to the Russian invasion will consist of free and democratic states in Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus and beyond, with strong regional and local authorities, economically dynamic cities and resilient societies committed to European values" (European Committee of the Regions, 2023). It also "notes that the Eastern Partnership remains a relevant framework, which has not exhausted its full regional potential and can continue to serve a purpose for all partners", according to differentiated objectives vis-à-vis the EU. Finally, as stated in the document, now "the flexible formats and instruments under this framework should integrate the needs of both the new accession countries and the other partners" (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

Notwithstanding the need to reconsider the relevance of the EaP in the new security context and in view of the opening of the EU accession process for three eastern partners, the key challenge of the EaP remains the same: the democratic transformation and resilience of the eastern partners.

### THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF THE EaP: BETWEEN TRANSFORMATIVE AND GEOPOLITICAL POWER

Since the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launch in April 2009, scholarly attention has ebbed and flowed mainly according to events shaking the involved geographical region or the EU's assessment of its own mark on that space. Attention has also been paid to specific relations with partners within the EaP, which are however not considered here to keep the focus on the general framework of this EU's tool. Overall, the literature can be regrouped around some recurrent themes that are reported here.

#### **The nature of the EaP: (external) governance versus integration**

First, and quite intuitively, the literature has extensively discussed **the nature of the Eastern Partnership**, focusing on the political project's peculiar form and nature lying between external policy and integration policy. Thus, for example, authors have described the attention paid to the projection of 'soft power' proclaimed by the EU (Nielsen and Vilson, 2014) or have earmarked the EaP as a set of multi-layered relations with its Eastern neighbours, an ambitious and sophisticated policy framework comprising elements of cooperation and integration (Tyushka and Schumacher, 2021). Tobias Schumacher, for example, emphasizes how the EaP is broader and more ambitious in scope compared to the earlier EU's southern enlargement towards the Mediterranean (Schumacher, 2021), while Boonstra and Shapovalova (2010) underline its

understanding as a step towards further differentiation between eastern and southern neighbours within the ENP.

Some authors have focused on the EaP as a way to show the EU's **stance and role in the international landscape** through a firm actorness in its neighbourhood and an ability to intervene in the region, or as a 'Pioneer Europe' in foreign policy making (Nitoiu, 2021; Delcour and Tulmets, 2009). In this sense, the EaP qualifies both as an **(external) governance tool of the EU** and an **ontological device**. With respect to the EaP as a **governance tool**, the literature is wide and goes in many directions. The work of Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009: 795) suggests that the notion of external governance is particularly suitable for conceptualizing the process of EU rule expansion beyond formal membership in the EU polity. Others (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2022, Manoli, 2016) have assessed the EU's Neighbourhood Policy as a structural foreign policy, one which is more about shaping the political, socio-economic, and legal structures in the region where states and societies interact.

### **The EaP as 'enlargement lite'?**

One of the early debates has evolved around the actual *raison d'être* of the policy and its relevance to enlargement. Still, the replication of the enlargement methodology, such as benchmarking and conditionality, shaped a perception of the EaP as an 'enlargement lite' (Popescu and Wilson, 2009). The debate on EaP's relevance to enlargement policy was revived in 2022 with some scholars arguing that the EaP, especially its regional approach, is irrelevant and it should be replaced by country-specific policies (Moshes, 2022). Despite Associated Trio countries having steadily voiced their preference for further differentiation and having supported the securitization of the EaP through 'security partnerships' (Gressel and Popescu, 2020), the EaP review in March 2020 did not mark a radical departure from EaP's original design (Manoli, 2021) coupling association with resilience as an overarching policy framework. The EaP/EU joint ministerial meeting in December 2022 reaffirmed the continuation of the EaP within its existing format but emphasized a tailor-made methodology to support partners who wished for more cooperation in security.

### **Norms and values versus geopolitics and security**

Just like the enlargement process, the EP has extensively been analysed in what has been described as its 'normative' and its '**transformative power**', that is, its ability to promote democracy in the neighbourhood (Smith, 2014; Youngs, 2009). Thus, authors have insisted on potential obstacles in this exercise, such as foreign policy conflicting objectives and the EU's swinging approach between privileging the status quo or a transformative role (Börzel and Lebanidze, 2021). Or, they have underlined how that power is circumscribed by partners' preferences, identities, strategies and attitudes (Browning and Christou, 2010).

A wide literature has then considered the **security role** of the EaP. Simão (2021) has included the EaP among tools for the reordering of the EU's security. Delcour (2010) has matched the EU's intention to be a security provider with actual results, underlining the lack of coherence in policy implementation. Christou and Croft (2012) have emphasised the problem with conflicting

security narratives with respect to the EaP, diminishing its potential. Part of the literature has then considered the role of the EaP in the conceptual development of new key words, such as ‘**building resilience**’ (Nitoiu and Simionov, 2022; Kaunert et al., 2023). Within this focus, some have emphasized the maintenance of an understanding of resilience as an approximation of EU templates, missing hence the local ownership component of the concept (Petrova and Delcour, 2019).

Among the recurrent themes discussed in the literature looking at the EU’s external projection, and of particular relevance for this project, is the one relating the Eastern Partnership and **geopolitics**. For Marchetti (2018), the overall Neighborhood Policy is geopolitical in nature and geostrategic in orientation, aimed at creating a European buffer zone. For others, the Eastern partnership has been conceived from the very beginning as a **geopolitical instrument** aimed at organizing space beyond its borders, although not a ‘modernist’ one (Browning, 2018). Also, ‘winning over’ eastern neighbours and ‘rolling back’ Russia’s influence was not only a reaction but an internal discursive process well before the change in dynamics in the eastern region (Cadier, 2021). Entering the debate about the ‘opportunity’ of becoming geopolitical for an actor such as the EU, Youngs and Pishikhova make the argument for a values-oriented version of geopolitics, still strategic in aim but eschewing the ‘winning the East and beating Russia’ argument. Johansson, Nogués and Leso (2024) note instead the lack of evidence of ‘the final birth of a geopolitical EU’ after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as announced by key EU figures, for a true commitment to provide guidance on the geospatial (re)ordering of the region seems to be still missing.

The literature that interprets the EaP as an **ontological signifier** has investigated the role of this policy framework in the construction of an ‘ideal self’ in the post-Soviet space (Nitoiu, 2021) and its geopolitical connotation as key to the preservation of the EU’s ontological security (Browning, 2018). Flipping the perspective, and focusing on the mutual constructions of the EaP as a policy framework, some authors have lingered on region-building processes in the post-soviet space, looking at the many drivers pushing states in the east to join the partnership (Delcour, 2021).

A very large amount of literature has then emphasised the critical aspects of the EP, which have to do with its **shape, achievements and impact on actors involved** in such a policy framework (Korosteleva, 2012; Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2010; Nielsen and Vilson, 2014). According to some, deficiencies not only persist but are added to many more challenges on the forefront in the region (Tyushka and Schumacher, 2021; Youngs and Pishchikova, 2013). Along with the emphasis on critical aspects, some contributions have also questioned EaP’s utility or emphasised the need for a bold revision to obtain more effectiveness. Authors have emphasized the hegemonic and hierarchical order inherent in the EaP (Simão, 2021), the ‘othering’ process inherent in power-relations (Korosteleva, 2017), and the top-down and Eurocentric approach endorsed which not only diminishes effectiveness likelihood but also ‘partnership and reciprocity’ expectations (Korosteleva, 2012).

## DCFTAs: EU's KEY POLICY INSTRUMENT IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES AND THEIR RESULTS

The main instrument of the EU's geoeconomic influence in four Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – has been **free trade agreements**. The key idea behind was to give EaP partners access to the Single Market, to create a conducive environment for European investments in these countries, fostering their trade with the EU and advancing their economic prospects. For the EU, the expected benefits were new export markets and competitive production locations, thereby creating a 'win-win' situation for both sides.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have signed **Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs)** with the EU, which are part of broader Association Agreements (European Commission, 2014). DCFTAs with Georgia and Moldova entered into force in July 2016, and with Ukraine in September 2017 (although it had been provisionally applied already since January 2016). These agreements are far-reaching and are assigned the highest possible depth index (Dür et al., 2014). They cover the following seven areas:

- tariff reduction/elimination,
- intellectual property rights protection,
- government purchases,
- technical barriers to trade (TBT), including sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures,
- trade in services,
- investment protection, and
- competition rules.

Thus, they envisage not only mutual duty-free market access (with some exceptions and transitory periods)<sup>3</sup>, but also require the EaP signatory countries to effectively implement all the EU *Acquis Communautaire*. Thus, the EU Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, of which the DCFTAs are part, are similar to Europe Agreements signed in the 1990s between the EU and Central European countries which later joined the block. However, unlike the case of Central European countries, the DCFTAs did not offer any 'carrot' of EU membership to EaP countries in question, at least initially (Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status only in June 2023, Georgia in December 2023).

Armenia's Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU entered into force in March 2021, although its substantial parts had been provisionally applied since June 2018 (The Comprehensive & Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union &

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<sup>3</sup> In June 2022, the EU put in place autonomous trade measures (ATMs) in the effort to support the country's economy in the face of Russia's aggression. ATMs temporarily suspended all remaining tariffs and quotas on all Ukrainian exports to the EU and have since been renewed twice (albeit with safeguard measures to protect EU farmers in case of market disruptions). Similar measures have also been put in place for Moldova's exports to the EU.

Armenia, 2021). The EU-Armenia CEPA is less ambitious than the DCFTAs between the EU and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Although it aims ‘to gradually approximate Armenia’s economic and financial regulations and policies to those of the European Union’ and explicitly envisages the adoption of EU *Acquis Communautaire* in some areas (such as statistics), in most other areas it is based on the application of WTO standards and norms. In particular, unlike DCFTAs, CEPA does not envisage tariff-free trade between Armenia and the EU, but a mere application of WTO norms, including the most-favoured-nation and the national treatment of each other’s goods.

Azerbaijan and Belarus do not have any far-reaching trade agreements with the EU. For both countries, the formal obstacle to forging such agreements is the fact that they are not WTO members. On top of that, strained political relations between the EU and Belarus have played a role. The country was the target of various EU sanctions already well before the start of the war in Ukraine, and as Belarus effectively sided with Russia during the war (Council of the EU, 2021)<sup>4</sup>, it was subject to further EU sanctions (EU sanctions against Belarus).

How can one assess the effectiveness of deep FTAs between the EU and the signatory EaP countries? In the following, we focus on trade and investments developments, focusing on the period up until 2021. The reason is that the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 led to a major reshuffling of trade flows across the EaP region (and Europe at large), reflecting factors other than EU trade agreements.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the economic effects of FTAs with the EU have been modest at best, and have varied significantly across countries. For instance, in Ukraine the EU’s importance as an export destination increased from 34% of total exports in 2015 to 41% in 2021. However, in Moldova it remained fairly stable at around 60%, and Georgia even recorded a pronounced decline from 35% to 21%, respectively. In Belarus, the EU export share had fallen dramatically since 2018, to only 14% in 2021, reflecting the impact of sanctions. In Azerbaijan, it hovered at 50-60% of total exports even in the absence of any FTA (Figure 1). Indeed, roughly 90% of Azerbaijani exports to the EU consists of hydrocarbons and fertilizers.

On the import side, the developments have been even more disappointing. Only in Ukraine did the share of the EU as a source of imports increase marginally, from 41% in 2015 to 42% in 2021. In all other EaP countries, it declined – despite the reduction of trade barriers for imports from the EU. On both export and import side, the EU was clearly losing out in EaP countries to

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<sup>4</sup> The first major EU sectoral sanctions on Belarus were imposed in June 2021, following the fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020 and the brutal crackdown on the protests, as well as the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in May 2021. Most importantly, those sanctions restricted trade in petroleum products, potash and goods used for the manufacture of tobacco products.

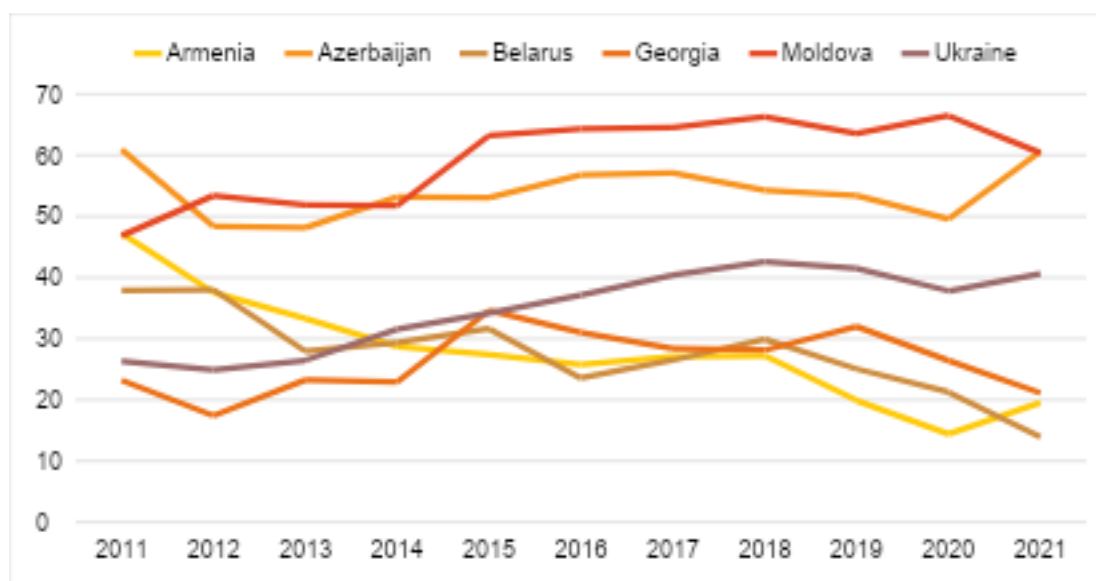
<sup>5</sup> For instance, the trade patterns of many EaP countries, such as Georgia and Armenia, have been distorted by the re-exports of Western products (both sanctioned and non-sanctioned) to Russia (Astrov et al., 2024), ‘inflating’ Russia’s share on the export side and the EU share on the import side. In Ukraine, the EU export share jumped by 23 pp, to 57%, between 2021 and 2022. However, this increase took place against the background of the overall export decline, partly because exports to third countries via Black Sea ports were blocked by the Russian marine vessels (Pindyuk, 2023).



both China and Russia (with the notable exception of Ukraine, whose dependence on Russia on both fronts was greatly reduced).

Neither has the commodity structure of most EaP countries' exports to the EU improved, at least so far. The only success story standing out in this respect has been Moldova, where the share of machinery and transport equipment – the commodity group with high value-added – in total exports to the EU jumped by some 10 pp between 2015 and 2021, to 30% in 2021, due to the country's increasing integration into the automotive industrial cluster with neighbouring Romania.<sup>6</sup> It needs to be emphasized, though, that this success can be only partly attributed to the DCFTA: the first marked jump in the export share of machinery and transport equipment in Moldova, by nearly 20 pp, occurred already back in 2012 – well before the DCFTA was signed.

**Figure 1 / Share of EU as export destination in 2011-2021, in % of total exports**



Source: Own calculations based on UN COMTRADE-WITS.

In other EaP countries, FTAs with the EU have failed to trigger sufficient FDI inflows. Despite marked reorientation of its trade flows towards the EU, Ukraine has remained a laggard in attracting FDI (largely on account of persistent institutional weaknesses, high corruption and geopolitical vulnerabilities), while in Georgia FDI inflows mostly targeted the non-tradable sector such as construction and real estate, and did precious little to improve the country's export competitiveness (Astrov, 2021). And even in Moldova, the DCFTA failed to generate a substantial improvement in its trade deficit with the EU. In all three countries, trade deficits with the EU declined by a mere 1-2 pp of GDP in 2015-2021 and in the case of Moldova and Georgia

<sup>6</sup> Another clear success story has been the formation of Moldova's IT Park, which offers fiscally competitive terms for IT companies with a single tax of 7%.

remained at very high levels (13% and 9% of GDP in 2021, respectively). This implies that the current model of trade integration by the EU with the region at best does not fundamentally improve its competitiveness, and at worst reinforces a subservient trading relationship (Grieverson, et al., 2023). The reasons for this are arguably many and notably include the lack of EU accession anchor (until recently), which reduced incentives to implement the necessary reforms in EaP countries, as well as the fragile geopolitical situation of the region ‘sandwiched’ between the EU and Russia, whose relations have been progressively deteriorating.

As in the Western Balkans, it is reasonable to consider assumptions that have undergirded these trade and economic tactics. Have increased trade and economic liberalization led to a parallel liberalization of institutions and the domestic political economies? If not, how can we understand this divergence?

## GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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### INTRODUCTION

In this section we will analyze geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership from a historical perspective. It is a section that analyzes some themes covered in the first chapter of this Deliverable, themes related to democratic consolidation and economic development in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, from an external perspective. Our aim is to unveil the ambitions that global and regional actors have advanced over time in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership vis-à-vis the EU. For this reason, we will focus on the cases of four major actors engaged in the Western Balkans and the EU's Eastern neighbourhood: the United States of America (USA), Russia, China, and Turkey. After the review of the historical engagement of these four major actors in both regions ('Engagement'), we will present how they described the reasons for engagement and their evolving strategies ('Framing'). Thus, this section maps major geopolitical actors' interests and the historical roots of their engagement in the two regions, drawing on scholarly writing, policy papers and official strategic documents. This analysis will inform further work on mapping linkages and influence of the EU and other geopolitical actors with WB/EaP countries and produce strategic foresight in other project deliverables.

### THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

#### **Western Balkans**

The US policy in the Western Balkans from 2008 to date has hewed to a largely derivative policy approach to the region, its policies largely being a dependent variable of the EU's enlargement framework (and NATO enlargement). With the noteworthy exception of the disruption generated in the mid-to-late Trump administration (2017-2021), the US maintained certain baselines: maintenance of intra-Yugoslav borders (including those of Kosovo, which became independent in 2008) and their territorial integrity; proclaimed support for war crimes accountability; and championing the EU enlargement process as a democratic and institutional reform driver. This alignment did not entail complete congruence in matters of policy, but reflected an unarticulated

shared conception that the American relationship with the EU wasn't really fundamentally *about* Europe: it was about *everywhere else*. The implicit, sometimes stated position of US policymakers was that "Europe ought to be able to handle this" (Interview by Bassuener, 2022). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, begun in February 2022, jarred this baseline. But as of yet, it has not fundamentally affected the US policy approach to Western Balkan countries. The current policy seems based on a *realpolitik*/"pragmatic" presumption that Balkan societies are endemically tribal, so managing their frictions (internally and among them) should be the policy, while trying to get them into the European Union.

Since 1999, amplified by democratic transitions in Croatia and Serbia in 2000, the US has consistently advocated for the enlargement of both "Euro-Atlantic" institutions – NATO and the EU – to encompass the Western Balkans. While national security and foreign policy strategies varied considerably in tone and focus across the four administrations from 2008 (US Department of State, 2004) to "the Pivot to Asia," (Blackwill, 2022) to "America First" and great power rivalry and competition (The White House, 2017), to "strategic competition to shape the future of the international order" (The White House, 2022), this has remained a throughline. Yet over the decade and a half in question, despite the surface consistency, American interest, depth of engagement, and strategic (as opposed to situational and tactical) agency has declined, in deference to the EU's enlargement parameters. There remain frictions, but with the exception of the Trump administration's wider confrontations with Europe, these rarely ascended the commanding heights.

The last 13 months of the George W. Bush administration saw the independence of Kosovo in February 2008 (championed by the US and other key Western powers after Kosovo's governing structures accepted the 2007 Ahtisaari Plan – US State Department, 2008) and Serbia rejected it (Smith, 2007), as well as a NATO Summit in Bucharest, at which Greece torpedoed North Macedonia's aspirations to join the Alliance alongside Albania and Croatia the following year (it finally joined in 2020) (Marusic, 2012). The Obama administration (2009-2017) initially seemed likely to pursue a more assertive policy in the region, particularly regarding democratic practice and war crimes accountability. But negative EU reaction to the posture demonstrated in particular by the then-Vice President Biden in his May 2009 Balkan tour, took the wind out the US sails, while doubling down on the strategic target of anchoring the region as a whole in the EU and NATO (Traynor, 2009). This posture was maintained effectively through the Obama presidency (Serwer, 2017). The Trump administration (2017-2021), despite serious concern by numerous analysts, was initially generally disinterested in the region, though President Trump's aggressive, protection racket approach toward NATO – and the EU more broadly – had significance (CBS News, 2017). However, the Trump administration's policy became highly disruptive with its embrace of a proposal by Serbian President Vučić and Kosovo counterpart Thaçi for what became termed a "land swap," but would effectively constitute a partition of Kosovo at the Ibar River (Gray, 2018a).

This followed EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini's willingness to support such an agreement, despite vehement opposition from some member states, particularly Germany (Gray,

2018b). Germany's opposition, given Trump's loathing for Merkel, may well have been a driver for the then-US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell (later presidential Balkan envoy and Director of National Intelligence) to pursue a deal between Serbia and Kosovo, which deliberately and successfully undermined Kosovo's elected Prime Minister Albin Kurti's first government (Bassuener and Weber, 2020). In any case, the "economic normalization" deal finally struck in September 2020 effectively resolved nothing, but provided a photo op for Trump as he campaigned for re-election (Salama, 2020). With the election of President Joe Biden (2021-2025), US policy returned to opposition to border changes. But otherwise, there was a remarkable degree of continuity with the Trump posture. In fact, the US policy over the course of the Biden administration became ever more evidently focused on "moving Serbia" as the largest Western Balkan state in the direction of the West (Bassuener, 2023). This is yet another example of how a flawed assumption has hampered effective engagement in the region.

Despite the dominance of the EU and its enlargement-based posture within the region, the US is still seen as the foundational security guarantor. Its leadership and military centrality in NATO, as well as its driving role in ending the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Peace Accords, 1995), Kosovo (Operation Allied Force and Kumanovo Agreement, 1999) and North Macedonia (Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2001), undergirds this position. Moreover, the US has supported the Open Balkan initiative of October 2019, in contrast to the EU. While EU enlargement doctrine does not prescribe the use of external security tools, the US stance remains an irritant for many in Brussels and several member capitals. Furthermore, as security (and sovereignty) guarantor for non-NATO states, particularly Bosnia and Kosovo, the US role is seen as an impediment by neighbors (Serbia, but also Croatia) who harbor ambitions and interests toward these states. A more restrained American role suits these ambitions.

In terms of the impact of US policy from 2008-2024 on the WB, brief capsules on each country follow, north to south.

*Serbia:* The US strongly supported and facilitated Kosovo independence, efforts to draw Serbia into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream, and the EU-mediated Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue including the 2013 Brussels Agreement (First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, 2013) – in service of its aim of achieving mutual recognition. Since coming to power in 2012 (first as Defense Minister, then as Prime Minister and later as President), Aleksandar Vučić, has systematically used the EU-US pursuit of the dialogue as a shield for his consolidation of domestic power and regional ambitions – without significant visible resistance from the US. Since 2022, the fact that Belgrade remains unaligned with EU foreign policy on sanctioning Russia has not negatively affected relations with Washington. This seems based on a) Serbia's apparent sales (Russell and Dunai, 2024) (through third countries, financed by the US and allies) of compatible weapons and munitions to Ukraine, b) continued desire to peel Belgrade away from Moscow and Beijing and, c) pursuit of critical raw materials, such as lithium, necessary to shift away from fossil fuels.

*Bosnia and Herzegovina:* The American downshift of engagement and deference to the EU's enlargement focus has perhaps had the greatest impact in the region on Bosnia, given its structurally determined political dysfunction and centrality to neighbors' irredentist agendas. While the EU has held the "safe and secure environment" maintenance deterrent mandate stipulated in Dayton's Annex 1A since 2004, NATO is the reinsurer of the mission through Berlin Plus arrangements (Rittimann, 2021) to support the EU. This remains valid, though the ground reality in real time is that there might be a deterrence failure. The US applies personal and institutional sanctions to those deemed violating Dayton and engaged in corruption, which have had discernible impact. But in a *de facto* security vacuum, these have not proven decisive. In addition, as part of its managerial policy, in 2022/3 the US drove the imposition (via the international High Representative) of EU-US mediated election law changes intended to split Serb and Croat nationalist leaders, generating genuine popular backlash in Bosnia without being effective.

*Montenegro:* Given the effective continuity of power under Milo Đukanović up until 2023, the US policy remained largely focused on getting the country into the EU and NATO. A Serbian-Russian coup attempt in 2016 (Ibid, 2019) probably accelerated Montenegro's bid to enter NATO,<sup>7</sup> which it did in 2017. Yet the US, together with European allies, threw their diplomatic weight behind opposition efforts to replace Đukanović since his DPS lost power in 2020 and he himself lost the presidency in 2023 elections. The party leading the minority governing coalition, the Europe Now! Movement, is itself ideologically amorphous and reliant on pro-Serbia/-Russia (and anti-EU/-NATO) parties (such as the nationalist/populist Democratic Front and the small parties that were born out of the Democratic Front's dissolution) about which the US has voiced concern (Kreizer, 2024). While both President Jakov Milatović and Prime Minister Milojko Spajić are from Europe Now!, their frictions were evident, leading to the two to part ways. The US policy remains focused on EU membership.

*Albania:* Since it joined NATO in 2009, the US' main focus in Albania has been on its internal governance, given its polarized politics between the ruling Socialists under the long-leading Prime Minister Edi Rama (in power since 2013) and the center-right Democratic Party. As with Vučić, Rama has consolidated power in over a decade of rule. In response to "systemic corruption," Washington pressed for a series of justice reform constitutional amendments, adopted in 2016 and still in the process of being implemented (US State Department, 2024). The US has relied on Rama for both supporting regional economic integration (in partnership with Vučić in Serbia and North Macedonia) via Open Balkan (now apparently on hold – Sinoruka, 2023) and for other needs, like housing asylees who fled Afghanistan after the US withdrawal in 2021 (Higgins, 2021).

*Kosovo:* While US policy had long been focused on achieving mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia and compliance with the 2013 Brussels Agreement (with its prescription of an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities), Washington's shift in focus and tone has been

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<sup>7</sup> After a long investigation, Montenegrin High Court acquitted alleged 2016 coup plotters in July 2024 (RFE/RL 2024b).

jarring in Kosovo. The Trump administration's apparent attempt to broker partition generated considerable distrust in the most pro-US polity in the Balkans. And if anything, the Biden administration's downshift in pursuit of "normalization" between Kosovo and Serbia and heavy pressure, in tandem with the EU, on Pristina has been more jarring, leading Prime Minister Kurti to undertake a series of moves to secure actual sovereignty over northern Kosovo, despite manifest US and EU displeasure (U.S. Embassy in Kosovo, 2024). The stalled Association also cost Kosovo membership in the Council of Europe, at the hands of EU members (Isufi and Isufi, 2024).

*North Macedonia:* As with the region, US policy toward what is now North Macedonia focused a great deal on achieving agreement with Greece to facilitate NATO and EU membership. However, the country's democratic backsliding under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016) spurred popular resistance, finally triggering US and EU diplomatic engagement to facilitate early elections (On developments in Macedonia: Statement to the PC, 2016), held in December 2016 (International Parliamentary Union, 2016). American diplomacy facilitated the formation of Zoran Zaev's government (Marusic, 2017); the US then encouraged the Zaev government to negotiate and conclude the Prespa Agreement with Greece (Kitsantonis, 2018), allowing the country's entry into NATO in 2020 (North Macedonia joins NATO as 30<sup>th</sup> Ally, 2020). Yet first French and Dutch resistance (Georgievski, 2018), then rekindled frictions with neighbor Bulgaria, initially mollified by Zaev early in his term (Leviev-Sawyer, 2017), hobbled the launch of EU membership talks (Dimeska, 2023). The US supports the EU proposal to add Bulgarians to the peoples of the country listed in the preamble of the Constitution, which remains highly controversial and hence, elusive.

### **Eastern Neighbourhood**

The EaP region has not been considered a top foreign policy priority, but the US approach generally aligns with that of the EU. It focuses on promoting democracy, human rights, rule of law, energy security, and free markets. Washington, however, does not approach the EaP as a region but it approaches it in a selective fashion. Of the six EaP countries, Washington has focused its strategic interests mainly on Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, working with the others on a case-by-case and sometimes ad hoc basis (Aronsson and Mankoff, 2023).

Rather than forging a policy targeting the EaP as a region, the US has devised a *Black Sea security policy* placing the non-NATO littoral states (Ukraine and Georgia) and Moldova (along with the NATO littoral states) as key regional partners in addressing challenges in NATO's eastern flank. Most recently, the Black Sea Act of 2023, introduced by the US Senate, called the National Security Council to direct an interagency strategy to strengthen the security and democratic resilience of partners in the Black Sea region in accordance with U.S. values and interests and referred to a holistic approach for fostering economic, energy and political linkages.

Washington has long advocated an ‘open door’ policy towards NATO membership, giving countries of the region a right to choose alliances and make independent decisions. Cooperation of the Associated Trio of EaP with NATO is long-standing as Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. Ukraine and Georgia have actively contributed to NATO peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan as well as to the global war on terrorism, participating in the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. During NATO’s April 2008 summit, Washington advocated for Ukraine and Georgia to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP); however, the move was blocked by Germany and France (Cooley and Mitchell, 2009). Instead, the US signed Strategic Partnership Charters with Ukraine in 2008 (re-signed in 2021) and Georgia in 2009, aiming to deepen partnership and expand cooperation (United States-Ukraine Charter, 2008; United States-Georgia Charter, 2009). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine all border on NATO member states, raising their strategic importance. Ukraine is particularly critical, given its size and location as well as the significant diaspora population (over 1 million according to the 2020 US census). The US also supports Ukraine, Moldova, and conditionally Georgia in their “positive movement towards EU membership” (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2023b). Although support to offering a MAP to Georgia and Ukraine has flowed over time due to democracy backlash and military conflicts in the respective countries, the US has maintained its focus on supporting their defence capabilities and compatibility with NATO standards. Moldova, still remaining a declaratory neutral country and with more than 30% of pro-NATO membership residents, is expecting to upgrade its cooperation with NATO under an Individual Partnership Action Plan to an Individually Tailored Partnership Program in early 2025 (Interfax, 2024).

US policy towards Azerbaijan has been filtered by three key issues: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan’s energy resources, and the country’s importance for access to Central Asia. Tensions between the US and Azerbaijan date back to the early 1990s due to the enactment of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which restricted certain types of direct U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan. Although it has been repeatedly waived to support cooperation with Baku, especially since the US-led operation in Afghanistan which was supported by Baku, tensions still remain due to various legislative acts and resolutions by the US Congress calling for action against Azerbaijan owed to human rights violations and war crimes. However, there have been positive developments in relations with Azerbaijan. Like Georgia, Azerbaijan was part of the Northern Distribution Network (providing supplies into Afghanistan) and the Southern Gas Corridor (aimed at reducing dependence of EU on Russia). Washington also encouraged domestic gas production in Ukraine, but these projects have not been implemented due to Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

To further its foreign policy goals, the United States has provided significant *foreign aid* to the EaP countries. Financial support aimed at promoting democratic change has been more significant in Moldova and Armenia than in Belarus and Azerbaijan (US Foreign Assistance, 2024). The US has provided more than \$2.6 billion in assistance to Moldova since its independence to improve energy security, boost trade, support independent media, and bolster local public administration (US Embassy in Moldova, 2024). Since Russia’s war against



Ukraine, the US became the primary security partner of Ukraine having provided the country approximately \$61.4 billion since 2022 and \$64.1 billion in military assistance in total since 2014 (US Department of State, 2024).

To enhance regional economic development and inter-connectivity, the United States has backed partnerships such as the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development-GUAM, which includes Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Washington also supports the Three Seas Initiative, of which Moldova and Ukraine are associated members, prioritizing energy cooperation that reduces dependence on Russia, transport infrastructure and digital communication networks significant for the security and resilience of the countries in the region and NATO's eastern flank.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the US has re-engaged with the EaP countries through military aid, joint exercises, US military presence, and arms sales, aiding first and foremost Ukraine as well as Georgia. The US has reviewed its regional strategy to strengthen political engagement, security, economic cooperation, and counter, what it terms, malign influence.

## RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### *Western Balkans*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's influence in the Western Balkans saw a resurgence under President Vladimir Putin. The early 2000s marked a period in which Russia re-established itself as an important player in the region, often in opposition to Western policies, particularly regarding the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Russia's opposition to NATO intervention in 1999 over Serbia's crackdown in Kosovo and its continued support for Serbia in the face of Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 are notable examples of this dynamic (Bechev, 2017).

The 2010s saw a further intensification of Russia's efforts to assert its influence in the region. This included political support for local actors sympathetic to Moscow, such as Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska and Aleksandar Vulin and Ivica Dacic in Serbia, as well as leveraging economic ties through the energy sector, particularly natural gas (Bechev, 2017; Prelec, 2020). Russia is also supporting far-right groups in the region in order to gain influence and foster instability (Stanichek and Caprile, 2023). Similarly, Russia is often utilising cultural ties and the Serbian Orthodox Church for that purpose (Stanichek and Caprile, 2023). The purported Kremlin-linked coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016 and ongoing allegations of Russian involvement in stirring ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo underscore Russia's strategic use of instability to maintain influence (Bellingcat, 2017; Prelec, 2022). While

Russia historically had good relations with these countries, ties have cooled significantly, particularly after Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO respectively in 2017 and 2020. In the case of North Macedonia, there are limits of Russian influence in terms of development of long-term strategic presence. These limits are even more highlighted in the case of Albania (a NATO member since 2009), whose relations to Russia can be described as ‘frozen’ (Loshaj, 2024).

Economically, Russia's influence has been primarily exerted through the energy sector. The acquisition of Serbia's national oil company NIS in 2008 and the development of the TurkStream pipeline highlight Russia's strategic investments to secure a foothold in the region's energy infrastructure (Bechev, 2017). Despite international sanctions and declining direct investments post-2014, Russian economic activity, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro, saw a resurgence following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, driven by Russian businesses seeking to circumvent Western sanctions (Zweers et al., 2023). Attempts of Russia to be economically involved in Albania have failed on several accounts (Loshaj, 2024). Russia was once a key trade partner for North Macedonia, primarily due to its exports of crude petroleum to the OKTA Refinery. However, since production at the facility ceased in 2013, the value of Russian imports has significantly declined (Vit, 2018).

Media manipulation and disinformation campaigns have been crucial tools in the effort to influence and destabilize the region, with pro-Russian narratives finding fertile ground in Serbia (and Serbian-speaking people in neighbouring countries) and North Macedonia, where anti-Western sentiments have been on the rise due to stalled EU integration processes (Bassuener, 2019; Prelec, Tzifakis and Bechev, 2023). This is especially true following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where pro-Russian attitudes have been dominant in the media. Russian propaganda outlets, such as Sputnik and RT, are present in some of these countries, most notably Serbia, which still refuses to sanction Russia, as well as Republika Srpska, which shares Serbia's stance. Local media, especially in Serbia, is an even bigger issue, as media with national frequencies often adopt Russian narratives and disseminate them. In the case of “Happy TV”, this is particularly pronounced. “Happy” hosts a daily show “Aktuelnosti” which covers the war in Ukraine in a full propagandist fashion, often disseminating more radical statements than those coming from the Kremlin itself (Devcic, 2023).

Russia's influence in Serbia has significantly grown over the last two decades, establishing a far stronger constituency than it had in 1999, during NATO's bombing campaign (NDI, 1999). In contrast, NATO, the EU, and the US have seen their constituencies weaken over the same period (IRI, 2024). While Aleksandar Vučić has cultivated a “balancing” approach that ostensibly bridges East and West, Serbian media have actively bolstered Russia's image during his time in power in Serbia, frequently portraying Vladimir Putin as a strongman to admire while depicting the EU and the US as weak or in a negative light. Public opinion polls reflect this shift: while NATO and EU support have eroded, pro-Russian sentiments remain entrenched, aided by media narratives and strategic political alignment. This dynamic underscores the increasing impact of

Russia's soft power in Serbia, which extends far beyond traditional media into the broader socio-political fabric (IRI, 2024).

While Russian influence in the media may not be as overt in other Western Balkan countries as it is in Serbia, it remains significant across the region, particularly during critical moments of political and societal importance. In North Macedonia, the limited language barriers have facilitated the penetration of Russian narratives, particularly during sensitive periods like the country's name change in 2018 and the associated referendum. During these times, Russia-backed disinformation campaigns capitalized on the situation, promoting boycott efforts and fostering anti-Western sentiment, thereby attempting to disrupt North Macedonia's path towards EU and NATO integration (Metodieva, 2019).

### **Eastern Neighbourhood**

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) became the main vehicle to sustain political and economic cooperation among the former Soviet states. The CIS was founded by the heads of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine on December 7-8, 1991 (Belovezhskaya Accords). For Russia, the CIS was vital to preserve control over its 'near abroad'. This is evident in the high importance set on the CIS in the various versions of the National Security Concept from the Yeltsin period to the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev. A 'weakening of the integration processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States' was cited already in 2000 as a national threat (National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000), a concern maintained in the following years (as in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation – See President of the Russian Federation, 2008).

The CIS was also an important economic institution for Russia. However, CIS membership did not shield the countries from "trade wars" with Moscow, including Russia's 2006 ban on imports of Moldovan and Georgian wine and other key products. In January 2009, Russia cut off natural gas supplies to Ukraine, impacting a number of other European countries as well.

Bilateral relations with Russia have been especially complicated in the case of Ukraine. Despite its role as a founder, Ukraine did not sign or ratify the CIS Charter; therefore, it was never a full member of the CIS. Ukraine and Russia signed a comprehensive treaty of friendship and cooperation only in 1997, resolving differences over Crimea, and called each other "strategic partners" (Reuters, 2022). Despite Russia's economic presence in Ukraine, the two countries have always had tense relations in other areas.

Georgia's 2003 Rose revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange revolution signalled a shift in focus toward EU and NATO membership. Under the pretext that it threatened the security of the Russian Federation, in August 2008, Moscow briefly invaded Georgian territory, beyond its separatist regions, and subsequently recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Georgia had joined the CIS charter in 1993, under Russian pressure, on August

14, 2008, the Georgian parliament unanimously decided to withdraw Georgia from the organization. A year later, Georgia officially left the CIS, although the country effectively remained in the CIS Free Trade Area.

Tensions with Russia rose further when the EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in May 2009. Russia viewed the EaP as competition and a potential threat to its national interests. Despite the fact that the EaP did not include a military dimension, Putin called it ‘an alternative to NATO’s expansion to the east’ (Park, 2014). The fact that one of the priorities of the EaP was the divergence of energy supply to the EU in order to bypass Russia, especially during a time when energy became central to Russia’s foreign policy, was another reason for Russia to oppose the EaP.

The Customs Union initiative, which became the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), was introduced by Russia in 2010, signed in 2014 and has been in force since 2015. The EAEU’s main objective was to create a ‘common market for goods, services, capital and labour’ among its member states in order to promote sustainable economic development (Treaty on Eurasian Economic Union, 2014). The EAEU was presented to post-Soviet states as an alternative to the EaP. Although two of the EaP countries have joined the EAEU (Belarus and Armenia), the other four have refrained. Armenia was initially expected to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU at the November 2013 EaP summit, alongside Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. Instead, as a result of strong pressure from Moscow to integrate with Russia rather than the EU, Armenia announced its intention to join the EAEU in September 2013 (Chatham House, 2022).

In 2013, Russia also exerted great pressure on Ukraine (threatening to impose trade sanctions and cut off gas supplies), taking advantage of the fact that the pro-Russian President of Ukraine, V. Yanukovich, was in charge. As a result, Ukraine refrained from signing an AA with the EU, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement (Herszenhorn, 2013; Cadier, 2014). In February 2014, the decision not to sign the agreement sparked the second revolution (Euromaidan) and Yanukovich’s escape from Ukraine. The newly elected administration signed the AA in June 2014. DCFTAs for Moldova and Georgia, became effective soon after: from 1 September 2014, and from 1 January 2015 for Ukraine. The AAs for all three countries have been in full force since 2016-17.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine turned into open conflict with the falsification of the referendum in Crimea (2014) and its subsequent annexation. That was followed by Russian military involvement in Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions, culminating in a full-scale invasion in February 2022 (Reuters, 2022). Ukraine fully completed its withdrawal from the CIS in 2018 but remains a member of the CIS Free Trade Area. As in the case of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have also seen their foreign policy direction shift between the EU and Russia, depending on the orientation of their national governments. Like Ukraine, they have been impacted by military conflicts involving Russia, serving to heighten mistrust. Both Moldova and Georgia experienced conflicts during the early 1990s, with breakaway regions declaring independence (South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova). Russia

managed to turn the Transnistrian conflict into a frozen one, maintaining the presence of Russian troops in this territory. While Moscow has yet to recognize Transnistria's independence, Russia went a step further in Georgia, granting formal recognition to South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the invasion of Georgia in August 2008 (March, 2011). As evident in the Foreign Policy Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023), Russia continues to support separatist movements on their territories, albeit the support has decreased since the invasion of Ukraine; in fact, in some cases, Russia not only supports them, but effectively created them.

Although the EaP countries were not initially viewed as potential EU candidates, that has changed since Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia applied for EU membership and Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022 (European Council, 2024). Georgia gained candidate status in December 2023 (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023).

As Moldova and Ukraine moved closer to the European Union, their economic dependence on Russia weakened dramatically, with the majority of exports now going to EU countries. Moldova was a full member of the CIS, but after 2022 it also announced its desire to cease participating in the organization completely (RFE/RL, 2023). Although Russia was traditionally a top export market and source of workers' remittances for Moldova, that is no longer the case. On the other hand, Georgia has been moving closer to Russia during the period of government of the Georgian Dream party (2012- ), having abstained from sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and toned down its desire to join NATO. Thanks to its visa-free policy, Georgia is now home to a large population of Russians who have emigrated since the start of the war in Ukraine. In May 2023, Russia unexpectedly abolished visa requirements for Georgian citizens and lifted a ban on direct flights between the two countries (Chumburidze and Gavriloza, 2023).

All three EaP countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova) have experienced extremely serious downsides to their relations with Russia. In addition to using political, economic and military tools in an attempt to keep countries within its sphere of influence at all costs, Russia is waging a global campaign of disinformation. The goal is to influence the people of these countries. In the latest Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, the European Union is labelled clearly as 'unfriendly' to Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). Integration within the CIS, under the 'near abroad' regional track of the Concept is highlighted as important, together with other interstate associations where Russia has an informal lead or strong participation in, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

The second war in Nagorno-Karabakh (September to November 2020) was a turning point in Russia's relations with Armenia. Although relations between the two countries have been deteriorating for several years, especially since Pashinyan coming to power in 2018, they were heavily dented when Russian "peacekeepers" deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh in the aftermath of the war in 2020 failed to prevent Azerbaijan's September 2023 offensive into the region that brought the region under the full control of Azerbaijan. Indicative of the deterioration of

Armenian-Russian relations has been Yerevan's decision to suspend its participation in the CSTO in August 2024 and to end the presence of Russian border guards in Armenia's International Airport after 32 years of presence. Despite recent efforts by Armenia to diversify its military, political, and foreign economic relations, including with France and the European Union, the country remains deeply linked to Russia through long standing military and economic connections. Russia has been the primary source of Armenia's military supplies, providing - according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2021) – around 94% of Armenia's arms imports during 2011-2020. Russian armed forces continue for 70 years to operate the 102nd Military Base at Gyumri. Armenia is also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union since January 2015.

Contrary to Russian-Armenian relations, the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict gave a boost to relations between Russia and Azerbaijan with high level bilateral contacts intensifying and prioritizing cooperation in the energy field and infrastructure projects. One of the key infrastructure projects for Moscow is the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) (a series of road, rail, and ship routes) connecting Russia to Iran and its Persian Gulf ports. Azerbaijan's role in the INSTC is crucial as the route goes through its territory, the only country that borders both Russia and Iran. During that state visit of Vl. Putin to Baku in August 2024, he was accompanied by the CEOs of state-controlled companies such as Gazprom and Rosneft, as well as the ministers of transport and economic development indicating strong economic interests behind the Moscow-Baku rapprochement.

The Russian-Belarus relations are complex, marked with deep linkages with the Russian government viewing Belarus as a "brotherly nation". The two countries share similar threat perceptions of the West over the past 30 years and their alignment has increased especially since 2020 (Massicot et al., 2024) and Belarus' support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that led to the isolation of Belarus from Europe. Minsk has increasingly drawn to closer integration with Moscow through the Union State and acquiesced to a greater number of Russian military demands, such as that Russia be granted basing rights.

## CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### *Western Balkans*

China's engagement with the Western Balkans is a relatively recent phenomenon, becoming particularly prominent after 2010. This period marked the beginning of China's strategic investments in the region, primarily through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) cooperation platform, also known as the 14+1 initiative. Initially launched as the 17+1 initiative, this framework brought together China and 17 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, including several Western Balkan states, to enhance

economic and political cooperation. However, the initiative later became the 14+1 platform following the withdrawal of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (in 2020-2021), reflecting concerns in these countries about growing Chinese influence and alignment with EU and NATO priorities. Despite this shift, the platform continues to serve as a mechanism for advancing China's interests in the region, particularly through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships.

In general, China's approach towards the region is part of its wider policy towards Europe and Central Asia, and, unlike Russia's, is not necessarily directed against the West. While its influence varies across the Western Balkan countries, the picture is relatively more uniform compared to Russia's approach.

Economically, China's involvement has been characterized by significant investments, predominantly through loans for infrastructural and energy projects, since 2010. Key examples include the construction of highways in Montenegro and North Macedonia and the acquisition of Serbia's steel mill in Smederevo in 2016, which was emblematic of the "Steel Friendship" between China and Serbia (Grgić, 2019; Lidarev, 2023). These projects often come with substantial financial loans, raising concerns about debt dependency and the long-term economic sovereignty of these countries. Chinese influence has further expanded into the 2020s. China's "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy" significantly enhanced its image as a benevolent partner, particularly in Serbia, where Chinese aid was prominently publicised and promoted by the pro-government media (Tzifakis and Prelec, 2021). This period also saw an increase in Chinese cultural and media outreach, although these efforts remain less extensive compared to its economic ventures (Hasic and Durakovic, 2022).

Politically, China's influence is most pronounced in Serbia, where a centralized government under President Aleksandar Vučić has facilitated strong bilateral relations. This partnership has been marked by high-level visits and agreements, including the controversial "smart cities" project and the joint patrols of Chinese and Serbian police in Serbian cities (Lidarev, 2023). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chinese investments have focused on energy projects, with local leaders acting as key intermediaries (Djolai and Stratulat, 2023). A similar kind of political influence can be seen in North Macedonia. Bilateral relations between China and North Macedonia started in 1993 right after North Macedonia's declaration of independence, however, they were terminated for a few years in 1999-2001 due to the latter's recognition of Taiwan. China resumed its diplomatic relations with North Macedonia in 2001 when the latter country severed its diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Chinese investments, while relatively small in terms of GDP for the Western Balkans, have an impact on individual national economies, as seen in North Macedonia. China's primary focus has been on loans from state-owned financial institutions, supplemented by donations and grants. Notable examples include the construction of the Miladinovci–Štip and Kichevo–Ohrid highways, which are the first infrastructure projects in the region financed through the 17+1 initiative. These investments illustrate China's strategic approach to enhancing its influence in the region, despite the overall scale of its economic footprint (Nechev and Nikolovski, 2020).

The economic relationship between China and the Western Balkans is heavily skewed, with Chinese exports vastly outnumbering imports from the region. In 2022, China was a major exporter to Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, primarily supplying machinery and electronic equipment (UNCOMTRADE). Despite these economic ties, Chinese direct investment remains relatively limited and often takes the form of acquisitions rather than greenfield investments (Stojkovski et al., 2021).

There is also a counter-effect to these investments. Many of the Chinese factories cause environmental damage (France24, 2024). This often causes the local population to rise against environmentally damaging businesses (Pesic, 2024). Likewise, limited respect for labour rights in Chinese factories is also a cause of concern (Pavkov, 2021). Some of these investments provoked opposition towards China, counterintuitively damaging the Chinese influence.

### **Eastern Neighbourhood**

China does not have a special doctrine or concept regarding the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Official documents by which changes in strategy can be tracked are primarily materials from party congresses of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and speeches of Chinese leaders. Under the leadership of the CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao (2002-2012), the country's foreign policy shifted from a hands-off approach to a soft power concept in the early 2000s.

Chinese soft power has several components, with economic might viewed as Beijing's most competitive external resource, highlighted most notably by the 2013 launch of One Belt, One Road – later renamed the BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI). With the aim of facilitating trade, exporting overcapacity, and raising the country's global influence, the BRI has resulted in a series of shipping and overland infrastructure projects stretching across Asia into Europe and Africa, funded by Chinese loans and investment. Projects include roads, bridges, high-speed railways, ports, and new 5G networks. Part of China's economic appeal is that the country has expressed readiness to talk to everyone without restrictions, following the logic of non-interference in the internal affairs of states in the region. In contrast, international financial institutions typically demand more scrutiny over potential projects, particularly regarding fiscal impact, transparency, and environmental standards. As a result, China is presented as a country with a long-term strategy (Albert, 2018).

Since the late 2010s, China's foreign policy has become 'more aggressive,' (Korsun'skyi, 2020) signalling the emergence of a new 'brand' of Chinese diplomacy to complement its soft power strategy. China clearly wants to be taken seriously on the world stage, promoting itself as an alternative to the Western approach and values. Unlike the older generation of diplomats, who used conservative and passive diplomacy, modern so-called 'wolf warriors' have become known for their aggressive and proactive tactics (Palanisami, 2020: 1). During the Covid-19 pandemic, these 'wolf diplomats' were out in full force on social media platforms, spreading



misinformation about the origins of the coronavirus and the Western response to the pandemic worldwide. China also advocated “vaccine diplomacy”, providing donations to EaP countries where the availability of Western vaccines was initially limited. According to E. Soler i Lecha and M. Ruiz de Austri Arexolaleiba (2022: 42), China had a unique opportunity, particularly as the West was focused on immunising its own population first.

Lacking a clear approach to the EaP region as a whole, China’s most important diplomatic tool is the intensification of bilateral relations. Bilateral relations have always been more important than multilateral ones because they give China more freedom to manoeuvre and apply various strategies. While the structure of Chinese foreign policy decision-making has undergone radical changes, with the creation of the Central National Security Commission in 2012 and the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in 2018, the tools for implementing them have remained rather traditional.

Among the EaP countries, Belarus has been a key partner, playing an important role in the BRI via the Northern Corridor. In contrast, relations with Ukraine developed slowly and did not go beyond trade and investment interests. The “Joint Declaration on the establishment and development of strategic partnership relations” was signed in Kyiv during a June 2011 visit by Hu Jintao to Ukraine, and several contracts worth USD 3.5 billion were implemented. Nevertheless, the implementation of these and previously signed documents stalled, and after Euromaidan-2013 relations generally changed for the worse. The line of China’s behaviour after 2014 was formed according to China’s “principle of neutrality” in world conflicts. But Beijing accused the West of manipulating “Ukrainians’ opinions” about the Association Agreement with the EU and therefore of manipulating the ongoing conflict. Chinese companies had invested in the Ukrainian aircraft engine manufacturer Motor Sich, but Kyiv announced the company’s nationalization in 2021 on national security grounds. Since 2022, the imposition of Western sanctions against Russia and Belarus have led to a search for alternative trade routes, raising the importance of Georgia and Azerbaijan as part of a Middle Corridor. The Georgian Government in summer 2023 signed a memorandum with China on Strategic Partnership, which by some authors was considered as an attempt by the country to establish a multivector policy (Avdaliani, 2023). In May 2024, the Georgian government announced that Chinese companies would play a key role in the construction of the Anaklia Deep Sea Port, the country’s largest-ever infrastructure project. Moldova is not viewed as a key partner for China, although it joined the Chinese BRI in 2013.

With regard to culture and education, the Confucius Institute is the main instrument for implementing China’s policy in all EaP countries. The Institute’s branches in various countries act as agents of influence, following the Chinese Communist party’s line and protecting the Chinese state’s interests. The first Confucius Institute in the Post-Soviet region was opened in Belarus in 2006 (Ian’dun, 2011: 10), followed by locations across the EaP region. In addition to the Confucius institutes, Beijing created Chinese language schools and cultural exchange programs between universities to promote Chinese language and culture and create a positive international image (Tzin’pin, 2014: 47). Scientific and technical activities have also been

important (Tszaili, 2009: 150). Beijing's efforts in the economic and cultural spheres have helped develop a positive attitude toward China in much of the EaP region.

However, the EaP countries have not yet developed a clear foreign policy strategy towards China, making their position vulnerable, as they are unprepared for dialogue on equal terms with Beijing. The global supply chain disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the EaP countries' deep dependence on China in many strategic areas. They are not self-sufficient in the medical and pharmaceutical industries nor in the production of computers, batteries, electric vehicles, and wind turbines (Salem, 2020: 2). Beijing's influence in the region increases as more Chinese investments reach the crucial technologies of EaP enterprises. Still, Chinese development projects may not be the best replacement for those financed by international institutions, partly because Chinese investments rarely involve grants, meaning that the risk burden falls on the host country. The import of Chinese labour and equipment is another challenging factor.

Outside of the economic and cultural spheres noted above, China's influence on domestic and foreign policy in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia has been rather limited. One exception came in 2021, when Ukraine withdrew its signature from a joint UN statement condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang, allegedly because of China's vaccine diplomacy (Soler i Lecha & Ruiz de Austri Arexolaleiba, 2022: 43). However, Ukrainian attitudes toward China have taken a turn for the worse since Russia's full-scale invasion, given perceptions of Beijing's ambiguous position on the war. According to a July 2024 opinion poll, just 4% of Ukrainian respondents have a positive attitude towards China, compared with 16.7% mostly positive, 58.8% negative, and another 20% undecided. (Rezultaty spil'noho doslidzhennia, 2024). About 62% of Ukrainian respondents do not trust China as a mediator in potential negotiations with Russia, while just 22% are ready to entrust Beijing with such a role (Korrespondent, 2024).

## TURKEY'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### Western Balkans

The role of Turkey in the Western Balkans in the last two decades has most often been described with the adage "Turkey is back" (Bechev, 2012). However, this phrase does not accurately describe the role of the country whose Ottoman heritage is deeply ingrained in almost all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, now known by the politically coined term Western Balkans (except for Slovenia and a part of Croatia that were never under Ottoman rule – see Judah, 2009). This heritage goes beyond politics and involves culture, language, ethnicity, and religion, all stemming from the common history of the Ottoman Empire, which included almost all countries of today's Western Balkans (Öztürk, 2021).

After the end of Bosnian war, Turkey remained an influential actor in the region by becoming a member of the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Committee. Turkey also participated in EU civilian and military missions, including EUPOL PROXIMA, EUFOR Concordia in North Macedonia, EUPM and EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia, and EULEX in Kosovo. Also, it took part in NATO missions KFOR and SFOR and various regional cooperation initiatives, including the South-East European Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (see Önsoy and Büyük, 2023).

The early 2000s brought new impetus to the cooperation, especially with the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as the Minister of Foreign Affairs who formulated a new vision (*Strategic Depth*) of the role of Turkey in the region thus trying to compensate for the absence of the EU and other international actors from the region as a result of the financial crisis in 2008 (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019). For Davutoglu, the stability of the EU and Turkey is linked with the stability in the Balkans, which is why the region received a prominent place in Turkish foreign policy efforts during this period (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2020).

As a result of the change in policy, Turkey became more active in the region by trying to mediate inter-ethnic relations, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a trilateral forum between Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been established as a form of high level conflict mediation mechanism. In similar vein, Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo played an important role in Turkish foreign policy due to the large number of Muslims living in these countries (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2020). Also, Turkey was successful in remedying its relations with Serbia, which were severely damaged after NATO intervention in 1999 and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008.

Activities in the political realm were followed in other fields as well. Turkey signed free trade agreements with all Balkan countries in the early 2000s, thus trying to increase exports and investments in these countries (Bechev, 2014). Still, even with this in mind, Turkey's exports to the region have not gone over 7.0% of the total Western Balkan imports. Regarding imports to Turkey, the number is even lower, around 2% (Eurostat, 2020). At the same time, the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) have increased exponentially. According to Önsoy and Büyük (2023), TIKA has conducted more than 900 projects and other activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 300 similar projects in Kosovo, 900 projects in North Macedonia, and nearly 450 projects in Albania. This kind of development projects span from investing in education, school and library updates to rebuilding houses destroyed in natural disasters to renovating mosques and Ottoman monuments.

Turkey's cultural influence in the region has been on the rise, particularly through popular TV series, increased number of tourists from the Western Balkans, and the expansion of Yunus Emre Institutes, which offer Turkish language classes and cultural courses. Anadolu Agency and Turkish Radio and Television have also expanded their scope of activities in the Western Balkans by offering services in local languages (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2020). The role of the Gülen movement in the region significantly diminished since the mid-2010s following accusations of a

failed coup by the Turkish government. However, in the realm of religion, a crucial aspect for Turkey given the significant Muslim population in the region, the Turkish Office of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) remains a key player. This has special weight since Turkey promotes a moderate form of Islam in the Western Balkans instead of Wahhabism that has been spreading from the Gulf (Ejdus, 2017), attracting people to join Islamic State and various other jihadist movements in the mid 2010s (Koppa, 2020).

### **Eastern Neighbourhood**

Turkey's strategic approaches to the countries of the EaP, as well as to the EaP region in general, are being guided by a combination of several interconnected factors. They influence the foreign and domestic policies of all six EaP countries and Turkey, on the one side, and the EU policies, on the other.

A key factor influencing Turkey's relations with the EaP countries are its own relations with the EU and persistent institutional uncertainty. While pursuing EU membership for many decades, Turkey, when elaborating its vision of the EaP international area, was put in a position where Ankara had to consider the fact that its strategic foreign policy aim has not yet been achieved. In fact, Turkey's European aspirations were gradually fading away. All the efforts to get closer, since the EU and Turkey opened accession negotiations in October 2005, appeared unsuccessful (European Commission, 2024b), and did not bring any feasible added value. Turkey moved away from Brussels, while Ukraine and Moldova and Georgia (until 2021) got closer to the EU and the first two even started accession negotiations with the EU as candidate countries in 2024. However, institutional uncertainty affected Ankara's foreign policy steps toward the EaP countries much earlier: as soon as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia strengthened their strategies towards membership in the EU, practically when the EaP was launched.

The EU-Turkey accession negotiations have been at a standstill since June 2018 (European Commission, 2024b), due to the disagreements between Ankara and Brussels, which perceived Turkey as backsliding on democracy, rule of law, and fundamental rights (European Union, 2016). Such a situation was in contrast with the goals of the EaP. The EaP, as a joint initiative of the European Union, together with its member states and six ex-Soviet republics, identified the promotion of human rights and the rule of law as the “core” of the policy of the Eastern Partnership (European Union External Action, 2024a). This is what the majority of the EaP countries are working on in their foreign and domestic policies. Thus, relations between the EU and Turkey are quite instructive for the EaP countries when it comes to tracking the right path to achieve European aspirations, if not toward full membership; in getting closer to the European values, economic, and political standards and to correspond to the Copenhagen criteria.

The geopolitical factor is not less important: Turkey has always been cautious in promoting its policy in the Eastern Neighbourhood region in order not to step into sharp conflict with Russia. The only exception is the bilateral, to some extent unique, strategic relations between Turkey

and Azerbaijan. Since the 1990s, Moscow has primarily backed Azerbaijan's rival, Armenia. However, Russia's support was reduced over time while Ankara significantly increased its support for Baku, including by providing vital military support in the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 made Turkey support Ukrainian territorial integrity, also due to the historic ties of Turkey with the Crimean Tatars. In September 2024, in a video message to the Fourth Crimea Platform Leaders Summit, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Turkey's "support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence is unwavering. The return of Crimea to Ukraine is a requirement of international law" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2024). Nevertheless, continued relations with Russia made Turkey neutral to Russia's war in Ukraine rather than proactively supporting Kyiv. This position weakened Ankara's potential constructive input into the EU's EaP goals and agendas. At the same time, balancing between Ukraine and Russia made it possible for Turkey to contribute positively to calming down the level of aggression in the Black Sea by pushing forward the 2022-23 grain deal. Turkish relations with Belarus, which has for many years found itself under Russia's political and economic domination, have always been driven by Ankara's close diplomatic and economic relations with Moscow.

It is not an exaggeration to state that one of the most significant interests of Turkey in the EaP region has always been located in the domain of economy and trade. Export-import operations with the EaP countries became an anchor of Turkish foreign policy in the region. Although Turkish relations with the EaP countries build both on a bilateral and a multilateral format (such as the Black Sea Naval Force) its diplomatic relations with Armenia remain officially non-existent with Ankara maintaining a closed borders policy with Armenia since 1993. For EaP countries, such as Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and to a great extent Azerbaijan, Turkey has remained one of the biggest economic and trade partners for many years. Turkish-Georgian relations are strengthened by the number of oil- and gas-pipelines projects to pump Azerbaijan's petroresources from the Caspian region via the territory of Georgia to compete with Russia and bypass it. Infrastructure projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the South Caucasus Pipeline, the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway and the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline have made Ankara a strong economic and security player in the region of the South Caucasus to criss-cross with the agenda of this subregional part of the EaP.

Besides an interest in expanding Turkey's economic power, Ankara is active in applying its "soft" power in the EaP region. The "soft" power involvement is visible in Crimea and especially in Azerbaijan, which share ethno-cultural foundations with Turkey. However, this strategy also extends to other EaP countries. During President Erdoğan's first presidential visit to Belarus, in Minsk on 11 November 2016, the Minsk Mosque was officially opened (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024a). The mosque, a replica of the original one built in the 19th century and destroyed during the Soviet era five decades ago, was built by Diyanet Foundation linked to Turkey's state-run Presidency of Religious Affairs (Daily Sabah, 2016). Turkey has good relations with the Moldovan autonomous republic of Gagauzia, which, in turn, tends to orient itself towards Russia and has uneasy relations with the rest of Moldova and the Chisinau government. Indirectly, Ankara may influence both centrifugal and centripetal forces in

Gagauzia depending on the Turkish geopolitical preferences at any point in time. Turkey also invests a lot in Batumi, a predominantly muslim-georgian populated regional center in Georgia, and tries to influence its population.

## FRAMING THE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF THE UNITED STATES

### **Framing of the U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans**

The policy focal points of the US in the intervening decade and a half are refracted through the sort of research that the US Government funded: “countering violent extremism (CVE)” and related concepts (Perry, 2019) and “malign foreign influence,” generally connoting Russia (Nilsson and Weissmann, 2024) and China (Šabanović et al., 2020), but also potentially Turkey, Gulf States, and Iran (Rrustemi et al., 2019). There is a tendency in this literature to conflate investment with influence, though some authors do review US policy priorities through funding, as well as links with militaries and security services (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 150-151). NATO enlargement was also a theme, garnering some writing in this span, reflecting the entry of Albania and Croatia, then Montenegro, and finally North Macedonia, as well as the deepening of geopolitical contestation with Russia. From the middle of the last decade, the theme of geopolitical competition began to ramp-up, reflecting US and EU concerns over relative influence with authoritarian challengers (Vuksanović, 2021). During the Biden administration, the themes of “democracy vs. autocracy” and combating corruption were added to this general outlook. These have been reflected in the policy pronouncements of the time (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2023a; see previous section for greater detail).

But the main finding from the literature review is that despite the fact that the US is *legally, politically, and structurally obligated* to support the EU in the event of violent crisis (via NATO’s KFOR in Kosovo; via Berlin-plus support on-call to EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the predominant military power in the West, academic scholarship specifically focusing on the American role in the Western Balkans from the mid-2000s forward - in contrast to non-peer reviewed articles and (a winnowing number) of policy papers – is remarkably sparse. This reflects the derivative nature of U.S. policy to support EU-steered processes (with occasional frictions and divergences).

### **Framing of the U.S. engagement in the Eastern Neighbourhood**

Most of the research and publications on U.S. policy on the EaP countries doubt their Western future due to Russian revanchism and consolidation of “effective hegemony” over Belarus, Moldova and Georgia, often explained as a result of U.S. “strategic ambiguity” (Mankoff, 2020; Mankoff, 2023; Hill, 2020; Cecire, 2024). For instance, William Courtney, former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia and Kazakhstan and special assistant to the president for Russia and Ukraine, emphasizes that Georgia – “a staunchly pro-Western country” and “a beacon of liberty” is rapidly moving in “an anti-democratic direction,” which is a surprise and a major concern for many in Europe and in the United States (Courtney, 2024; Tavberidze, 2024). Michael Cecire, a Senior Policy Advisor at the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, agrees that Georgia is vital to U.S. interests, stating that Georgia was “arguably the stablest and most democratic of the post-Soviet republics outside of the Baltics, and plausibly the last hope in a region” (Cecire, 2016). However, examining the political processes in Georgia after 2013, he warns of Tbilisi’s drift towards Russia because of ‘Western quiescence in the face of Russian territorial aggression’ (Cecire, 2015). The indifference and passiveness of the U.S. towards the South Caucasus allowed Russia to take the leading role in the region (Kuzio, 2012).

Some US perceptions towards the region can be discerned from hearings dedicated to the Black Sea region with particular attention to Russia’s aggressive policy. These included calls for reviving the U.S. policy towards the area – “the soft underbelly of transatlantic security”- aiming to ensure its strategic lines of communication, including energy pipelines to Europe, strengthen the safety and sovereignty of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and mitigate the risk of dangerous escalatory dynamics in relations with Russia and competition with China (Tefft, 2005; Brzezinski, 2021; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2023c).

The geopolitical competition in the EaP countries mainly involves the rivalry of Russia and the U.S., as the Kremlin has yet to see the EU as an independent and significant security competitor (Babynina, 2018; Russian Council, 2023). Russia perceived the normative essence of the EaP initiative without great seriousness due to the dominance of ‘geopolitical realism’ in Moscow’s strategy towards the EaP countries that Russia regards as its historical sphere of influence (Raika et al., 2024). However, the Kremlin has aggressively worked against Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine’s European integration, shifting these countries from a ‘normative battlefield’ to an area of ‘territorial and spatial rivalry’ with the EU and the U.S. (Maksymenko, 2014; Tolstov 2014).

The U.S. foreign policy approach toward the EaP region tends to align with that of the EU and can be seen as broadly cooperative, although this is likely to change after Donald Trump’s return to the U.S. presidency in 2025, particularly in regard to Ukraine (Sukhov, 2024). At the EU-U.S. summit in 2005, the two partners declared their determination to continue creating ‘a Europe whole, free, and at peace,’ adding that ‘The European Neighbourhood Policy and U.S. support for democratic and economic transitions will contribute further to stability, prosperity and partnership’ (Peters and Bittner, 2006).

Despite common goals, there have been differences between the EU’s and the U.S. 's approaches to the EaP region. A 2006 study indicated that EU risk perception uses a structure-centred

approach and is proactive, aiming to improve structures before a conflict emerges. In contrast, under the leadership of George W. Bush (2001-09), the U.S. National Security Strategy committed to an actor-centred and reactive approach, pledging to work with others to ‘help manage local crises when they emerge’ and adding that the United States should be ‘realistic about its ability to help those who are unwilling or unready to help themselves’ (Peters and Bittner, 2006).

One study blames the U.S. actor-centred approach for failing to anticipate and prevent Georgia’s 2008 conflict with Russia, as the Bush administration’s support for Mikheil Saakashvili government rather than for overall democratic development led to ‘an unhealthy capture of U.S. foreign policy by Tbilisi,’ causing the United States to overlook Georgia’s democratic backsliding (Cooley and Mitchell, 2009). While both the United States and the EU have supported the structure-centred approach of the OSCE negotiation mechanism in the Transnistria conflict (Peters and Bittner, 2006), in Georgia, the U.S. emphasised restoring territorial integrity rather than serving as an ‘honest broker’ in resolving the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Cooley and Mitchell, 2009). The U.S. approach did shift somewhat during the Obama administration (2009-17), which called during the annual OSCE summit in December 2010 for reestablishing an OSCE mission in Georgia with a mandate that included the breakaway regions; however, Russia refused (Nichol, 2012).

Differences have also emerged in U.S. versus EU policy concerning Russia’s role in the EaP region. Neither side questioned Russia’s participation in the mediation of the Transnistria conflict, but the United States was more forceful in calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops (Peters and Bittner, 2006; Woehrel, 2010). Under Bush’s leadership, the United States was also pushing hard for NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, advocating for the two countries to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) during the April 2008 summit. Despite support from Central Europe, the move was blocked by Germany and France, who questioned the countries’ qualifications (partly due to concerns about Georgia’s democratic credentials, as well as the lack of agreement among Ukraine’s leading political parties), while also expressing unease about the implications for relations with Russia. Despite strong abstentions from the side of its western European partners, the US convinced member countries unanimously to support a promise of eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. However, prospects for a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia grew increasingly distant after the Russia-Georgia conflict of August 2008, which elicited concerns that Moscow could take similar action in Ukraine and triggered fear among NATO partners in Europe of being drawn into a future military conflict with Russia (Woehrel, 2009; Cooley and Mitchell, 2009). Nevertheless, the promise of eventual membership, which by no means can substitute the benefits of MAP, was repeated at every consecutive summit up to 2024.

The energy sphere has elicited considerable attention from the United States, which has been highly critical of Moscow’s actions in the EaP region, including supply cutoffs and ‘precipitous’ price increases and ‘politically motivated efforts to constrain energy supply to Ukraine.’ The gas crisis of January 2009 highlighted the need for ‘transparent, market-oriented arrangements for



the sale and shipment of natural gas and the importance of diversifying energy supplies' (Woehrel, 2009). As the United States and EU searched for ways to diversify Europe's energy supplies, Georgia's geopolitical importance increased as a transit state for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline (Papava, 2005). The United States and the EU (particularly Germany) clashed over the need for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to bring Russian gas to Germany, largely because it was a way to bypass Ukraine and avoid paying the country transit fees (Pifer, 2021).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have changed the dynamics of U.S.-Ukrainian relations and hardened the stance of both the United States and the EU toward Russia (Woźniak, 2016; Sokolshchik, 2024). Both the EU and the U.S. acknowledge that their position in the region and on Russia's war in Ukraine has broader implications for global stability and the future of democracy. According to the 2023 U.S.-EU Summit Joint Statement, the parties "are working to secure peace, stability, and prosperity regionally and across the world, including in our steadfast support for Ukraine (...) We are more united than ever" in supporting Ukraine's, Moldova's and Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and their European perspectives as well as advancing a lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan (The White House, 2023). Still, the issue of military assistance to Ukraine has been the subject of considerable debate, with Republicans in Congress blocking aid for more than six months in 2023-24, undermining Ukraine's defence capacity.

The U.S.-Chinese strategic rivalry has created dilemmas for EaP countries as they struggle to attract investments and develop more rapidly. In Ukraine, a key example is the Chinese firm Skyrizon's investment in the Ukrainian defence company, Motor Sich. Under the Trump administration (2017-2021), U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Ukraine in an effort to prevent Skyrizon from acquiring Motor Sich. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of Commerce added Skyrizon to the Military End User list, arguing that the company was 'seeking to acquire intellectual property and technology to advance key military capabilities that threaten U.S. security.' Shortly after, the Ukrainian government announced plans to nationalise Motor Sich (Poita, 2023). In Georgia, the United States has encouraged U.S. companies to invest in the country's infrastructure. During the Trump administration, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo expressed hope in June 2019 that Georgia would complete the deepwater port project in Anaklia since it would strengthen the country's relations with 'free economies' and 'prevent Georgia from falling prey to Russian or Chinese economic influence.' However, after its Georgian partners were accused of money laundering, a prominent U.S. investor in the project pulled out in August of that year (Welt, 2019; Hess and Otarashvili, 2020).

The United States is not a major investor in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and trade ties are not especially significant. Nevertheless, connections among business and political elites have impacted foreign policy and domestic affairs on both sides of the Atlantic. Probably most notable was Ukraine's role in Trump's first impeachment trial in December 2019, over allegations that Trump had improperly sought the country's help to improve his re-election prospects, asking Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to reopen an investigation into the activities of Hunter Biden (Deyermund, 2023).

In the case of Georgia, there has been speculation that although the U.S. leadership did not support Saakashvili's military action in South Ossetia on 7 August 2008 aimed at countering Russia's creeping annexation, there is a real possibility that Georgia received encouragement from 'unofficial channels.' Indeed, Washington and Tbilisi communicate via 'various current and former government officials, lobbyists, and U.S./Georgia supporters ... [who] may have sent a very different message to the Georgian government.' (Cooley & Mitchell, 2009). Other authors, such as Dickinson (2021), describe the 2008 war as instigated by Russia, using South Ossetian separatists as proxies. This perspective appears more credible than the narrative of Saakashvili's simple attempt to regain control of lost territories. Russian forces had been stationed along the Georgian border for months, supporting increased shelling and provocations against Georgian peacekeepers and Georgian-populated villages, while waiting for an opportune moment to invade the neighboring country. These tactics later proved similar to those used in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

Pro-Ukraine lobbyists have also been very active in Washington. A July 2022 report from the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft revealed that lobbyists working for Ukrainian clients made over 13,000 political contacts during 2021. The main goals were to halt Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline and push for military support and potential NATO membership. On the other hand, Russian lobbyists in the United States were advocating the opposite, focusing primarily on moving Nord Stream 2 forward. After Russia's full-scale invasion, pro-Russian lobbyists were formally forced to stop their work (Freeman, 2022). However, there have been reports that a number of prominent right-wing media personalities in the United States allegedly received Russian funding in the runup to the 2024 election (Batey, 2024).

## FRAMING THE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF RUSSIA

### **Framing of Russian engagement in the Western Balkans**

The geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans involves a complex interplay of historical legacies, strategic interests, and regional dynamics. Russia's engagement in the region is rooted in historical ties and a desire to counter Western influence, particularly that of NATO and the EU. This competition is characterized by a combination of political, economic, and cultural strategies aimed at maintaining Russia's status as a major regional player.

From a theoretical perspective, Russia's approach can be seen through the lens of realist geopolitics, where power and influence are pursued to secure national interests and counter perceived threats from rival powers (Bechev, 2017). Russia's use of energy dependence, political alliances, and cultural affinity with Orthodox Christian populations exemplifies these tactics. This overall approach towards the Western Balkans is in accordance with what's been referred to

as Russia's 'imperial' strategic culture (Herd, 2022), which operates by leveraging historical spheres of influence. The region's historical ties to Russia, dating back to the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, provide a fertile ground for Moscow to exploit existing tensions and foster pro-Russian sentiments. This purported historical connection, however, should not be overstated: the rocky relations between the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, beginning with the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, are often overlooked. Consequently, the narrative of a 'Slavic Brothers' bond holds more sway in ideological terms than it does in historical reality. Russia's ideological narratives often serve as a means to project order and authority, even when the historical realities underlying these narratives are tenuous or contradictory (Lewis, D. 2020). In this, as in other fields, Russia 'punches above its weight' in the region (Bechev, 2017).

Politically, Russia's engagement today is marked by support for local leaders and parties that align with its interests. This includes fostering close relationships with figures like Milorad Dodik in Bosnia-Herzegovina and leveraging media influence to shape public opinion, often by relying on the amplifying factor of state-controlled or state-influenced media in the Western Balkans rather than through outright Russian-sponsored propaganda. Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council allows it to obstruct international initiatives that threaten its influence in the region (Headley, 2008). Similarly, good relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church and various far-right groups enable Russia to exert influence through non-state actors.

Economically, Russia's focus on the energy sector, particularly natural gas, serves as a tool for maintaining economic dependence and political leverage. The presence of state-connected actors in the energy trade enhances Russia's ability to build clientelistic networks and secure long-term influence (Owen et al. 2022; Prelec, 2020). Russia's control over energy resources and transit routes becomes a means of exerting power.

Culturally, Russia employs information manipulation and media influence to consolidate a pro-Russian constituency. This involves exploiting anti-Western sentiments and promoting narratives that resonate with local historical and religious identities. The use of media outlets, both Russian-funded and local, amplifies these messages, extending Russia's influence beyond its immediate political allies (Prelec, Tzifakis, and Bechev, 2023). This approach also enables a contribution to a general sense of chaos and disorder, and distrust in democratic institutions and the very notion of civil society, that help to move Putin closer to his aim of fundamentally re-aligning the global order away from the liberal post-WWII structures.

The EU's role as a geopolitical actor in the Western Balkans complicates Russia's efforts. The European Union is the dominant economic actor in the region, and all the Western Balkan countries trade exponentially more with the EU than with Russia. Similarly, the EU's normative power, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, contrasts with the perceived Russia's more transactional approach. European influence over the region is more stable and constant, and, unlike Russian influence, it has a powerful effect on all the Western Balkans countries. And finally, as long as the EU integration of the Western Balkans is delayed,

Russia can exploit the situation to disrupt the region's stability. It achieves this predominantly through political influence, strategic communication, and propaganda (Lange, 2017).

### **Framing of Russian engagement in Eastern Neighbourhood**

After the collapse of the USSR, in particular, since the consolidation of power by Vladimir Putin, Russia did not follow the path of reforms and transformation from an empire into a regional power, but set a strategic goal to regain the lost sphere of influence, called the “near abroad”. This goal implies denying the independent foreign policy of the EaP countries, since this could harm Russian state interests. It is necessary to talk specifically about the interests of the “state” since they are the ones that appear in the speeches of leaders and official documents. National interests are not the same as state interests, and they may not coincide. Moscow continues to see EaP countries as a buffer zone that separates Russia from hostile foreign alliances. From the Russian perspective, rather than an imperial or revisionist power, some local experts consider their country as a ‘restorative’ power, aiming to reclaim what is rightfully its own (Nuriyev, 2020).

Viewing foreign policy as a zero-sum game in which major powers compete for dominance, Moscow believes that if its neighbours ‘are not controlled by Russia, they are dominated by another, competing power’ (Jonavicius et al., 2019). As a result, Russia is strongly opposed to NATO and EU enlargement to the region and considers the existence of the EaP as a threat to its dominance.

By offering EaP countries an Association Agreement rather than an enhanced partnership and cooperation framework (found in the original Neighbourhood Policy), the EU is seen as pushing the countries toward a gradual disassociation from Russia (Zagorski, 2011). The free trade agreements with the EU create new barriers to commerce between EaP countries and Russia, conflicting with Moscow’s aim of bringing them into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Other aspects of the association agreements are also troubling for Russia, including energy cooperation and integration into the EU energy market.

While the use of soft power dominates the EU’s foreign policy toward the EaP region, Russia relies on a fusion of hard and soft power. Most fundamentally, the EU’s soft/normative power could not achieve its transformative goals in the region, while Russia continued deploying its hard power elements against EaP countries, as happened in the case of Ukraine. Protracted conflicts (which all but Belarus have faced) have been Russia’s main and most damaging tool in the EaP region, as Moscow supports separatism while at the same time taking part in mediation. Nevertheless, Russia’s policy of aggression can also contribute to a weakening of influence, as is the case with Ukraine since 2014. (Legucka and Włodkowska, 2021).

Spreading false information is another mechanism commonly used by Russia, serving to undermine social trust. Moscow also uses the Russian Orthodox Church to spread its influence in

the EaP region (de Waal et al, 2024). Weaponising dependencies, Russia has taken advantage of its dominance in energy supply to threaten its neighbours with cut offs, while also imposing travel bans and import restrictions. (Legucka and Włodkowska, 2021; Jonavicius et al., 2019)

It has been widely documented that political and, previously, business elites in Russia have played a significant role in the shaping of Russian foreign policy in its ‘near abroad’, not just in policy formation but also in policy implementation, always aligned with their survival goals and self-interests. Although caution must be exercised not to perceive these groups as monolithic actors, we could generally categorise them as below. Some of the most influential groups when it comes to the formation of Russian foreign policy in the EaP are the ‘siloviki’, who are people coming from the secret service and the military-industrial complex, forming Putin’s close circle of advisors and colleagues and the ‘oligarchs’, largely linked to individuals controlling strategic assets, such as energy companies. A third notable influential group is the Russian Orthodox Church.

Coinciding with the Putin administration and his background in the KGB, the rise of the ‘siloviki’ has been linked to notions of ‘militocracy’ by creating an administration with individuals with a force-structure background. Nonetheless, the literature indicates that they are a diverse group with links to Soviet era elites (for example see Kryshatanovskaya and White, 2003; Benz, 2006; Rivera and Rivera, 2019; Snegovaya and Petrov, 2022). As a result, notions such as sovereignty and anti-western sentiment, the concept of Eurasianism and geopolitical realism, all characteristics of Russian foreign policy, have been highlighted, especially after 2012 where there was an intermediate ‘liberal’ period under Medvedev (Lewis, C., 2020). For example, Götz and Staun (2022) discuss Russia’s strategic culture in the case of the 2022 war on Ukraine and identify two major strands of narratives that the elites share: (i) the perceived vulnerability towards the west and (ii) the entitlement of Russia’s influence over the post-Soviet space. They showcase the intertwined interests of the elites by highlighting that ‘strategic culture helps to account for the conditions that made Russia’s military assault on Ukraine possible in a way that links international-level pressures with individual-level decision-making’. The influence of the ‘siloviki’ inside the EaP countries has also been researched (for example, see Kuzio, 2012 for Ukraine under Yanukovic).

Analysis of the ‘oligarchs’ has been mainly based on state-business relations divided into two periods; the Yeltsin period, where the state was controlled by business and the Putin period, where security forces took over business. Yakovlev (2006) pointed to two basic strategies of Russian businesses during this period of time: isolation from, and close cooperation with the state. The Ukrainian gas crisis triggered the resurgence of more state-business relations literature, focusing on the power of the Kremlin over its businesses and their use as foreign policy tools (for example, see Orttung 2006; Sakwa 2007; Hanson 2009). As a result, the Yeltsin era oligarchs’ power declined and the few who remained, linked their interests to the Putin administration in the service of growing the Russian economy (Brancaleone, 2021; Rutland, 2023). Indeed, in many cases assets such as energy companies, passed under the control of the ‘siloviki’. The use of energy by Russia as leverage against Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has

been widely documented (for example, Hedenskog and Larsson, 2007; Rutland, 2008; Newman, 2011; Sauvageot, 2020). However, with the diversification of energy routes and the emergence of Azerbaijani oil and gas as a competitor to Russian supplies, Georgia has significantly reduced its dependence on Russia over the past decade. Since 2022, Moldova has also shifted away from Russian gas supplies, thanks to the Iasi-Ungheni pipeline.

Although Russian foreign policy is mostly based on ‘hard power’, ‘soft power’ tools reproducing dominant narratives linked to identity, culture, and religion also play an important role in its strategy in the ‘near abroad’, represented by the third influential group: the Russian Orthodox Church, which in fact is an integral part of the Russian state. Alongside links to the autocephalous churches in Georgia, Moldova, and – in the past – in Ukraine, the Church also maintains significant ties to separatist territories such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and before their annexation, Crimea, Donbas, etc. (for example, see Conroy, 2015). In simplistic terms, as the topic is much more complicated, these narratives are mainly tied to conservative/traditionalist views, anti-Western and anti-EU sentiment, anti-liberal/democratic development, etc. (for example, see Hudson, 2019).

## FRAMING THE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF CHINA

### **Framing of Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans**

China's involvement in the Western Balkans represents a different facet of geopolitical competition, characterized by economic engagement and strategic investments. Unlike Russia, China does not have extensive historical and cultural ties to the region, and its approach is primarily driven by economic interests aligned with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At least on the surface, this strategy is less about countering specific geopolitical rivals and more about integrating the region into China's global economic network.

China's approach can be analyzed through the lens of economic statecraft, where economic tools are used to achieve strategic objectives, while also serving as part of a broader, long-term effort to showcase an alternative mode of governance that appeals to elites who favour systems that consolidate unaccountable power and minimise oversight. The focus on infrastructure financing and large-scale investments aims to create economic dependencies that enhance China's influence. This is evident in projects like the construction of highways and the acquisition of key industrial assets, which serve both economic and strategic purposes (Grgić, 2019). For example, Chinese firms have been involved in constructing significant infrastructure projects, such as the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro and the Belgrade-Budapest railway. It is worth noting that this softer approach focused on a more peaceful achievement of goals through the economy in a distant region is in line with prescriptions stemming from both Confucian-Menicean and

Parabellum approaches to the Chinese strategic culture, as the country achieves its strategic goals, but does so without resorting to more confrontational approach as it would not be neither necessary nor productive (Johnston, 1995).

Politically, China's engagement is facilitated through the 14+1 cooperation platform, which includes both EU and non-EU countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This platform allows China to extend its influence by fostering bilateral and multilateral relationships that can be leveraged for broader geopolitical gains. The 14+1 format not only serves as a mechanism for promoting Chinese investments, but also as a diplomatic tool that enhances China's soft power in the region.

Besides its lending power for infrastructural projects, China has extended its influence through soft power mechanisms. Confucius Institutes are a prominent tool of China's soft power strategy, established worldwide to promote the Chinese language and culture. By the end of March 2023, these institutes were operational in every country except Kosovo. Their creation often involves memoranda of understanding, the construction of schools, and the initiation of academic exchanges. However, critics, including experts and Western security services, have raised concerns about these institutes. They argue that the institutes function as vehicles for Chinese propaganda, emphasizing a positive image of China while neglecting or downplaying critical political and societal issues. Another mechanism for applying soft power is the media presence (Blue Europe, 2024). This dynamic was most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Serbian state-aligned media prominently amplified pro-China narratives and pushed the notion of "Chinese brothers" (Tzifakis and Prelec, 2021).

Moreover, China's involvement in the Western Balkans can be seen as part of its broader strategy to establish a foothold in Europe, thereby extending its influence over a region traditionally influenced by the EU and NATO. By financing infrastructure and development projects, China offers an alternative to Western financial institutions, which often impose stringent conditions. This has made Chinese investments particularly attractive to Western Balkan countries that are in dire need of modernization and development but lack the financial means to achieve these goals independently.

### **Framing of Chinese engagement in Eastern Neighbourhood**

After an 'Opening Up' foreign policy cycle in 1979-2009, China entered its 'Great Power Diplomacy' period around 2009 (Flint and Xiaotong, 2019). The current cycle corresponds with the appointment of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012 and the 2013 launch of One Belt, One Road, later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under Xi's leadership, China has not only transformed internally, but has also strengthened its international standing through significant foreign direct investment around the world. The BRI is the centerpiece of China's current foreign policy, combining economic aims with increased political and security commitments. With the aim of

managing China's industrial overcapacity and increasing access to global commodities and new technologies, the BRI offers loans for infrastructure construction projects that have raised the country's global influence (Flint and Xiaotong, 2019).

In terms of competition, China has stepped forward to fill the void amid signs of the United States' decline as a hegemonic power, economic weakness in the EU, and the emergence of multipolarity. Some observers argued that China did not initially appear to be attempting to disrupt the rules of the capitalist world economy or to reorganise global geopolitical structures, but rather sought to operate within the current system to 'ensure domestic stability and economic growth' (Flint and Xiaotong, 2019). Despite a foreign policy approach that is dominated by soft power, some contradictions have emerged, amid rising assertiveness and aggression. (Jain and Chakrabarti, 2023).

In regard to the European Partnership (EaP) countries, Beijing continues 'to recognise Russia's privileged position in the region', while Russia, in turn, views the BRI as 'conducive to the creation of a multipolar world,' helping to counterbalance U.S. hegemony (Nuriyev, 2020); in fact, to destroy the existing international order, where the US dominates. China takes a hierarchical approach toward Former Soviet countries, and its foreign policy consists of a system of bilateral partnerships that are ranked according to a range of concerns, including border protection, securing of strategic resources (energy, metals, agriculture), and access to markets (Braga and Sangar, 2020). The BRI has broadened the scope of China's security concerns, and participation in BRI projects can increase a country's importance for China. Beijing's model in the region consists of 'intense promotion of the BRI, complete with big promises to invest in many different sectors,' serving to improve infrastructure and increase economic growth. However, promised investments into EaP states often fail to materialise, instead remaining in the planning phase (Nuriyev, 2020).

Of the six EaP countries, Belarus has the strongest relationship with China, and the country plays a key role in the BRI's land route that stretches through Russia and into Europe. Among the three EaP countries considered here, Ukraine has had a 'strategic partnership' with China since June 2011, based primarily on resources such as agriculture and iron ore. China has also expressed interest in investments in Ukraine's energy sector and export-oriented manufacturing facilities, as well as cooperation in space exploration and defence equipment (Gerasymchuk and Poita, 2018). Although Ukrainian exports to China have soared, other aspects of the relationship have stagnated. Crimea was initially expected to be a BRI transit hub, but Russia's 2014 annexation of the peninsula halted those plans. In 2017, plans were revived for an alternate route, and a bilateral agreement was signed. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 put those plans on hold once again.

Moldova is still considered a non-strategic partner of China and is not expected to play an important role in the BRI. In the case of Georgia, although a bilateral free trade agreement with China took effect in 2018 – marking the first of its kind in Eurasia – the country was until recently a non-strategic partner of China. However, since 2021, the Georgian Dream leadership



has increasingly turned toward China for infrastructure projects. China and Georgia agreed to a strategic partnership in July 2023, laying out a vision for expanded bilateral economic and political cooperation, including BRI initiatives (Avdaliani, 2023). Georgia's strategic importance to China has increased amid Russia's war in Ukraine, given its location along the Middle Corridor, a trade route between China and Europe that bypasses Russia. Goods transported along the Middle Corridor can either go via the Black Sea or overland through Turkey, but either way they pass through Georgia. In order to fully support the Black Sea route, Georgia's infrastructure requires upgrading, most notably through the construction of a deep-sea port. Although U.S. and EU-based companies had previously expressed interest in investing in the Anaklia Black Sea Deep Water Port, those plans fell apart. The Georgian government announced in May 2024 that a Chinese consortium had submitted the sole bid to build the project (RFE/RL, 2024a) and won it, and the final decision goes after all conditions of the proposal will be clarified (Agenda.ge, 2024).

From the perspective of the EaP countries, partnership with China is an attractive way to boost investment and raise living standards, while also reducing dependence on Russia. Chinese funding also allows the countries to avoid oversight from the International Monetary Fund, which tends to impose stricter requirements before offering loans. Nevertheless, given the tensions between China and the United States and EU, EaP countries have to tread carefully when welcoming Chinese investments and assistance, especially if they aim to eventually join the EU and NATO. Indeed, Chinese loans and investments tend to be non-transparent and could increase technological dependence on China, possibly resulting in a slower accession process (Poita, 2023). Although the EU's June 2016 China strategy emphasises the need to 'ensure that any Chinese involvement in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods helps reinforce rules-based governance and regional security,' there are significant risks. Countries with higher governance standards are better equipped to evaluate the true costs and benefits of Chinese investments. Ideally, any future infrastructure projects to receive Chinese funding would correspond with the list of priority investments already agreed upon under the transport component of the EaP (Makocki, 2017).

Beijing's economic influence in the EaP region has been accompanied by efforts to encourage the countries to approach China independently of the United States and the EU. To spread those narratives, China has created media outlets and expert organisations that publish positive information about China and call for closer cooperation (Havlíček and Yelisseyu, 2021). For example, the EaP countries have been urged to refrain from criticism of China's human rights record and the country's tensions with Taiwan. In 2021, China reportedly threatened to cancel a delivery of COVID-19 vaccine doses to Kyiv, pressuring Ukraine to withdraw its signature from a joint UN statement condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang (Poita, 2023).

Despite the CPC's dominance in the country, China's foreign policy decisions—including the BRI—are viewed as being influenced by a variety of actors, including the Communist Party, government ministries, state-owned enterprises, provisional governors, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was established as an alternative to the World

Bank (Flint and Xiaotong, 2019). One study evaluates the extent to which Chinese state-business elites are integrated transnationally, finding that the state apparatus and the CPC remain a ‘continued and pervasive influence.’ The CPC is still the main source of power in Chinese society, and corporate managers are committed to ‘directing China’s transnationalizing capital to commercial values on the one hand, and the values and interests of the state on the other.’ (de Graaff and van Apeldoorn, 2017).

## FRAMING THE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE CASE OF TURKEY

### **Framing of Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans**

While Turkey’s ties to the Balkans have been strong ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey’s foreign policy became increasingly assertive in this region following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. The key architect of this enhanced engagement was Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as Foreign Minister (2009–2014) and then as Prime Minister (2014–2016). In his 2001 book *STRATEGIC DEPTH: TURKEY’S INTERNATIONAL POSITION* (STRATEJİK DERİNLİK), he lays out his vision of Turkey as a pivotal country in Afro-Euroasian area. For Turkey, Balkans play a crucial role as the crossroads to Europe and as one of the key regions where Turkey should use its historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties to enhance influence (Davutoğlu, 2001). Moreover, he argued that Turkey should have zero problems with its neighbours (including Western Balkans) and play a role of regional stabilizer.

Accordingly, in the years ahead, Turkey’s presence in the region strengthened in the areas of religion, culture, and economy, particularly in countries with sizeable Muslim populations such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo (Petrović and Reljić, 2011). Turkey exercised its influence in the region through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Yunus Emre Institute and the Hizmet Movement, until its leader fell out of favor with the regime following the failed coup attempt in 2016<sup>8</sup>. Through its “mosque diplomacy” and patronage of Islamic institutions Turkey not only fostered its own version of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam but also projected

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<sup>8</sup> For years, even before the AKP’s ascent to power, Turkey helped spread the Hizmet movement in the Western Balkans through NGOs, high schools, universities, magazines, foundations and cultural and religion centers. While AKP and regime worsened their relations in 2011, the rivalry peaked when Erdoğan accused Fethullah Gülen of orchestrating the 2016 failed coup and labeled his movement a terrorist organization. Since then, Turkey has pressured Western Balkan states to crack down on schools and extradite Gülenists, with varying degrees of compliance.

its soft power (Tol, 2019). Also, through TİKA Turkey helped renovate many historic buildings and monuments from the Ottoman period especially in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo. However, Turkey's cultural influence also disseminated through other means, such as hugely popular TV soap operas also known as "dizi" (Gündüz, 2020).

Turkey also stepped up its economic footprint in the region. It signed free trade agreements with North Macedonia (1999), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2003), Albania (2008), Serbia (2009), Montenegro (2010), and Kosovo (2013). Accordingly, Turkey's trade with the Western Balkans rose from \$435 million in 2002 to \$3 billion in 2016 (Weise, 2018). Between 2007 and 2018, Turkish investments in the region quadrupled, focusing mostly on banking and infrastructure (Szpala, 2018). Turkish banks such as Turkish Economy Bank, Halk Bank, Ziraat Bank, and İşbank made acquisitions and opened branches across the region. Turkey also made major investments in the infrastructure and construction sector (e.g. Vermice-Pristina-Merdare highway, Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, highways in Albania) civil aviation infrastructure (e.g. Pristina International Airport, Skopje International Airport), education (e.g. International Balkan University, International University of Sarajevo) energy, tourism and the textile industry (Ejdus, 2017).

In the sphere of politics, Erdoğan has been personally committed through frequent diplomatic visits showcasing not only his personal commitment to the Balkan Muslims but to the stability of the region more broadly. Turkey supported diplomatically Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo both in NATO and other international fora. Turkey also remained engaged in various peacekeeping operations and as a member of the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a NATO member, Turkey supported the development of the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. As a diplomatic actor, Turkey also invested efforts in resolving regional disputes through two trilateral initiatives: one with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, and the other with Croatia and Serbia (Szpala, 2022). As a result of this initiative, the Istanbul Declaration was signed in 2010, committing to peace and stability in the region.

Turkey's ascendance in the region started to get even more religious and ethnic character after 2011 due to the authoritarian turn at home, growing estrangement with the EU but also the rise of new geopolitical challenges in the Middle East (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2020; Vračić, 2016). This was also the time when the AKP leadership started to fall out with the Hizmet movement, peaking with the failed coup, leading to attempts from Ankara to cripple the movement in the region. Other limitations are its exclusive focus on religion, ignorance of local actors, exaggeration of its own power, and de-Europeanizing tendencies in its domestic politics (Demirtaş, 2015). Overall, Turkey's economic clout in the region remains small in comparison to that of the EU. Most importantly, Ankara struggles to translate its increased social and cultural footprint into political influence (Ekinci, 2014).

These developments have inspired growing scholarship, revolving around three key debates. One debate is about Turkey's "return to the Balkans." While many scholars repeat this claim, others

point out that Turkey never left the region. Bechev, for instance, sheds light on the long history of Turkey's presence in the region, from the Balkan Entente in 1934, the Balkan Pact in 1953 with Greece and Yugoslavia, to its diplomatic support of the Balkan Muslims in the 1990s and its post-Dayton efforts in regional stabilization in concert with NATO and the EU (Bechev, 2012). Finally, some scholars acknowledge the continued presence of Turkey in the region but point out the novelties arising with the AKP government. This primarily concerns their focus on religious ties, which was irrelevant until Turgut Özal time in late 1980s (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2020: 227).

Another debate is whether Turkey acts as a partner or a competitor to the EU in the Western Balkans. Some scholars focus on the divergences and Turkey's unilateral tendencies under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Bechev, 2012). Others, on the other hand, argue that these claims are overstated (Saatçioğlu, 2019) and point out that Turkey is not a competitor but rather a strategic partner of the EU (Dursun Özkanza, 2016).

Another point of contention in the literature is the issue of neo-Ottomanism. Some scholars and policymakers use this term to describe Turkey's foreign policy towards the region, which builds upon the historical and cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. While the concept may be treated with sympathy by some Turkish policymakers and Balkan Muslims, it generated a backlash among non-Muslim nationalists, as most countries in the region constructed their identities in opposition to centuries of Ottoman domination (Rašidagić and Zesova, 2020). Some authors claim that this concept, reflecting neo-imperialist expansionist aspirations, is the driving force of Turkey's foreign policy in the region (Tanasković, 2010). Other scholars argue that these claims are part of the nationalist imaginary (Dević, 2016) and as such inflated out of realistic proportions, and that Turkey's role in the region is not only much more cooperative and benevolent (Ekinci, 2014), but also driven by pragmatic interests, globalization, and regional shifts (Bechev, 2012).

### **Framing of Turkish engagement in Eastern Neighbourhood**

Analyses of Turkey's foreign policy in the EaP area tend to focus on the balancing of relations between Turkey and the EU, on the one hand, and bilateral relations between Ankara and the six EaP countries, on the other, including Turkey's close ally Azerbaijan. From the point of the Turkish strategic culture, Turkey as "a founding member of almost all European institutions including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, among others" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024b), serves as a civilizational bridge between Europe and Asia, and aims to combine integrative features of both neighboring spaces. The Organization of Turkic States, "which embraces the civilizational roots of the Turkic World" has five member states, including Azerbaijan, and "expands the institutional basis of Turkish foreign relations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024b). This initiative, which has created excitement in the Turkic world, will be

carried to further integration stages. Full membership of the European Union also remains as a strategic priority (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2024b).

This priority expresses itself in Ole Frahm and Katharina Hoffmann work entitled “Let’s stay friends! The potential for EU-Turkey cooperation in the Eastern Partnership area” (2019). The authors argue that “in times of increasing conflict, the European Union (EU) and Turkey should continue at least a minimum of cooperation by shifting the focus to novel areas that are not as politically charged” (Frahm and Hoffmann, 2019). They consider the EaP area as the one where both Turkey and EU could have cooperation to “stay friends”. Frahm and Hoffmann (2019) are quite optimistic as to the merging policies of the EU and Turkey in the EaP zone, where Ankara is closely connected to Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine (not accidentally, those four are GUAM member-countries) as a well-established regional player with close economic, cultural, historical, and migration relations. The authors believe that “non-state actors from Turkey should be actively involved in cooperation, particularly businesspeople” as this “would be advantageous to the nations of the Eastern Partnership as well as strengthen ties with pro-European groups in Turkey” (Frahm and Hoffmann, 2019).

It is essential to understand Turkey’s politics in the EaP through its strategic vision of zones of conflict there. The unresolved Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region stood in front of Ankara’s strategic behaviour in the South Caucasus. Pierre Mirel argues that Turkey’s armed support for the successful Azerbaijani offensive in 2023, allowed it “to gain a solid foothold in what Erdogan considers a natural zone of influence” (Mirel, 2021). The territorial success of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh strengthened the positions of Turkey in the southern part of the EaP especially in contrast with the weakened Russian positions there. Amid Russia’s war in Ukraine, it gave additional benefits for Turkey in its bilateral relations with Moscow as it made clear that Russia has to respect Turkey’s regional interests. Examining Turkey’s geopolitical role in the EaP also requires considering EU-Turkey energy relations. Ten years ago, Tolga Demiryol (2014) described Turkey as an energy corridor between the EU and the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian states, and she argued that the country, consequently, should be considered a “strategic asset for European energy security” (Demiryol, 2014). However, “despite robust incentives for cooperation” “the EU-Turkey energy partnership failed to meet mutual expectations” (Demiryol, 2014). Partly, both the EU and Turkey may be blamed for this result. In 2024, Demiryol’s explanation still holds: “the variation in energy needs of the Member States prevents the EU from acting in unison in external energy policy”, when “Turkey also prioritizes its own energy security, particularly in its relations with suppliers, which undermines cooperation with the EU” (Demiryol, 2014). Not coincidentally, Ankara did not introduce economic sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and continues its energy cooperation with Moscow in the Black Sea. This contradicts the EU’s current strategy to minimize Russia’s involvement in the European energy market. Another one of Demiryol’s conclusions that is still valid is that “Turkish decision makers are convinced that energy cooperation warrants palpable progress in Turkey’s accession while most EU actors appear hesitant to establish a direct connection between energy and accession” (Demiryol, 2014). Notably, the European Green Party welcomed launching the EaP in 2009 with regards to Turkey,

stating that “the inclusion of Turkey in the context of the Eastern Partnership projects would be a positive stabilising factor of importance to Europe as a whole, and would also promote in the harmonisation of relations among the Black Sea region countries” (European Greens, 2009).

Turkish foreign policy in the EaP region has also been studied as part of Ankara’s activity in relation to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Analyses at the time by Özgür Ünal Eriş (2007), Seyfi Taşhan (2007), Deniz Devrim and Evelina Schulz (2009), Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Nathalie Tocci (2015) were quite enthusiastic about the new Turkish role in the Black Sea region, where three EU instruments – the EaP, the Black Sea Synergy, and ENP itself – embraced all six countries of the EaP in the Black Sea region (especially since the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007). Turkey had to become an important economic and security partner for the EU in the wider Black Sea region to make the EU’s southeast neighborhood more sustainable. Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci (2015) treated Turkey as a powerful regional player that can effectively use its soft power resources to significantly help to remedy the weakness of the EU presence in this region. “In many respects, Turkey may be viewed as ‘doing the European Neighbourhood Policy’ for the EU”, as it “could help prevent the region’s sources of instability from spilling over into the EU” (Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci, 2015). Even just a few years before relations between the EU and Turkey worsened, Jakub Wodka and Sarah Kuzmich (2013) highlighted a strong role of Turkey for the EU amid dramatic geopolitical changes on the external borders of the EU: “Along with the Arab Spring and the eastern neighbourhood gradually drifting towards “soft” authoritarianism, crisis-struck Europe is challenged with a fundamental and in fact existential question, “whither thou goest without Turkey?” prompting a new debate about the need to revive the membership negotiations”. They were revived in 2015, but since 2018 this question is still not answered despite further dramatic shifts in European security in 2022.

A cooling trend in relations between Brussels and Ankara prompted the latter to find, if not an alternative to European integration, then an alternative leadership for Turkey in the Balkans and eastward. Some critics even warned that “the geopolitical awakening of the EU after the pandemic crisis calls for the advancement of a strategy that would manage to deal with Turkey’s assertive and revisionist behavior” (Tsakonas, 2020). At the same time, the countries of the EaP could benefit from the Turkish “Zero Problems Policy” and from better relations between Turkey and the EU, allowing both to concentrate on their common efforts to end Russia’s war in Ukraine and bring stability to the region. Strategically, in its policy towards the countries of the EaP, Ankara balances its responsibilities as a NATO member with the rest of Turkey’s national interests, which sometimes may contradict the general strategy of not only NATO on the Black Sea region but also of the EU towards articulating its EaP instrument for the post-Soviet space.

## EU FOREIGN POLICY AND MILITARY ACTORNESS: INSTRUMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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### INTRODUCTION

The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed significant, though uneven, progress in European foreign and security policy cooperation. After the failure of the 1952 European Defence Community, which aimed to create a military dimension of European integration, the European Community refrained from engaging directly in security and defence matters during the Cold War. An external agenda had developed mainly focusing on managing the political effects of the vast net of trade relations that the European Community enjoyed. Geopolitics was neither part of the evolving policy field of foreign policy nor the liberal post-cold war agenda. However, since the early 1990s, the EU has gradually emerged as a security actor, evolving through several key temporal themes: **actorness**, **austerity**, **protection**, **defence**, **power** and **autonomy**.

The theme of **European actorness** in foreign and security policy was triggered with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. "The hour of Europe has come," declared Jacques Poos, the Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, who, as President of the Foreign Ministers' Council, led European crisis management efforts at the onset of the Yugoslav crisis in June 1991. Unfortunately, Europe proved unprepared for the challenge (Glaurdic, 2020). The Balkan conflicts of the 1990s rather underscored the inability of European states to manage crises in their own region. Concurrently, NATO's post-Cold War role was uncertain as its traditional adversary had dissolved. European crisis response capabilities initially developed through the Western European Union (WEU) but were transferred to the EU, in the form of the Petersberg tasks, around the turn of the millennium. Under the leadership of High Representative Javier Solana, the EU enhanced its crisis management capacities in the early 21st century.

A second key theme in European security cooperation has been **austerity**. The financial crisis of 2008–2009 affected nearly every European state and strained defence budgets. Joint investments and a more efficient defence sector were promoted as essential for maintaining Europe's credibility in international security. As then HR/VP Catherine Ashton remarked in 2012, "It's the only pragmatic way forward" (Ashton, 2012).

However, the leitmotif of austerity began to shift following Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as increased regional instability in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, leading to concerns over **protection**. Security threats such as hybrid warfare, terrorism, and migration—exacerbated by globalisation—shifted European priorities. Focus turned towards securing Europe's borders and addressing perceived threats from outside the EU. This approach was encapsulated by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's 2016 call for "A Europe that protects," (Juncker, 2016) a theme that persisted in subsequent years.

By the late 2010s, the focus on protection was increasingly complemented by an emphasis on **power**. The rise of China and the protectionist policies of the Trump administration prompted Europe to confront new geopolitical and geo-economic realities. Brexit – the departure of the UK from the EU – further motivated the remaining members to advance integration and remove barriers to greater security cooperation. Under the leadership of HR/VP Federica Mogherini and her successor Josep Borrell, who emphasized the need for Europe to “speak the language of power” (Borrell, 2019) the EU rapidly expanded its security instruments and mechanisms with the aim to project power.

Finally, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its attack on the European security order have unleashed a new momentum for European foreign and security policy cooperation. This includes close collaboration with the U.S. on sanctions and export controls, the initiation of a new era of enlargement, and the comprehensive utilization of various post-2016 instruments for defence cooperation to support Ukraine and enhance Europe's defence capabilities. Twenty-five years after the establishment of the Common Security and Defence Policy as a small-scale crisis management function, the EU is now providing **defence** in the broader sense of the term. The inclusion of a Defence Commissioner in the second Commission of von der Leyen illustrates this development.

Throughout this development, the overarching goal of achieving greater European **autonomy** in security has persisted. Whether through enhancing actor capabilities, pursuing economic efficiency, ensuring protection, or projecting power, or defending Europe, the ambition has been to reduce reliance on external actors, particularly the United States. In recent years, this ambition has intensified, with initial goals of small-scale intervention evolving into broader aims of strategic autonomy and sovereignty in key sectors. The concept of European sovereignty has even been proposed as a comprehensive vision for self-sufficiency across multiple societal domains. (Romanova, 2021)

Nevertheless, the evolution of EU security cooperation has not fully unified European states. Divergent threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and varying levels of urgency in responding to new security challenges have driven some countries and regional groupings to pursue security collaboration outside of EU frameworks. Challenges to European security cooperation remain and the path forward will, as in the last 25 years, be heavily influenced by overarching trends in the transatlantic relationship.

The war in Ukraine has challenged the foundational principles of the EU as a security provider. Its eventual resolution will undoubtedly shape the future of the Union, particularly as Ukraine progresses toward EU membership while its NATO membership remains uncertain, leaving the question of future security arrangements unresolved. European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has underscored defence as a priority and a key sector in completing the single market (European Commission, 2024c; European Commission 2024d). Undoubtedly, both external and internal pressures will position the development of a European Defence Union as a central pillar of European integration in the years ahead.



## UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES

The European Union's defense and security arrangements, as well as their underlying rationale, have undergone substantial changes over time. These developments have been the subject of academic inquiry from a broad range of perspectives. This literature review summarises the most important theoretical developments and empirical findings in the area.

In general, the study of EU foreign, security, and defence policy has evolved alongside the policies itself, reflecting both changes in the object of study and the prevailing trends and preferred schools of thought at the time of writing.

### *Early theoretical development on EU security and defence policy*

The birth and early development of the policy field have been thoroughly covered by integration theory and IR theory.

Realist IR-thinking, with Morgenthau (1967) as an early example, held that rational unitary nation states seeking to maximise their self-interest and military security shaped European integration. Forging a common EU security and defence policy would only be possible insofar that the member states considered the substance of the arrangements to be in accordance with their ever-changing self-interests. The prospects for advanced and sustainable integration were thus bleak, according to the realists.

Intergovernmental scholars like Stanley Hoffman (1966), built on but nuanced realist positions. Hoffman distinguishes between *low politics* (taxes, economic policy, welfare) and *high politics* (security, defence, foreign policy) and argued that the logic of integration takes on different forms in these domains. According to his strand of thinking, EU member states would be more willing to adapt to norms in the former sphere whereas foreign policy and security matters would require more distinct goals and processes. Updating the intergovernmental perspective, Andrew Moravcsik (1998) emphasised that the EU is an intergovernmental organisation whose policy arrangements evolve only when member states deem them to enhance their influence.

The institutional dimension of cooperation has been examined through various new institutional perspectives, including historical institutionalist scholars who focus on path dependencies in EU security policy (Fritzsche, 2021), rational choice studies that analyse the interest matrix involved in the launch of specific missions (Wagner, 2003) and sociological institutionalists offering constructivist explanations of how actors internalize norms by way of 'Brusselisation' (Menon, 2011; Merand, 2012; Breuer, 2012).

As the policy field resulted in a substantial array of diplomatic and security engagements, the ‘practice’ turn made its mark also here, studying for example the everyday policy making both at headquarters and in the field (for an overview Bremberg et al., 2022).

As the policy fields have developed in relatively distinct phases that incrementally has strengthened the EU as an actor, theories inspired by psychological development have lately been utilised to analyse the maturation process of the EU as a foreign and security policy actor. recent example is the special issue on *Zeitenwende in European Security*’ (Maurer, Raube & Whitman, 2024) where the authors explore what a mature EU foreign and security actor might look like. Another example is Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen’s (2018) research on how ontological (in)security affects EU populations and their perception of the Unions capacity to face these threats.

While the scholarly efforts above either offer overarching and general explanations to development or heavily specific illustrations of the diffusion of norms and practices that effect and result from EU foreign and security policy, one middle range explanatory framework is that of EU actorness. This approach has been used with success to measure and gauge the performance of the EU and its instruments in relation to internal and external factors (for an overview, see Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019).

### **Analyzing EU defense and security actorness**

The actorness approach discussed above is well placed to structure the analysis in this report. EU scholars have suggested a variety of more or less specific attributes that would give the EU the capacity to be a purposeful actor in world affairs. (Sjöstedt, 1977; Koops, 2011) These attributes range from material resources to institutional solutions, decision-making procedures and common values as well as favourable external conditions. For the purpose of this task, we depart from the basic assumption that effective EU action is a function of cohesion, capabilities, and context (as elaborated in Fägersten 2014, which inspired the following passages). For these three variables, the geopolitical turbulence since 2016 can be assumed to have unleashed push as well as pull factors on EU foreign and security policy.

**Cohesion** denotes the ability of key EU stakeholders, including both member states and institutions, to collaborate in pursuit of a unified objective. This cohesion hinges on the presence of sufficiently aligned interests, values, and threat perceptions—or at the very least, the perception of such alignment (Ekengren and Engelbrekt, 2006; Groen, Niemann and Oberthür, 2012; Brattberg and Rhinard, 2013). It is further supported by decision-making mechanisms that allow for cooperative outcomes even in the absence of full consensus. However, cohesion may be weakened by conflicts that arise both at the horizontal level (between member states, institutions, and agencies) and at the vertical level (between national capitals and EU institutions in Brussels)

Indications of changes in cohesion brought about by the external geopolitical situation could be:

- Member state and/or institutional preferences have changed and are now more or less similar/compatible.
- The policy domain has become more conducive to issue-linkage and package deals, enhancing the ability of EU member states to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.
- Decision-making procedures have been changed to improve decision-making ability, for example, by moving from unanimity to qualified majority voting or majority voting.

**Capabilities** encompass both material resources—such as economic funds and crisis management equipment—and institutional resources, including procedures for implementation and enforcement (Ekengren and Engelbrekt, 2006). In essence, an actor's ability to act depends not only on access to the necessary resources but also on the capacity to effectively apply them "to a particular problem in a reasonably direct, adaptive, and swift way" (Brattberg and Rhinard, 2013). For a more detailed discussion and definitions of the concept of actorness, see Bretherton and Vogler (2006).

Signs of changes in capabilities within the security policy domain, driven by current geopolitical turbulence, may include one or a combination of the following conditions:

- Member states and/or EU institutions establish new joint or pooled instruments, mechanisms and deployable resources.
- New practices or decision-making procedures (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019) enable the EU to utilize existing capabilities in innovative ways.

**Context**, in turn, refers to the external environment that either enables or constrains EU action. This includes variables such as external events and ideas, the objectives of other actors, recognition by counterparts, and the EU's authority to act within the international system. Scholars have debated whether context should be considered part of the concept of 'actorness' or treated as a separate factor (for differing perspectives, see Brattberg and Rhinard, 2013; Groen & Niemann, 2012 and Rhinard & Sjöstedt 2019). In the latter view, the external context—or 'opportunity structure'—conditions actorness and, when combined with it, contributes to overall effectiveness or goal attainment (Groen, Niemann and Oberthür, 2012).

For the purpose of this task, the context will be evaluated as to what extent external geopolitical pressure will result in:

- Increased or decreased external demand for foreign and security policy measures and tools deployed by the EU, as articulated by the EU Council and Commission (e.g., those outlined in the Strategic Compass).
- Changes in how external actors and powers recognize the EU as a legitimate actor and/or partner within a specific policy domain.

## MAKING IT WORK: THE INSTRUMENTS OF EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN TIMES OF TURBULENCE

Once again, EU security and defence policy finds itself at a time of geopolitical transition. The post-World War II shift from Europe-centric multipolarity to Cold War bipolarity left the Union without a security role. Instead, it was the transition from Cold War bipolarity to US hegemony that gave birth to EU security and defence policy: the fall of the Soviet Union made the geopolitical landscape less charged, while a range of suppressed frictions surfaced, calling for regional crisis management capacity. At the same time, the US, both through its militarily superiority and its focus elsewhere, inspired the Europeans to increase their capabilities.

Today, we are once again experiencing a period of transition, as US hegemony gives way to a world where power and economic growth are spread among a multitude of actors. China and its allies challenge US superiority globally, while Russia continues the aggression in Ukraine and attack on the European security order. European security provision is again being called for, but this time in a far more geopolitical context than the smaller-scale crisis management paradigm that gave birth to the policy field 25 years ago.

As noted in the introduction to this report, the mid-2010s witnessed a significant surge in the development of strategies and instruments within the domain of EU foreign and security policy. Internally, a long-standing ambition to update the European Security Strategy into a Global Strategy culminated, after years of think tank deliberations, in the EU Global Strategy of 2016. Externally, the first Trump administration cast doubt on the integrity of NATO's Article 5 and the U.S. commitment to Europe, prompting a renewed push for strategic autonomy—a concept that reemerged in the EU Global Strategy. Brexit also played a role, not only by removing a traditionally sceptical veto player, but also by creating a need for renewed momentum in cooperation, particularly in the areas of security and defence. Additionally, the 2014 annexation of Crimea sharpened European focus on security issues (though it did not result in anything resembling a "Zeitenwende"). Overall, the EU rapidly developed plans and instruments, with a popular sentiment in Brussels at the time being, "We have achieved more in six years than in the previous sixty" (Dimitrova, 2020).

In general, the instruments introduced during this period aimed to address gaps in EU capabilities, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), and the European Peace Facility (EPF), while also contributing, to some extent, to cohesion, notably through the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). Despite the transatlantic tensions during Donald Trump's first term, which pushed Europeans to consider taking on a greater security role, this ambition primarily resulted in the development of new tools and procedures rather than tangible improvements in capabilities. Furthermore, the broader context remained unfavorable for more active European security engagement. Complex challenges in Europe's surroundings—such as the ongoing war in Syria—highlighted the mismatch between the Union's limited crisis

management capacity and the scale of these issues. The EU's inability to effectively manage its role in the withdrawal from Afghanistan underscored this limitation with striking clarity.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the subsequent assault on the European security order, significantly altered this dynamic. While the EU had been increasing its capabilities in the preceding years, the Russian war of 2022 added both cohesion (common threat perceptions, public support) and a favourable context (security issues that called for action that was within the remit of the EU: arms production and transfer, sanctions, training missions etc) for greater EU security involvement. Overall, EU security and defence policy has become more aligned with the US during the Biden administration, as demonstrated by joint efforts on sanctions and export controls, as well as the somewhat clearer roles of the EU and NATO. In a broader sense, the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) framework illustrated a contextual shift, as the US administration recognized the EU Commission as an effective and legitimate cooperation partner, even in sensitive areas closely linked to security policy. Discussions on autonomy increasingly focus on the ability to act as a European pillar within NATO, with the EU serving as a crucial enabler of this ambition. The membership of Sweden and Finland in the alliance has further strengthened the link between regional European security and the US.

Increasingly, China plays a significant role in shaping European foreign, security, and defence policy. Since China's accession to the WTO, the EU's policies have primarily focused on trade, human rights, and environmental issues, often aligned with its broader multilateral agenda. However, this approach began to shift slightly during the Juncker Commission. Pressured by the Trump administration to adopt a tougher stance on China and alarmed by high-profile Chinese takeovers of European firms and critical infrastructure, Juncker proclaimed that the EU could no longer afford to be "naïve free-traders." This more vigilant approach to China and its interests in Europe was codified in the 2019 *Strategic Outlook*, which famously described China as simultaneously a partner in cooperation, a competitor in trade, and a systemic rival (European Commission, 2019).

Since 2019, the notion of China as a partner has steadily declined, while its roles as a competitor and systemic rival have become more pronounced (Lizzi, 2024). Today, China influences EU security and defence policy in at least three key areas.

The first is the Chinese threat to Europe's economic security. The concept of economic security represents a new paradigm for the EU where the deep interdependence resulting from three decades of liberal globalization is increasingly viewed as a source of vulnerability that must be addressed to safeguard security (for an overview, see Chimits, et al., 2024). This area of policy has become increasingly focused on managing vulnerabilities in relation to China. Early initiatives included the 2019 Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) screening mechanism and the 5G Toolbox, which helped member states build secure telecommunications networks.

The EU's 2023 strategy on economic security (European Commission, 2023) has streamlined these various policy streams under the pillars of *Protect*, *Promote*, and *Partner*. This approach is set to continue under Ursula von der Leyen's second Commission, as illustrated in her mission

statements to incoming commissioners. While formal ties between economic security and traditional defence and security strategies—such as the EU’s defence industry strategy and the *Strategic Compass*—are limited (Fiott, 2024a), substantial links exist in practice. Economic security measures impact export controls, dual-use regulations, and research on critical technologies. In sum, addressing vulnerabilities related to China has enhanced EU capabilities in the broader security domain of economic security.

China’s alignment with Russia and its role in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine constitute a second area of impact. This cooperation takes various forms, including joint activities in the Arctic and Baltic regions (Andersson, 2024), as well as support for Russia’s war in Ukraine. Such support ranges from overarching strategic alignment to the transfer of sensitive technologies (von Essen, 2023).

China’s backing of Russia has contributed to diminishing enthusiasm for Central and Eastern European cooperation with China, as evidenced by the now largely obsolete 17+1 format (Bergsen and Šniukaitė, 2022). This shift has, in turn, fostered greater EU cohesion as an actor, though differences in member states’ approaches to China persist.

Third, China’s posture and activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait increasingly affect EU security and defence policy. The EU has significant economic, diplomatic, and security interests in the region and has adapted its engagement accordingly. This includes actions such as maritime presence and the adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies (Macchiarini Crosson et al., 2023). Individual member states have also adjusted, with some deploying maritime patrols and enhancing defence cooperation with regional partners.

The perceived threat posed by China in this region has driven Europeans to build maritime capacities. However, this focus occasionally conflicts with the need to bolster security closer to home and provide substantial support—primarily in land and air domains—for Ukraine.

Finally, it is worth unpacking the extent to which China, for example, has broken with or exploited gaps in certain norms or trading law (for example with regard to intellectual property theft), or have unexpectedly “hacked” the capitalist model by liberalizing the economy while not liberalizing governance or institutions. It is arguable that this unlevel playing field has amplified tensions in the democratic world, and which has been seen in the rise of right wing populism often undergirded by dissatisfaction with economic realities.

## TIMES OF CRISIS: THE EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

In the words of Jean Monnet “Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises” (Monnet, 1976) The war in Ukraine certainly proves him

right. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced the EU to launch itself as a geopolitical actor in a fashion inconceivable just a few years ago.

The EU has, as earlier noted, developed a close collaboration with the U.S. on sanctions and export controls, initiated a new enlargement process, and launched a series of instruments for defence cooperation to support Ukraine and enhance Europe's defence capabilities.

This section is a case study of how the EU's policies have been applied and developed vis à vis Ukraine following the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. The ambition is not to create an exhaustive account of all initiatives made by the EU during the war, but to rein in the most important developments and overall direction.

### **The opening of Eastern accession talks**

An appropriate starting point is the formal opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine (alongside Moldova and Georgia, with the latter not being granted candidate status). The negotiations seeing daylight is indicative of a process of shifting priorities for the EU. The geopolitical urgency of stabilising the eastern neighbourhood has challenged the previous emphasis on financial stability and internal reform maturity of candidate countries.

With the opening of an enlargement process with these countries, who all share the predicament of ongoing border disputes, the EU steps into an arena where hard borders and territorial integrity are at stake. This is uncharted territory for the EU whose historical role has been to emphasise trade, norms and standards rather than borders and military posturing.

The eastward enlargement has been framed as a “geonormative” dilemma for the EU (Bosse 2024). The geopolitical urgency of Ukraine's accession to the EU (and NATO) clashes with the EU's merit-driven requirements of potential member states, at least according to some experts and commentators. A key question in this debate is whether geopolitical considerations clash with the reform status of candidate countries, or whether the geopolitical urgency is actually speeding up the pace of reform in Ukraine, regarding for instance anti-corruption measures and the independence of the judiciary. Ukraine's quest for survival gives the EU leverage to shape the Ukrainian reform process, the reasoning goes (Bosse, 2024).

The enlargement process is obviously not where most financial or political capital has been directed given the pressing military situation, but their symbolic and substantial importance should not be understated in assessing the EU's geopolitical actorness. The status of Ukraine's accession negotiations is dealt with in more detail earlier in this work package (see section titled: What after the New geopolitical tensions in Europe? The case of Ukraine)

### *EU Support to Ukraine by category*

As of October 2024, the EU has provided Ukraine with civilian, military and economic support worth more than €118 billion since the invasion in early 2022 (Council of the European Union, 2024). This estimate includes direct support from member states, support from member states being reimbursed by the EU, and direct EU support. In the following section, the support has been divided into military, financial and humanitarian categories to attempt to provide analytical clarity.

#### *Military support*

Lacking military resources of its own, the EU's primary military role has been to coordinate and provide financial incentives to its member states. Overall, €43,5 billion of the €118 billion consist of military support in different forms. The European Peace Facility (EPF) is arguably the most important EU instrument through which Ukraine has been supported militarily. As late as December 2021 the EU only agreed to provide Ukraine with non-lethal weaponry through the EPF. A few days after the invasion this changed. Ever since, the EPF has enabled military donations to Ukraine possible by reimbursing the MS according to the contributions from their stock. The sums provided through the EPF are decided collectively by the member states and consensus is needed. This is the first time in the history of the EU that a non-member has been supported with lethal weaponry. In the first two years, most of the support came from EU MS “emptying their warehouses of aging equipment and munitions” (Bergmann, 2024). Late in 2024, when much of the old stock already has been depleted, the deliveries have slowed down as member states become wary of dispersing the hardware that they need for their own defences and meeting NATO targets (Bergmann, 2024). The key question is thus how to ramp up European production.

There are a few reasons why it is difficult to ramp up production (For discussions, see Fiott, 2024b; Fiott, 2024c, Bergmann, 2024; Maksak, Drapak and Gerasymchuk, 2023). One reason is that defense companies are unwilling to act on their own and invest in long-term production infrastructure, as they are uncertain about long-term demand. A phase of stability or a frozen conflict might incentivize states to once again reduce defense budgets. Another reason is that EU states don't necessarily prioritize Ukraine. They need to meet their own targets, especially if external support is not perceived as guaranteed. Third, member states are still not coordinating their procurement and production to a sufficient extent. There is great potential in working together to create an economy of scale. Cooperating and coordinating with others within the EU framework is difficult due to the many bureaucratic hurdles in place. A fourth reason is that European weapons producers do not always prioritise Europe. There are more lucrative markets overseas; European orders sometimes must wait in line. These reasons lead to a swath of suboptimal outcomes in trying to maximise the potential of European military production and thus support for Ukraine. This is something that Ursula von der Leyen and her new Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius are attempting to address. The fact that the Commission includes a Defence commissioner is a change that reflects shifting priorities. "Europe must spend more, spend better, spend European" is a brief version of von der Leyen's job description for



Kubilius (European Parliament, 2024). Kubilius has been instructed to produce a White Paper on the future of EU Defence together with the incoming High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Kaja Kallas. It is to be delivered within the first 100 days of their tenure.

Aside from the EPF there are several military mechanisms within the EU that guide activity and have potential to be used as tools to support Ukraine. In the following paragraphs some of these will be reviewed.

The EU is currently attempting to take steps to address the lagging military production in the Union. In March 2024, the Commission released the new European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). The ambition is to improve the EU's defence capacity with a particular focus on the defence industrial capacity. EDIS has not been created with specific regard to the war in Ukraine, but it is clearly an important context adding urgency. Collaborative investment, adaptability and integration of defence readiness are key concepts of EDIS. An important proposition is the €1,5 billion European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) which is a voluntary legal framework to simplify and speed up military procurement and provide financing. The success of EDIP is contingent on member states buying in to secure adequate financing. The current targets are ambitious but non-binding, for instance that 50 % of all military procurement in the Union should stem from the Union itself. Today that figure sits at 20 % (Kubilius, 2024).

With regards to Ukraine, a defence innovation centre in Kyiv was opened on 10 September 2024 to further defence industrial cooperation between the EU and Ukraine. One ambition is to allow Ukrainian startups and defence firms to gain access to EU funding as they attempt to spur and support innovative Ukrainian weapons production. EU counterparts are encouraged to learn from the advances made in technological developments, most notably in the field of drone technology, where Ukraine has become one of the most advanced producers globally. Some producers from the EU have already opened their own offices in Ukraine ahead of the EU own office, such as Latvia's Atlas Aerospace, Germany's Quantum Systems and Denmark's defence industry hub (Sprenger, 2024).

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been brought forward as a significant EU forum for advancing joint EU military capacities. Ukraine has shown an active interest in joining PESCO cooperation. But so far PESCO's cooperation with Ukraine in connection to the war has not had a significant impact. PESCO's Cyber Rapid Response Team and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security has been employed in Ukraine from February 2022 at the request of Ukraine. It is worth mentioning that Ukraine has benefitted indirectly from several of the European capabilities brought forward within the frames of PESCO (Maksak, Drapak and Gerasymchuk, 2023).

Another program that has been launched is the EU Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine). This mission was adopted in November 2022 with the purpose to train and prepare Ukraine's Armed Forces (a civilian security sector reform mission – EUAM – was established already in 2014). Training takes place in several EU countries, notably Germany and Poland. A total of 24 member states are offering training and personnel in this mission.

Around 60 000 Ukrainian soldiers have been trained since the outset. The funding of EUMAM comes from the EPF and was extended for two years in early November 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2024).

A potential model for ramping up military industry in the EU is the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) program, based on an Estonian suggestion. The ASAP initiative aims to increase the production of ammunition and missiles by addressing bottlenecks in the supply chain. A total of €500 was allocated for this task. The initial goal of producing 1 million rounds per year has not been met but will be met in 2025 according to EU officials (Kubilius, 2024). The limitation is as often the lack of funding. As Estonia's defence minister explained, "The biggest challenge and the biggest obstacle is very simple—you need new money" (Bergmann, 2024). While ASAP focuses on addressing the supply side of production, another program, EDIRPA, aims to stimulate the demand side, specifically the procurement of defence products. With a total budget of EUR 310 million, EDIRPA facilitates cooperation among Member States in defence procurement, enabling them to jointly coordinate and acquire the most urgent and critical defence products, particularly those necessitated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

### *Financial*

EU loans to Ukraine: Since 2022, EU financial support to the Ukrainian Government amounts to €57,8 billion out of the total €118 billion. For context, the US has provided \$27 billion in financial support and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) \$10 billion. The EU is thus the largest outside provider. More EU financial support has been approved and is in the pipeline as of late 2024. However, most of the €40 billion consists of loans that Ukraine is unlikely to be able to pay back in the foreseeable future. The EU understands this and has made the terms of repayment flexible to not strain Ukrainian public finances more than necessary. The EU money is needed for Ukraine to keep basic government services running, such as schools and health care. The IMF estimates that Ukraine needs an additional \$38 billion from external parties to meet its budget in 2024. Even though the EU's financial contributions are in loans and not grants, it is undoubtedly a showcase of the EU establishing itself as an international financial power (Spielberger, 2024). Continuing to support Ukraine financially is a task that will require much political (and obviously financial) capital from several key actors in the EU, not least the Commission.

Sanctions: The EU has imposed major sanctions against Russia following the invasion, on top of those already in place following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Sanctions have been placed on the Russian state, economic sectors, specific companies and individuals. Subsequent sanctions have also been targeted on third parties deemed to have aided the Russian war efforts such as Belarus, Iran and North Korea. The total sum amounts to €24.9 billion of private Russian (or third party) frozen assets frozen and €210 billion of assets from the Central Bank of Russia blocked in the EU. These assets are or will be used to prop up the Ukrainian system mainly via the European Peace Facility program.

### *Humanitarian*

Millions of Ukrainians have been forced to flee the country or are internally displaced. To alleviate the cost of MS for welcoming refugees, the EU has allocated €17 billion. The EU estimates that 14.6 million Ukrainians are in need of humanitarian assistance. The Commission has launched its largest ever operation under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (European Commission, 2024e; European Commission, 2024f). All 27 member states together with Norway, Turkey, Serbia, Iceland, Moldova and North Macedonia are participating in the program. 151,000 tonnes of aid in different forms have been delivered, including medical supplies, shelter items, vehicles and power generators. The commission has allocated around €966 million and individual member states around €2,4 billion. Other programmes in the humanitarian realm include judicial investigations into Russian war crimes and the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform in Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) to help train Ukrainian authorities to investigate and prosecute war crimes.

### **EU actorness and Russia's war in Ukraine**

The war in Ukraine has had a major impact on the functionality of EU military and security programs, rendering the EU a highly relevant (but still limited) complement to NATO. However, the war in Ukraine has also laid bare the limitations of the EU as a geopolitical actor. The war and the EU's efforts to manage it have led to changes in the Union's context, cohesion, and capabilities.

The **cohesion** of Europe following the invasion has been stronger than most observers expected. The war brought about a common threat perception that the Union had been lacking up until that point. That is not to say that the cohesion is rock solid or unquestionable. Early on, the EU quickly developed sufficient political unity among member states and institutions to muster support for Ukraine. As the war goes on, it remains to be seen if this newfound unity can survive the test of time, internal disputes (most visible in Hungary's Viktor Orban's stance), and developments across the Atlantic Ocean following the re-election of Donald Trump.

The member states most wary of contributing to the support of Ukraine are Hungary, Malta, Cyprus, and since 2023, Slovakia. Hungary has not only refused to contribute, but has also conditioned its support to the packages of assistance to Ukraine with unblocking assistance and other favours to Hungary. Orban has also openly asserted that providing support to Ukraine fuels the war, advocating "peace" (on Russia's terms). He has paid theatrical visits to Kyiv, Moscow, and Beijing during the Hungarian Council presidency. There are also new actors in the EU countries which are more appeasing towards to Russia, such as Slovakia's leader Fico and the Austrian government. Perhaps most concerning for Ukraine's prospects of receiving EU support

is the instability of the German government (after the November 2024 break of the Liberal Democratic Party with Social Democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition) and the malfunctioning French-German engine. Olaf Scholz's governing coalition is an important contributor but is under pressure from weakened domestic support and a lagging economy. Given Germany's weight in Europe, a more active German leadership is necessary to unite Europe for the Ukrainian cause but that kind of leadership may be lacking until the conduct and conclusion of federal elections in early 2025 in Germany.

There is ample fear after the US election that some member states may pull away from European unity and attempt to negotiate bilateral deals with the U.S. regarding security protection or prefer dealing with defence primarily through NATO.

With regards to the inter-institutional dynamics of the EU, the Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen (now in her second term in office) has taken a clear lead in accordance with its ambition to become a “geopolitical Commission”. This has manifested itself in several ways; the Commission played an important role in securing the sanctions levied on Russia together with the UK and US. The public role for the Commission, not least for von der Leyen herself, has also been elevated (Håkansson, 2023). One might almost say that Henry Kissinger's famous (but possibly apocryphal) question of whom to call when he needs to speak to Europe has been answered. It can be noted that the relationship between Von der Leyen and the European Council President Charles Michel has been frosty to say the least (Herszenhorn et al., 2021). This rift should first and foremost be seen as a personal conflict rather than a deep-seated institutional strain.

In summary, Russia's war in Ukraine has strengthened overall cohesion among EU member states, despite persistent differences that may resurface as an end-game scenario approaches. Both military assistance and the adoption of sanctions by the EU demonstrate a growing convergence in threat perception. Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, China's role in the conflict has further contributed to this alignment of threat perception. New EU tools have also enhanced the Union's ability to link issues and offer comprehensive package deals, as exemplified by initiatives supporting defence innovation and production in aid of Ukraine.

**Capabilities.** The institutional constraints of acting in support of Ukraine have also been lower than many observers would have thought, at least in the initial year following the invasion. Pre-existing tools (such as the EPF) have been used actively, but novel institutional reform has been limited. The EU does not have weapons of its own, only the MS do. But it has been able to muster administrative capacity and financing of the assistance programs, enabling the MS to send military assistance by guaranteeing they will be reimbursed for their contributions. The most potent path to supporting Ukraine is beyond the direct grasp of the EU itself, resting with the militaries and governments of the member states.

Long term there are many questions to be answered regarding the EU's military capability and institutional setup. There is no common vision of how this policy domain should evolve in the coming decades. A key question right now is how and to what extent the EU can secure funding

for funding the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). According to a recent report from the Financial Times, the Commission will shortly bring forward a proposal to fund arms production by allocating funds from the EU's largest budget post, the regional support (Tamma, 2020). Regardless of the outcome, Monnet's assessment that "Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises" seems worthy of repetition.

Overall, the EU has experienced a modest increase in its capabilities as a security actor due to the war in Ukraine. New instruments have been established, particularly in the defence industrial sector, while existing mechanisms, such as the European Peace Facility, have been expanded and utilized in novel ways. The European Commission has assumed a more prominent leadership role within its remit, and new methods for channelling EU budget funds toward security-related activities have further enhanced the Union's capabilities. The ongoing efforts toward establishing a European Defence Union—prioritized by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—and the proposed enhancements of capabilities expected to feature in the forthcoming Defence White Paper may further strengthen the EU's defence capacities. Nevertheless, the EU continues to lack many of the resources necessary to transform itself into a fully-fledged security provider or to achieve a significant degree of strategic autonomy in defence.

**Context.** The full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine has occurred at a perilous time for Europe. Doubts over the transatlantic relationship and the American commitment to European security loom large over the continent. The EU has begun to speak of strategic autonomy and geopolitical actorness but is yet to develop a full set of tools to match this ambition. Regardless, the Russian war on Ukraine has sped up this process in a way that would have been hard to imagine in peaceful times. Sweden and Finland have been spurred to join NATO and the German government speaks of a "zeitenwende", pledging to boost its defence spending rapidly. The Union, originally conceived as a tool to mitigate the spirals of arms races by controlling the flows of coal and steel, is now increasingly focused on boosting and ramping up arms production. The war certainly has provided an impetus for rapid and major changes in the EU's security and defence policy.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on the context of EU security actorness is nuanced. On one hand, the war presented challenges that the Union was not fully equipped to address. Large-scale industrial warfare on the European continent differs significantly from the small-scale crisis management tasks for which the EU is prepared, underscoring the strengthening of NATO and its central role in European security. On the other hand, the Union has experienced increased demand in other areas of its security-related activities, including military mobility, training, defence industry incentives, and sanctions coordination. In these domains, external partners, such as the Biden administration, have increasingly recognized the EU as a legitimate and relevant actor. However, it remains uncertain to what extent this perception of the EU will persist under Trump's forthcoming U.S. administration.

In light of these contributions it is reasonable to ponder an end to the war that may not entail Ukraine maintaining sovereignty over all of its territory; that may not entail formal security guarantees like NATO; and that may not deliver the peace dividend expected by the people in

Ukraine or beyond. Would such a scenario breed optimism in an EU future partnership of some sort (including membership)? Or will it breed skepticism that values in fact don't matter, and that the realpolitik incentives of sheer might and trade always prevail?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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The final section of this GEO-POWER-EU report presents the overarching conceptual framework that will inform the research going forward. The study to date suggests a number of key gaps concerning policies, practices and approaches towards developing a comprehensive EU strategy for the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership region, while considering the strategic ambition of other geopolitical actors.

The conceptual framework of the research will be structured along (a) the need to pose, test and reconsider key assumptions related to reform and enlargement, (b) the need for responding to the gaps identified in the previous sections of this report, and (c) the rationale guiding the research to be implemented during the project's lifetime.

### ASSUMPTIONS TO BE POSITED, TESTED, AND RE-CONSIDERED

The conceptual framework of this multi-year research project aims to evaluate whether the EU's approach to the enlargement process for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership is effective. It examines both the preparation of new members for membership and the integration of shared values while addressing European geopolitical security concerns, particularly regarding external actors like China, Russia, and Turkey and regarding possible shifts in US policies after Trump starts his second term in office. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors. The ability to “surpass” current practices is only possible if assumptions underlying past and current engagement practices and approaches are articulated, considered and either proven correct, proven false, or determined to be existing in a state of ambiguity.

As the policy of enlargement has existed for decades, a number of assumptions have appeared to take root among EU institutions, member states and even candidates. Some of these are specific to the EU and the European space, while others reflect global dynamics over the decades since the end of the Cold War. In the first months of the project, a number of key assumptions have been drafted, and are included below. This list is neither exhaustive nor final; however, the assumptions provide the guiding themes and constructs that will be used in the data collection and most importantly in the data analysis processes:

- Enlargement is held by European institutions to be a central element of European integration.

- Enlargement is held by individual member states to be a central element of European integration.
- The EU will face an existential crisis if enlargement with the WB and the associated trio is halted.
- A staged approach to new membership among the WB and the Associated trio countries would incentivize and accelerate candidate progress on reform.
- A regatta approach to new membership among the WB and the Associated trio countries would incentivize candidate progress on reform.
- The increase in scope and detail of the accession process/conditionality has hindered successful reform and enlargement.
- The failure to rapidly integrate the WB countries into the EU without regard to the widened set of conditions has been detrimental to the region.
- The failure to rapidly integrate the WB into the EU without regard to the widened set of conditions has been detrimental to the health of the EU itself.
- The EU would benefit from keeping the WB and the Associated trio countries in an EU “waiting room”, while encouraging further free-trade and economic deals.
- The WB and Associated trio countries would benefit from further free-trade and economic deals with the EU while remaining in the “waiting room” for full membership.
- State Capture led by domestic elites who re-purpose institutions and legislation for private gain and to narrow political competition is a key obstacle to the reforms required of EU candidates.
- Greater economic liberalization and integration in the two regions may not lead to political/democratic liberalization.
- (External) corrosive capital is facilitated by corrupt local stakeholders and global financial intermediaries and has negative economic, political, environmental and social impact in both regions. EU’s efforts to create a Common Regional Market and integrate both regions into the EU Single Market incentivize countries not to rely on corrosive capital and does not unintentionally support mal governance in EU candidates.
- EU investment in green transition activities in the WB and Associated trio countries has both the potential to incentivize the reform needed for accession, as well as to facilitate green stabilocracies if not allowing for a just transition.
- Effective EU actorness in the foreign and security policy depends on cohesion, capabilities, and context (as elaborated in Fägersten, 2014).



- A lack of a firm vision for EU enlargement created conditions for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- The outcome of the war in Ukraine will be a litmus test on the balance between realpolitik and comprehensive security dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic sphere.
- Geopolitical competition is supplanting the notion of comprehensive security in the countries being studied, with military and economic transactionalism taking precedence over a shared-values approach to foreign policy and alliances.

The Geo-Power-EU project does not intend to definitively address or answer all of these key assumptions. However, by simply introducing them a conceptual and practical exercise is being integrated into the work of the entire consortium. While the aim of this first deliverable – the baseline study – is to set out a common set of facts, chronologies and processes, the inclusion of these preliminary assumptions provides the basis for testing them out throughout the course of the research. This will be done through active consortium discussions throughout the project, through active efforts to integrate these ideas into the literature review and primary data collection, and, in the final stages, into the analysis. The analysis will summarize which assumptions hold true, which have proven false and which require recalibration or reimagining.

### SUMMARY OF GAPS ANALYSIS

Following the results of our baseline study, we can confirm that the following gaps remain unresolved:

- Democratic backsliding in EU candidate countries has gone hand-in-hand with an inconsistent EU's approach to enlargement and EaP policies – both not always seeming to reward progress achieved by the candidate and associated countries, by providing either moral/reputational support, or financial support.
- An interplay among internal and external actors to detail how the financial and reputational benefits of the EU and other Western actors can actually feed into support for those actors who seek to maintain and strengthen state capture.

#### Evidence from baseline study (chapter 1):

- Western Balkan countries have made limited or no progress in further democratization, and in some cases, they have experienced democratic backsliding. For instance, 2024 data from Freedom House show that almost all countries in the region scored lower than in 2023, further reinforcing their classification as 'partly free' and highlighting continued backsliding.

- Nonetheless, the Enlargement Package, adopted by the European Commission on 30 October 2024, is cautiously optimistic about the development of democracy in Western Balkan countries, thus mismatching the evaluation made by most of the major democracy indices.
- While other ex-socialist countries from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) took between 8 and 11 years to join the EU from the date of application, some WB countries have failed to begin accession negotiations in spite of a process lasting over two decades.
- In most of the EaP countries, the strong confidence in the process of Europeanisation (see the cases of Ukraine and Georgia) was often undermined by the very format of cooperation envisaged within the EaP, which for long time did not guarantee clear prospects of a possible entry into the European Union for these countries.
- With the exception of protests in Georgia in early December 2024, most major protest movements since 2014 have focused not on a pro-European agenda but on combating corruption and increasing civil society's role in domestic political life. This shift has distanced the process of democratization from the EU's active influence, partly due to growing disillusionment among pro-European civil society with the EU's transformative power.

Evidence from the study of geopolitical competition (chapter 2):

- Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and, overall, the engagement of China and Turkey — together with the potential disengagement of the USA — in both regions raises the question of how the EU could emerge as a fully-fledged geopolitical power. In broader terms, the candidate status only recently awarded to Ukraine and Moldova — and, later, to Georgia — reflects the realisation that the EU also needs to act more strategically in its Eastern Neighbourhood to avoid 'vacuums' to be filled by other actors.
- Global geopolitical developments and political crises have diverted U.S. attention, influencing shifting political approaches within EaP countries, the openness of European partners toward integration, and the influence of competing powers like Russia and China. In this context, the strategic revision of the EaP, with a focus on Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, must involve the U.S. as a potential ally.
- Evidence shows how the slow pace of reform of the countries of the WB, and consequently their EU integration, provide openings for Russian influence among domestic/local elites with little genuine interest in the reforms needed for membership. On the other hand, despite the evolving war dynamics in Ukraine, Russia's influence on the EaP has decreased in 3 out of six EaP member states.

- China's strategy in the Western Balkans mainly revolved around leveraging economic investments to build political influence (as it has done in other theatres) and cultivate a positive image, thereby serving its long-term geopolitical interests. China's willingness to make deals without consideration of process, anti-corruption measures, or transparency suits the non-democratic, self-serving preferences of many local elites. On the other hand, while China is not currently a game-changer in the EaP regions, the perception that the 'Chinese factor' can help countries overcome the economic gap with the West may bring important shifts over time.
- The Chinese threat to the EU's economic security, its alignment with Russia and its role in Russia's aggression against Ukraine pose further challenges for the EU.
- Personalized political relations and strengthened ties among Turkish political elites and local political actors in the WB are the cornerstone of relations between WB countries and Turkey.

Evidence from baseline study (chapter 3 on EU Foreign Policy and Military Actorness):

- The growing geopolitical tensions are creating the ground for new security threats, and the resulting need for increasing the EU's ability to act independently as a security and defence actor.
- The war in Ukraine has fundamentally tested the EU's role as a security provider. Its eventual outcome will inevitably influence the Union's future, also for potential security arrangements.
- The EU's internal cohesion has been strong in the case of the 2022 Russian aggression, despite the differing interests and capabilities among EU countries. Still, some of the instruments used to support Ukraine have been rigid and inflexible.
- In terms of European defence, there appears to be widespread acceptance of the idea of a stronger European pillar within NATO, with the EU serving as a key mechanism to support and enable this pillar. However, even this position reveals divergent visions regarding European autonomy and sovereignty.

## How GEO-POWER-EU WILL RESPOND

GEO-POWER-EU is based on the core assumption that the **EU's enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood policies require revision to align with a new geopolitical vision for the Western Balkans and Eastern partner countries.** The project aims to advance beyond the current "state of the art" to contribute to academic and policy debates on these policies.

In light of this, the project has the ambition to advance a new conceptual framework and an innovative policy framework that questions a number of long-held but potentially false assumptions, building on the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in the policy cycle. In terms of methodology, the project is mobilizing cutting-edge expertise from different disciplines to implement a multi-stage plan, grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach, with all partners contributing to data collection and processing.

The overall research question of the Geo-Power-EU project is: ‘How can the EU be empowered to manage security threats within the deteriorating geopolitical environment that lies in its Eastern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans?’

To answer this question, GEO-POWER-EU assesses the effectiveness of EU policies towards these two regions. The project examines the state of EU strategic autonomy and the implications of the Union’s underdeveloped defence cooperation and weak defence capabilities.

For its needs, the project takes two independent variables:

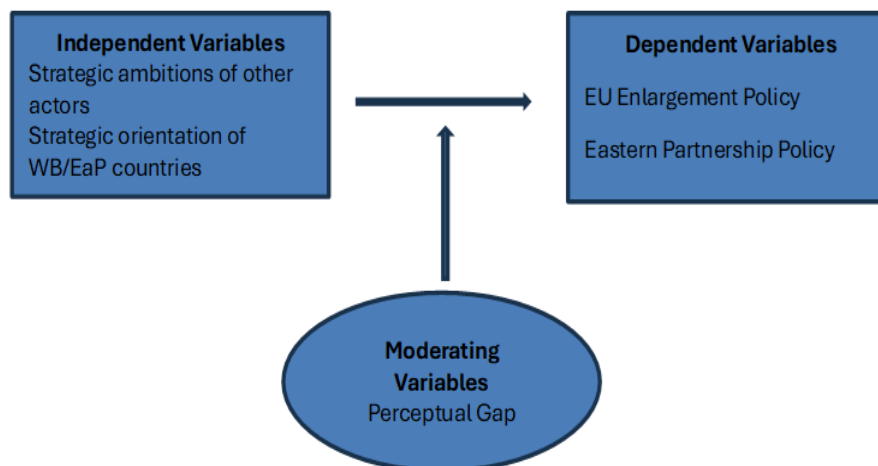
A) The first is the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors, namely, the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey. The project measures the linkages and influence of these external actors with WB/EaP countries and produces strategic foresight (with scenario planning and scenario testing) on the prospects of geopolitical competition.

B) The second independent variable is the strategic orientation of WB/EaP countries.

The project discerns the perceptions and preferences of local actors in these countries through the employment of a variety of research methods that include a public opinion survey, focus groups, in-depth elite interviews, and a social media sentiment analysis.

The dependent variable is EU foreign policy decisions and actions towards these two regions. Of course, EU foreign policy activities are impacting the strategic choices of third countries. However, the project analytically focuses on examining the deficiencies of EU policies towards the two regions to articulate policy recommendations for increasing the EU’s geopolitical influence.

**Graph 1. Key Research Variables of Geo-Power-EU project**



### THE GEO-POWER-EU MULTI-STAGE PLAN

After the first stage of the project which delivers the current baseline study, the project is structured around three research foci as follows:

#### ⇒ Research Focus: Enlargement and Eastern Partnership (WP2)

The two key research sub-questions of this WP of the project are:

- ‘to what extent and why EU Enlargement policy regarding the WB and the EaP have not been fit for purpose?’
- ‘how do these policies need to be adapted to the new geopolitical, energy-related and economic realities that have emerged since the start of the current decade? (i.e. 2020)’

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To address the key research questions the project undertakes empirical research along three axes: a) Discerning perceptual gaps on EU policies; b) Identifying policy challenges in two overarching theme areas c) Proposing a reformed Eastern Partnership

● **Discerning perceptual gaps on EU policies**

The WP does not undertake a comprehensive measurement of the effectiveness of the EU's enlargement and EaP policies *per se*; rather, it aims to discern the various perceptions between the EU and Partner Countries regarding the effectiveness of these policies aiming at indicating the *Perceptual Gap* between the EU policies, on the one hand, and the expectations of EU's partners, on the other. Measuring policy effectiveness is strongly influenced by the perceptions of the engaged actors and it can thus be essentially subjective. The Work Package, therefore, introduces and explores a *Moderating Variable*, the perceptual gap. The notion of 'gap' indicates clashes between actions and expectations of others and between perceptions (Chaban and Elgström, 2020) that impact on the measuring of policy effectiveness.

The project builds on the premise that perceptions have significant explanatory strength in the assessment of a policy, the effectiveness of EU external action (Elgström and Chaban, 2015) and in the subsequent policy reform action. Perceptual gaps on EU policies/actorness between the EU and 'others' also strengthen a much-needed de-centered approach to the EU's external actorness. The de-centered approach criticizes Eurocentrism in the analysis of European foreign policy, which 'often renders scholars blind to other world views and realities, although engaging with these may be critical for understanding the relevance and impact of this policy in other parts of the world' (Keukeleire and Lecocq, 2018: 277).

Literature on International Relations and European studies is rich in conceptualizing perceptions and perceptual gaps in (EU's) external policy. Hill's seminal work in understanding the international actorness of the EU explored the 'capabilities-expectations gap' (Hill, 1993) while Tsuruoka (2008) pointed to the 'expectations deficit' where expectations of EU's international actorness drop or remain low while capabilities are on the rise, referring thus to a 'deficit' rather than a 'gap'. Chaban and Elgström (2021) suggest three ways of understanding 'gaps' concerning the EU's international actorness: a) the *perception gap*: between EU's self-perception and others' perceptions of the EU, b) the *expectation-performance gap*: between others' perception of EU performance and their expectations and c) the *hope-performance gap*: between others' perception of EU performance and their hopes. Chaban and Elgstrom (2023: 1051-1052) contributed further to the theorization of the expectation–performance and hope–performance gaps by proposing a fourth type of gap: the 'critical expectation gaps' that is when an entrenched expectation of the EU encounters a perception of performance that indicates a severe contradiction.

Geo-Power-EU project looks into the intersections of the expectations with the perceived performance of EU Enlargement policy in the WB and the EaP (Table 1). The project identifies the gaps according to:

1. the source of expectations and perceptions regarding Enlargement Policy (Task 2.1.) and Eastern Partnership (Task 2.1 and Task 2.4), that is the EU versus Partners in WB and EaP and
2. Perceived Effectiveness of the EU in two overarching key issue areas namely:
  - Economic convergence, Emigration and brain drain (Task 2.2)
  - Green energy transition, energy security and energy poverty (Task 2.3)

**Table 1. Matrix of Intersections of Expectations with Perceived Performance of EU's Enlargement / EaP Policy**

Expectations	Perceived Performance	
	<i>Good</i>	<i>Poor</i>
<i>High</i>	High Expectations Good Perception of Performance (S1, Expectations-Performance Convergence)	High Expectations Poor Perceived Performance (S2, Expectations-Performance Gap)
<i>Low</i>	Low Expectations Good Perception of Performance (S3 Expectations-Performance Gap)	Low Expectations Poor Perceived Performance (S4, Expectations-Performance Convergence)

*Adapted from Chaban and Elgström (2023)*

What drives perceptions? In the study of the European Commission (2015a) on EU's global actorness as perceived by strategic partner countries, the explanatory variables were grouped into three levels: the individual level such as the socio-economic characteristics of the individual, country-level characteristics such as cultural and historic ties to Europe, as well as global factors. At the empirical level, regarding EU's enlargement policy, there is an increasing interest in researching the underlying factors influencing perceptions of the Western Balkan populations about the EU (Uvalic, 2023; Jovic, 2018). Applying the paradigm of Chaban (2019) on the perceptions of EU's actorness in the Western Balkans, Uvalic (2023: 4) identifies three types of causal factors that drive perceptions: a) endogenous factors triggered by actions undertaken by a third country actor without any EU engagement (i.e. foreign policy priorities of national

governments), b) exogenous factors triggered by the EU's actions without the involvement of a third country (i.e. EU enlargement policy based on conditionality), and c) global factors triggered by actors outside the Union's and a third country's control (i.e. policies of external non-EU actors) and their interactions. Accordingly, in this project, the empirical work will research the explanatory variables in the above three rubrics of the perceptual gaps between EU policies and the expectations of EU partner countries in the WB and the EaP.

### ● **Identifying policy challenges in two overarching theme areas**

The project builds on two Thematic Areas bearing policy implications:

First, the WP will define the challenge of economic convergence and the struggle against emigration and brain drain in the partner countries (Task 2.2). The driving Research Question is “What policies should the EU enact to promote economic convergence and limit the damage from emigration?” Linked to that, the sub-questions to be addressed are:

- How much is brain drain a question of economic development differentials, and how much is it influenced by factors like institutional quality, corruption and quality of life?
- What are the likely impacts of emigration and brain drain on the economic growth of the WB/EaP countries?

Second, the WP will assess the difficulties in promoting green energy transition without undermining energy security or provoking energy poverty (Task 2.3). The driving Research Question is “What are the socio-economic and governance considerations in the energy transition of WB/EaP countries?” Linked to that, the sub-questions to be addressed are:

- In which ways may the energy transformation and green transition reshape geopolitics in Europe?
- How can the EU induce the WB/EaP countries to advance decarbonisation and reform their energy sectors?
- How can the EU increase energy security, energy system resilience and market integration of WB/EaP countries?

### ● **Proposing a reformed Eastern Partnership**

In the context of policy towards the EaP, the research question is as follows: ‘to what extent and how can the EaP respond to the changing geopolitical environment in order to help enhance the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor?’



## ⇒ Research Focus: Geopolitical Competition and EU Strategic Autonomy (WP3)

WP3 aims to explore and analyse the complex interplay between geopolitical competition and the EU's strategic autonomy in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. This involves examining the influence of external actors such as the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, as well as local and international networks that facilitate or challenge these influences. The focus will be on how these relationships affect governance, democratic resilience, and regional stability. In order to develop such an analysis, the following tools will be implemented:

### ● Development of an Interdependence Database (Task 3.1)

Bilateral linkages between geopolitical actors and nine WB6/EAP3 countries will be collected and mapped. Building on the typologies of Levitsky and Way (2010) and Bieber and Tzifakis (2020), the database examines the four groups of linkages: political relations, security, economic and societal cooperation. The interdependence is understood as the relationships evident from the tangible links such as:

- *institutional arrangements* at the level of states (agreements, contracts, membership in intergovernmental organisations), and sub-state actors close to power (political parties, business associations, diaspora, civil society)
- *practices* (e.g. aligned voting in intergovernmental fora, joint exercises or deployments)
- *exchanges* (export-import, people, staff)

The task will also highlight the multidimensional relationships that shape regional dynamics, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how external and internal influences intersect.

### ● Indices Development (Task 3.2)

Three indices will be created to measure different dimensions of geopolitical influence:

- *Interdependence Index*: Evaluates the range and density of interactions among external geopolitical actors and local stakeholders.
- *Exposure Risk Index*: Assesses the vulnerabilities of countries to these influences, considering the role of local agency and networks in mitigating or exacerbating risks.
- *Strategic Autonomy Index*: Measures the degree to which countries can maintain independent decision-making in the face of external pressures and influences. The findings will be informed by the findings from the previous two indices, as well

as by the findings from public opinion survey and social media sentiment analysis.

● **Case Studies on Corrosive Capital (Task 3.3)**

This task will analyse governance gaps exploited by geopolitical actors, emphasising how local agency interacts with foreign investments that exploit these vulnerabilities. The analysis will focus on the governance gaps, agency, mechanisms of influencing and the impact of corrosive capital investments both for national level governance and for geo-political competition. The research will focus on the dynamics in specific countries, including Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova, and how these local actors facilitate or resist corrosive capital.

● **Case Studies on Disinformation (Task 3.4)**

This task will investigate how disinformation campaigns by external actors intertwine with local narratives and media landscapes. It will examine the role of local stakeholders in both perpetuating and combating disinformation, highlighting the societal vulnerabilities that are exploited.

● **Strategic Foresight (Task 3.5)**

This task will engage in scenario planning to map the possible futures of geopolitical competition, considering the interplay between various actors. Scenarios will explore potential outcomes based on how the EU and local actors respond to external pressures and evolving geopolitical dynamics.

● **EU Strategic Autonomy and Defence Cooperation (Task 3.6)**

This task will explore the research question: How can the EU increase its strategic autonomy and its ability to contain military threats that emanate from the deteriorating geopolitical environment lying beyond its borders? For this purpose, analysis and interviews will be carried out to address the political, institutional, and technological challenges facing the EU in enhancing its defence capabilities and strategic autonomy, considering the local and international networks that influence defence policy. The research aim is to explore the margins of the ability of the EU to increase its strategic autonomy and enhance defence cooperation, while fostering the Transatlantic partnership and its institutional cooperation with NATO.

## ⇒ **Research Focus: A comprehensive and multidimensional policy framework (WP4)**

Based on the findings of all previous WPs (1-3), WP4 aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how the EU can mitigate security threats and strengthen its role as a geopolitical actor in the volatile, aggravated environment of the European Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. WP4's objectives are to conduct scenario testing with regard to intended and unintended consequences of geopolitical competition in the short, mid and long-term and to produce a proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards the two regions building on preceding work with policy recommendations.

In order to develop such an analysis, the following tools will be implemented:

### • **Scenario testing with Serious Game (Task 4.1)**

This task is linked to WP3, where the game is designed. Its purpose is to produce a new tailor-made game both in terms of game mechanics (turns, phases, basic rules) and its scenarios (actors, events, map, context etc). The game will be built on the basis of the strategic foresight exercise and will be tested with the project's partners and external stakeholders, including EU and national government officials.

The game will:

- be interactive simulate the prospective geopolitical environment
- help researchers understand the possible impact of EU's interventions in the two regions
- facilitate the production of innovative solutions
- serve as a source of data on the behaviour of game participants.

The methods that will be used are game production and scenario testing with simulation.

- *Multistakeholder co-creation studios on the reform of EU enlargement and EaP (Task 4.2)*. This task will finalise ideas, arguments and recommendations on the EU Enlargement and EAP policies. Findings will be debated to co-create/finetune policy prescriptions for the reform of these policies. The methods that will be used are workshops and multistakeholder co-creation studios.
- *Multistakeholder co-creation studios on the prospects of geopolitical competition, military threats and EU strategic autonomy and defence cooperation (Task 4.3)*. This task

will finalise ideas and recommendations about the EU preparation for the evolution of geopolitical competition in the two regions, focusing on the enhancement of strategic autonomy and defence cooperation and capabilities. The findings will be debated to co-create/finetune policy prescriptions for EU defence reform. The methods that will be used are workshops and multistakeholder co-creation studios.

- *Development of a Proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards the two regions (Task 4.4).* This task will streamline the project's main arguments and propositions from previous tasks and organize them in a single strategic framework. Its aim will be to summarize the conceptual underpinnings and empirical research carried out under this project; outline the deficiencies of EU policies towards the two regions under examination; present the outcome of the project's foresight and alternative scenarios; and articulate a coherent strategy for the increase of EU's geopolitical influence in these regions. The method that will be used is desk research.

#### Key research sub-questions:

WP4 links to the analysis and findings of all previous packages, and it is connected to all sub-questions, mainly in the latter phases of testing deliverables from previous WPs in multistakeholder studios and the foresight exercise (i.e. RSQ 1 and RSQ 2 from WP2; RSQ 3, RSQ4 and RSQ5 from WP3). Overall, the project adopts a comprehensive temporal perspective by assessing the past (WP1), analysing the present (WP2 & WP3) and projecting into the future (WP4). Preceding WPs progressively assess the effectiveness of EU policies towards the WBs and the European Neighbourhood, examining the state of EU strategic autonomy and the implications of the Union's underdeveloped defense cooperation and weak defense capabilities. The two deliverables in WP4, i.e. the serious game and the proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards the two regions, will be based on the cumulation of analysis of past and present in order to support coherent future policies.

WP4 deliverables address partly RSQ4 and directly RSQ6.:

RSQ4: how is geopolitical competition expected to evolve in the two regions, is addressed with the creation of the serious game and the testing of various short, medium and long-term implications of different geopolitical scenarios in the WBs and the European Neighbourhood?

The goal is to identify how different EU strategies in the two neighbouring regions, which stem from strategic foresight, react to the strategic behaviour of other regional or global actors and what intended or unintended consequences may be expected in the near- (up to 5 years), mid- (5-10 years) and long-term (beyond 10 years). Gaming will be used as a supplementary method of extracting policy recommendations. The findings of strategic foresight and scenario testing and its draft policy recommendations for the preparation of the EU in view of the most likely scenarios will be presented during the multi-stakeholder co-creation studios. These studios will help finetune and co-create the project's final policy prescriptions. Building the game will have several advantages over more traditional research methods in security policy research. It will simulate the complex geopolitical environment allowing researchers to test the impact of EU

policy interventions in the WBs and the European Neighbourhood in a safe and controlled setting. This will help identify potential unintended consequences and inform future EU policy towards the region. Additionally, the serious game will allow participants to develop innovative solutions to complex policy problems and generate real-time data on participants' behaviour and decision-making providing valuable insights into factors determining policy outcomes.

RSQ6: whether it is possible to bring together different ideas, arguments and recommendations produced in the project into a single strategic framework, is addressed in the synthesis of the policy proposal. The aim is to move from the analysis of specific issues and corresponding policies to the larger picture and articulate a proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards the two regions. Policy prescriptions will be co-created/fine tuned in national workshops and multi-stakeholder co-creation studios.

The WBs and the Eastern Neighbourhood have been studied mostly separately as two distinct political regions falling under different policy radars. However, since the EU candidate status granted to Ukraine and Moldova, the conceptual and policy boundaries of the two regions have become blurred. Furthermore, there is a lack of perspectives resulting from security studies in discussing enlargement and neighbourhood policies. Thus far, these have been primarily discussed as manifestations of the EU's transformative, structural, normative, external power (Manoli, 2016; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). Other research focuses on specific dimensions of the policies such as the legal aspects of European Neighbourhood (Kerikmae and Chochia, 2016) or member-state perspectives of enlargement (Ker-Lindsay, et al., 2020).

In light of this, the project has the ambition to advance a new conceptual framework and an innovative policy framework built on the use of quantitative and qualitative methods in the policy cycle. The proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards the two regions will answer the main research question of the project, i.e. in what way can the EU be empowered to manage security threats within the deteriorating geopolitical environment that lies in its Eastern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans?

## GLOSSARY

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**Capabilities** encompass both material resources—such as economic funds and crisis management equipment—and institutional resources, including procedures for implementation and enforcement, such as new joint or pooled instruments, mechanisms and deployable resources, practices or decision-making procedures.

**Cohesion** denotes the ability of key EU stakeholders, including both member states and institutions, to collaborate in pursuit of a common unified objective. This cohesion hinges on the presence of sufficiently aligned interests, values, and threat perceptions—or at the very least, the perception of such alignment.

**Context** refers to the external environment that either enables or constrains EU action. This includes variables such as external events and ideas, the objectives of other actors, recognition by counterparts, and the EU's authority to act within the international system.

**Corrosive Capital** refers to foreign investments that exploit governance weaknesses in host countries and make them wider, often leading to/reinforcing state capture and undermining democratic institutions, while local actors may play a role in facilitating these investments.

**Economic convergence** refers to the diminishing of differences in per capita income across economies. It mainly encompasses economic outcomes such as employment, GDP per capita and income distribution

**Effectiveness** is defined as the degree to which the EU attains the main goals of its foreign policy.

**Energy poverty** is defined as a situation where a household cannot meet its domestic energy needs.

**Energy security** is defined as the continuous availability of energy in varied forms, in sufficient quantities, and at reasonable prices.

**Geopolitical Competition** refers to the strategic contest among global powers and local actors to exert influence and control over regions, characterised by political manoeuvring, economic investments, and military alliances.

**Green energy transition** refers to the global energy sector's shift from fossil-based systems of energy production and consumption to renewable energy sources.

**Interdependence** refers to the complex web of relationships and dependencies among states and non-state actors, shaped by political, economic, security, and societal dimensions, highlighting the role of local networks in mediating influences.

**Perceptual gap** indicates clashes between actions and expectations of others and between perceptions that impact on the measuring of policy effectiveness.

**Strategic Autonomy** refers to the EU's capacity to act independently in its foreign and security policy, minimising reliance on external powers while addressing internal and external challenges, with consideration of local agency.

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