



***POLITICAL THREAT  
ASSESSMENT IN EASTERN  
NEIGHBOURHOOD &  
WESTERN BALKAN  
COUNTRIES***

***D5.1***

***January 2025***

**D5.1. WORKING PAPER ON POLITICAL THREAT ASSESSMENT IN EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD & WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES**

<b>PROJECT NUMBER:</b>	101132446
<b>PROJECT ACRONYM:</b>	REUNIR
<b>PROJECT NAME:</b>	Future-proofing EU security, enlargement and eastern neighbourhood policies for a new age of international relations
<b>WORK PACKAGE:</b>	WP5 - Political perspectives on EU democratisation policies vis-à-vis, and relations with the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood
<b>AUTHORS:</b>	Isabell Burmester Florian Bieber Steven Blockmans Laure Delcour Adriab Ermurachi Kornely Kakachia Anna Osypchuk Predrag Petrović Lura Pollozhani Anton Suslov
<b>CONTRIBUTORS:</b>	Bidizna Lebanidze Oleh Sabura Maksym Yakovlyev

**HISTORY OF CHANGES**

<b>VERSION</b>	<b>Publication date</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>0.1</b>	07.10.2024 (M10)	Input paper for Natolin workshop
<b>0.2</b>	20.11.2024 (M11)	First draft (with inputs from workshop)
<b>1.0</b>	23.12.2024 (M12)	Draft for peer review
<b>2.0</b>	17.01.2025 (M13)	Final version



Funded under the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, project ID No. 101132446. The content of this working paper represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This working paper assesses political threats to democratisation and EU integration in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and Western Balkans (WB). These regions are vital for the European Union's strategic goals, yet their progress is hindered by geopolitical interference from actors such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Gulf states.

The geopolitical context highlights how EN and WB countries are navigating a complex landscape of influence. Russia remains the most disruptive external actor, employing political interference, disinformation, and cultural diplomacy to destabilise governments and impede EU alignment. Countries like Serbia, Georgia, and Moldova are particularly vulnerable to Russian tactics, which includes support for separatist movements and anti-EU political narratives. China's approach is more subtle, focusing on economic investments and promoting its governance model as an alternative to liberal democracy, with notable impacts in Serbia and Montenegro. Türkiye and the Gulf states primarily use cultural and religious diplomacy, leveraging historical and religious ties to expand their influence, although their impact is less destabilising compared to Russia.

The threat assessment reveals that external actors use a range of tools to undermine democratic institutions and EU integration efforts. These include disinformation campaigns, electoral interference, and leveraging cultural and religious institutions. The likelihood and impact of these threats vary, with Russia's activities in Serbia and Georgia posing significant risks. China's influence, although less overt, fosters long-term authoritarian tendencies. Cultural diplomacy by Russia and Türkiye further complicates the democratic aspirations of these regions, through exploiting societal divisions and historical narratives.

Addressing these threats requires targeted EU policies to mitigate vulnerabilities such as weak institutions, restricted media freedom, and socio-economic instability. Comprehensive strategies must counter hybrid threats while fostering resilience in candidate countries to ensure their alignment with democratic norms and European integration objectives. This Working Paper serves as a foundation for further research and policy development to strengthen the EU's position in these contested regions.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and Western Balkans (WB) represent regions of critical geopolitical importance for both the European Union (EU) and external actors, such as Russia (for which the EN/WB are also critically important), Türkiye, China and some of the Gulf states. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, many countries in these regions have pursued paths towards democratisation and closer integration with the EU. These processes are intended to foster stability, economic development, and the consolidation of democratic institutions in line with the EU's values and standards. However, the trajectory of these countries towards EU membership is fraught with challenges, including the strategic interests and interventions of external state actors that may undermine or delay progress. The US has thus far been aligned with the EU in terms of promoting democratisation. However, it is likely to both decrease assistance (including to Ukraine) and shift attention away from the region during the new Trump presidency, thereby depriving the EU of a major ally and the EN/WB from an important support.

This Working Paper aims to identify and categorise the threats posed by external state actors to the democratisation and EU integration of candidate and potential candidate countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans for the period 2025-2030. Specifically, it focuses on Russia, China, and Türkiye as the main external state actors identified in our threat scan. These actors have developed political and cultural influence (though to varying degrees) in these regions. Their influence in the political sphere ranges from direct interference in electoral processes to the strategic use of cultural diplomacy and the role of religious institutions, often in ways that conflict with the declared goals of both the EU and the candidate countries.

The integration of countries from these regions into the EU is not just a question of legal alignment and institutional reform, but also a matter of navigating complex (geo)political realities. The EU's enlargement strategy aims to support these countries in adopting democratic norms, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights. However, external state actors may view these developments as counter to their strategic interests and use a variety of tools to destabilise or slow down these processes. Therefore, understanding threat dynamics and external actors' interests in a changing geopolitical environment is essential to formulating effective EU policies that can mitigate external interference and support long-term democratisation and stability. This report presents a first threat assessment by mapping the instruments available to malevolent foreign actors, the likelihood of these tools being used, and their expected impact. The resilience of candidate countries, i.e. their ability to absorb such pressures and bounce back to the status quo ante, as well as the means for the EU to support them in advancing along the integration track, are topics which will be covered in subsequent REUNIR research.

## Geopolitical context

The Eastern Neighbourhood trio (EN3) and six countries of the Western Balkans (WB6) belong to geographical regions that have historically been contested spaces for influence by larger powers. As these countries seek to align themselves more closely with the EU, they are often caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war, where their

aspirations for membership of the EU clash with the ambitions of external actors who have vested interests in maintaining their own influence.

Russia has long viewed the Eastern Neighbourhood, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as part of its near abroad—a sphere of influence that should remain under Moscow’s control. The country’s leadership perceives EU integration and NATO expansion as existential threats to its strategic interests. This perception prompts the Russian authorities to use a range of tactics to undermine the pro-Western aspirations of EN countries. These include cultural diplomacy, mobilising the Russian Orthodox Church, meddling in electoral processes and maintaining ties with, and influence over, local politicians. Russia has also engaged in ‘gaslighting’ i.e. seeking to convince actors that their reality is untrue, as well as disinformation campaigns targeting, for instance LGBTIQ+ persons. Similarly, in the Western Balkans, Russia capitalises on historical, religious, and political ties, particularly in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (with Republika Srpska), to obstruct EU accession processes and maintain instability in the region.

China, while less overtly aggressive than Russia, has increasingly positioned itself as a global power with significant influence in both the EN and the WB. Besides attempts at creating economic dependencies that may hinder the governance reforms required for EU integration, China promotes its own model of governance, which emphasises economic growth without democratic freedoms, as a viable alternative to the Western democratic model.

Türkiye’s influence in both regions stems from its historical ties, cultural connections, and increasingly assertive foreign policy under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the Western Balkans, Türkiye portrays itself as a protector of Muslim communities, using religious and cultural diplomacy to extend its influence in countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, Türkiye has pursued pragmatic partnerships, particularly with Ukraine and Georgia, balancing its NATO membership with its own regional ambitions. While Türkiye itself is a candidate for EU membership, its domestic political developments, including increasing authoritarianism and tensions with the EU, present challenges for its role as a constructive player in the region.

Some Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, have also become more active in the regions examined in this report, primarily through economic investments and religious influence. In the Western Balkans, Gulf states have invested in real estate, tourism, and infrastructure, and they have also supported Islamic religious institutions and charities.

## Threats to democratisation and EU integration

The threats posed by external state actors to the democratisation and EU integration of candidate countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans are multifaceted and complex. Russia, China, Türkiye, and some Gulf states each pursue their own strategic interests in these regions, often in ways that are detrimental to the long-term goals of democratic consolidation and European integration. By understanding the specific methods and motivations of these actors, the EU can better formulate policies that mitigate malign foreign interference, support democratic institutions, and foster resilience among its neighbours and potential members.

Threats to democratisation and stabilisation posed by external state actors have increasingly jeopardised EU security interests, in particular [since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022](#). In fact, the domestic environments in WB and EN countries are especially susceptible to foreign interference (Delcour et al. 2024) due to the restricted space for media freedom, professional journalism, and media literacy. However, there is no official definition of foreign influencing or foreign malign influencing (FMI) by the EU. The EU is working with the narrower concept of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), [defined by the EEAS](#). According to this definition, FIMI ['describes a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory'](#).

FIMI activities are [activities with a malign intent](#) and their definition is therefore normative and actor-dependent. For the EU and its partners, FIMI describes ['attempts by foreign actors to manipulate information environments and interfere in democratic processes'](#) that ['destabilise the very fabric of our rules-based international system'](#). Indeed, the EU [seeks to develop international FIMI norms](#) with reference to the existing international legal framework, especially human rights to freedom of expression and information. It does so because FIMI activities negatively affect the ability of citizens to take rational and informed decisions, thereby disrupting political processes and eroding trust in public institutions.

These threats to democratisation in WB and EN countries also constitute a threat for the EU's strategic interests in candidate countries. Since EU enlargement gained new momentum with the membership applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EU has become increasingly concerned about FIMI threats in candidate countries (European Commission 2023). This growing concern is due to the fact that in this new geopolitical context ['competing actors are likely to intensify FIMI campaigns to disrupt the accession negotiations'](#).

The EU defines threats as activities with specific objectives that put ['emphasis on exploiting the vulnerabilities of the target'](#). Following the EU definition and the REUNIR threat assessment methodology, we [adopt a broad definition of threats as a function of capabilities and intent to exploit vulnerabilities](#). FIMI activities, in particular, are [defined by their deceptive or manipulative behaviour](#) with regards to democratisation and stabilisation processes in candidate countries. These types of activities, sometimes also referred to as hybrid threats, [are identified by analysing](#) the tools the external actors use, the vulnerabilities they exploit, and the objectives they pursue.

For the purpose of this Working Paper, we define threats as ['the mixture of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods \(i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological\), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives'](#). We focus on external state actors and their ['pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes'](#).

These threats can [emerge from calculable risks or from fundamental uncertainty](#). The differentiation between risk and uncertainty is important for how policymakers respond. Under conditions of risk, outcomes are predictable, probabilities can be assigned, and policymakers can plan and allocate resources to exert control over future events. By contrast, under conditions of uncertainty, where outcomes are unpredictable and probabilities cannot be assigned, policymakers may also rely on creativity and adaptability. In addition to



control power responses, they can use innovative approaches to navigate dynamic situations, and thereby demonstrate the agility associated with protean power (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018). As we have previously shown, the EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood over the past 35 years has faced [considerable risks and uncertainties](#). Currently, the EU is still facing both risks (political interference in the WB6 and EN3 countries by external state actors) and uncertainties (cultural influence that could lead to unexpected social and political upheavals adding an element of unpredictability) that pose a threat to democratisation in the candidate countries.

For this Working Paper, we conducted a threat assessment to identify the objectives, interests, and capabilities of threatening state actors in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood. The focus was on identifying current threats posed by malign foreign state actors to EU candidate countries. We conduct threat scans and likelihood and impact assessments over the short to medium term (2025-30). Our work will serve as a basis for scenario-building and foresight analysis in the medium to long term (2030-35) as part of WP7. The trends exposed in this report are based on country-specific threat assessments that have been drawn up using primary and secondary literature complemented by interviews. Because external state actor activities threatening democratisation and stabilisation [are covert](#) and intangible (Cormac, Walton, and Puyvelde 2022), they are particularly difficult to observe and document. External actors design political interference and cultural diplomacy instruments to persuade and change the perceptions and opinions of EN and WB actors without these actors even knowing they are being manipulated. For example, disinformation campaigns through social media and media outlets are most effective when they are not seen as such. That is why desk research has been informed by a textual analysis of EN3 and WB6 civil society reports and media, complemented by insights gleaned from a review of the available literature. Interviews with four experts in three EN/WB countries were conducted in the period from December 2024 to January 2025 to refine the analysis.

For each country, we identified the instruments available to external actors for threatening domestic democratisation processes and which objectives, interests, capabilities, and foreign malign influence channels they are based on. In order to understand the threats the use of these instruments pose to democratisation in EU candidate countries in the WB and EN for the next five years (2025-2030), we then assessed the likelihood of these instruments posing a threat (based on the receptivity of the target, the capabilities of the original actor, and the availability of external support) and their potential intended and unintended impact (based on the size of the target group within the country and the stability of the country's democratic system). These indicators were used to make expert judgments about the instruments being used in the near future (2025-2030) on a three-point scale — low, medium, and high. The findings of these country-specific analyses were then grouped together by type of instruments (political interference and cultural diplomacy) and external state actor (Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf states). These findings are presented below. Full country narratives and threat matrices are presented in annex.

## 2. THREAT ASSESSMENT

The following sections of this report will dig deeper into the specific threats posed by each of these external actors and provide an overview of the available instruments (Section 1), as well as the likelihood of them being used and their expected impact (Section 2). The main trends and elements for further research will be outlined in the concluding remarks.

### 2.1. Instruments available to external actors for threatening democratisation

The political instruments used by these external state actors can be broadly categorised into political and cultural dimensions. Each actor uses a distinct combination of these tools to pursue its strategic goals, often creating complex challenges for the democratisation and EU integration processes. In what follows, we focus our analysis on the most salient examples of how each instrument is used by Russia, China and other external actors in the EN/WB.

#### i. Political interference and destabilisation

One of the most direct threats to the democratisation and EU integration of candidate countries is political interference. **Russia** in particular has employed a range of tactics aimed at destabilising pro-Western governments and undermining public trust in democratic institutions. This includes supporting separatist movements, political parties and anti-EU governments, meddling in electoral processes, and spreading disinformation through state-controlled media outlets. The effects of Russia's actions are increasingly [supported and amplified](#) by China's policies.

Russian **disinformation** in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood is pervasive, operating primarily through (social) media campaigns, leveraging social and cultural narratives. In **Serbia**, Russian influence is amplified not directly by Russian state media but through local pro-government outlets that dominate 85 % of the media space (Petrović 2024b). While Russian platforms like Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today (RT) operate as internet portals, their impact is limited compared to the broader influence of Serbian pro-government media, which embed pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments with a strong emotional tone (Petrović 2024a). Polls indicate that support for Russia among Serbian citizens is closely tied to viewership of these pro-government TV channels and [backing for President Aleksandar Vučić](#).

The coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates the extent of this influence. Serbian media not only echoed Russian narratives but exaggerated them, claiming that Ukraine had provoked Russia and predicting a broader Russian military campaign to 'liberate' the Balkans from Western influence (Kisić 2022). Even as Serbian outlets toned down overt pro-Putin rhetoric after it became clear that the war would be protracted, anti-Western messaging remains prevalent, particularly on social media and alternative platforms like Telegram (CRTA 2022).

In neighbouring **North Macedonia**, the absence of local offices for Russian state media like RT and Sputnik has led to Serbian media taking on the role of disseminating pro-Russian and anti-Western messages. Many

North Macedonians understand Serbian, which allows these narratives to gain traction, especially through internet portals and social media. Additionally, [alternative medicine magazines](#) with Russian ties and social media activity from the Russian embassy in Skopje serve to [reinforce conservative, anti-EU sentiments](#).

**Montenegro** faces similar challenges, where Serbian-owned media outlets, such as IN4S, Borba, and Prva TV, continue to promote pro-Russian narratives despite formal bans on Russian media. These channels claim that Euro-Atlantic integration threatens Montenegrin identity, pushing the idea that only Russia can protect Serbian culture [from Western encroachment](#). IN4S, in particular, has been implicated in connections with Russian security services and intensified its propaganda efforts following the Ukraine invasion (IN4S 2024).

**Albania** is also affected by regional disinformation, particularly content translated into Albanian from Serbian and other sources, which influences public opinion across Kosovo and North Macedonia. Reports indicate that Turkish and Iranian state media contribute to the spread of Russian-aligned disinformation in Albanian, promoting narratives that [cast the EU and the West in a negative light](#).

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, especially within Republika Srpska (RS), pro-Russian disinformation is widespread, primarily driven by local media aligned with Serbian and Russian interests. This hampers the integration of Serbs within Bosnia and fosters division, [particularly in relation to Kosovo](#). The disinformation campaign aims to stoke fear and promote a sense of ethnic and cultural threat, aligning the Serb population with Moscow's geopolitical goals.

Russian disinformation is massive in the EN3, where the Kremlin leverages social media platforms like Telegram and X, along with troll farms and deepfakes, [to disrupt social cohesion and undermine pro-EU policies](#). In **Moldova**, Russian-aligned media spread false narratives during referendum campaigns (including the October 2024 referendum) to portray European integration as a threat to national stability, using local influencers to manipulate public perception. Similarly, in **Ukraine**, Russia intensifies societal tensions, exploiting existing divisions to weaken trust in both institutions and interpersonal relationships. In **Georgia**, disinformation regarding the potential threats to Georgia's territorial integrity - such as a [Maidan-like scenario in Tbilisi](#) or '[Ukrainisation](#)' and the opening of the "'Second Front' should any government in Tbilisi stick to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations - stems from both Russia and the Georgian government itself. The Kremlin and its affiliated media outlets have amplified this narrative by framing recent large-scale public protests in Georgia as efforts to replicate Ukraine's [2013–2014 Euromaidan protests](#). Simultaneously, they have sought to minimise the scale and legitimacy of public discontent, dismissing the protests as attempts to destabilise the country, [orchestrated by the US and president Zurabishvili](#), rather than genuine expressions of societal frustration with the government's policies.

Across the region, Russia's disinformation strategy is tailored to each country's cultural and linguistic context, aiming to polarise societies, diminish trust in Western alliances, and stall Euro-Atlantic integration efforts. By leveraging local media, social networks, and culturally resonant narratives, Russia continues to exert significant influence, challenging democratic stability and alignment with Western institutions.

In addition to disinformation, Russia's strategy in the WB6 and EN3 countries is characterised by its **support for separatist movements, pro-Russian political parties, anti-EU governments, and interference in electoral processes**. This approach is designed to disrupt regional stability, hinder Euro-Atlantic integration, and expand Moscow's geopolitical influence.

In **Serbia**, Russia leverages its ideological alignment with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under President Aleksandar Vučić. By promoting nationalism and authoritarian governance, Russia ensures Serbia's distance from the EU (Lindberg 2024). Joint initiatives, such as the task force against 'colour revolutions' formed in 2021, highlight the deepening ties between Belgrade and Moscow (Cvijić 2024). This collaboration is aimed at countering any Western-backed democratic movements and maintaining an authoritarian grip on power.

**Montenegro** is similarly targeted through pro-Russian political parties that represent ethnic Serbs, such as the New Serbian Democracy (NSD) and Democratic People's Party (DNP). These parties, now in government following the fall of Milo Đukanović, advocate for closer ties with Russia and push anti-EU policies, such as proposals for a Foreign Agents Law to curb the influence of NGOs (HRA 2024). This alignment has fostered divisions within the country. US intelligence reports have also revealed covert Russian financial support for these parties, especially since the annexation of Crimea (VOA 2022). Moscow also has long-standing connections with pro-Serb political figures like Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, who were implicated in the 2016 coup attempt with alleged Russian involvement (RFE 2017). These leaders continue to promote narratives that portray ethnic Serbs as under threat from Western-aligned Montenegrin authorities, fostering ethnic tensions to derail Montenegro's EU path.

In **North Macedonia**, Russian influence is funnelled through the Democratic Party of Serbs, led by Ivan Stoilkovic, who holds a significant position in the government. Stoilkovic maintains close relations with Russian diplomats and participates in Moscow-backed security forums (Neziri 2024). While the current VMRO-DPMNE government led by Hristijan Mickoski claims a pro-EU orientation, there are concerns due to its past involvement in Russian-supported campaigns [against the country's EU-aligned policies](#). Furthermore, the far-left party Levica (the Left), led by Dimitar Apasiev, plays a crucial role in advancing Russia's anti-EU agenda. Since its founding in 2015, Levica has grown in influence, winning parliamentary seats while vocally opposing EU and NATO membership. The party supports Russia's stance on Ukraine and pushes for alternatives like the Eurasian Economic Union, positioning Russia as a viable partner over the EU (Petrovski et al. 2024). This party is a key conduit for Russian influence, using its platform to broadcast anti-Western rhetoric.

Russia actively supports separatist movements in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, particularly within Republika Srpska (RS). The leadership of RS, under Milorad Dodik, maintains strong ties with Moscow, promoting secessionist rhetoric and resisting efforts toward EU integration. The promotion of the 'Serbian World' concept—paralleling Russia's own nationalist agenda—serves to deepen ethnic divisions and undermine the cohesion of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Petrović 2024a). By backing Dodik, Russia seeks to destabilise the region and prevent it from moving closer to NATO and the EU.

In **Georgia**, the ruling Georgian Dream party has aligned itself more closely with Russia, particularly [after adopting the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in 2024](#). Moscow backs this party [as part of its broader strategy to prevent Georgia from deepening its ties with the EU and NATO](#). By supporting the incumbent regime and suggesting the normalisation of Georgia-Russia relations, Russia ensures that pro-Western reforms are stalled, thereby maintaining its leverage in the region. While Russia continues to support the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's incumbent government may harbour hopes of replicating the Nagorno-Karabakh scenario — an authoritarian-style 'conflict resolution' aimed at regaining

territorial unity with Russia's tacit approval and under its de facto control. Such an outcome, however, would effectively bind Georgia to Russia, leveraging the 'lure of Abkhazia' as a tool of influence (Kakachia2024). In **Moldova**, in addition to traditional support for Transnistria (even if currently subjected to a gas cutoff), Russia targeted the country's democratic institutions and pro-European political parties (e.g. Action and Solidarity Party, Political Bloc 'Împreună'). In October-November 2024, during both the presidential elections and the referendum organised to enshrine EU integration in the Constitution, [Russia employed various tools to influence the results](#).

Russia also covertly supports certain **Ukrainian** politicians (including through corruption or blackmail) by providing financial backing and using compromising materials. Its objectives are to [erode trust](#) in the government, politicians, society, and also Ukrainian military forces, both at the institutional and interpersonal levels. Russia seeks to influence the public agenda, divide Ukrainian society, and weaken social cohesion. It also aims to escalate conflicts and tensions within Ukrainian society and among different groups by sensationalising and manipulating existing issues.

In addition to supporting these political groups, there is also evidence of Russia's interference in electoral processes in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood. In **Serbia**, Russia's influence on elections is more indirect, bolstered by its support of far-right movements and political parties that oppose the EU. These groups, often linked to Russian paramilitary organisations, use social media and public demonstrations to influence voter sentiment and pressure the government to avoid closer ties with the West (Petrović and Ignjatijević 2023).

During **Moldova's** 2024 presidential elections, Russia used tactics such as vote-buying, voter transportation, and disinformation through state-controlled media channels and Russian media broadcasting to sway the results [in favour of pro-Russian candidates](#). This interference is expected to continue in the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections, aiming to undermine Moldova's democratic institutions and EU aspirations.

In **Georgia**, allegations of Russian meddling in the 2024 parliamentary elections have fuelled political instability. The Georgian Dream party, facing accusations of rigging the electoral process, has increasingly aligned itself with Moscow to retain power (Kakachia and Kakabadze 2024). This has intensified polarisation in the country, further complicating its EU integration efforts.

Overall, Russia's support for separatist movements, pro-Russian political parties, and anti-EU governments, as well as its meddling in elections, is part of a broader strategy to exert influence in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus. By exploiting ethnic tensions, funding sympathetic political actors, and interfering in electoral processes, Moscow seeks to destabilise the region, stall democratic reforms, and prevent further integration into Western institutions.

**China's** growing influence in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood serves to challenge the dominance of Western democratic models by promoting its authoritarian governance approach. By building networks of influence through **strategic partnerships and indirect political messaging, both in support of Russia and independent thereof**, China is gradually eroding the appeal of Euro-Atlantic integration in these regions.

Under President Aleksandar Vučić, **Serbia** has developed a multifaceted relationship with China, extending beyond economic cooperation into political spheres. Economic partnership serves as a façade for deepening

ties between two authoritarian regimes. For over a decade, there has been significant knowledge transfer from the Chinese Communist Party to Serbia's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), particularly in areas related to managing large state systems. Notably, SNS members have undergone training in China on single-party governance (Dragić 2024). A significant milestone in their relationship was the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vučić in May 2024, where they signed a joint declaration to build a 'Community of Shared Future' and deepen their strategic partnership. During this visit, 29 agreements were signed, predominantly political rather than economic, including ten related to media cooperation (Spaić 2024).

Contrary to a commonly held belief, China does not aim to use Serbia as an economic gateway to Europe (with the exception of defence sales and critical infrastructure projects): it has prioritised Hungary for that role due to its EU membership. Instead, China regards Serbia as a platform for promoting its model of digital autocracy in the Balkans (Amnesty International 2024, Ranković & Miljuš 2024). Serbia's participation in China's global initiatives signifies its alignment with Beijing's vision of offering developing nations an alternative to Western democratic models. According to Liu Gang of the Xinhua Institute, China's foreign policy aims to unite developing countries against the 'Western myth of dominance' (Djordjević 2024a). This has the potential to undermine Serbia's EU aspirations by drawing it closer to China's authoritarian orbit.

China also uses political messaging presenting China in a positive light and emphasising its developmental initiatives. In **Albania**, Radio China International broadcasts in Albanian in a local radio with coverage of two cities in Albania [including the capital of Tirana](#). Pro-Chinese narratives and messages are also increasingly present in **Montenegro**, spreading through multiple channels. In 2019, the national public broadcaster, Radio-Television of Montenegro (RTCG), signed an agreement with the International Chinese Television Corporation, becoming a member of the 'Silk Road' community, which is the largest distributor of television and radio programmes across China. Following the change of Montenegro's decades-long government in 2020, cooperation between RTCG and the Chinese Media Group (CMG) has deepened over the following years. In recent years, [RTCG has broadcast several documentaries praising Montenegro-China cooperation](#), co-produced by Montenegrin and Chinese media services. The spread of pro-Chinese messages in Montenegrin media is also [facilitated](#) by the fact that many journalists have participated in study visits to China, where strictly organised programmes show only the positive aspects of the country. From 2014 to today, it is estimated that around 70 Montenegrin journalists have participated in such visits — a considerable number given Montenegro's size (Žugić and Mihailović 2024). Additionally, Serbian media in Montenegro, aligned with authorities in Belgrade, actively disseminate pro-Chinese content, either produced independently or sourced from Chinese media broadcasting in Serbian (Vladislavljev 2024). The main goal of Chinese influence in Montenegro's media sphere is to foster positive perceptions among Montenegrin citizens of Chinese culture, economy, technology, and governance. Although, unlike Russia, China does not directly interfere in internal or foreign policy, its influence can have political consequences in the medium and long term, shaping an impression that the future belongs to China and that it represents a credible alternative to the EU and Western nations (Žugić and Mihailović 2024).

Meanwhile, in **Georgia**, the current government has signed strategic partnership agreements with China. These may gradually shift the country's focus away from the EU, [potentially impacting its democratic reforms](#). China showed unprecedented interest in Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, as indicated by the [Chinese ambassador's visit to the Georgian Central Election Commission](#).

In **Ukraine**, China has positioned itself as a potential peacemaker. The US is likely to develop a similar approach under the Trump presidency. However, this strategy appears to serve Beijing's geopolitical interests. At the 79th UN General Assembly in September 2024, China launched the 'Friends of Peace' initiative alongside Brazil, which promotes negotiations with Russia, often on terms that could be disadvantageous to Ukraine and its Western allies. This initiative, while framed as supporting the UN Charter, implicitly advocates for concessions that align with China's broader goal of positioning itself as a central power in a multipolar world. Crucially, China's positioning as a potential peacemaker is undermined by suspicions of [critical technological components](#) and even [arm deliveries](#) to Russia.

Türkiye, while less overt in its interference, has also used political influence to shape domestic politics in countries where it has strong cultural or religious ties. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Türkiye has backed political actors that align with its own interests, particularly within the Muslim Bosniak community. Similarly, in the EN, Türkiye has engaged in balancing its support for Ukrainian sovereignty with its ongoing cooperation with Russia.

External state actors beyond Russia and China are actively involved in shaping the political landscape of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, often with conflicting agendas that contribute to disinformation, polarisation, and threats to democratic consolidation. Under the Trump presidency, the US may well become the third global revisionist power eroding the liberal international order, including democracies. In **Albania**, reports indicate that disinformation in Albanian is not only spread by Russia but also by state-controlled media from Türkiye and Iran, which align their narratives to portray Western countries negatively [while supporting Russian interests](#). This disinformation landscape creates a volatile environment that hampers democratic progress, especially given Albania's digital vulnerabilities.

Türkiye also poses political uncertainties in **Ukraine**, where it uses its ties with both Russia and Ukraine to position itself as a regional power broker. While President Erdogan has expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty, he simultaneously advocates for peace negotiations, thereby positioning Türkiye [as a crucial mediator](#). This dual approach allows Türkiye to maintain influence over both sides, reinforcing its strategic ambitions in the region.

## ii. Cultural diplomacy and influence

**Cultural and religious diplomacy** is another tool used by external actors to influence the political and social dynamics of countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans. External state actors are increasingly leveraging cultural instruments to expand their sway. Through religious institutions, educational programmes, and cultural exchanges, countries like Russia, China, Iran, and Türkiye aim to foster pro-authoritarian sentiments, undermine democratic values, and strengthen ties with local elites.

**Russia** has mobilised the spiritual power of the Russian Orthodox Church to influence domestic politics in the EU's neighbourhood, notably in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It has also supported other actors (e.g. CSOs and think tanks) that promote the traditional values it seeks to diffuse. In several EN and WB countries, Russian centres of the Russkiy Mir Foundation serve as key instruments of cultural diplomacy, promoting Russian language but also 'traditional Russian moral and spiritual values'.

The **Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC)** and the **Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)** share strong historical ties, which have deepened following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Both institutions align with the political ambitions of Moscow and Belgrade, promoting concepts like the 'Russian World' and the 'Serbian World'. This shared vision seeks to unify Orthodox believers across borders under a nationalist banner, often challenging Western influence in the region (Karabeg 2023). The SPC supports Russia's stance on Kosovo and aligns with the ROC's condemnation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's independence, portraying the West as [an adversary in a civilisational battle](#).

The SPC has also been active in organising anti-Western rallies in Serbia, often collaborating with far-right groups like the Night Wolves. These gatherings promote traditional and family values while celebrating Russia as a protector of Orthodox Christianity against Western secularism. Political rhetoric at these events frequently includes support for Vladimir Putin, portraying him as a defender of global Orthodoxy (BBC 2022). In **Montenegro**, the ROC's influence is felt through its close ties with the SPC, which wields considerable sway over both Serbs and some ethnic Montenegrins. Orthodox brotherhoods, such as Miholjski Zbor and Stupovi, organise rallies supporting Russia and [opposing Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic integration](#).

In **Moldova**, the Moldovan branch of the ROC plays a key role in promoting pro-Russian sentiments. The Church leverages its high levels of public trust to align religious messages with Moscow's geopolitical goals, thereby deepening social polarisation and [complicating Moldova's EU integration efforts](#). This strategy is particularly effective among ethnic minorities, where support for pro-European parties remains minimal. By exploiting religious affiliations, Russia aims to foster opposition to pro-Western reforms, thus maintaining its influence over Moldova's political landscape.

In **Georgia**, despite earlier attempts to [reduce its influence](#) the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) remains a powerful institution, deeply influencing national identity and societal values. The GOC's social conservatism and Eurosceptic rhetoric align it with Russia's ideological agenda, despite Georgia's official pro-European stance. The [Church's influence](#) was evident in the recent adoption of anti-LGBTIQ+ legislation, which critics argue undermines [Georgia's EU accession process](#). The GOC's alignment with the ROC on moral issues further weakens Georgia's resilience against Russian influence, creating societal divisions that hinder democratic progress.

**Russia** has developed a different approach and a specific narrative in Ukraine, especially in preparation of the full-scale invasion. It has employed the concept of 'Russkiy mir' to emphasise that Ukraine is not really an independent state and a separate entity with its own history and sovereignty, but rather only a part of Russia.

**China's** approach in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans is largely economic, but its soft power is growing. In recent years, China has increasingly sought to uphold a positive image and promote its culture through scientific cooperation and cultural instruments, first and foremost Confucius Institutes, many of which target local government officials (Tonchev 2020). However, in recent years growing international backlash has led China to rebrand its cultural instruments, including the Confucius Institutes.

China uses educational exchanges, seminars, and study visits to cultivate pro-China sentiments in the Balkans, particularly in North Macedonia and Montenegro. These programmes focus on showcasing China's economic and technological advancements, subtly promoting its governance model without overt political



messaging. In **North Macedonia**, it organises study visits, seminars, and exchanges for government officials, journalists, and academics, cultivating a network of pro-China figures who often later attain influential positions (Metamorphosis 2023). By exposing participants to China's technological advancements and controlled society, Beijing seeks to build a network of individuals who hold favourable views toward China and may later influence their countries' policies.

In **Montenegro**, China's efforts are similarly aimed at building goodwill among professionals through controlled visits and training programmes beyond the media sphere with the Chinese Embassy and Confucius Institutes playing key roles (Žugić & Mihailović 2024). China currently does not directly influence the government of Montenegro but has focused its efforts on building a network of individuals from various professional backgrounds holding positive views of China and may one day hold important positions in the Montenegrin state and society. To this end, [China organises](#) seminars, conferences, and study visits not only for journalists but also for government officials, representatives of state-owned companies, and associations. Participants report that the hosts are very hospitable and consistently emphasise that China has no political agenda, only a desire to enhance economic cooperation with Montenegro. However, the visits are strictly controlled and focus solely on presenting China's positive aspects, demonstrating its economic, technological, and military power (Žugić and Mihailović 2024). Through cultural diplomacy China conveys indirect messages that portray a well-functioning Chinese society, organising these visits around celebrations that mark the anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party's founding. The Chinese embassy and the Confucius Institute in Montenegro are the main organisers and implementers of these programmes (Žugić and Mihailović 2024).

In **Serbia**, China's strategic focus includes academic exchanges and youth programmes designed to foster long-term relationships with future leaders (Ćurčić 2024). This aligns with China's strategy of using educational exchanges in Global South countries to expand its influence, establish intelligence networks, and promote its model of governance. Although the exchanges are framed as economic cooperation, they serve the broader goal of promoting China's authoritarian model as an alternative to Western liberal democracy (Yau 2024).

China has been steadily expanding its footprint in both the cultural and academic sectors in **Georgia**, by establishing a Confucius Institute with the Free University of Tbilisi and signing bilateral agreements with Georgian universities.

Türkiye's promotion of Ottoman heritage and Islamic identity in the Western Balkans is a form of soft power designed to shape public opinion. This promotion can also bolster political movements that align with Türkiye's regional ambitions, potentially complicating efforts towards EU integration that are predicated on secular democratic principles.

Türkiye's influence in the Balkans is exerted through religious and cultural channels. By funding mosque construction and organising religious activities, Ankara seeks to reinforce its position as a regional leader and protector of Muslim communities. However, these efforts face resistance from local elites who are wary of Türkiye's broader political ambitions. In **Kosovo**, Türkiye's influence manifests through [cultural and religious channels](#) such as the funding of mosque constructions and religious activities, though local elites oppose Türkiye's [attempts to exert more significant political influence](#). Türkiye's engagement extends to the EN3. In

**Ukraine**, it maintains a delicate balance between supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and positioning itself as a mediator in the conflict with Russia. Ankara leverages its historical ties with the Crimean Tatars, [providing financial and educational support to strengthen its regional leadership](#). Through educational initiatives and cultural projects, Türkiye bolsters its geopolitical influence while positioning itself as a mediator in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In **Georgia**, Türkiye promotes its culture through academic cooperation, particularly as part of the International Black Sea University. It also provides [funding to support the construction of mosques and schools in Ajara](#) and seeks to promote the Ottoman heritage in the region. This has triggered concerns among the population and opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church, as has been the case for [the restoration of the Aziz mosque](#) since 2012.

**Iran** has sought to extend its influence in **Albania**, not only through disinformation but also by leveraging religious and cultural channels. The presence of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) in Albania has been a point of contention, [leading to cyber-attacks attributed to Iranian state actors](#) (REFD3.1). Iran's state-sponsored media, such as Pars Today, continues to criticise Albania for its support of the MEK, [using this narrative to push anti-Western sentiments](#). Additionally, Iran's focus on cultural diplomacy in Albania seeks to expand its soft power, though it faces substantial pushback from local authorities.

Certain **Gulf states** have similarly promoted religious and cultural institutions, particularly within the Muslim populations of the Western Balkans, for instance in **Albania**. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has sought to spread Wahhabism by supporting the construction of mosques and the training of imams. While these efforts are often framed as charity or cultural exchange, they can also serve to build political influence and foster ideologies that may not be conducive to the EU's vision of pluralistic, liberal democracy. The creation and diffusion of information platforms, like Al Jazeera Balkans, [serves similar purposes](#). The extent of this influence however has been held in check by the secularism of WB states, as is the case in Albania. These activities have also triggered varied and ambivalent feelings among Muslim populations, as is the case in [Bosnia and Herzegovina vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia](#).

In sum, external state actors, particularly Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran, are increasingly using cultural and religious institutions as instruments of influence in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood. By leveraging shared religious identities, organising cultural exchanges, and promoting educational initiatives, these actors aim to create networks of local supporters, foster anti-Western sentiments, and promote authoritarian governance models. This cultural soft power strategy not only challenges Western influence but also complicates the democratic trajectories of these regions, making them more susceptible to external manipulation.

## 2.2. Likelihood and impact of the threats materialising

In order to assess the likelihood and (potential) impact of the instruments mapped in the previous section, we developed a set of indicators Table 1. The likelihood of threats coming to pass is determined by three key factors: the receptivity of the target, the capabilities and intent of the malign actor, and the availability of external support to mitigate or counter the threat. A low likelihood occurs when the target is minimally receptive, the actor's capabilities are limited, and substantial external support is available. In cases where these factors are moderate — such as a medium level of receptivity, medium actor capabilities, and moderate

external support — the likelihood is categorised as medium. The likelihood is considered high when the target is highly receptive, the actor is highly capable, and external countermeasures are scarce.

The impact of these threats is assessed on a similar scale. A low impact is described as having no significant adverse effects or being a mere nuisance. When the impact is medium, the threats affect targets of moderate significance in moderately stable democracies. These threats are not immediate but may result in unintended spill over consequences. A high impact represents a severe and immediate threat to the country’s integrity and democratic governance, especially in scenarios where the target is a majority and the country’s democratic system lacks stability. We used changes in democracy and corruption indicators over time (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3) as a measure of the stability of the countries’ democratic system.

Table 1 Likelihood and impact indicators

Indicators to measure the likelihood of threats posed by malign countries coming to pass	Indicators to measure impact (incl. unintended consequences) of instruments used for foreign interference
<p><u>1-Low</u>                      Low receptivity by target;                      Low capabilities/intent of original actor;                      High availability of external support mitigating/countering threat through similar channels.</p>	<p><u>1-Low (nuisance)</u>                      No unfavourable impact or just nuisance;                      Target is a minority in a country with a fairly stable democratic culture and system;                      No substantial threat to country/its democratic government or possibly (unintended) positive consequences (strengthening of democratic government).</p>
<p><u>2-Medium</u>                      Medium receptivity by target;                      Medium capabilities/intent of original actor;                      Medium availability of external support mitigating/countering threat through similar channels.</p>	<p><u>2-Medium</u>                      Target is of moderate significance;                      Country’s democratic system is moderately stable;                      Threat is not immediate                      Possible (unintended) threat spillover.</p>
<p><u>3-High</u>                      High receptivity by target;                      High capabilities/intent of original actor;                      Low availability of external support mitigating/countering threat through similar channels available.</p>	<p><u>3- High (immediate threat to the integrity of the country and its democratic government)</u>                      Immediate threat to the integrity of the country and its democratic government;                      Target is a majority                      Country does not have a stable democratic system.</p>

Figure 1 illustrates the V-Dem Deliberative Democracy Scores for Eastern European and Balkan countries from 2008 to 2023, highlighting trends in democratic stability and change. Consistently low scores or high fluctuations in the V-Dem scores suggest democratic instability. For example, Serbia shows a steady decline in scores after 2012, indicating potential democratic backsliding and instability. Moldova has currently the highest scores but also exhibits the highest fluctuation since 2008, which could again indicate instability.

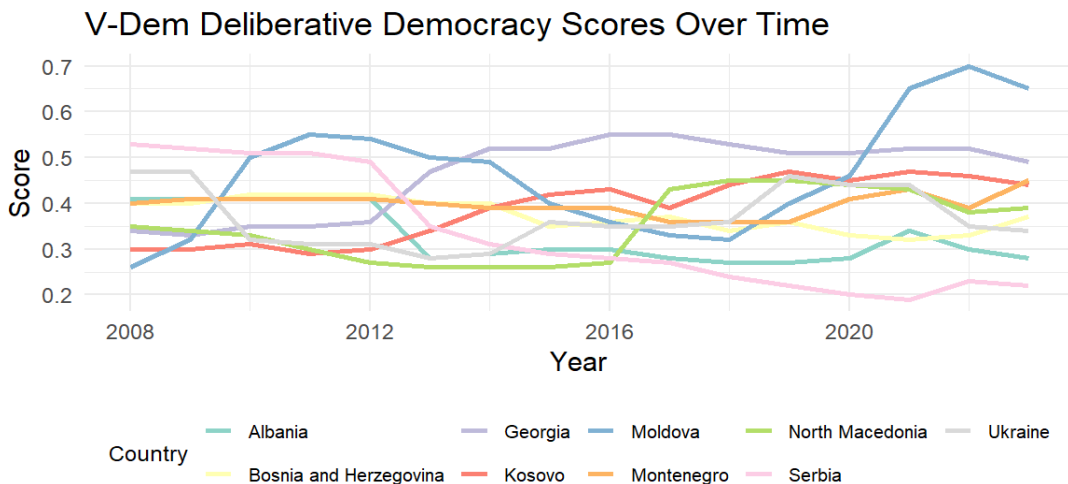


Figure 1 V-Dem Democracy Scores for WB6 and EN3

Figure 2 depicts the Freedom House Democracy Percentage Scores for the EN3 and WB6 from 2016 to 2023. Like the V-Dem Scores, the Freedom House Scores reflect varying levels of democratic performance and stability across the region. The shorter time period (due to data availability) means that fluctuations in scores are not a good indicator of democratic instability here. However, the data show upward and downward trends. Serbia shows a notable decline, indicating a weakening democratic environment. In contrast, countries like Moldova and Ukraine show upward trends in their scores, particularly after 2020, reflecting improvements in democratic governance.

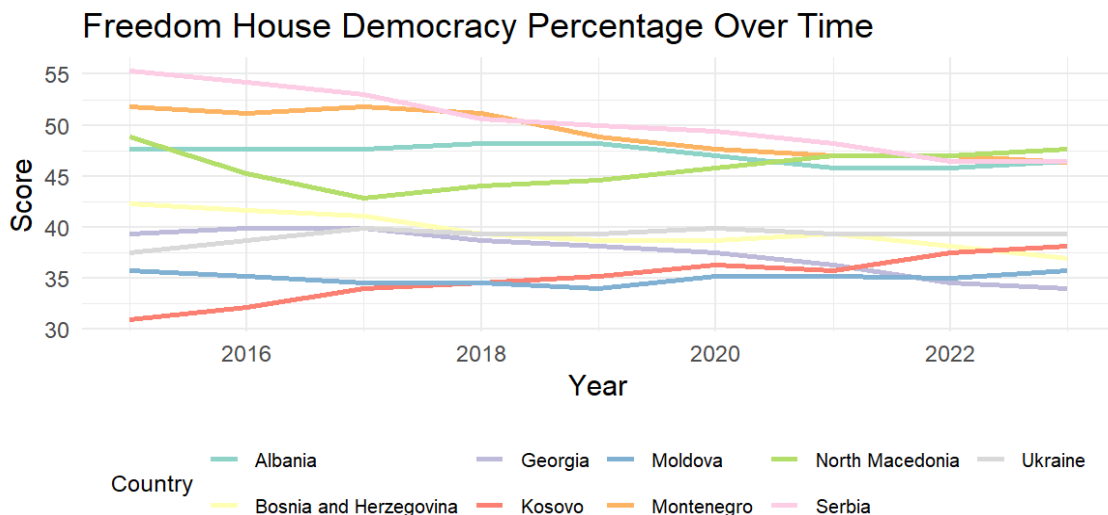


Figure 2 Freedom House Democracy Index for WB6 and EN3

Figure 3 presents the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scores for the nine candidate countries from 2012 to 2023. The trends reveal varied progress in addressing corruption across these countries. Georgia consistently maintains the highest CPI scores, reflecting relative stability and effectiveness in combating corruption. Moldova and Kosovo show gradual improvements over time, signalling some progress. Ukraine also exhibits notable improvement, particularly after 2014, as reforms were

implemented. In contrast, Serbia and Montenegro display stagnation or slight declines, indicating persistent corruption challenges. Other countries, such as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, demonstrate modest or fluctuating trends, suggesting limited success in reducing corruption. These patterns highlight the region's differing trajectories in transparency and governance.

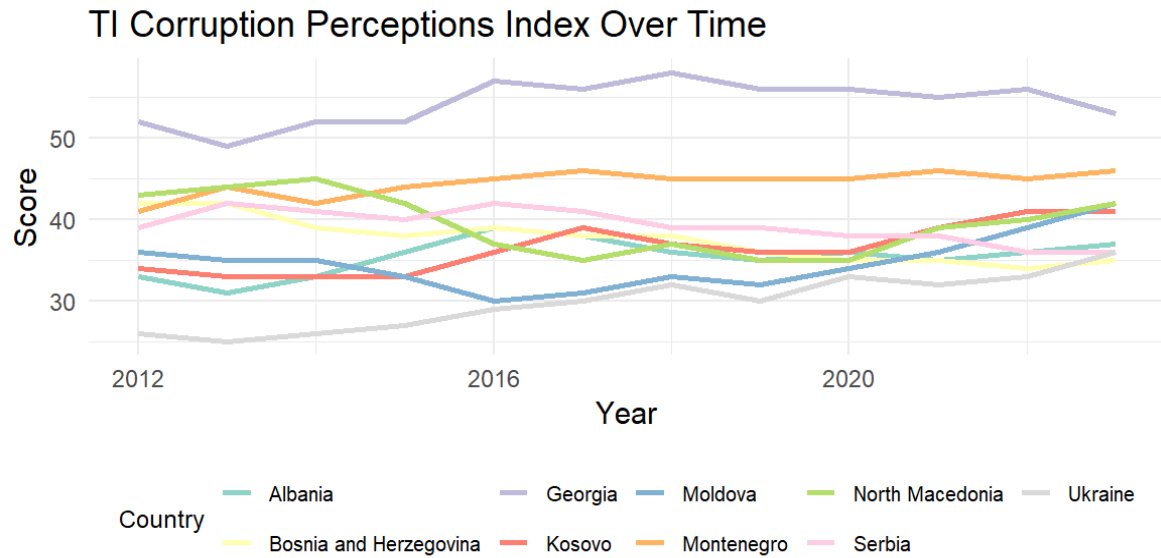


Figure 3 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index for WB6 and EN3

#### i. Political interference and destabilisation instruments

Figure 4 presents an assessment of the likelihood and impact of political interference and destabilisation efforts by foreign actors, classified by specific country pairs. It organises these assessments into categories based on whether the likelihood of interference and its impact are low, medium, or high. This framework illustrates the varying degrees of threat posed by these interactions.

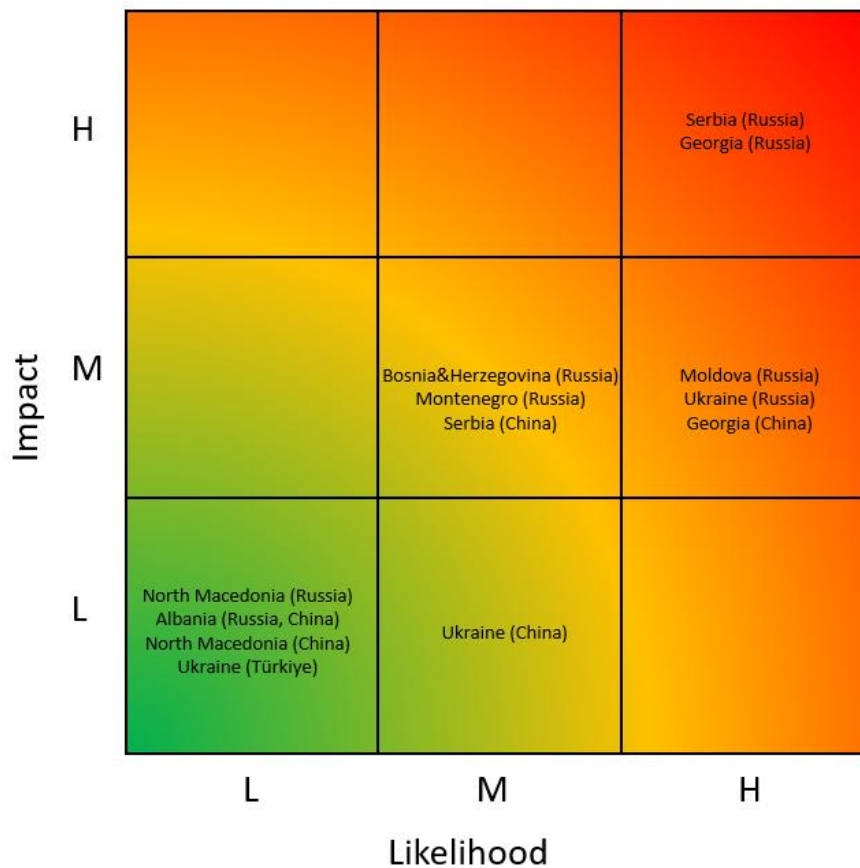


Figure 4 Likelihood and impact of political interference and destabilisation instruments. Source: the authors.  
L = Low; M = Medium; H = High

At the highest levels of both likelihood and impact, the focus is on the dynamics between **Russia and Serbia**, as well as **Russia and Georgia**. These pairs represent the most significant threats, where interference is both **highly probable and highly consequential**.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda has been prominent in **Serbia** for over a decade and has intensified in recent years with the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party. One reason for this is the ideological alignment between Vučić's and Putin's regimes, characterised by nationalism and authoritarianism, as well as political claims toward neighbouring countries. However, the closeness between the Russian and Serbian authorities needs to be nuanced. In fact, Serbia is pursuing a balanced policy between Russia and the West (interview, 17.12.2024); for example, it has allegedly [delivered ammunition to Ukraine](#). The dissemination of Russian propaganda is part of this policy (interview, 17.12.2024) and develops through pro-government media, which dominate the media landscape. It reverberates well beyond pro-government media, though, as far-right groups amplify pro-Russian propaganda on social media, reaching citizens who do not follow mainstream outlets. As a result, pro-Russian, pro-Putin, and anti-Western sentiments are widespread and deeply ingrained among the Serbian population. Consequently, the likelihood of Russian influence in this area posing a threat is high, with a high impact.

Apart from a few marginal neo-Nazi groups, the Serbian far-right is strongly pro-Russian. Some far-right figures even tolerate Russia's support for Vučić's government, which they view as treacherous and falsely pro-Russian. While far-right groups lack access to mainstream media, they are highly active on social media, spreading pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda to audiences beyond traditional media consumers. As a result, there is a high likelihood of Russian influence in this sphere posing a threat, with an impact assessed as high.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda is also pervasive in **Georgia**, creating a high likelihood and high impact. Pro-Russian, Eurosceptic, and anti-Western narratives resonate with the political preferences of the incumbent regime, which seeks to consolidate its grip on power amid increasing democratising pressure from the West. Consequently, high-ranking government officials and state-aligned media frequently serve as primary sources of foreign information manipulation and interference, as well as 'gaslighting'. This alignment between governmental policies and foreign disinformation contrasts sharply with the largely pro-Western stance of the Georgian population, fuelling continuous political crises and public protests. This persistent discord undermines the country's psychological resilience, leaving Georgia increasingly vulnerable to Russia's political influence and destabilising strategies.

Allegations of Russian meddling in Georgia's 2024 elections – [denied](#) by the Russian authorities - point to the continuous use of hybrid warfare tactics against Georgia (Kakachia and Kakabadze 2024). Russia's political interference in the years to come has both a high likelihood and a high immediate impact. This is because Georgia stands at a critical juncture between authoritarianism and democratisation as the electoral victory of the ruling party in the last parliamentary elections is questioned both internally and externally. The most immediate threat derives from the incumbent regime's determination to stay in power at all costs, which makes it very likely to turn protests into violent clashes in the short term. In such a scenario, Russia is likely to intervene either by supporting the Russia-friendly incumbent regime or exacerbating political instability by mobilising assets such as GRU pre-positioned in Georgia. As Georgia is currently surrounded by autocratic countries (Russia, but also Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Iran), all of these can support directly or indirectly the ruling elites. For instance, Azerbaijan, which has allegedly provided police equipment during the previous government, could send policemen and equipment (interview, 23/12/2024).

In the medium categories, interactions such as Russia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, Russia and Montenegro, and China and Serbia are notable. These represent a **medium likelihood and impact**.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Russia's influence is tightly intertwined with, and channelled through Republika Srpska (RS) (interview, 23/12/2024). Disinformation is spread by RS media, which often endorse Russia's policies. Russia also seeks to thwart the country's Euro-Atlantic integration by offering counter models, whether in terms of domestic development or regional integration. For instance, the RS Parliament passed and later shelved (in 2024) a foreign agent law that would threaten the work of some media and NGOs. In addition to threatening the secession of the entity, the dominant politician of RS Milorad Dodik has also referred to joining the BRICS.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western messages in **Montenegro** are spread by numerous traditional and social media outlets, as well as Serbian political parties, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and various Orthodox brotherhoods. The long-term marginalisation of ethnic Serbs by Đukanović's pro-Western government, along

with widespread corruption and crime associated with his administration, has made some citizens in Montenegro susceptible to pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-EU narratives. Nonetheless, a significant number of political actors and NGOs actively work to expose pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda, and [the majority of citizens still support a Western foreign policy orientation](#) for Montenegro and its EU membership. Therefore, the likelihood of Russian influence materialising as a threat in this area is medium, with a medium impact. Russian influence on the Montenegrin authorities has grown compared to the period of Milo Đukanović's rule, as pro-Russian political parties representing the interests of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro are now participating in the executive government. However, they have not succeeded in altering Montenegro's foreign policy course, which remains oriented toward EU membership, and Montenegro has, among other things, imposed sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, although there are significant pro-Russian sentiments in Montenegro, the majority of citizens support the country's foreign policy alignment with the West, with an overwhelming [majority in favour of EU membership](#). Therefore, the likelihood of Russian influence materialising as a threat in this area is medium, with a medium impact.

Pro-Chinese narratives in **Serbia** have been on the rise in recent years, becoming increasingly political rather than economic. These narratives praise China's governance model as being fairer globally for developing nations and locally for ordinary people, offering progress and development. In Serbia, poor socio-economic conditions are often blamed not on the government but on Western liberal elites, providing fertile ground for pro-Chinese, anti-Western propaganda. China recently signed ten media agreements with Serbia, likely intensifying these narratives. Additionally, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese messages share a strong anti-Western focus, complementing each other and creating a cumulative effect. Consequently, Chinese influence in Serbia is assessed as a medium-level threat with a medium impact.

Chinese political influence over Serbia's government has grown in the past five years, as China views Serbia as a key channel for exerting political influence in the region. Additionally, as Serbia's leadership increasingly leans toward autocracy, it strengthens ties with authoritarian China as an external source of legitimacy. Through its 'Shared Future' political initiative with developing countries, China seeks to expand and solidify its influence (Nathan and Zhang 2021). As a result, China's influence in Serbia is likely to pose a medium-level threat, with a medium impact. In cases with a **medium likelihood but a high impact**, relationship such as Russia and Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, and China and Georgia are highlighted, reflecting potential for significant destabilisation.

The likelihood of these threats materialising in **Moldova** varies depending on the specific activities outlined above but remains medium to high across most areas. For instance, disinformation campaigns via social media and state-controlled media are highly likely to continue, with a moderate impact on public opinion and trust in democratic institutions. The persistent flow of misinformation could contribute to societal polarisation and weaken democratic governance, especially in the run-up to the 2025 parliamentary elections. During the referendum campaign in October 2024, the Russian Federation amplified its disinformation efforts by spreading misleading claims about the economic and social consequences of European integration, portraying the EU as a source of instability and moral decline. These narratives were tailored to exploit societal divisions, including those related to identity and cultural values, and were heavily circulated via local influencers, fake accounts, and pro-Russian outlets, significantly influencing voter perceptions and turnout. The impact of these campaigns over the 2025-2030 period could be significant. By continuously undermining trust in pro-European political actors and democratic institutions, disinformation



may polarise Moldovan society further and weaken the country's path toward European integration, along with its objective of becoming an EU Member State by 2030. As Moldova strengthens ties with EU institutions, these campaigns could also serve to sow doubt about the benefits of EU membership, creating an environment of uncertainty and division within the electorate.

Support for pro-Russian political parties, including financial aid and logistical backing, is highly likely to continue, with a high potential impact. This support may further fragment Moldova's political landscape, weakening pro-EU forces and promoting alternative political agendas aligned with Russian interests. According to a study developed by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, the Pro-European parties in the Republic Moldova receive limited support from Russian speaking people, ranging between 2 % and 6 %. In contrast, pro-Russian parties enjoy significantly higher backing within these groups, [with support levels reaching up to 54 % or more](#). In the long term, these efforts could erode Moldova's institutional resilience, making it more susceptible to external interference.

The forthcoming period, particularly around the 2025 parliamentary elections and the progression of Moldova's EU accession process, is highly likely to see an intensification of Russian efforts to undermine pro-EU political forces. Russia is expected to target pro-European political parties, independent media, and civil society groups that advocate for democratic governance and European integration. These malign activities will likely include continued support for opposition movements, the use of troll farms, and state-controlled media campaigns. In a context where Moldovan political parties are increasingly building ties with EU counterparts, these tactics may fuel political fragmentation and weaken the pro-European agenda. The impact of this threat is likely to be heightened as Moldova's political landscape becomes more entwined with the EU accession process, making pro-EU actors more vulnerable to external interference. Overall, while the immediate threat may not result in large-scale destabilisation, the cumulative impact of these varied forms of interference is likely to erode democratic governance and diminish the effectiveness of Moldova's institutions over time.

Though the likelihood and impact of political threats posed by **Russia to Ukraine** significantly depend on the conditions of the peace deal, there are general societal trends that make predictions possible. Russia heads the anti-rating of external actors: 94.3 % of Ukrainians consider Russia in a negative way, and 78.5 % support ['the complete severing of all relations with the Russian Federation up to a complete ban on the entry of Russian citizens into Ukraine'](#). Such an extremely negative attitude towards Russians makes both society and democratic politicians less susceptible to Russian disinformation campaigns, bribery and blackmailing of politicians, and other malign influence. At the same time, Russia continues to view Ukraine as an integral part of its sphere of influence. This makes it unlikely that, even after the war ends, Russia will not try to interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine.

Another set of threats includes those where Russia targets Ukraine indirectly through the influence of foreign societies and governments. This might include support for 'pro-peace' organisations and public influencers, the exploitation of human rights and minority rights rhetoric and groups, and the exploitation of the Hungarian government to influence Ukraine's political process. In addition, Russia might seek to influence the peace discourse via so-called Russian liberal opposition outside Russia, exploiting anti-West sentiments and its Soviet legacy to reframe the war against Ukraine as anti-West and prevent 'Global South' countries

from helping Ukraine. Since all the abovementioned threats are ongoing, the probability that they will be used in the future is high, while their impact has already proved to be medium.

The **China-Georgia** relationship also offers an illustration of a **high likelihood** combined with a **medium impact** dynamic. While less consequential than Russia's, China's interference in **Georgia** is equally highly likely to materialise in 2025-35. The willingness of the current Georgian government to cooperate closely with China (arguably at the expense of strategic relations with the West) along with the 2017 free trade agreement and 2023 strategic partnership agreement (Avdaliani 2023) contribute to this expectation. China's expanding influence could have a medium negative impact on democratisation and stability in Georgia since it can indirectly undermine democratic initiatives and European integration efforts in the country.

The case of **China-Ukraine** is an example of a **medium likelihood and a low impact relationship** with a moderate probability of threats and low destabilising potential. China is actively involved in establishing itself geopolitically as one of the poles of powers in a multi-polar competition, as well as a peace bearer and broker. One of the main sources of potential political threat for Ukraine lie in China's ongoing 'peace building' projects and activities with regards to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Most significantly, for example, China abstains from taking part in Ukrainian or Ukrainian allies' peace initiatives and promote the '[friends of peace](#)' club founded together with Brazil. Such activities may lessen support for Ukraine and destabilise the country's political efforts - both internally and internationally - to promote and sustain its vision of a just peace and normative world-order.

The **low likelihood and low impact** category include pairs like Russia and North Macedonia, Russia and Albania, China and Albania, Iran and Albania, China and North Macedonia, and Türkiye and Ukraine, suggesting minimal threats from these relationships.

Unlike the previous VMRO-DPMNE-led government, the current government in **North Macedonia** is pro-EU, with Russian influence limited to within the Serbian minority party, which lacks significant political power. Therefore, the likelihood of Russian influence materialising within the government is low, with a low impact. The probability of Russian influence in North Macedonia's political opposition posing a threat is currently small, as the main pro-Russian political party holds only six parliamentary seats. Consequently, the impact of Russian influence in the opposition is also considered weak. However, it is worth noting that Levica is experiencing steady growth in support, and in a context of rising public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and North Macedonia's stalled progress toward EU membership, voter support for this party could increase.

Chinese influence in both the media and government spheres in **North Macedonia** remains in its early stages, and Chinese systems and culture are still relatively unfamiliar to citizens. Consequently, the likelihood of Chinese influence posing a threat is low, with its current potential impact considered weak. However, it is important to consider that Chinese and Russian propaganda efforts share a common anti-Western orientation. Together, they could have a cumulative effect on shaping anti-Western sentiments within North Macedonian public opinion. Further research on this topic would be valuable for understanding these dynamics more fully.

Disinformation from both Russia and China has been increasing in recent years in **Albania**, especially since the pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Disinformation from Russia, in particular, seeks to

destabilise the country by fuelling frustration. However, the likelihood of this being used on a wider scale is low, with also a limited impact. Due to the language barrier, Albania is not the direct target of disinformation. Instead Russian news travels through Kosovo and North Macedonia. Disinformation is therefore not specifically tailored to the Albanian political context.

**Turkish** political influence that might potentially threaten **Ukraine** stems from the country positioning itself as a regional leader and peace mediator in (potential) peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, with necessary neutrality and ties to both countries. There is a small chance that such activities might undermine Ukrainian efforts in peacebuilding and sustaining a just peace and its sovereignty.

## ii. Cultural diplomacy instruments

Figure 5 evaluates the likelihood and impact of cultural diplomacy instruments used by the external actors in their interactions with the candidate countries.

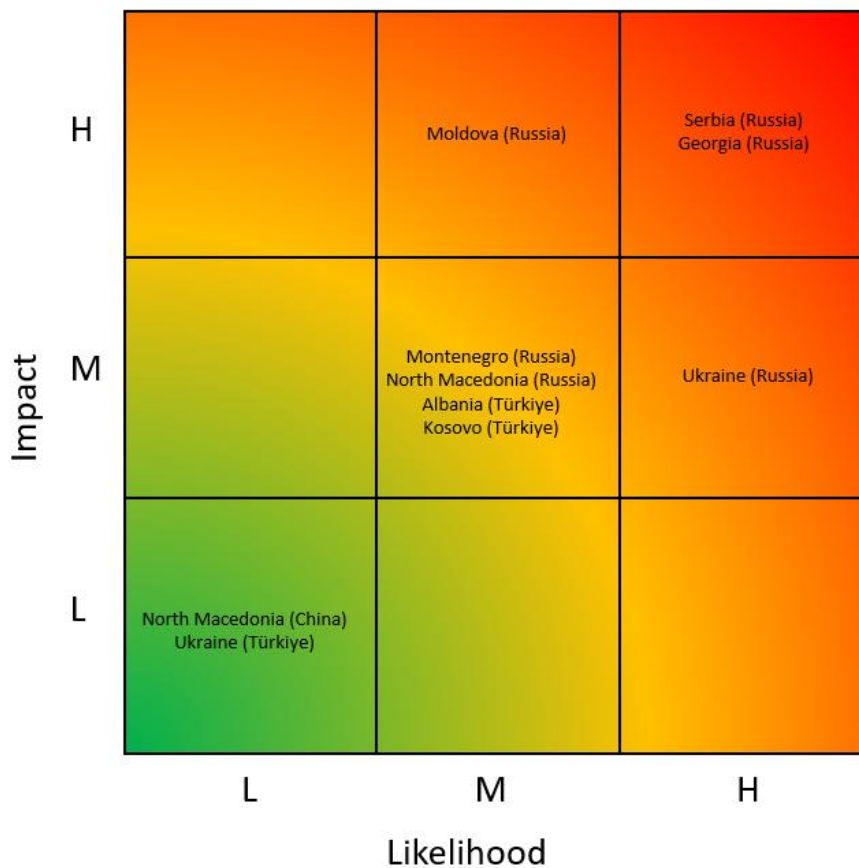


Figure 5 Likelihood and impact of cultural diplomacy instruments. Source: the authors.  
L = Low; M = Medium; H = High

In cases with both **high likelihood and high impact**, relationships between Russia and Serbia and Russia and Georgia are highlighted. These pairings represent the most significant use of cultural diplomacy, where such efforts are both highly probable and profoundly influential.

Research shows a strong [pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment](#) among the **Serbian** population, as well as significant support for undemocratic forms of governance (Petrovic 2024). Additionally, most citizens support the idea of the Serbian World. These conditions favour the persistence of Russian influence in Serbia's government, making it highly likely that it will manifest as a threat, with a high impact. Furthermore, the Serbian Orthodox Church, alongside the Serbian Armed Forces, holds the highest public trust in Serbia (Simić 2022). It has traditionally maintained strong ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which have deepened since the end of the Cold War. Both churches share an anti-Western stance, viewing the West as a threat to traditional and family values, as well as to the national identity and interests of Serbs and Russians. Consequently, there is a high likelihood of Russian influence in this domain posing a threat, with an impact assessed as strong.

In **Georgia**, the high likelihood and significant impact of Russia's cultural diplomacy instruments are primarily rooted in religious ties. The Georgian Orthodox Church, which remains the most popular institution in the country, maintains close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. It frequently promotes socially conservative values, opposes liberal norms, and thus serves as a conduit for Russia's Eurosceptic influence among its clergy and followers. Additionally, Georgia's Soviet-era cultural and intellectual elite, who retain some influence over older generations, often — whether deliberately or unintentionally — propagate pro-Russian and Eurosceptic views. This aligns them with the anti-Western and illiberal narratives espoused by various political actors, including the current government.

An example of high likelihood but only medium impact is Russia's cultural influence in **Ukraine**, which is most notable in its struggle to maintain the influence in the sphere of religion, particularly considering the [high level of trust and respect](#) that Ukrainians have in the Church as an institution. Russia strives to present the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC (MP)), which is a part of the ROC as the only true and canonical Orthodox church, the defender of the true faith, and the proper place to belong. These efforts are streamed both within Ukraine through the UOC (MP) itself and affiliated agents (politicians, activists, etc.) and internationally, for example through the influence Russia and ROC has in other Orthodox churches, the World Council of Churches, etc. These efforts are aimed at undermining and discrediting the Ukrainian government and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In addition, rhetoric about traditional values and Ruskiy Mir has been spread in Ukraine through ROC/UOC(MP)-affiliated structures.

Another aspect of Russia's activities that might potentially threaten Ukraine is Russia's exploitation of sentiments towards Russian culture and its cultural ties with foreign countries. These sentiments are used to shape the political agenda while targeting the Ukrainian government and its international partners (primarily, in the EU, UK, the US, Canada and other countries that support Ukraine), and to undermine political support of Ukraine and its unity. The objective is also to foster sympathy for Russian culture, increase susceptibility to Russian narratives that portray Ukraine as a country waging a war against Russian culture, , while portraying Ukrainian culture as secondary and less important. Still, these activities, while moderately likely to present a threat, won't bring significant damage and destabilisation to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, **medium likelihood combined with high impact** is observed in interactions like Russia and Moldova. This relationship indicates scenarios where cultural diplomacy has the potential to produce significant effects, even if its probability is moderate.

Religious influence through the **Moldovan** branch of the Russian Orthodox Church is also likely to persist, with a medium likelihood of deepening societal divisions. The impact, however, could be significant, as this influence extends into the political realm and may undermine national cohesion, especially in a context of heightened political competition and EU accession processes.

In the medium categories, relationships such as Russia and Montenegro, Russia and North Macedonia, Türkiye and Albania, and Türkiye and Kosovo, are categorised as having a **medium level of likelihood and impact**, suggesting moderate significance in their cultural diplomacy dynamics.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) holds significant religious and political influence in **Montenegro**, as it enjoys the trust of both ethnic Serbs and ethnic Montenegrins. The protests organised by the SPC against Milo Đukanović's government's initiative to nationalise its property in Montenegro led to the fall of his administration in 2020. Political parties and numerous Orthodox brotherhoods gather around the SPC providing organisational and logistical support to some of the Church's activities. However, there is also strong political and civic opposition to the SPC's influence in Montenegro, with [the majority of citizens being pro-Western and supporting Montenegro's EU membership](#). Therefore, the likelihood of Russian influence materialising as a threat in this area is medium, with an impact assessed as moderate.

In **North Macedonia**, the MOC wields significant influence among ethnic Macedonians, making the probability of Russian influence manifesting as a threat medium, with an impact also assessed as medium.

At the low end of the spectrum, with both **low likelihood and low impact**, are examples like China and North Macedonia and Türkiye and Ukraine. These pairings suggest minimal engagement or consequences from cultural diplomacy efforts. For instance, Chinese influence in the media space in **North Macedonia** remains in its early stages. The Macedonian media pick up messages from Chinese social media in the country (e.g. from the embassy or Confucius Institute), but Chinese media do not broadcast in Macedonian language. The potential impact of Chinese influence through the media is also assessed as low, given the weak degree of familiarity of Macedonian citizens with the Chinese system and culture, which limits their receptivity to Chinese messages. However, Chinese and Russian disinformation may ultimately reinforce each other in shaping anti-Western opinion in North Macedonia.

The Türkiye - Ukraine pairing reflects similar dynamics. Potentially, Türkiye's close religious, historical and cultural ties, including mutually intelligible languages, to Crimean Tatars might at some moment threaten **Ukraine's** political stability and democracy. Still, such possibilities are far-fetched and even then, their impact would be rather low considering the [small size of the Crimean Tatar population \(1.5 %\)](#), and the fact that they are well-integrated into Ukrainian society.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This working paper has outlined the multifaceted and evolving threats posed by external state actors to the democratisation and EU integration processes in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans countries. By examining the instruments of influence deployed by external states actors, we have highlighted the use of political interference and cultural diplomacy instruments that undermine the stability, governance, and democratic consolidation of EU candidate countries.

The findings of this threat assessment indicate that Russia remains the most prominent actor in obstructing democratisation and EU integration through deliberate strategies of destabilisation and political interference, including support for separatist movements and disinformation campaigns. Russia's influence is especially significant in the EN3, but also in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where its activities exploit existing societal divides, ethnic tensions, and fragile institutions to stall democratic progress. This report has shown that Russia's ability to leverage cultural and religious diplomacy, particularly through the Russian Orthodox Church, further reinforces its soft power influence in target countries, weakening national resilience against external manipulation.

China's approach, while less overtly disruptive than Russia's, focuses on promoting its authoritarian governance model as a viable alternative to Western democratic norms. The strategic use of media agreements, and educational initiatives in Serbia, Montenegro, and parts of the EN (Georgia), signals China's increasing geopolitical ambition in these regions. While China's influence does not currently pose immediate destabilising effects, its long-term potential to erode support for democratic reforms and European integration should not be underestimated.

Türkiye and certain Gulf states have also been identified as significant actors in shaping political and/or cultural dynamics, particularly with the Muslim populations of the Western Balkans. Türkiye's cultural diplomacy, rooted in shared religious and historical ties, seeks to strengthen its regional influence. However, these activities, while not directly destabilising, can create political uncertainties and complicate alignment with the EU's democratic principles. Similarly, religious funding from Gulf states carries risks of creating dependencies that may subtly shape governance priorities and societal values.

The assessment of the likelihood and impact of the threats for 2025 to 2030 highlights several key trends. Firstly, the susceptibility of WB and EN countries to external interference is heightened by vulnerabilities such as weak democratic institutions, restricted media freedom, and socio-economic instability. These conditions create fertile ground for malign actors to exploit divisions, amplify grievances, and undermine trust in democratic processes. Secondly, the hybrid nature of the threats — encompassing both overt political interference and covert cultural diplomacy — demands a more comprehensive understanding of how external state actors operate across different channels to achieve their strategic objectives. Third, the malign influences exerted by external actors can also reinforce each other, as is the case for disinformation campaigns from China and Russia, which can have a cumulative effect in EN and WB countries. The forthcoming Trump presidency could trigger additional risks if the US president cuts support to or even turns against Ukraine and other candidate countries.

WB and EN countries have developed resources and capabilities to respond to malign influences in the face of threats posed by external actors and the risks they entail for their democratisation and EU integration

processes, thereby exerting control over future events. Further research in this work package will identify the policies implemented to mitigate foreseeable political risks and foster resilience in an uncertain environment.

## ANNEX A. COUNTRY NARRATIVES

### A.1. Albania

In Albania, domestic disinformation and polarisation are key issues in the democratic consolidation of the country. However, there have also been attempts at spreading disinformation in the rest of the region, as explored below.

The issue with the spread of disinformation is that news that gets translated into Albanian (in Kosovo and North Macedonia) traverses borders, and can influence these country as well. A report by BIRN mapping the spread of disinformation from **Russia** (Voko and Likmeta 2023), notes that it is also spread in the Albanian language by the state news agencies of Türkiye and **Iran**, which pursue their own agenda through disinformation, tilting towards positive narratives of Russia and negative views of Western countries and the EU (Bino and Likmeta 2023). The spread of disinformation increased after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Voko and Likmeta 2023). China's media involvement through Radio China International, which broadcasts in Albanian, also broadcasts through local radio that covers two Albanian cities including the capital Tirana. These broadcasts focus mostly on sharing news that portray a positive image of China and its initiatives (Bino and Likmeta 2023a). Sources of media propaganda that are state sponsored by external actors such as Russia, Iran and China convey a volatile and vulnerable environment of often opposing narratives and spread disinformation that affects the democratic process.

In addition, the problem of disinformation and digital literacy becomes more acute when one considers the digital vulnerability of the country. Albania was a target of cyberattacks by the **Iranian government** in 2022 (CISA 2022), in apparent retaliation to Albania housing a group of mujahedin that oppose the regime in Iran, the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) (who were also later targets of a police operation by the Albanian state police) (Motamedi 2023). The cyberattack led to the expulsion of Iranian diplomats from the country. It is also suspected that the Iranians were aided by the Russians, at least in training (Oghanna 2022). While the attack was contained, it showed the vulnerability of states to malicious cyberattacks that put citizens at risk, inhibit government public services and threaten the security of data at a time when governments of the region were trying to increase the provision of e-government services. The presence of the MEK in Albania has also been a topic of contention in the Iranian state sponsored media, Pars Today (Bino and Likmeta 2023).



Table 2 Threat Matrix, Albania

Original Actor	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact (severity)
Iran	Albanian Government and citizens	Cyber and media space	cyber attacks	Iran has committed cyberattacks against the Albanian government a few times, and it could do so again. these cyberattacks have mostly targeted official websites of the government, putting citizen's data at risk (the personal information of citizens has been published in the past). These continued attacks make the Albanian digital space highly vulnerable, and the same goes for the private data of citizens. Furthermore, the presence of the MEK mujaheddins further helps to sow tensions between the two countries.	Medium	Medium
Türkiye	Islamic Religious Community			Türkiye is the main donor of the Namazgah Mosque, which is Albania's biggest mosque built on the property of the Albanian Islamic Community (AIC). However, for a few years now, Türkiye has refused to hand over the mosque due to disagreements with the supposed pro-Gülenist governing structures of the AIC. This has caused a rift between religious and government actors, and the matter is still unresolved. Recently, the PM made calls to establish new religious institutions based on Bektashi practices. This has caused further tensions, which could destabilise the political and social fabric of society.	Low	Low
Gulf States	Secular ideologies	Organisations	Financing	The Gulf states have funded a mosque as well as some organisations. Thus far however influence has been minimal due largely to the fact that Albania is a highly secular state.	Low	Low

Russia	Albanian Government and citizens	Cyber and media space	Spread of disinformation through state owned media channels (also using Iranian and Turkish state-owned media channels)	Russian disinformation in Albania has risen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-vaccination movement, and increased since their invasion of Ukraine. Albania is not the sole target, with news being translated into Albanian as it travels through Kosovo and North Macedonia as well. Disinformation serves to destabilise and fuel frustrations.	Low	Low
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## A.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

A key threat in Bosnia Herzegovina is the widespread nature of disinformation, especially by media in Republika Srpska (RS), which often endorse Russian policies and President Putin (Balkan Insight 2024a). Disinformation is mostly the result of media published either in the RS or in Serbia and less the consequence of active Russian disinformation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina also contends with territorial threats, with the dominant RS politician Milorad Dodik repeatedly threatening secession. Recently, he announced that he would declare independence if Donald Trump were to be re-elected as US president (RFERL 2023). While such threats might be hollow, the risk of RS authorities attempting such a step in case of a weakened Western alliance and US commitment to the peace agreement cannot be excluded. Even if RS does not take steps towards secession, it has undermined the functioning of state institutions, weakening the state in the process. RS has been actively supported not just by Serbia and Russia but also by China and Hungary (Zeneli 2023).

The RS has also created other threatening dynamics in the country as its parliament passed and later shelved (in 2024) a foreign agent law that would threaten the work of some media and NGOs (Balkan Insight. 2024b). This law might be revived, or other laws might be passed to increase pressure on critical voices, underscoring the threats to democracy in the RS.

Historical revisionism has been on the rise and includes the denial of war crimes, the glorification of convicted war criminals and the denial of commemorations. This [revisionism became particularly visible](#) in the context of [a vote in the UN General Assembly on designating July 11](#) the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide, in May 2024. Historical revisionism contributes to increased nationalist tensions. and polarisation, threatening the consolidation of democracy.

Lastly, radical Islamist movements have failed to take hold in Bosnia despite some Salafi communities that were implicated in recruiting for ISIS in 2014. Political polarisation, nationalist tensions and economic stagnation risk giving more space to radical groups. Similarly, the war in the Middle East has had a polarising effect. Nationalist Serb and Croat groups often play up the threat of radical Islam to justify their policies (DW 2024). Within this context of revisionism, disinformation and polarisation, Bosnia and Herzegovina has many internal threats that also have regional implications due to the involvement of external actors from the region.

Table 3 Threat Matrix, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Actor	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Russia	Citizens in Republic Srpska	Serbian and RS media	Disinformation	Disinformation is widespread, especially through media in Republika Srpska, and often endorses Russian policies and President Putin. Disinformation is mostly the result of media published either in the RS or in Serbia and less the consequence of active Russian disinformation.		
Domestic political actors – Republika Srpska, Russia, China	State institutions	RS Officials in entity and state levels, security forces (police)	Secession of Republika Srpska.	The dominant politician of RS Milorad Dodik has repeatedly threatened the secession of the entity. Recently, he announced that he would declare independence if Donald Trump were to be re-elected as US president. While such threats might be hollow, the risk of RS authorities attempting such a step in case of a weakened Western alliance and US commitment to the peace agreement cannot be excluded. Even if RS does not take steps towards secession, it has undermined the functioning of state institutions, weakening the state in the process. RS has been actively supported not just by Serbia and Russia but also by China and Hungary.	Low	High
Republika Srpska political actors, Russia	Citizens in RS	RS police, courts	Political persecution	The RS parliament passed and later shelved (in 2024) a foreign agent law that would threaten the work of some media and NGOs. This law might be revived, or other laws might be passed to increase pressure on critical voices, underscoring the threats to democracy in the RS.	Medium	Medium
Republika Srpska, Serbia	Citizens in RS	RS Institutions (government,	Historical revisionism and nationalism	Historical revisionism has been on the rise and includes the denial of war crimes, the glorification of convicted war criminals and the denial of commemorations. This revisionism became particularly visible in the context of a vote in the UN General Assembly on designating July 11 the	High	Medium

		president, schools).		International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide. Historical revisionism contributes to increased nationalist tensions and polarisation.		
Political Islamist movements	Government of Bosnia and Heregovina, marginalized groups	Parliament of Bosnia and Heregovina, Gulf State backed organizations		Overall, radical Islamist movements have failed to take hold in Bosnia despite some Salafi communities that were implicated in recruiting for ISIS in 2014. Political polarisation, nationalist tensions and economic stagnation risk giving more space to radical groups. Similarly, the war in the Middle East has had a polarising effect. Nationalist Serb and Croat groups often play up the threat of radical Islam to justify their policies.	Medium	Medium

### A.3. Kosovo

The sometimes-tense situation in the north between the Kosovo government and the Serb minority living in the country escalated in 2023 when a group of armed men took over the Banjska monastery. A shoot-out left one Kosovo policeman dead, as well three of the attackers (Moloney 2023). There was also unrest in several municipalities in the north due to ethnically Albanian mayors starting work after an electoral boycott by the majority ethnically Serbian local population. This unrest became violent with protesters attacking KFOR forces (Radio Free Europe 2023). The Russian Z symbol is used throughout the North to express support for Russia (Balkan Insight 2024) and was seen during the unrest. By 2021, Kosovo had already expelled Russian diplomats due to destabilising activities (Radio Free Europe 2021).

The Banjska attack has also served as a catalyst for the spread of disinformation. This disinformation was targeted particularly towards Kosovo Serbs by both **Serbian** as well as **Russian** channels (Radio Free Europe 2021). In the past, the **US** has also helped spread disinformation, which led to the downfall of the first Kurti government during the Trump presidency (Greene et al. 2021). Disinformation, particularly that targeted towards the Serb majority or oriented against them, seriously hampers the integration of the Serb community in Kosovo and contributes to fear and hostility among the population, which in turn has been used to empower populist narratives.

**EU sanctions:** the EU's sanctions on Kosovo in the aftermath of the unrest in the north (GLPS 2024) can also be seen as a threat to democracy domestically. The sanctions have created frustration among the local population, as they are perceived as being unfair. This has contributed to the diminished influence of western actors such as the EU and the US. Non enlargement generally is seen as a threat (Greene et al. 2021), and in the case of Kosovo, which stands the furthest from a clear EU path, the threat is significant. As disinformation articles gathered by EUvsDisinfo show, such frustrations from the side of citizens of the Western Balkans form part of the disinformation narrative that Russia in particular is spreading (EUvsDisinfo 2020).

Lastly, while the issue of foreign fighters was and continues to be governed strictly by the Kosovo police, a more recent threat to democracy has been the adoption of strong anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric by some political parties and members of parliament. Most recently, two MPs of the ruling Vetëvendosje left the party in favour of 'The list of the family' in defence of family values, sparking reactions from civil society organisations in the country concerned about the dangerous precedent of such statements (Koha 2024). There have also been concerns of the influence that both Türkiye and the Gulf states yield, at least culturally, through the financing of mosques and religious activities. This influence however is generally resisted by local elites.

Table 4 Threat Matrix, Kosovo

Actor	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Serbia (+Russia)	Kosovo Government, Kosovo Serbs	Srpska Lista/ Organised crime groups in the North of Kosovo		Maintain control of the parallel structures in the north and of organised crime routes. Destabilise the region of the north and the country by keeping the relations between the Kosovar government and the Serb community tense which are further exacerbated by the response of the Kosovo government.	High	High
EU	Kosovo Government	EU instruments	Sanctions against the government of Kosovo	The sanctions are meant as a sign to the government of Kosovo. They have been interpreted by citizens however to be unfair and unjust, thus fuelling populist sentiments in the country.	Medium/ongoing	Medium
Political Islamist movements (rather than state or single actor, mostly Gulf States)	Kosovo government, marginalized groups	Kosovo parliament, Gulf State backed organisations	Online influence; policy influence; financing conservative voices	Political Islam is not very strong in Kosovo. Nonetheless it is an underlying current of the conservative parliamentary groups that are becoming vocal against LGBTQ+ rights. If they can mobilise more conservative views among men, they could become politically significant and destabilising.	Low	Low
Russia	Kosovo government and its citizens	Digital space	Disinformation	Russian disinformation in the region has been on the rise particularly since their invasion of Ukraine. In Kosovo, Russian disinformation has focused on sowing distrust and fear among Kosovo Serbs of the Kosovo government. They are also narratively influential. The Z symbol as well as the Wagner group insignia were spotted across North Mitrovica during the unrest. These groups can be used to further destabilise the north and to continue hampering the relationship between Kosovo Serbs and the Kosovo government.	Medium	Medium

## A.4. Montenegro

A significant threat for Montenegro comes from Russia and its support for anti-Western narratives. These narratives operate through political parties that represent the political interests of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro and are now part of the new government (e.g. the New Serbian Democracy (NSD), Socialist People's Party (SNP), and Democratic People's Party (DNP)). According to US intelligence reports, Russia has secretly provided financial support to political parties representing the interests of Serbs in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with this support increasing significantly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (VOA 2022). These political parties aim to portray the identity of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro as being threatened by ethnic Montenegrins, as well as by Western countries. By promoting cooperation with Russia, they seek to present Russia as the protector of the identity and interests of Serbs in Montenegro. The main goal of Russian influence through these Serbian political parties in Montenegro is to foster fears among ethnic Serbs that ethnic Montenegrins and Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic aspirations threaten their identity, thereby seeking to slow down the process.

Moreover, in the projection of Russian soft power in Montenegro, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays a significant role, particularly through its [strong relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church \(SOC\)](#), which wields immense influence that [transcends ethnic divisions](#) between Montenegrins and Serbs. In practical terms, various Orthodox brotherhoods in Montenegro, such as Miholjski Zbor, Zavjetnici Tvrdoš Nikšić, Stupovi, the Serbian cultural centre Patriarch Varnava, and the Serbian society Saint Sava, play significant roles in spreading ultra-conservative, pro-Russian, and anti-Western sentiments and values by organising numerous activities, such as protests and events.

The spreading of anti-Western narratives also goes through dis/misinformation. Although Montenegrin authorities have banned the broadcast of 20 Russian media outlets, including the Balkan services of Russia Today and Sputnik, Russian propaganda continues to flow through some Serbian media in Montenegro. A network of media outlets, including IN4S, Borba, Alo, and Press, as well as TV stations Prva and Adria, actively promote pro-Russian positions. Media from Serbia is very present in Montenegro's media space, either directly or through the ownership structure of Montenegrin media (Karastanović 2024:45-55).

Nevertheless, despite the significant influence of Russian narratives the majority of citizens support the country's foreign policy alignment with the West, with an overwhelming majority in favour of EU membership. Therefore, the likelihood of Russian influence materialising as a threat in these areas is medium, with a medium impact.

Montenegro also has to contend with China's growing influence, as it builds a network of individuals from various professional backgrounds that hold positive views of China and may one day hold important positions. Political messages are conveyed indirectly through portrayals of a well-functioning Chinese society, by [organising seminars, conferences, and study visits for journalists, government officials, representatives of state-owned companies, and associations](#). Moreover, and related to the latter, pro-Chinese narratives and messages are increasingly present in Montenegro, spreading through



multiple channels to foster positive perceptions of Chinese culture, economy, technology, and governance among Montenegrin citizens, cumulating with Russian propaganda in its anti-Western orientation. Nevertheless, these activities are still in their early stages. Thus, the likelihood of Chinese influence in these areas becoming a threat is low, with its impact assessed as low.

Table 5 Threat Matrix, Montenegro

Actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Russia	Spreading anti-western propaganda.	Pro-EU Political Parties pro-Western citizens.	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; Serbian orthodox church clergy.	Pro-Russian political parties; Troll farms and bots; Pro-Russian Serbian Orthodox Church clergy; Anti-western MNE and SER media.	Sowing distrust in western democracies; Stopping or slowing down EU integration of MNE; Promote ultra-conservative and anti-Western values.	Medium	Medium
Russia	Instrumentalising politicians from ruling political parties;  Instrumentalising opposition political parties;  Instrumentalising orthodox brotherhood associations in MNE.	MNE government Pro-western voters	Social media; Intelligence operations; Party cooperation; Serbian Orthodox Church; 'Serbian House'.	Influential journalists, media and internet portals; Ruling party in Serbia; Local political actors; SOC clergy.	Undermine democratic institutions and reforms; Undermine MNE's EU integration path; Undermine trust into democracy; Destabilise political environment.	Medium	Medium
Russia	Nurturing so called family and ultra-conservative values.	Pro-Western citizens.	Social media; Cultural centres (Serbian house) and foundations; Anti-western media and internet portals.	Authority of SOC clergy; Anti-Western media; 'Serbian house'.	Spreading ultra-conservative values contradicting western democracies; Dividing MNE citizens.	Medium	Medium

			Serbian orthodox church.				
China	Spreading articles favourable to China	Broader population	Local journalist who participated in exchange programmes; Traditional media publishing pro-China articles; Serbian media.	Local journalists; Serbian media.	Promotion of Chinese culture; Reputation and image building; Dissemination of China's official positions and propaganda; Promotion of Chinese model of governance.	Low	Low
China	Building relationship and trust	Public administration and local government representatives, business associations, media, academic communities, teachers and students.	Trainings; Scholarships; Conferences.	Chinese government	Promotion of Chinese culture; Recruiting assets; Promotion of Chinese model of governance.	Low	Low

## A.5. North Macedonia

North Macedonia contends with multifaceted activities from Russia to influence its politics and citizens. Russian influence on authorities operates through the Serbian political party in North Macedonia - the Democratic Party of Serbs - led by Ivan Stoilkovic. Stoilkovic is the Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia and also serves as the Minister of Inter-Community Relations. He is known for his pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-NATO views (Neziri 2024).

Russia also has influence among opposition political parties in North Macedonia, its primary instrument being Levica (the Left), led by Dimitar Apasiev. Founded in 2015, this party has steadily grown in popularity among citizens. Throughout this period, Levica has maintained a strongly pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-NATO stance. Since Russian media outlets are not directly present in North Macedonia, the party serves as an important megaphone for Russian propaganda by disseminating pro-Russian and anti-Western messages in Macedonian through local media (Meta 2023). Serbian media outlets close to authorities in Belgrade, which are present in North Macedonia, act as the primary channels for spreading these messages (Geopost 2024). Other channels of influence are [magazines promoting alternative medicine](#), often traditional and Russian in origin, and the Russian embassy in Skopje. The main goal of these information activities is to promote conservative and anti-Western views and values among North Macedonian citizens, [creating a foundation for resistance to pro-European policies](#).

The impact of Russia's influence on both the current government – which is pro-EU – and on the political opposition – with one main pro-Russian political party holding only six parliamentary seats – remains nevertheless low. However, rising public dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation and North Macedonia's stalled progress toward EU membership makes citizens more susceptible to anti-Western and pro-Russian messages.

Another important channel of Russian influence in North Macedonia is the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), which enjoys wide trust among ethnic Macedonians. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has particularly solid ties over the MOC's mid-level clergy, which actively promotes so-called conservative and family values. These are framed as being under threat from globalisation and other modern forms of integration driven by 'globalist liberal elites', thereby fostering anti-Western sentiment among citizens.

China also seeks to exert influence in North Macedonia and to spread positive views of the country's culture and social governance model, presenting itself as a global leader in digital technologies and a better alternative to Western democratic systems. To this end, it seeks indirect influence on the government by organising study visits, exchanges, and seminars for government officials, as well as for editors, journalists, and representatives of associations and chambers, who may later hold important roles in the state and society (Metamorphosis 2023). Moreover, Chinese media in North Macedonia broadcast in Albanian and Serbian, which are understood by a significant portion of the Macedonian population. China also actively uses social media to spread pro-China messages, [whose contents are then often picked up by Macedonian media](#).

Nevertheless, Chinese influence in the North Macedonian government and the media space remains in its early stages. This influence focuses on actors with low capabilities, and citizens are not highly receptive given that they are still relatively unfamiliar with Chinese systems and culture. Propaganda efforts could nonetheless cumulate with Russia's in shaping anti-Western sentiments within North Macedonian public opinion.

Table 6 Threat Matrix, North Macedonia

Actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Russia	Spreading anti-western propaganda capitalising on slow pace of NMK's EU integration;  Maintaining cooperation with Pro-Russian mid-level Orthodox Church clergy.	Pro-western population.	Social media; Russian embassy in NMK; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; Cooperation between Russian and NMK orthodox clergy.	Pro-Russian political parties; Troll farms and bots; Pro-Russian Orthodox Church mid-level clergy); Anti-western media.	Sowing distrust in western democracies; Stopping or slowing down EU integration of NMK; Promote ultra-conservative and anti-Western values.	Medium	Medium
Russia	Influencing politicians from Serb minority political party DPS;  Influencing politicians from the ruling VMRO-DPMNE;  Influencing politicians from the opposition political party Levica.	NMK government;  Pro-western voters;	Social media; Intelligence operations; Party cooperation.	Recruiting influential journalists; Strength of local political actors; Media cooperation and media content sharing.	Undermine democratic institutions and reforms; Undermine NMK's EU integration path; Undermining trust in democracy; Destabilise political environment.	Low	Low
Russia	Nurturing so called family and ultra-conservative values.	North Macedonians and Serb minority with conservative leanings.	Social media; Cultural centres and foundations; Russian embassy social network accounts; NMK Orthodox Church clergy; Alternative medicine magazines offering Russian	Local media; NMK orthodox clergy.	Spreading ultra-conservative values contradicting western democracies.	Medium	Medium

			traditional medicaments and medical advice.				
China	Spreading articles favourable to China.	Pro-western population.	Chinese embassy social networks accounts; Traditional media publishing pro-China articles.	Chinese embassy; Local media.	Promotion of Chinese culture; Reputation and image building; Dissemination of China's official positions; Promotion of Chinese model of governance.	Low	Low
China	Building relationship and trust.	Researchers and academia, Politicians, mid-level state bureaucrats, journalists, NGOs.	Confucius Institute; Trainings; Scholarships; Conferences.	China	Promotion of Chinese culture, Promotion of Chinese model of governance.	Low	Low

## A.6. Serbia

In Serbia, a key threat is Russia's significant influence, which operates at various levels. First, the Serbian government increasingly serves as the primary channel for Russian influence in Serbia and neighbouring countries with Serbian minorities, leveraging its sway over Serbian political parties. In recent years, it has become clear that Deputy Prime Minister Vulin is the key figure in the Serbian government responsible for maintaining and promoting political and security ties with Russia and for implementing Russian influence in Serbia, tasked with placing pro-Russian personnel in key state institutions (Stojković 2023). This Russian influence is rooted in the ideological alignment of Putin's and Vučić's regimes, characterised by nationalism and authoritarianism. Russia supports authoritarian trends in Serbia, as this distances the country from Euro-Atlantic integration, while hindering reconciliation and cooperation with neighbouring states. The authoritarian ties between Serbia and Russia are evident in their joint task force established in 2021 to combat so-called colour revolutions (Cvijić 2024), and in their near identical projects for the Serbian and Russian worlds, which envision the unification of Serbs/Russians (including those in neighbouring countries) within the same cultural, media, and political space under a single, powerful leader (Ljubičić 2022). By loudly advocating for the Serbian world, Russia also sends a message that it can potentially and easily destabilise the situation in the Western Balkans (Petrovic 2024).

Another important channel of Russian influence in Serbia is far-right extremist movements, all of which support Russia, with the exception of a few marginal neo-Nazi groups (Petrović and Ignjatijević 2023). Russia leverages Serbia's far-right to redirect public dissatisfaction toward the global liberal elite and the West, while also threatening the stability of Serbia and the Western Balkans through the interconnections between Serbian far-right groups and Russian paramilitary organisations. Additionally, they serve to hinder the country's orientation toward the West and the spreading of liberal worldviews (Petrovic 2024).

The diffusion of anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments and political messages also goes through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which traditionally has good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). These were further strengthened after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, as their interests became more aligned, sharing their ambitions of extension beyond national borders (Karabeg 2023). The SOC, like the ROC, continuously promotes Eastern Orthodox values, portraying them as fundamentally opposed to those of the 'decadent West'. The SOC, alongside the Serbian Armed Forces, holds the highest public trust in Serbia (Simić 2022) and therefore heightens the risk of Russia's malign influence, which was acknowledged in a [European Parliament resolution](#) in 2022.

Russia also influences Serbia's media, not directly but through pro-government media, which occupy 85 % of the media space (Petrović 2024). Pro-government media are not only pro-Russian but convey these messages with a stronger emotional charge than Russian media present in Serbia (Petrović 2024). The most extreme example is the coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where pro-government media reported that it was actually Ukraine that attacked Russia (Kisić 2022). Pro-government media took these narratives further, suggesting that Russia's military intervention would extend to the



Balkans, where it would ‘liberate’ its allies from Western-imposed liberal rule and correct historical injustices inflicted on Serbs.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda has been prominent in Serbia for over a decade. This has intensified in recent years, spread via numerous internet portals, social media – on which far-right groups are highly active – and Telegram channels, reaching a large number of citizens, including those who do not follow traditional media (CRTA 2022). As a result, pro-Russian, pro-Putin, and anti-Western sentiments are [widespread and deeply ingrained among the Serbian population](#), as is significant support for undemocratic forms of governance (Petrovic 2024). Additionally, most citizens support the idea of the Serbian World. Consequently, the likelihood of Russian influence in these areas posing a threat is high, with a high impact.

Moreover, the influence of China has been rising in recent years in Serbia. At the governmental level, the government of Aleksandar Vučić has developed cooperation with China not only in the fields of economy and infrastructure, but also in politics, with increasingly close relations between the two authoritarian regimes. In this regard, for the past ten years, there has been ongoing cooperation and knowledge transfer from the Chinese Communist Party to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party in terms of managing large systems. In May 2024, the two presidents signed a joint declaration on deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership and building a ‘Community of Shared Future’ between Serbia and China in the New Era, comprising mostly political agreements (Spaić 2024). As part of China’s ambition to expand its intelligence network and influence through intergovernmental cooperation programmes (Yau 2024), Serbia aims to promote its political model of digital autocracy in the region (Ranković and Miljuš 2024). Serbia is the first country in Europe to agree to be part of China’s global initiative, through which China primarily seeks to offer developing countries a political model represented as a fairer and more efficient alternative to Western democracies (Djordjević 2024a).

This belief is also promoted through activities of dis/misinformation, with Chinese media outlets acting in Serbia through internet portals, such as China Radio International (CRI), whose content is frequently picked up and republished by various media outlets in Serbia (Vladislavljev 2024). The primary goal of pro-Chinese propaganda is to build a positive image of Chinese culture and political system. However, the bulk of Chinese propaganda is being conducted through Serbian pro-government media, which particularly intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, and amplified an emotionally charged pro-Chinese and anti-European narrative (Todorović Štjplija 2021). Pro-government media widely reported on the European Union’s passive response in helping Serbia, while portraying China as the primary source of aid and Serbia’s irreplaceable and only true ally (Vuksanović 2021). This further legitimises the country’s policy of ‘sitting on multiple chairs’, which goes against its obligations to gradually align with the EU’s foreign policy.

As Serbia’s leadership increasingly leans toward autocracy, it has strengthened ties with authoritarian China as an external source of legitimacy. This has allowed Chinese political influence to grow in the past five years, along with pro-Chinese narratives that are increasingly political rather than economic. [Poor socio-economic conditions](#), often blamed on Western liberal elites, provide fertile ground for anti-Western propaganda, which cumulates with pro-Russian narratives. Overall, China’s

influence further erodes public trust in democratic institutions and EU integration, and undermines Serbia's aim of becoming an EU member, posing a medium-level threat, with a medium impact.

Table 7 Threat Matrix, Serbia

Actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Russia	<p>Spreading anti-western propaganda capitalising on slow pace of Serbia's EU integration</p> <p>Fighting against so called 'coloured revolution'</p>	Pro-EU Political Parties (including outside of the Parliament).	<p>Serbian pro-government media (private and public);</p> <p>Social media;</p> <p>Russian embassy/Russian house;</p> <p>Russian media in SER language or affiliated media outlets;</p> <p>Telgram channels of far-right groups.</p>	<p>Ruling political party in Serbia;</p> <p>Serbian pro-government media (private and public);</p> <p>Anti-western social media accounts.</p>	<p>Sowing distrust in western democracies;</p> <p>Stopping or slowing down EU integration of SER;</p> <p>Spreading fear among citizens that the West is Serbia's enemy.</p>	High	High
Russia	<p>Instrumentalising politicians from the ruling parties;</p> <p>Instrumentalising politicians from the right-wing opposition political parties;</p> <p>Instrumentalising far-right formal and informal groups.</p>	<p>SER government;</p> <p>Pro-western voters;</p> <p>Pro-western political parties.</p>	<p>Political party cooperation</p> <p>Government cooperation</p> <p>Cooperation between far-right groups</p>	<p>Recruiting influential journalists;</p> <p>Strength of local political actors</p> <p>Media cooperation and media content sharing.</p>	<p>Undermine democratic institutions and reforms;</p> <p>Undermine SER's EU integration path;</p> <p>Undermining trust in democracy;</p> <p>Geopolitical control;</p> <p>Spreading fear about possible armed conflicts in the WB;</p> <p>Spreading and strengthening pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments among citizens.</p>	High	High

Russia	Nurturing so-called family and ultra-conservative values.	Pro-western population.	Social media; Far-right groups Russian house Serbian orthodox church.		Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Spreading ultra-conservative values contradicting western democracies.	High	High-
China	Improving cooperation among SER and CN ruling parties.	Serbian ruling party.	Ruling parties and governments of two states.	Ruling parties and governments of two states.	Building trust; Sharing Chinese know-how on how to govern big state institutions and systems; Promoting Chinese model of governance as better alternative to Western democracies; Recruiting assets.	Medium	Medium
China	Spreading articles favourable of China.	Pro-western population.	Traditional media publishing pro-China articles, and sharing Chinese media content.		Promotion of Chinese culture; Reputation and image building; Dissemination of China's official positions and propaganda; Promotion of Chinese brands and products; Promoting Chinese model of governance as a better alternative to Western democracies.	Medium	Medium

China	Improving media cooperation between SER and CN media.	Pro-western population.	Agreements between two governments	Ruling parties and governments of two states.	Improving the image of China; Improving popularity of Digital autocracy model over Western democracy; Spreading fear among citizens of coloured revolutions and Western hegemony.	Medium	Medium
China	Building relationship and trust	Researchers and academia, Politicians, mid-level state bureaucrats, journalists, NGOs.	Confucius Institute; Trainings; Scholarships; Conferences.		Promotion of Chinese culture; Reputation and image building.	Low	Low

## A.7. Georgia

Pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda is also pervasive in Georgia, creating a high likelihood and significant impact of political interference and destabilisation efforts by Russia. Pro-Russian, Eurosceptic, and anti-Western narratives resonate with the political preferences of the incumbent regime, which seeks to consolidate its grip on power amid increasing democratising pressure from the West. Consequently, high-ranking government officials and state-aligned media frequently serve as primary sources of foreign information manipulation and interference, as well as 'gaslighting'. This alignment between governmental policies and foreign disinformation contrasts sharply with the largely pro-Western stance of the Georgian population, fuelling continuous political crises and public protests. This persistent discord undermines the country's psychological resilience, leaving Georgia increasingly vulnerable to Russia's political influence and destabilising strategies.

While China's political, cultural, and normative influence in Georgia remains limited, the current government has actively sought to deepen economic relations and establish strategic ties with Beijing as an alternative to the West. In 2023, Georgia and China signed a strategic cooperation agreement, marking a significant step in this direction. Although China alone wields limited geopolitical influence in the region, its collaboration with Russia could generate substantial synergies that undermine the West's presence. This alignment could provide Georgia's political regime with an alternative pathway to insulate itself from the democratising pressures traditionally exerted by the West.

In Georgia, the high likelihood and significant impact of Russia's cultural diplomacy instruments are primarily rooted in religious ties. The Georgian Orthodox Church, which remains the most popular institution in the country, maintains close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. It frequently promotes socially conservative values, opposes liberal norms, and thus serves as a conduit for Russia's Eurosceptic influence among its clergy and followers. Additionally, Georgia's Soviet-era cultural and intellectual elite, who retain some influence over older generations, often — whether deliberately or unintentionally — propagate pro-Russian and Eurosceptic views. This aligns them with the anti-Western and illiberal narratives espoused by various political actors, including the current government.

Georgia stands at a critical juncture between authoritarianism and democratisation following the eruption of a political and legitimacy crisis after the recent parliamentary elections. The legitimacy of the ruling Georgian Dream party's electoral victory has been questioned internally as well as externally, which puts Georgia's democratic resilience and political stability under pressure. If this political crisis is not addressed in a timely manner, it may lead to further turmoil that negatively affects its Europeanisation and EU accession process. Moreover, Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili claimed that the country had fallen victim to a 'Russian special operation'. Moscow, however, [dismissed the allegations of its involvement in Georgia's elections](#), instead accusing the West of meddling in Georgia's internal affairs and expressing its willingness to further normalise bilateral relations with Tbilisi.

Russia's alleged interference in Georgia's 2024 elections is a recent example of its continuous use of hybrid warfare tactics against Georgia (Kakachia and Kakabadze 2024), which has a high likelihood and a high immediate impact. This may further contribute to the consolidation of authoritarian illiberalism,

thereby reinforcing oligarchic rule. In doing so, Russia aims to achieve several objectives: undermining democratisation and European integration efforts; hindering Georgia's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures; damaging the strategic partnership between US and Georgia; maintaining geopolitical control and regional influence; and supporting an anti-Western, Russia-friendly incumbent regime. Russia also hopes to draw Georgia into Kremlin-backed regional integration projects such as the Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), as well as the 3+3 format meant to bring together Russia, Türkiye, Iran and the three South Caucasus countries (Lebanidze 2019).

To achieve these aims, Russia relies on its rich toolbox of capabilities and employs a diverse range of strategies. These include promoting narratives that pit **traditional values** against Western liberalism—particularly by framing family values in opposition to LGBTQ rights and other minority groups (IWPR 2019); **funding pro-Russian political factions and NGOs**; manipulating fears stemming from the war in Ukraine; and **disseminating disinformation** regarding the potential threats to Georgia's territorial integrity, such as the realisation of a Maidan-like scenario in Tbilisi or the opening of the 'Second Front' should any government in Tbilisi stick to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Seskuria 2021).

As **Georgia's Orthodox Church (GOC)** is considered a powerful symbol of the country's sovereignty and an important part of the Georgian national narrative and consciousness, the stance of the Church on moral, ideological, and political issues carries significant weight (Kakachia 2014). The GOC, through its social-conservative and Eurosceptic attitudes, further weakens Georgia's societal resilience towards Russia's malign influence and creates pockets of vulnerabilities. As Georgia's progress toward deeper integration with the EU has stalled, changes in church-state relations have surfaced, challenging the principles of secularism and the Europeanisation process. In September 2024, the Georgian parliament adopted the anti-LGBTQ+ legislative package, which is seen as undermining Georgia's EU accession process. The GOC, while officially supporting the state's pro-European foreign policy, shares numerous values with its Russian counterpart and criticises liberal values. Moreover, several high-ranking clergy members and affiliated groups have actively participated in promoting anti-Western and EU-sceptic propaganda.

Moreover, Russian interference further increases the likelihood of and severe impact on extreme **political polarisation** and party-led radicalisation within Georgia (Freedom House 2024), undermining societal consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration. This polarisation is further compounded by the lack of a strong, unified opposition capable of challenging the incumbent regime (Silagadze 2017). The fragmentation of the opposition allows the ruling party to consolidate power and resist democratic reforms, as it can portray itself as the only viable alternative to instability and chaos.

Russia's malign activities have found fertile ground in Georgia. The ability to undermine democratisation and stability in Georgia has been further strengthened by the dominance of Georgia's ruling party, and its attempts to consolidate power while weakening checks and balances in the country (Freedom House 2024). The ruling party's control over key state institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement agencies has enabled it to suppress dissent and marginalise critical voices. The selective application of justice and the use of trumped-up charges against opposition figures (Civil Georgia 2023) has created an environment of fear and self-censorship, making it difficult for civil society and independent media to hold the government accountable.

Russia has been actively **supporting the incumbent regime in Georgia** through various means, including expressing political backing via Kremlin-controlled public and official channels (Civil Georgia 2024a). This strategy aims to prevent the resurgence of a pro-European government in Georgia (Civil Georgia 2024c). On its side, the Georgian Dream-led government, by adopting the law on foreign influence on 14 May 2024, deepened its ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia and with other Eurasian authoritarian powers (Sabanadze 2024).

Another significant external actor that poses a potential threat to the democratisation and Europeanisation processes in Georgia is **China**. There is a high likelihood that China's influence across cultural, academic, and business sectors will continue to expand further. The willingness of the current Georgian government to cooperate closely with China, arguably at the expense of strategic relations with the West for example through the 2017 free trade agreement and the 2023 strategic partnership agreement between the two countries (Avdaliani 2023) have contributed to this expectation. China's expanding influence could have a medium negative impact on democratisation and stability in Georgia since it can indirectly undermine democratic initiatives and European integration efforts in the country.

Given the outcomes of the 2024 parliamentary elections, it is likely that Georgia gravitates further toward Russian and Chinese spheres of influence, which could lead to a marked deterioration of democracy and political stability within the nation. If the influence of illiberal actors continues to grow, it may with a high likelihood and with a high negative impact, further erode essential democratic components of Georgia's fragile political system — such as checks and balances, judicial independence, human rights protections, and anti-corruption measures. This shift would likely exacerbate existing extreme polarisation and radicalisation within Georgian politics, ultimately compromising political stability.

Moreover, a regression toward authoritarianism and the strengthening of oligarchic rule could have severe consequences for Georgia's economic development and prosperity. The concentration of power in the hands of a few elites and the lack of a level playing field for businesses could stifle innovation, discourage foreign investment, and limit economic opportunities for the majority of the population. This, in turn, could lead to increased social unrest, brain drain, and a widening of existing inequalities.



Table 8 Threat Matrix, Georgia

Actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact
Russia	<p>Continue with hybrid warfare tactics of disinformation during and after the parliamentary election period in Georgia. Strengthen extreme polarisation and undermine and weaken societal consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration.</p> <p>Support pro-Russian groups and political parties. Strengthen pro-Russian faction of the Georgian Orthodox to ensure smooth and favourable leadership transition in the church.</p>	Pro-Western opposition parties, civil society activists and independent media	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; government-controlled media channels;	Strengthening pro-Russian discourse in Georgian traditional and social media; Troll farms and bots; Funding pro-Russian political groups; Using Russian influence on Georgian Orthodox Church;	Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Promote anti-Western and Russia-friendly regime. To drag Georgia into Kremlin-promoted regional integration projects (Eurasian Union, CSTO, 3+3 format).	High	High - Threat is immediate
Russia	Finance pro-Russian digital and traditional	Pro-Western opposition parties, civil society activists and	Social media; On-line influencers.	Recruiting influential journalists; Funding and supporting pro-Russian media outlets.	Undermine democratic institutions and reforms; Undermine EU and western partners role in the development of Georgia;	High	High

	propaganda media outlets in Georgia.	independent media.			Control public opinion and narrative; Destabilise political environment.		
Russia	Exploit the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts to gain influence on Georgia;  Strengthening economic dependency of Georgia on Russia through trade and economic activity after imposition of Western sanctions against Russia.	Georgian public, critical media, opposition parties, civil society groups; population of occupied territories.	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; Economic pressure; Fostering divisions in Parliament.	Manipulating the Fear of the War after the Russian invasion of Ukraine; Spreading disinformation about potential territorial integrity of Georgia if Tbilisi drops Euro-Atlantic course.	Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Use conflict regions as a geopolitical leverage to prevent Georgia's EU integration.	High	High
Russia	Support the discourse on traditional values and 'sovereignty' against LGBTQ and other minority groups;  Leverage on sentiments related to Russian culture and cultural connections.	General population	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; disseminate anti-Western propaganda via Georgian Orthodox Church representatives.	Using the Russian influence on Georgian Orthodox Church to undermine pro-European sentiments; Marginalising pro-EU politicians; Providing access to Russian market only for economic agents, discriminating against others; Funding and supporting pro-Russian media.	Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Prevent EU integration; Destabilise political environment; strengthen pro-Russian sentiments in Georgian society.	High	Medium

Russia	Assist the incumbent regime to stay in power through different means, and Kremlin-controlled public and official channels.	Opposition parties; civil society actors; independent media.	Informal channels; official channels.	Official statements (FSB, Foreign Ministry spokesperson; Duma MPs);	Preventing return of pro-European government into power.	High	High
China	Support anti-democratic and anti-Western discourse in Georgian society; strengthen dependency of Georgia on China-led development projects and initiatives.	Georgian Government; General public and business community.	governmental, business and diplomatic channels.	Through Chinese companies and business networks operating in Georgia; personal links to governmental officials; cultural influence (Confucius institutes etc.) Through port and infrastructure projects.	To derail Georgia's Western and democratic trajectory, to promote Eurasian agenda in Georgia.	High	Medium

## A.8. Moldova

The Republic of Moldova faces multifaceted threats to its democracy and political stability, primarily originating from the **Russian Federation**, which seeks to exert influence in the Republic of Moldova through disinformation, political interference, and the strategic use of local proxies. This section outlines key external threats posed by the Russian Federation, its methods, and the potential consequences for Moldova's future.

The Russian Federation is expected to continue intensifying its efforts to influence Moldova's political landscape, particularly targeting the country's democratic institutions and pro-European political parties (e.g. Action and Solidarity Party, Political Bloc 'Împreună'). During the presidential elections in October-November 2024, Russia employed various tools to influence the results, including organising the transportation of voters, financial incentives such as paying for votes, and disseminating disinformation through state-controlled media channels. These strategies are anticipated to persist and evolve during the upcoming parliamentary elections in spring-summer 2025, further undermining Moldova's democratic processes and pro-European trajectory. **Disinformation campaigns** have become a central tool in Russia's strategy, leveraging social media platforms and Russian-controlled media to disseminate false narratives. These campaigns aim to discredit pro-EU political actors and shape public opinion in favour of Moldova's geopolitical alignment with Russia (RFE/RL 2024). During the recent referendum campaign, the Russian Federation amplified its disinformation efforts by spreading misleading claims about the economic and social consequences of European integration, portraying the EU as a source of instability and moral decline. These narratives were tailored to exploit societal divisions, including those related to identity and cultural values, and were heavily circulated via local influencers, fake accounts, and pro-Russian outlets, significantly influencing voter perceptions and turnout. The impact of these campaigns over the 2025-2030 period could be significant. By continuously undermining trust in pro-European political actors and democratic institutions, disinformation may polarise Moldovan society further and weaken the country's path toward European integration, especially in the context of becoming an EU Member State by 2030. As Moldova strengthens ties with EU institutions, these campaigns could also serve to sow doubt about the benefits of EU membership, creating an environment of uncertainty and division within the electorate.

Additionally, Russian **support for pro-Russian political parties** within the Republic of Moldova poses a significant risk. These parties are bolstered by funding and other resources that enable them to amplify Russia's narratives. The use of troll farms and automated bots will likely escalate, generating a persistent stream of misinformation designed to weaken public confidence in democratic institutions and disrupt Moldova's political processes.

Another critical component of Russia's influence in Moldova lies in its **strategic partnership** with the Orthodox Church. Russia is expected to continue leveraging this strategic partnership, using religion as a vehicle to advance its geopolitical agenda. The Moldovan branch of the Russian Orthodox Church will likely remain a key player in promoting pro-Russian sentiments, often aligning religious teachings with Russia's geopolitical goals, especially as the Church enjoys levels of trust in society higher than 60%. This influence extends beyond the religious sphere, deepening societal polarisation within Moldovan

society. The Church's involvement in political matters may further exacerbate divisions within Moldovan society, threatening national cohesion and complicating efforts to maintain social stability (Stop Fals 2023). According to a study developed by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, 'the pro-European parties in Moldova enjoy only minimal support (2 % to 6 %) from Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauzians or Bulgarian ethnic groups. On the other hand, support for pro-Russian parties among these ethnic groups ranges from 54 % to 74 %'<sup>1</sup>, who consider they would best develop the country and rebuild trust with Moldovan citizens after years of unfulfilled promises.

The forthcoming period, particularly around the 2025 parliamentary elections and the progression of Moldova's EU accession process, is highly likely to see an intensification of Russian efforts to undermine pro-EU political forces. Russia is expected to target pro-European political parties, independent media, and civil society groups that advocate for democratic governance and European integration. These malign activities will likely include continued support for opposition movements, the use of troll farms, and state-controlled media campaigns. In a context where Moldovan political parties are increasingly building ties with EU counterparts, these tactics may fuel political fragmentation and weaken the pro-European agenda. These methods also serve to increase political fragmentation and promote alternative political agendas that align with Russia's interests. The impact of this threat is likely to be heightened as Moldova's political landscape becomes more entwined with the EU accession process, making pro-EU actors more vulnerable to external interference.

The overarching objective of Russia's influence operations is to maintain geopolitical control over Moldova and the broader region. By weakening Moldova's ties with the EU, the Russian Federation aims to preserve its sphere of influence and prevent the country from fully embracing a Western-oriented foreign policy. The promotion of pro-Russian governments within Moldova would further entrench Moscow's influence, making it more difficult for the country to pursue democratic reforms and deepen its integration with European structures.

The likelihood of these threats materialising varies depending on the specific activities outlined above but remains moderate to high across most areas (table 2). For instance, disinformation campaigns via social media and state-controlled media are highly likely to continue, with a moderate impact on public opinion and trust in democratic institutions (table 2). The persistent flow of misinformation could contribute to societal polarisation and weaken democratic governance, especially in the run-up to the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Religious influence through the Moldovan branch of the Russian Orthodox Church is also likely to persist, with a moderate probability of deepening societal divisions. The impact, however, could be

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<sup>1</sup> Pagung, Sarah, and Stanislav Ghilechi. 2018. 'Ethnic Polarization Must Disappear from the Speeches of Political Actors, Instead Moldova Should Accelerate the Europeanization Process of Society'. Policy Paper. IPRE. <https://ipre.md/2018/11/15/ethnic-polarization-must-disappear-from-the-speeches-of-political-actors-instead-moldova-should-accelerate-the-europeanization-process-of-society/?lang=en>.

significant, as this influence extends into the political realm and may undermine national cohesion, especially in a context of heightened political competition and EU accession processes.

Support for pro-Russian political parties, including financial aid and logistical backing, carries a high likelihood of continuing, with a high potential impact. This support may further fragment Moldova's political landscape, weakening pro-EU forces and promoting alternative political agendas aligned with Russian interests. According to a study developed by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, the pro-European parties in the Republic Moldova receive limited support from Russian speaking people, ranging between 2 % and 6 %. In contrast, pro-Russian parties enjoy significantly higher backing within these groups, with support levels reaching up to 54 % or more.<sup>1</sup> In the long term, these efforts could erode Moldova's institutional resilience, making it more susceptible to external interference.

Overall, while the immediate threat may not result in large-scale destabilisation, the cumulative impact of these varied forms of interference is likely to erode democratic governance and diminish the effectiveness of Moldova's institutions over time.

Table 9 Threat Matrix, Moldova

Actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact (severity)
Russia	<p>Continue with a higher intensity disinformation campaign, especially during election period;</p> <p>Intensify cooperation with Pro-Russian Orthodox Church of Moldova (Metropolis of Chişinău and all Moldova);</p> <p>To bribe declared pro-European politicians.</p>	Pro-EU Political Parties (including outside of the Parliament).	<p>Social media;</p> <p>Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets;</p> <p>Troll farms and bots.</p>	<p>Support for pro-Russian political parties;</p> <p>Troll farms and bots;</p> <p>Funding opposition campaigns;</p> <p>Pro-Russian Orthodox Church of Moldova (Metropolis of Chişinău and all Moldova);</p> <p>Recruiting pro-EU politicians;</p> <p>Funding and supporting pro-Russian media.</p>	<p>Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence;</p> <p>Promote pro-Russian governments.</p>	High	Medium - Threat is not immediate
Russia	<p>Disinformation campaigns;</p> <p>Recruit influential journalists.</p>	Independent media and NGOs.	<p>Social media;</p> <p>On-line influencers.</p>	<p>Recruiting influential journalists;</p> <p>Funding and supporting pro-Russian media.</p>	<p>Undermine democratic institutions and reforms;</p> <p>Undermine EU and western partners role in the development of the Republic of Moldova;</p> <p>Control public opinion and narrative;</p> <p>Destabilise political environment.</p>	Medium	Medium

Russia	Exploit the Transnistrian conflict; Economic pressure.	Moldovan Government (pro-EU Governments).	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; Economic pressure; Fostering divisions in Parliament.	Manipulating the Transnistria Conflict (especially in the context of the war in Ukraine); Pro-Russian Orthodox Church of Moldova (Metropolis of Chişinău and all Moldova); Recruiting pro-EU politicians; Providing access to Russian market only for economic agents, discriminating against others.	Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Prevent EU integration.	Medium	Medium Target is of moderate significance Country's democratic system is moderately stable; Moldova's economy doesn't depend on Russian economy.
Russia	Exploit human rights and minority rights rhetoric and groups; Leverage on sentiments related to Russian culture and cultural connections.	General population.	Social media; Russian-controlled or affiliated media outlets; Troll farms and bots; Economic pressure.	Pro-Russian Orthodox Church of Moldova (Metropolis of Chişinău and all Moldova); Recruiting pro-EU politicians; Providing access to Russian market only for economic agents, discriminating against others; Funding and supporting pro-Russian media.	Geopolitical control and maintain regional influence; Prevent EU integration; Destabilise political environment.	Medium	Medium Target is of moderate significance Country's democratic system is moderately stable; Moldova's economy doesn't depend on Russian economy.





## A.9. Ukraine

**Russia** remains the primary source of political threats to Ukraine, engaging in various dangerous actions both on the international stage and within Ukraine. Overall, the likelihood of political and cultural instruments to posit a threat to Ukraine could be assessed as moderate. As these instruments are actively employed by Russia, we see that their impact should be estimated as medium (table 1, table 2).

The Kremlin launches **disinformation campaigns** and leverages social media and messaging platforms — primarily Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, and X — as well as public media and affiliated politicians to sow division within Ukrainian society and undermine social cohesion. This includes eroding both institutional and interpersonal trust. Russia seeks to intensify conflicts and tensions within Ukrainian society and among various groups by sensationalising, exaggerating, and manipulating existing issues. It also aims to spread despair and uncertainty fostering an atmosphere of cynicism, fatalism, and distrust. Additionally, disinformation and misinformation are used to shape mainstream media agendas by generating hype on social platforms. In these efforts, Russia employs **troll farms** staffed by individuals who speak the target country's language and understand its cultural context, funds political parties and media through financial networks, and utilises deepfake technology.

Russia **covertly supports certain Ukrainian politicians** (including through corruption or blackmail) by providing financial backing and using compromising materials (Security Service of Ukraine, 2021). Its objectives are to erode trust in the government, politicians, society, and also Ukrainian military forces, both at the institutional and interpersonal levels. Russia seeks to influence the public agenda, divide Ukrainian society, and weaken social cohesion. It also aims to escalate conflicts and tensions within Ukrainian society and among different groups by sensationalising and manipulating existing issues in a hyped and exaggerated manner.

Russia potentially may **use for political aims its previous economic connections to influence Ukrainian politics and society after the war**, particularly aiming to destabilise the situation in Ukraine. Before the full-scale invasion in 2022 and even more so before 2014, Russians owned or controlled a significant number of stakes and property in Ukraine, for example in energy companies and various industries. There are also Russia's widespread pre-war relationships with Ukrainian politicians, public figures, media, and the church.

Russia is making every effort to **retain the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church with connections and dependence on the Moscow Patriarchate**. This is being carried out through various channels, including the rhetoric and actions of the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian intelligence services, other Orthodox churches (such as Polish, Serbian, and Bulgarian), pro-Russian church leaders and theologians, and lobbyists. Russia relies on the vulnerability of those within the church's hierarchy to corruption and blackmail due to their past connections, material needs and greed, as well as on intelligence operations. It exploits the high level of trust the Ukrainians have in the church in general, and abuses religious freedom to create divisions and incite social unrest (for data on trust in Church as institution see: Razumkov Centre, 2024). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which presents itself as the only canonical one, is also one of the key promoters of so-called traditional

values that, according to a Russian understanding of them, allegedly challenge European integration aspirations.

Additionally, Russia seeks to portray Ukraine as a country that violates religious freedom, weaken international partners' trust (particularly the US), and undermine Ukraine's image as a democracy. Similarly, Russia is constantly pushing narratives that Ukraine abuses the rights of its ethnic and 'language-speaker' minorities. All these are in line with Russia trying **to exploit the rhetoric of human rights and minority rights protection** internationally and portray Ukraine as circumventing such rights and freedoms to challenge support for Ukraine, particularly among Ukraine's allies and partner countries.

Another activity Russia **engages in is supporting 'pro-peace' organisations and public influencers** by targeting the Ukrainian population and government as well as its international partners (FakeNews.pl, 2024; Center for countering disinformation, 2023). This strategy aims to manipulate public opinion by promoting narratives that align with Russia's interests, often under the guise of advocating for peace but in reality, advocating for Ukraine's surrender. Support is provided through the financial backing of these groups and activists, along with orchestrated campaigns on social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and X. Additionally, Russia works to set the particular agenda for media outlets and politicians (i.e. Russia is pushing for peace, etc.). This is carried out within Ukraine and internationally and aims to shape public discourse and influence opinions in favour of its objectives.

The primary objectives of **exploiting the appeal of peacebuilding and pacifist rhetoric** are both at the Ukrainian national and international levels. On the national level, it is to discredit the mobilisation process in Ukraine and diminish social solidarity and to breed distrust in the government and Ukraine's international partners. On the international level it aims at weakening military assistance and supply and support for Ukraine. Additionally, it seeks to pressure Ukraine and its allies into negotiating with Russia on Russia's terms.

Russia **leverages the Hungarian (Orban's) government** to influence Ukraine's political process by capitalising on Hungary's current ideological outlook, strong economic ties with Russia (especially in the energy sector), and populist tendencies. By this, Russia also aims to weaken the EU's geopolitical position, undermine a cohesive EU foreign policy, diminish support for Ukraine, and disrupt its EU accession efforts and the overall EU enlargement process.

Russia **exploits sentiments towards Russian culture and its cultural** ties with foreign countries to shape the political agenda while targeting the Ukrainian government and its international partners (primarily, in the EU, UK, the US, Canada and other countries that support Ukraine). Russia employs various strategies, including financial support for bilateral projects, scholarships, and initiatives that promote interest in Russian art, language, and culture. Key channels of influence are: Russian cultural and educational organisations and initiatives (e.g. ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO), non-governmental entities and those opposed to Putin's regime, who can actually serve as channels of Russian influence. Additionally, Russia engages cultural institutions and agents in target countries that have connections or interests in Russian culture and art. This influence is further reinforced through Russia-produced cultural products and media broadcasts: 'independent' films and series; state-supported networks like Russia Today and Sputnik, etc. The primary objective of these activities is to weaken support for Ukraine by fostering

sympathy for Russian culture and, consequently, for Russians, while increasing susceptibility to Russian narratives and propaganda. These narratives aim to portray Ukraine as a country waging a war against Russian culture and attempting to 'cancel' it, while implicitly objecting Russia's position as an empire and portraying Ukrainian culture as secondary and less important. Also, some of these narratives depict Russia and its 'ordinary' people as the main victims of the war by describing it as 'Putin's war'. For example: the so-called 'Russian opposition' narrative which states that 'ordinary Russians' are all victims of Putin's regime and have no other choice but to join 'the SVO'/Russian army.

Russia seeks **to influence the peace discourse through the so-called Russian liberal opposition based outside the country**. Here again the target are foreign governments and societies worldwide but especially those who support Ukraine (the EU, UK, US etc). The main actors are Russian public figures and media in exile who rely on the financial resources available to them as well as their previous connections with Western and international politicians, media, experts, and activists. Additionally, there is a desire among Western and international politicians, media, and experts to find opposition to Russia/Putin among Russians in exile or to perceive and treat them as such. The aim is to persuade foreign governments and societies that it is Putin's war. This approach involves the 'humanisation' of Russia's war against Ukraine to weaken anti-Russian policies, such as sanctions against Russia and restrictions on Russian citizens. Additionally, it promotes their own vision of a peace deal. Such rhetoric of Russia's dissidents and media in exile are in accord with Russia's official discourse on sanctions, denial of Russians responsibility for the war, and pacification.

Here are some examples of their rhetoric mirroring Russian mainstream propaganda and discourses. For example, Navalny team FBK's rhetoric in 2022-2023 leveraged mentions of violence and crimes committed by the Russian army in the occupied territories of Ukraine to highlight the suffering of Russians, including Russian liberals. They also used discussions about reparations and the post-war development of Russia to emphasise the necessity of all kinds of support, including financial aid, so that Russia can 'bounce back from the bottom' and build capacity for the necessary compensation (Romaniuk and Snopok, 2023). On his release and exchange from Russian prison, Vladimir Kara-Murza referred to Western sanctions as '[unjust](#)' (Shkarlat, 2024). Another example is Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Alexei Navalny, who stated that 'governments of different countries impose various sanctions on Russia—both personal and sectoral, as well as against ordinary citizens. ... [However,] no one has a clear understanding of why they are being imposed, what their ultimate goal is, or how they affect the speed at which Putin's regime will collapse' (Anti-Corruption Foundation, 2024). She also stated that the 'de-colonisers can't explain why people with shared backgrounds and culture should be artificially divided'.

Russia is making efforts **to exploit anti-West sentiments** and the image of the Soviet Union as a champion of colonised and marginalised nations, portraying itself as the heir to the USSR. The objective is **to reframe its war against Ukraine as an anti-West struggle and to prevent countries of the so-called Global South from supporting Ukraine**. For example, countries that are members of the African Union, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are targeted. The main channels of this influence are Russian officials, anti-Western and anti-globalist activists and organisations. Russia continues programmes and initiatives originally established by the Soviet Union in various regions and countries, particularly in the so-called Global South, and target governments and experts/media. These

initiatives involve comprehensive bilateral agreements, regional projects, activities by ROSSOSTRUDNICHESTVO, educational and cultural ties, and the support of specific groups, among other efforts. International organisations, such as the UN, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, are used as platforms for these campaigns which are sustained by financial resources and support Russia provides to relevant/target movements, groups, and governments.

Additionally, Russia **leverages the susceptibility of certain countries, regions, and sociopolitical movements to anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-globalist rhetoric**. This is combined with their willingness to view Russia as the heir to the Soviet Union and as a counterbalance to Western, American, globalist, and capitalist hegemony. As a result, Russia seeks to use the so-called Global South as its advocate on the international stage. Also, Russia aims to justify its approach toward post-Soviet and Socialist countries by framing them as part of its sphere of influence and dominance. Overall, Russia strives to legitimise itself as a key player in a multipolar world, positioning itself as a competing geopolitical power opposed to the West.

Russia **abuses its veto power and position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council** to obstruct support for Ukraine and block relevant Security Council decisions. Russia has been the most frequent user of the veto power in the UN Security Council in recent years.

**Türkiye** poses two political threats to Ukraine which are classified as ‘uncertainties’, and thus their likelihood is assessed as low as well as their impact (table 1, table 2). Firstly, it influences the Crimean Tatars through close **historical and cultural ties**, including linguistic (mutually intelligible languages), and religious connections to reinforce its position as a regional leader and to bolster its geopolitical ambitions. Türkiye mainly engages into political actions and financial support, including funding for educational and cultural initiatives for Crimean Tatars.

Secondly, Türkiye positions itself as a **mediator or broker** in peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia based on its extensive ties with both Russia and Ukraine, as well as within the region and NATO. The main objective is to reinforce Türkiye’s geopolitical standing as a peacemaker and regional leader. Recently, President Erdogan made statements both in direct support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and in favour of peace negotiations.

Finally, **China** also presents political threats (classified as risk of medium likelihood and low impact) to Ukraine by influencing the peace discourse through its own peace plan (table 1). China also does not participate in Ukraine’s peace initiative and summits, aiming to reinforce its geopolitical position as a peacemaker and one of the key power poles in the multipolar competition. In September 2024, on the 79th UN General Assembly in New York, China intensified its **‘peace-making’** efforts by launching with Brazil the club of the ‘friends of peace’ which counts among its members Brazil, China, Türkiye, South Africa, Algeria, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Mexico, Kenya, and Zambia. The club [‘stressed respecting UN Charter principles and called for peaceful solutions through inclusive diplomacy ... and the need for de-escalation in the conflict, ... emphasised avoiding the expansion of the current battlefield’](#). Recently the club has been joined by Hungary and three more countries. While rhetorically the club’s appeal maintains the respect to the UN charter, it also implicitly pushes for the immediate negotiations with Russia which is only currently possible on terms unfavourable to Ukraine and its allies.

Table 10 Threat Matrix, Ukraine

Original actor	Expected activities	Target	Channels	Capabilities	Objectives	Likelihood	Impact (severity)
Russia	Launch disinformation campaigns;	General population of Ukraine, government;	Via social media and messengers - mainly Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, X; also via public media and affiliated politicians;	Troll farms with people who speak the target country's language and understand the local context and culture; money and networks funding political parties and media in the target country; usage of deepfake technology;	To divide Ukrainian society and weaken social cohesion. To weaken the levels of trust in politicians and society (both institutional and interpersonal). To deepen clashes and tensions within Ukrainian society and between different groups by highlighting and discussing in the hyped, exaggerated and manipulative way different existing issues and topics. To spread despair and uncertainty as well as to create an atmosphere of cynicism, fatalism/futility, and distrust. To dis/misinform and to set agenda for mainstream media through hype in social media.	Medium / Ongoing	2-Medium

Russia	Support non-publicly (covertly) Ukrainian politicians (including via corruption or blackmail).	Ukrainian politicians (both ruling parties and opposition).	Financial support, compromising materials.	Politicians susceptible to corruption and blackmail due to their past and ties, material needs and greed etc. Intelligence.	To weaken the levels of trust in government, politicians, and society (both institutional and interpersonal). To set agenda. To divide Ukrainian society and weaken social cohesion. To deepen clashes and tensions within Ukrainian society and between different groups by highlighting and discussing in the hyped, exaggerated and manipulative way different existing issues and topics.	Medium	2-Medium
Russia	Maintain Ukrainian Orthodox Church's ties and dependence on Moscow Patriarchy.	General population of Ukraine, government.	Russian Orthodox Church; Russian Secret/Special services; other Orthodox churches (e.g. Polish, Serbian, Bulgarian etc); pro-Russian church hierarchs and theologians; lobbyists.	Hierarchs susceptible to corruption and blackmail due to their past and ties, material needs and greed etc. Intelligence. Abuse of high trust in church by Ukrainian society. Abuse of freedom of religion.	To divide Ukrainian society and instigate social unrest. To present Ukraine as a country which violates freedom of religion to weaken international partners' trust in Ukraine (particularly, the USA). To undermine Ukraine's image as a democracy.	Medium / Ongoing	1-Low

Russia	Support 'pro-peace' organisations and public influencers.	General population of Ukraine, government, international partners.	Financial support to these groups and activists, also campaigns in social media, particularly TikTok, Facebook, X and agenda setting for media and politicians. This is done both on the internal/national and international levels.	Allure of peacebuilding/pacifist rhetoric and its abuse.	On the national level: to discredit the mobilisation process in Ukraine and weaken solidarity in society; to breed distrust in the government and Ukraine's international partners. On the international level: to weaken the support for Ukraine and military assistance and supply. To put pressure on Ukraine and its allies to negotiate with Russia on Russia's/any terms.	Medium / Ongoing	1-Low
Russia	Exploit Hungarian government to influence Ukraine's political process.	Government of Ukraine, the EU.	Hungarian (Orban's) government.	Hungarian government current ideological outlook, strong economic ties with Russia (especially in the energy sector), populism.	To weaken the EU's geopolitical position, to undermine common EU foreign policy, to weaken the support for Ukraine and disrupt its accession to the EU and the EU enlargement process in general.	High / Ongoing	2-Medium
Russia	Exploit human rights and minority rights rhetoric and groups.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners, international organisations, general population of Ukraine.	Human rights activists and organisations susceptible to Russian narratives and propaganda.	Abuse of human rights and minority rights rhetoric.	To present Ukraine as a country which violates human rights and freedoms to weaken international partners'	Medium / Ongoing	1-Low



					trust in Ukraine. To undermine Ukraine's image as a democracy.		
Russia	Exploit sentiment towards Russian culture and cultural ties with foreign countries for setting political agenda.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners.	<p>Russian cultural and educational organisations and initiatives (e.g. ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO), including non-government and those in opposition to Putin's regime.</p> <p>Cultural institutions and agents in target countries with ties or interest in Russian culture and art. Russia-made cultural products and media broadcasts ("independent" films and series, state-supported broadcasting networks like Russia Today and Sputnik).</p>	Financial support for bilateral projects, scholarships etc. Exploitation of interest in Russian art, language, and culture.	<p>To weaken support for Ukraine through maintaining sympathy to Russian culture and, thus, Russians and heightening susceptibility to Russian narratives and propaganda.</p> <p>To present Ukraine as a country which leads the war against Russian culture and cancel it, including by implicitly objecting Russia's position as empire and describing Ukrainian culture as less important.</p> <p>To present Russia and Russian "ordinary" people as the main victims in the war by describing it as 'Putin's war'.</p>	Medium / Ongoing	2-Medium

Russia	Influence the peace discourse via so-called Russian liberal opposition outside Russia.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners, international organisations.	Western / International (EU/USA/UK etc) politicians, activists, NGOs, experts, media etc., who are sympathetic to Russians 'in exile' and treat/perceive them as opposition to Russia/Putin. Russians 'in exile' who present themselves or pose as opposition to Russia/Putin.	Financial resources available to Russian public figures and media in exile. Their ties (especially previous) with Western/International politicians, media, experts, activists etc. The desire on the part of Western/International politicians, medias, experts, etc to find opposition to Russia/Putin among Russians in exile or to see/treat them as such.	To persuade foreign governments and societies that 'it is Putin's war' by 'humanisation' of Russia's war against Ukraine and, thus, weaken anti-Russian policies (e.g. sanctions, restrictions for Russian citizens etc) as well as promote their own vision of the peace deal.	Medium / Ongoing	1-Low
Russia	Exploit the anti-West sentiments and image of Soviet Union as champion of colonised / marginalised nations and countries with itself as SU's heir to reframe its war against Ukraine as anti-West and prevent the 'Global South' countries from helping Ukraine.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners, international organisations.	Russian officials, anti-Western and anti-globalist activists and organisations. Governments and experts/media of different (targeted) countries, particularly of the so-called Global South. International organisations that could be used as platform, such	Financial resources and support Russia gives to these movements, groups, and governments. Continuation of programmes and initiatives Soviet Union had regarding different regions and countries (particularly, of the so-called 'Global South'). Such initiatives include	To use 'Global South' as Russia's advocate on the international arena. To justify Russia's attitude to the post-Soviet/Socialist countries as its sphere of influence and dominance, as well as legitimise Russia as a pole in a multipolar competition/opposing geopolitical power to the West.	Medium / Ongoing	2-Medium

			as UN, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation etc.	comprehensive bi-lateral agreements, regional initiatives, Rossotrudnichestvo activities, educational and cultural ties and initiatives, support of particular groups, but is not limited to them. Susceptibility of countries, regions, and particular sociopolitical movements and groups to anti-Western, anti-American, and globalist rhetoric combined with the readiness to see Russia as heir to Soviet Union and an opposition to 'Western/American/globalist/capitalist' hegemony.			
Russia	Abuse its veto power and position as permanent member in the UN Security council.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners, international organisations.	Russia has a veto power in UN SC.	The regulations of the UN SC.	To hinder support to Ukraine and block relevant UN SC decisions.	High / Ongoing	2-Medium

Russia	Use previous economic ties to influence Ukraine's society and economy after the war.	Ukrainian politicians (both ruling parties and opposition), civil society, experts, business, government, general public.	Through former/past ownership and control of property and stakes in energy companies, industries, other economic sectors; pre-war ties to Ukrainian politicians and public influencers, church etc.	Before the full-scale invasion in 2022, and even more before 2014, Russians owned or controlled a lot of stakes and property in Ukraine. There also had been a lot of ties between Ukrainian and Russian politicians, experts etc.	To de-stabilise situation in Ukraine.	Low / After the war	1-Low
China	Influence the peace discourse through its own peace plan and non-participation in Ukraine peace summit.	Government of Ukraine, Ukraine's international partners, international organisations.	Chinese officials' statements and activities (e.g. participation or non-participation in summits etc.).	China's influence on other countries and politicians.	To reinforce China's geopolitical position as a peacemaker and one of the power poles in the multipolar competition.	Medium / Ongoing	2-Low
Türkiye	Influence Crimean Tatars through cultural and linguistic ties	General population of Ukraine, government	Financial support, including for educational and cultural initiatives. Political actions	Close historical and cultural ties, including linguistic (mutually understandable languages) and religious ones	To reinforce Türkiye 's position as a regional leader and to strengthen its geopolitical ambitions.	Low / Ongoing	1-Low
Türkiye	Assert itself as a mediator/broker in (peace) negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.	Government of Ukraine.	Turkish officials' statements, initiatives, and activities.	Close and extensive ties both with Russia and Ukraine, in the region, and NATO.	To reinforce Türkiye 's geopolitical position as a peacemaker and regional leader.	Low / Ongoing	2-Low

## ANNEX B. LIST OF REFERENCES

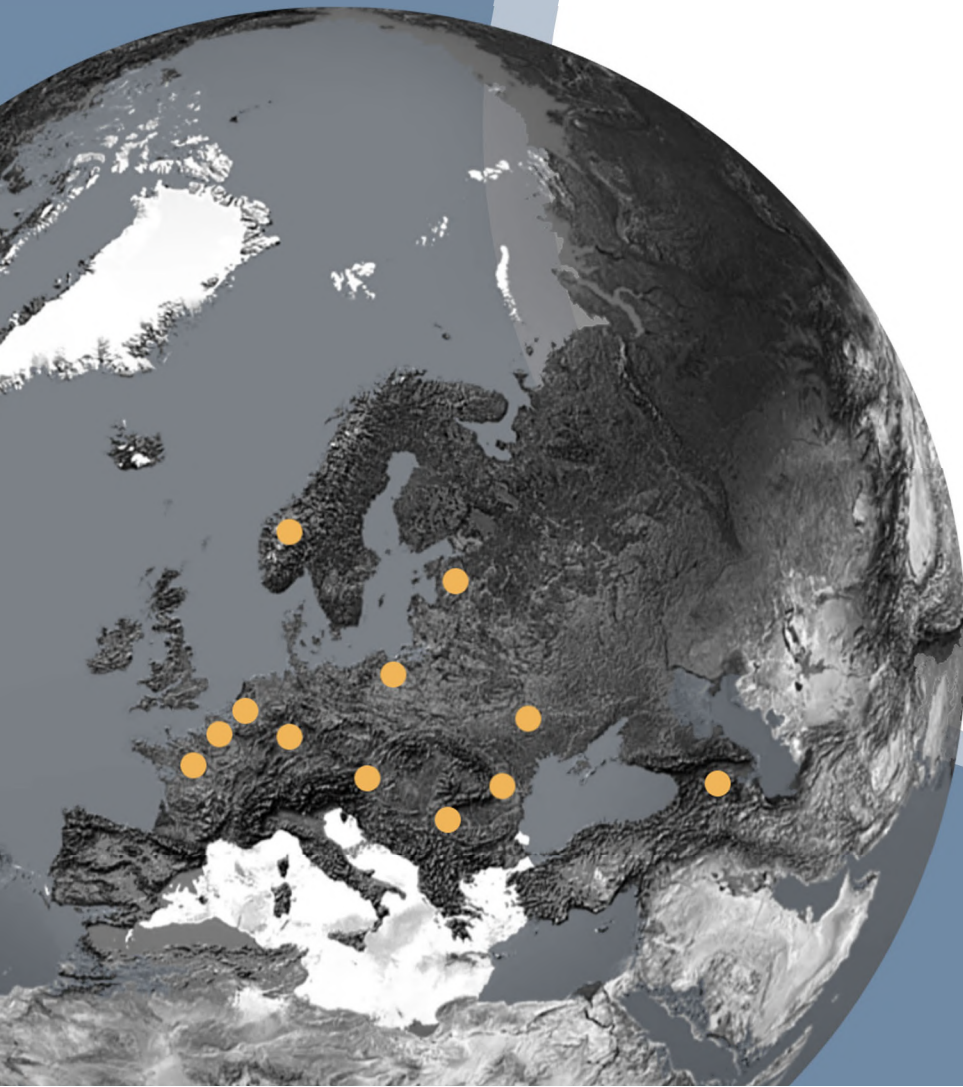
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1. Expert, Centre for Contemporary Politics, Serbia, &7 December 2024.
2. Director, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Georgia, 23 December 2024.
3. Expert, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23 December 2024.





Funded under the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, project ID No. 101132446. The content of this working paper represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.