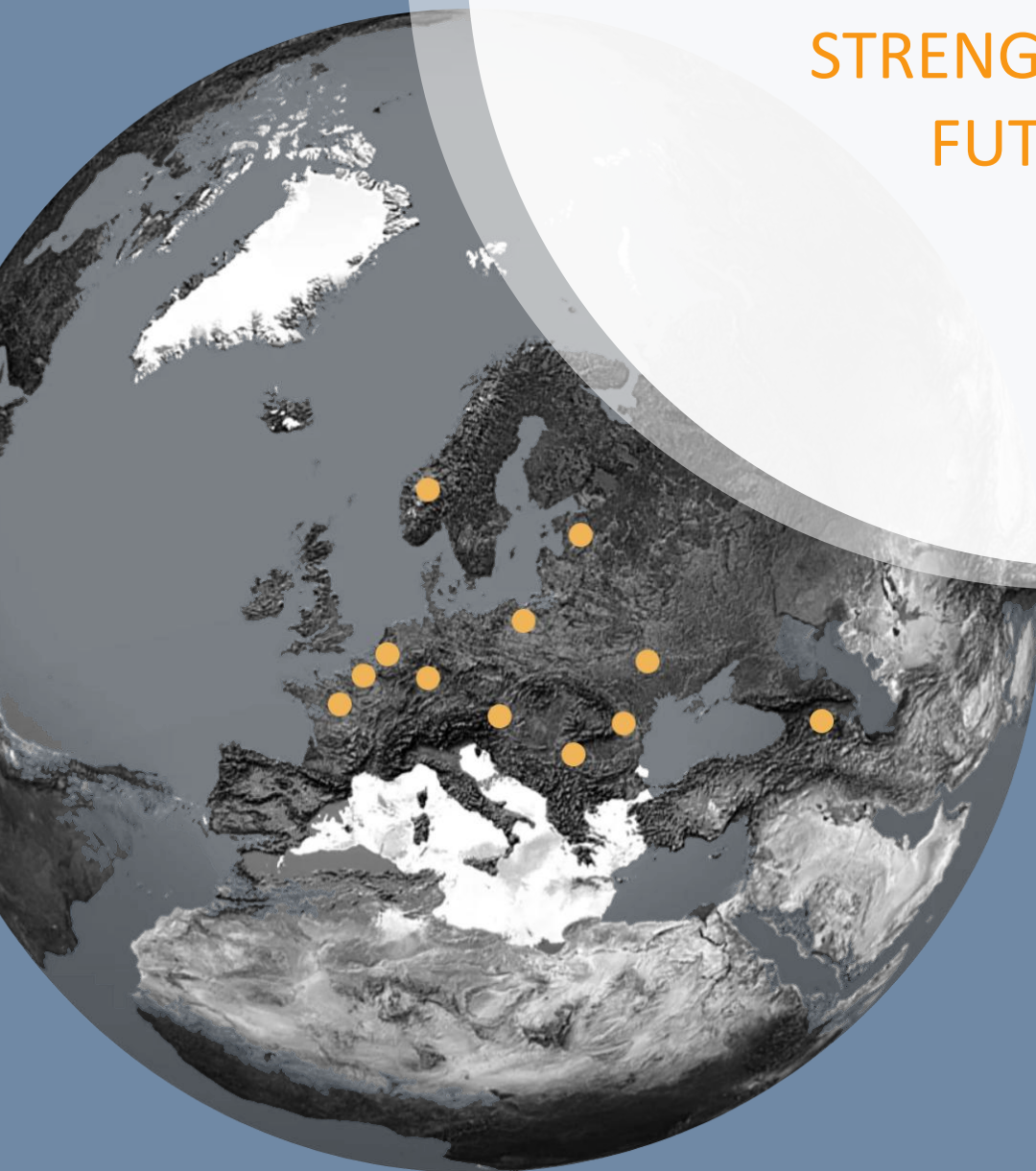




INVESTING IN
SECURITY: A POLICY
AGENDA TO
STRENGTHEN THE EU'S
FUTURE MEMBERS



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REUNIR – D3.3 – POLICY BRIEF 1 ON OPTIONS FOR NEW AND REVISED INSTRUMENTS TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE TO MILITARY THREATS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS & EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

EU accession Candidate Countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood face to varying degrees, military-based or other hard security threats from third states such as Russia and China. These threats range from destabilising defence cooperation arrangements, through hybrid warfare with military elements, to military coercion and large-scale armed aggression. The Candidate Countries, however, also to varying degrees, lack resilience against these threats.

The EU has tools and instruments to assist resilience-building against hard security threats. So far however, it has used these in only limited ways, for example in its support to Ukraine and in its peace support presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This undermines EU recognition that investing in the security of countries immediately beyond its borders is also an investment in its own peace and security.

To address this, the EU urgently needs to adopt a robust and multi-front approach which uses all the tools and instruments at its disposal to enhance the resilience of the Candidate Countries against hard security threats. It must:

- place greater emphasis on security and defence in the enlargement process and on concluding and operationalising security and defence partnerships with the Candidate Countries;
- implement a broad range of measures to integrate the candidate countries into its own security and defence processes; and
- establish a stronger security presence in the two regions through direct interventions with Common Security and Defence Policy and other security-related instruments.

1. CONTEXT

The EU [recognises](#) that enlargement is “an investment in peace and security in Europe”. Yet it makes only limited use of the tools it has available to help build security in the six countries of the Western Balkans (WB) and the three countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) that are on the enlargement track. Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated, vividly and tragically, that military threats posed by third states beyond the EU's borders can have devastating outcomes for the affected countries, but also detrimental consequences for the EU and its Member States (MS). As external threats grow and as the US decreases its engagement, Europe's security is at a watershed. A robust and multi-pronged approach to enhancing hard security beyond the EU, specifically in these nine Candidate Countries (CC), is urgently needed.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Threats

To varying degrees, the CCs all face military-based or other hard security threats from third states. These range from destabilising defence cooperation arrangements between third states and CC neighbours, through the use of military tools against the CCs in hybrid warfare, to military coercion and large-scale armed aggression. In earlier work, we characterised these threats in the form of six military instruments. We then assessed the likelihood of these being applied against each of the CCs, and what the impact might be.¹

In the WB, Russia is the main hostile third state actor. It operates as a spoiler power, sowing instability through defence cooperation, training, and arms transfers with states in the region. China's presence in the region is motivated largely by geoeconomics. Even so, its actions may create obstacles to the WB countries' integration into European security arrangements. Similarly, the defence-related actions of Türkiye, which promotes parallel, possibly replacement regional arrangements centred around its own leadership, may also complicate the CC's EU integration.

Serbia, while not a third state, also poses threats in the WB, notably through directly employing military instruments against Kosovo. At the same time, its military relationship with Russia stands in the way of its own EU integration. This has, however, declined in the wake of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

In the EN, the situation is bleaker. Russia is the predominant third state posing military threats to CCs in the region. These include the most severe of the military instruments we have defined: coercive military presence and large-scale aggression. Other countries, including Belarus, China, Iran and North Korea, also pose threats to the EN, but do so in the context of their support for Russia's war in Ukraine.

Finally, the US has rapidly emerged as at least a cause for concern in both the WB and EN. Sources of concern include the administration's broad intention to reduce US contributions to European security, and its

¹ Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), *Military Threat Assessment in Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkans*, REUNIR Working Paper 3.1. <https://reunir-horizon.eu/d3-1-military-threat-assessment-in-eastern-neighbourhood-western-balkan-countries/>.

apparent tolerance of the threats that third states, notably Russia, pose to CCs. The risk posed by the US is greatest—and the potential impact most severe—for Ukraine.

1.1.2. Resilience

Quantitative indicators of vulnerability to and capacity to deal with these military threats (e.g., defence spending, security personnel numbers, cybersecurity indices, defence corruption indices, will-to-defend polling) demonstrate that, with few exceptions, resilience in the EN and WB is lower than average levels in the EU.² Qualitative data, collected through interviews and focus groups conducted in the two regions as well as assessments found in the open literature, support this finding.

Broadly, the CCs lack capacity to deal with both conventional and hybrid military threats to their security. For some, risks are mitigated by NATO membership or by international military or other presence (notably, the EU's EUFOR (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and NATO's KFOR (Kosovo)). Cooperation with external actors is thus an important factor in strengthening resilience in CCs, suggesting that EU policies and actions can be further mobilised to improve security. Ukraine's resilience against Russia's military aggression has been extraordinary—indeed Ukraine's resilience exceeds EU averages according to many indicators—but has still depended heavily on political, financial, and military support from a coalition of allies.

Of particular concern are those instances where high threat levels are met with low levels of resilience. In the EN, the greatest concern is Russia's possible (in the case of Ukraine, ongoing) use of military force as an instrument of coercion, or of aggression. The EN CCs are relatively powerless in the face of large-scale Russian military threats and are susceptible to the military components of third state hybrid actions (mostly, again, from Russia) in the region.

This is also a concern in some of the WB CCs, but hybrid attacks, including cyberattacks, are a more immediate issue than large-scale aggression in most of this region. More broadly, the three NATO Allies are better positioned than the non-NATO CCs as far as resilience is concerned.

The employment of military instruments against CCs is destabilising and can impact effective governance, presenting an obstacle to their EU ambitions. In the worst cases, MS may suffer spillover effects that require costly interventions to restore stability in and beyond EU borders.

2. CURRENT POLICIES

The EU has two key policy areas through which it can potentially assist the CCs of the WB and EN in strengthening their resilience against military and other hard security threats. The first is the enlargement process, in particular chapter 31 of the acquis. This requires CCs to progressively align with Common Foreign and Security Policy directions and demonstrate a willingness and ability to take part in EU actions. To the extent that it considers security and defence, the enlargement process is thus more concerned with the

² Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), *Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkan Countries to Military Threats*, REUNIR Working Paper 3.2. <https://reunir-horizon.eu/d3-2-resilience-of-eastern-neighbourhood-western-balkan-countries-to-military-threats/>.

ability of CCs to pursue external actions alongside other MS, rather than their internal ability to resist pressure from outside.

A related issue is the EU's [security and defence partnerships](#), which provide a framework that facilitates participation in other EU defence initiatives. So far, of the CCs, such partnerships have only been concluded with Albania, Moldova, and North Macedonia.

The second area concerns the instruments and tools associated with the EU's growing security and defence dimension, including those available through the Common Security and Defence Policy. We consider these in two main categories:

- tools of integration (initiatives and programmes in which CCs might be invited to take part as third states, building security through inclusion);
- and tools of intervention (instruments that allow the EU to act directly in a CC to deal with identified threats).

While the EU has been keen to include Ukraine in, for example, the European Defence Industrial Programme and the Security Action for Europe instrument, these and other tools of integration (such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund) remain largely inaccessible to CCs. This means that their defence research and production entities cannot take part in, or receive funding from, such initiatives. With the exception of EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the remarkable support for Ukraine through the European Peace Facility and EU Military Assistance Mission, EU tools of intervention have had minimal impact, if they have been deployed at all.³

The EU therefore already has the instruments and tools it needs for resilience building against hard security threats in the WB and EN. These however have only been employed in a limited number of cases, leaving CCs exposed to threats that may in turn create threats for MS. Even a substantial increase in the deployment of resilience building tools and instruments would require few resources and save the EU from significant costs that may accrue from hard security threats to CCs later. Consensus on implementing this however may be hard to achieve, especially if (some) MS are more ready to support the agendas of hostile third states than the interests of CCs.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU must recognise that investing in security in the WB and EN benefits CCs, and also strengthens its own peace and security. The EU must, as a matter of urgency, adopt a robust and multi-front approach that uses all the tools and instruments at its disposal, to enhance the resilience of CCs against hard security threats.

- The EU must place greater emphasis on security and defence in the enlargement process. It has leverage to encourage and incentivise defence and security sector modernisation and reform in CCs. This can be achieved through the inclusion of appropriate benchmarks and reporting in chapter 31

³ Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkan Countries, p. 36.

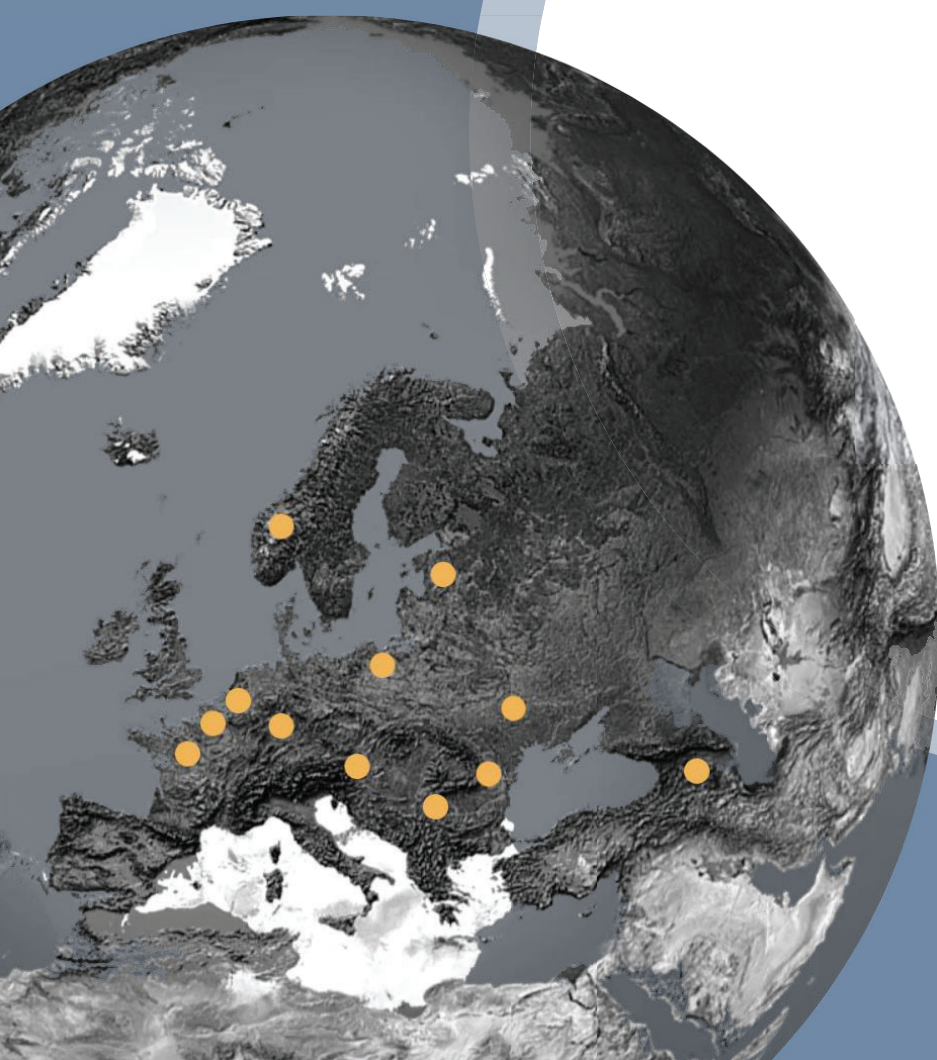
negotiations of the enlargement process, and through greater efforts to conclude and operationalise security and defence partnerships with CCs.

- The EU must implement measures to integrate CCs into EU security and defence processes. This should include the integration of CCs into present and future EU efforts to enhance the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (for example, inclusion in Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defence Fund, the European Defence Industrial Strategy / Programme, Security Action for Europe, and the European Defence Agency). Where relevant, the EU should build on arrangements established for Ukraine's integration and extend these to all CCs. MS might also be offered additional incentives to include CCs in EU projects they take part in, for example under the European Defence Fund. The EU should also include formats and arrangements to associate CCs with (a) EU security and defence structures (EU Military Committee, EU Military Staff, Rapid Deployment Capacity), and (b) security-related strategies and policies (EU cyber defence policy, maritime security strategy, EU space strategy for security and defence, strategic approach for the Black Sea region) and associated activities.
- The EU must establish a stronger security presence in the WB and EN. This can be achieved through direct intervention in CCs using the Common Security and Defence Policy and other security-related instruments. Building defence capacity that draws, where relevant, from examples established for Ukraine (European Peace Facility, EU Military Assistance Mission (Ukraine)) or through similar arrangements that may be agreed in the next Multiannual Financial Framework or in the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, is also critical. More support to boost cyber defence capacity in CCs and expand crisis response capabilities (e.g. PESCO cyber rapid response teams) is needed. The EU should also enhance its security-related presence and action in the WB and EN (through EUFOR, EUMM Georgia, EULEX Kosovo, EUAM Ukraine, EUMAM, EUPM Moldova), and take account where necessary of the impact of US strategic realignment. Finally, the EU should consider exercising the Rapid Deployment Capacity in the WB and EN, for example to reinforce EUFOR.

This menu of actions should be tailored to meet individual CC needs, taking careful account of national and regional political and security dynamics. It is likely that any ambitious set of plans will struggle to find consensus among MS, given the limited nature of current EU security and defence-related activity in the WB and EN. Nonetheless, Russia's war in Ukraine, and the EU's response, should serve as both warning and inspiration to them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Europe's security is at a turning point. The EU is rapidly developing a robust defence dimension to equip itself for future challenges. But it will remain vulnerable if countries on its borders are themselves vulnerable to hard security threats from third states. The EU has the tools and instruments to assist CCs in the WB and EN to build resilience against threats, and the evidence to demonstrate that vigorous actions in this domain can reap huge benefits. It must find the will and resources to act while the opportunity to do so still exists.



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