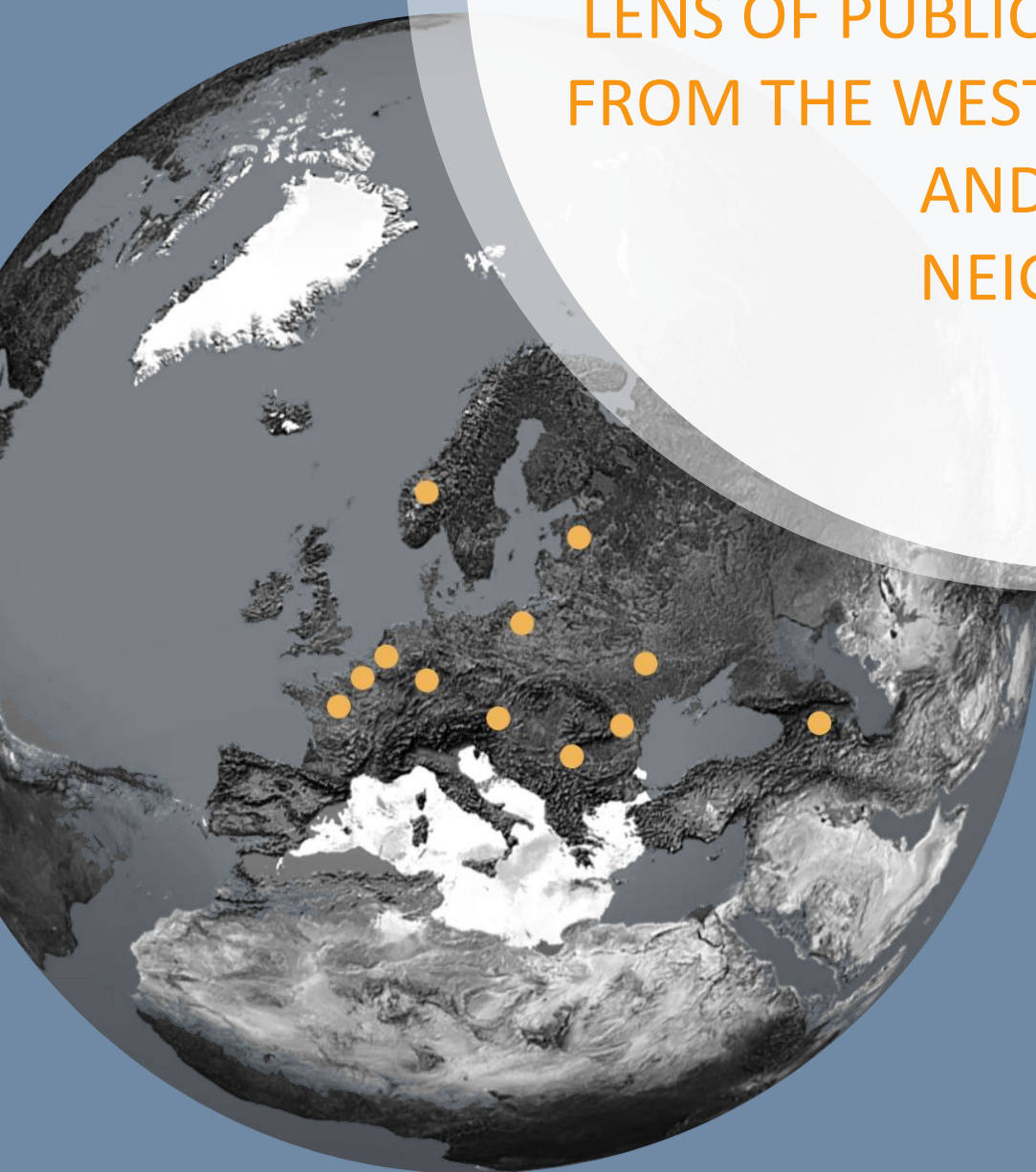REUNIR

TACKLING EXTERNAL MALIGN INFLUENCES AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF EU ENLARGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

In recent years, there has been a substantial shift in the EU's stance on enlargement towards geopolitical logic and actorness. This is reflected in academic literature and debates on the reasons, rationales, effects, and deconstructions of such a turn. This Paper aims to look at how local perceptions and expectations in Candidate Countries (CCs) are shaped by malign foreign influences and the "geopoliticisation" of EU enlargement, including the interplay of control and protean powers in addressing these challenges.

As such, this Paper contributes to relevant academic debates by offering a perspective from the six CCs in the Western Balkans (WB6) and the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) trio. Building on data from public opinion polls conducted in these countries in 2021-2025, our research draws on fieldwork carried out in the first half of 2025: at least two focus groups per country, with experts and the general public, and a minimum of 10 interviews per country with officials, politicians, experts, and civil society activists. In our empirical work, we focus on local perceptions and public sentiments regarding the risks, uncertainties, and external influences, particularly of a malign nature, that these countries are facing in the security, political, and socio-economic areas.

We argue that in all nine CCs under review, malign external influences are seen as coming, if not exactly from within the region, then closely connected with it. Russia is seen as the key malign external actor by the public and experts in the EN3, accompanied (and mimicked in many of its approaches) by Serbia in the case of the WB6. Perceptions of the closeness of malign external influence are manifested and reflected upon differently in public perceptions in these countries, along with expectations of the EU and its role in resisting malign influences and boosting enlargement.

The Paper also demonstrates that it is misleading to lump CCs together geographically, as the differences between the WB6 and EN3 are striking. Still, there are patterns and trends that transcend these regions and highlight CC responses to external influences, particularly Russia's, as well as their interactions with the EU enlargement process, external policies, and toolkit. A comparative analysis of such perceptions and responses therefore expands the conceptual frameworks of the geopolitical turn of enlargement and the interplay of control and protean powers, and the wider theoretical debates regarding EU integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical turn in EU enlargement policy is a response to the numerous external threats and malign influences that Europe has faced over the last decade. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine shows that the European subcontinent is no longer a safe territory with secure borders that nobody would violate. In the face of an uncertain future and increasing external threats, the EU has been forced to reconsider its role on the international stage.

In this context the regional significance of the EU is being transformed, with at least some CCs seeing the EU as a potential security factor. For the EU, the enlargement process itself is no longer a box-ticking exercise focused on the technical requirements of compliance with membership criteria. There is no doubt that future Member States (MS) must comply with the fundamental values of the EU, but the lengthy process of verifying compliance with procedural criteria may undermine enlargement itself. Countries of the WB and EN that aspire to become EU members can contribute significantly to the stability of the EU in the future.

However, understanding the local context of these countries, and especially how officials, observers and citizens assess their main security threats and perceive the EU, requires in-depth research. Based on expert interviews and focus groups with public representatives, this Paper seeks to identify the external threats facing societies of the WB and EN, and how the actions of the EU are perceived. Using the framework of protean power (as opposed to control power) (Katzenstein & Seybert 2018) to explain the actions of the EU (Lawrence *et al.* 2024; Akhvlediani et al. 2024; Delcour *et al. 2024)*, based on a methodology that combines discursive institutionalism with strategic narratives, we tried to identify the main security risks and perceptions of the EU, and outline what experts and the general public see as possible strategies to reduce the harmful effects of various external threats coming from Russia, China, Iran and other countries. The objective of this Paper is to reveal how local perceptions and expectations in CCs are shaped by malign foreign influences and the geopolitisation of EU enlargement, including the interplay of control and protean powers in addressing these challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL ANCHORING

Geopolitics is a term experiencing a comeback in both scientific and public discourses (Fischer, 2015; Nickel, 2024). The growing importance of geopolitics is evoked by policymakers, the media, and in everyday conversation. Some would equate it or used interchangeably with *Realpolitik* (Balfour, 2023; Helwig, 2024). Others would point out to the fact that many were wrong to either ignore geopolitics (Le Gloannec, 2018) or not pay enough attention to how the world security architecture was crumbling because of territorial disputes, (neo)imperial ambitions of authoritarian regimes and other factors (Cox, 2022; Umland, 2024).

The German scholar Friedrich Ratzel, often considered the father of political geography (his 1897 book was entitled *Politische Geographie*), approached states as living organisms that require their living space – *Lebensraum* – for growth and development (Ratzel 1897). For Ratzel, this concept relied on Darwinian ideas of natural selection, which he applied to study interactions between nation-states. Still, it was Klaus Haushofer, a German military officer and later a professor of geography at Munich University who elaborated

the concept of geopolitics and used it to justify territorial expansion for a state's self-sufficiency and survival. Haushofer founded the Institute of Geopolitics in Munich in 1922 and two years later established and edited the monthly journal *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* (Journal for Geopolitics).

However, Haushofer cannot be credited as the first to coin the concept of *geopolitics,* which is attributed to the Swedish scholar and student of Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén. In his 1916 book *Staten som livsform* ("*The State as a Living Form")* Kjellén used the term "geopolitics" (*Geopolitik*) to speak about "the science of the state as a realm in space" (Kjellén, 1916, p. 39). In this book, he used the term *geopolitics* 31 times, had a separate chapter dedicated to it (2nd chapter), and mentioned social politics, ethnopolitics, economic politics, etc. (Kjellén, 1916, p. 37). The Swedish-Norwegian political scientist Ola Tunander, who published on the works of Kjellén, called him "perhaps the most influential Scandinavian political scientist ever" because "together with the political geographer Fredrich Ratzel, Kjellén was the founder of the German geopolitical school" (Tunander, 2001, p. 451), referring to the great influence this school had on world and German expansionist politics.

In his 2008 article "Geopolitics of the North: "Geopolitik" of the Weak" (Tunander, 2008), O. Tunander suggested that after the end of the Cold War, the Nordic states became free from Cold War politics. As a result, "the Nordic foreign policy elite amalgamated with Nordic constructivist scholar to reshape the political landscape," but simultaneously these countries had to adapt to "the new geography of power". In turn, "this return to Kjellénean geopolitics was not based on the power politics of the 'US victory school' but…on European and Scandinavian relative weakness: a *Geopolitik* of the weak" (Tunander, 2008:). This relatively long quote from Tunander's article will help us answer one crucial question: when talking about the comeback of geopolitics in the form of geopoliticisation of the EU and its enlargement, what exactly do we have in mind? To say that it is all about making geographical space important (again) and reacting to the hard-core challenges of security would clearly be an oversimplification. The risks of oversimplification are also obvious: they might lead us to discuss EU security (and its future) in the vocabulary of the 1920s-30s, such as the *Lebensraum* of the EU. When Tunander spoke of the post-Cold War return of Kjellén's geopolitical ideas, he referred to the adaptation of the Nordic countries to the new geography of power and brought into discussion the "Scandinavian relative weakness". It would be beyond the scope of this Paper to go deeper into the analysis of Tunander's article. As a main take away from it however, we can examine the geopolitical aspects of enlargement from the perspective of EU strengths and weaknesses, with a particular emphasis on the institutional level of EU enlargement and on how it is perceived in WB and EN countries.

, Domestic and regional issues related to great power competition and security play an increasingly important role when decision-making is framed through a geopolitical lens. Decisions are still guided by economic and value-based logic (especially in the case of EU enlargement). Still, strategic rivalries and power imperatives are something neither the European Commission nor EU public opinion can afford to ignore. In September, at a press conference, and in November 2019, at the European Parliament, the newly elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, famously spoke of the *"geopolitical Commission"* she sought to lead. There may be different readings and interpretations of her statement, and it is undoubtedly true that she didn't have the ideas of the early version of geopolitics in mind, but the focus on reshaping the logic of EU foreign policy by prioritising geopolitical necessities is clear.

The study of the geopolitics of the EU is not something new. In 2009 S. Marcu published an article dealing with the "geopolitical changes that came about on the eastern border of Europe (Romania-Moldova-Ukraine) and the border relations between these three countries after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the integration of Romania into the EU" (Marcu, 2009). G. Escribano Francés studied the dilemma between the market and geopolitical logic in providing for energy security in the EU (Escribano Francés, 2008; Escribano Francés, 2011), and generally, the topic of energy corridors and their geopolitical importance for Europe was a topic that was paid attention to (Văduva, 2011; Pardo Sierra, 2010). The concepts and logic of geopolitics have also been applied to studies outside traditional IR, for example, in the analysis of markets for internationalisation and the influence these have had on foreign direct investment, using the case of Poland (Dias & Teixeira, 2011).

One can argue that, in the context of EU enlargement, geopoliticisation means that the process of admitting new MS is no longer seen as a technocratic exercise focused solely on meeting criteria, but as a strategic tool to shape Europe's geopolitical future. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine turned the process of EU enlargement into a core European security issue, which means that expanding the Union is seen as vital to stabilising the European subcontinent and countering hostile powers with malign influence. These influences can vary widely and, depending on the region and country, may be perceived differently by experts and the general public. This Paper, due to space limitations, cannot examine all the different types of threats and malign influences – such as disinformation, political financing, media capture, influence networks – but the research indicates how experts and the public see these threats and what they think about the sources of malign influences in their respective countries and regions.

If the EU's enlargement policy is seen as not merely a rational, technocratic process but as an adaptive and, to a certain degree, improvisational response to radical uncertainty and geopolitical shocks, such as the Russian full-scale war against Ukraine, one can rely on the *protean power* framework to explain the current course of events (Thomas, 2025).

Protean power refers to the capacity for agile adaptation in the face of uncertainty, and it stands in contrast to *control power,* which relies on influencing outcomes in calculable, risk-managed situations. Within the frameworks of traditional hard and soft power, it is assumed that actors can predict scenarios and calculate risks, which, in turn, allows them to exercise control to achieve desired outcomes. When operating in environments of known probabilities and planned strategies, one can speak of different forms of control power. By contrast, protean power emphasises flexibility, improvisation, and resilience - the practices of coping with uncertainty - which is something the EU can do when dealing with threats and malign influences from outside current EU borders (Aydın-Düzgit, Kaliber, 2025).

Based on data gathered within the research framework, this Paper uses the protean power framework to understand the EU's response to uncertainty and the rapidly changing geopolitical environment, in contrast to a control power based on planning and predictability. Responses from our respondents can help us evaluate if protean power can be applied by the EU as an uncertainty-driven adaptation to change the approach to enlargement policies and politics.

3. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodological framework for this Paper draws on *discursive institutionalism* developed by Vivien A. Schmidt. She stated that discursive institutionalism is an alternative to the already existing types of (neo)institutionalism. Schmidt's institutionalism conceptualises ideas as the substantive content of politics and regards discourse as the interactive process that produces ideas, helps them circulate, but also contests them. According to Schmidt, ideas exist at different levels, from very specific policy solutions to broader policy programmes or even "public philosophies". They can be cognitive, i.e. explaining "what is" and "what to do", or normative - explaining "what is good" and "what is appropriate". As with many other definitions of the discourse, she perceived it as the medium through which actors articulate, justify and challenge these ideas in different institutional settings.

Within the framework of discursive institutionalism, there are two basic forms of discourse: *coordinative discourse* and *communicative discourse* (Schmidt 2008). The first refers to exchanges among policy actors who are involved in policy formulation, such as experts, advisers, and interest-group representatives. This means it concerns the internal coordination of ideas within policy network projects. *Communicative discourse* refers to the discourse of political leaders, parties, and other public figures when they present, legitimise, or contest policies in front of broader publics. This type of discourse, according to V. Schmidt, is about how policies are communicated, justified, and, on the whole, made acceptable to citizens.

There are studies that used discursive institutionalism to analyse interview data in EU-related contexts. In the study of lobbying around the reform of the EU Emissions Trading System, Fitch-Roy and Wood apply discursive institutionalism as a methodological approach to study 32 in-depth interviews with EU officials, business representatives and environmental NGOs. A. Mgaloblishvili (2020) employed discursive institutionalism as a methodological framework to study the role of religious actors in EU politics, using, as the source of data, speeches, publications and interviews with representatives of churches and religious organisations. Her study examined how these actors frame European integration, and how their coordinative and communicative discourses interact with institutional structures inside the EU (Mgaloblishvili 2020). Schilin (2024) applies a discursive-institutionalist lens to trace how ideas about differentiated integration structured crisis perceptions and reform preferences during the eurozone and COVID-19 crises.

At a more specific level of analysis of our interlocutors' utterances and statements, we examined their *strategic narratives.* Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) define strategic narratives as stories that political actors construct and project in order to shape shared understandings of international politics. In our case, these were the perceptions and expectations in EU CCs, and how these were shaped by malign foreign influences and the geopolitisation of EU enlargement. Strategic narratives are not just ad-hoc messages, but structured accounts of who the key actors are (i.e. the main external threats), what kind of international order they inhabit, what has happened in the past (the narrative account of how the process of negotiating with EU was going), what is at stake now, and what future is desirable or dangerous. In international relations and policy research, strategic-narrative analysis is traditionally used to trace how states and other actors construct perceptions of friends and enemies, risks and threats through "stories". This is relevant to analysing the data collected through interviews.

The strategic narratives framework already proved its effectiveness when combined with qualitative interview data in several EU-related studies. Szilvia Nagy, in her study of Georgia's EU bid, draws on narrative interviews to reconstruct how a group of civil society organisations narrate Georgia's candidacy to address the geopolitical tensions (Nagy, 2025b). She also uses data from semi-structured interviews that cover Georgia's application process for EU candidacy status between 2022 and 2024, to trace competing strategic narratives of Georgia's EU candidacy in the context of the EU's recent "geopolitical turn" to enlargement (Nagy, 2025a). Nagy also published a study in which she analyses interviews with civil-society organisations to show how they contest and re-frame the EU's official enlargement narrative through more relational, bottom-up stories about accession and borderlands (Nagy, 2025b). There are also interview-based studies that use strategic narratives to examine how EU actors construct threats and security. Drawing on elite interviews with diplomats and defence officials, Mustasilta and Karjalainen (2025) mapped MS strategic narratives regarding the European Peace Facility and the EU's evolving security role.

4. INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS INFORMATION

The fieldwork was conducted across the nine target countries – six from the WB and three from the EN – between February and March 2025. Data collection was primarily based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with at least 10 experts per country and on focus group discussions. In total, the REUNIR researchers spoke with 293 interlocutors. The sampling strategy ensured representation across all major sectors related to political, socio-economic, and military developments.

The interviewees came from diverse fields. For example, the sample included current and former politicians, high-ranking government officials from key ministries (particularly those related to European integration and security), former diplomats, members of parliament, and staff from international organisations. These groups were complemented by experts, including academics, university professors specialising in social sciences and international relations, leading analysts from local think tanks and research institutes. Critical voices were also gathered from civil society and media, including human rights activists, NGO leaders, journalists, and media experts. Representatives of the private sector were interviewed. Finally, the interviews were supplemented by at least two focus group discussions in each country: one with the general public, to ensure the research was grounded in the experiences of ordinary citizens, and one with experts. The final sample composition was fairly evenly split, comprising 177 men and 116 women.

The consolidated Table 1 presents the precise distribution of the sample across institutional categories, gender, and country, adhering strictly to the consolidated fieldwork data.

Table 1 Categories of focus group discussions participants and interview respondents

Country	Academia	Civil Society	State Institutions	Private Sector	Political Parties	Other	Men	Women	Total Participants
Albania	6	11	4	3	0	7	21	10	31
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5	5	4	2	0	7	17	6	23
Georgia	7	11	1	2	0	10	18	13	31
Montenegro	5	9	6	0	0	11	16	15	31
Moldova	1	17	15	6	4	8	27	24	51
North Macedonia	6	9	3	1	0	15	23	11	34
Kosovo	4	16	3	1	2	6	19	13	32
Serbia	3	10	2	3	0	17	19	16	35
Ukraine	4	13	0	0	2	6	17	8	25
Total							177	116	293

4.1. Ethical Constraints and Fieldwork Context

During the fieldwork, we encountered several geopolitical and domestic constraints that impacted sampling composition and safety procedures. Fieldwork in Serbia and Georgia encountered methodological difficulties, primarily due to ongoing political protests and civil society's active boycott of state institutions and repression by state institutions. This environment complicated efforts to gather the government's perspective, necessitating that external researchers engage directly with state bodies—a strategy that yielded limited success. Because of the situation in Georgia, the research maintained the anonymity of interlocutors to avoid creating a potentially unsafe environment for them. In the case of Ukraine, to ensure the safety of all parties, the research utilised a strictly online approach for interviews and focus groups. The interviews were conducted by researchers from the REUNIR project. The core qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interview guides and complementary focus group discussion guides designed for cross-country comparability.

Based on the common structure, the guides for both interviews and focus group discussions were structured around three main thematic blocks:

1. Current Threats and Malign External Influence: This block aimed to map the current and perceived military/hard security, socio-economic, and political threats facing the country. It explicitly asked

respondents to identify the most significant malign state actors and to elaborate on the *nature* of the threats they pose.

2. Domestic Political Dynamics and Resilience: Questions focused on identifying core problems/obstacles to democratisation (e.g., corruption, human rights), assessing the role of domestic non-governmental actors (civil society, EU), probing tangible manifestations of resilience, and evaluating the government's perceived success in managing threats.

3. Future Challenges and Policy Interventions: This thematic block asked participants to project the greatest threats for the period up to 2035 (the next 5-10 years) in military, socio-economic, and political domains. Crucially, it culminated in identifying concrete policy steps the respective governments need to take, with a specific focus on how the EU can assist.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

5.1. External actors in the WB6 and EN3 regions: mapping and perceptions

5.1.1. Russia

Perceptions of Russia are the most diverse among all external actors. For EN countries, Russia represents an existential threat, as it views EU accession as an obstacle to its own efforts to undermine their sovereignty and bring them back under its control. In the WB, perceptions of Russia are polarised. Serbia stands out the most, with 88 % of the population holding a positive view of the Russian Federation and 46 % identifying it as their main ally (more than all other countries combined) (IRI, 2024, p. 53). At the same time, the populations of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro view Russia as a primary threat, alongside Serbia.

Experts noted that Russia exerts a destructive influence in the region indirectly, primarily through Serbia. The latter is viewed by its neighbours—particularly Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—as a conduit for Russian interests and a destabilising factor (Ranković 2025, p. 130; Pejić Nikić 2025, pp. 153). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia actively supports the separatist rhetoric of Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, using it to destabilise the entire country and obstruct its path toward NATO (Buljubašić 2025, p. 30). Russia employs cyberattacks and church structures to promote anti-Western narratives, particularly in Montenegro and North Macedonia. In North Macedonia, Russian disinformation exploits the sensitive issue of Bulgaria's veto over the EU accession process for North Macedonia—which demands concessions related to historical memory and identity—fuelling anti-EU sentiment and frustration with the EU (Ranković 2025, p.132; Pejić Nikić, 2025, pp. 153).

While Russia seeks to destroy Ukraine as a state through military force and all forms of hybrid aggression, its strong aggression in Moldova and Georgia is primarily hybrid and relies on the occupation of parts of their territories. In Moldova, it engages in energy blackmail, although Chișinău is successfully diversifying its energy supplies and weakening Russia's energy grip. Russia also attempts to provoke protests through proxy parties and to destabilise the country via Transnistria and Gagauzia. In Georgia, Russia's strategy is to impose "peace

through fear." The pro-Russian government promotes the narrative that peace can only be maintained by avoiding actions that might irritate Moscow. Close economic cooperation – including the influx of Russian tourists and active trade – is also used by Russia as leverage to deter sharp pro-Western moves (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 58).

5.1.2. China

Perceptions of China in the EN and WB vary, although it is generally seen not just as an economic partner but as a carrier of specific influence. In the Balkans, experts describe China's economic presence as an "invisible entrapment," gradually growing without sufficient public attention, particularly in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Buljubašić 2025, p. 31). In Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, Beijing is perceived more through the lens of geopolitics and Russia's war against Ukraine or as a distant economic player.

The most prominent example of Chinese influence is Serbia, where relations with Beijing have reached an official level described as an "iron friendship" (Petrović 2025, p. 178). This alliance has translated into billion-dollar infrastructure contracts, often concluded without tenders, undermining EU norms. The economic component of this "friendship" is implemented through intergovernmental agreements that allow standards of transparency to be bypassed (Petrović 2025, p. 178).

This has led to the so-called "quiet infiltration" of Chinese technologies into security infrastructure (Petrović 2025, p. 167). A notable example is the widespread implementation of "Safe City" surveillance systems using Huawei cameras in Belgrade, Niš, and Novi Sad, integrating artificial intelligence for facial recognition. This raises expert concerns about their potential use for espionage or control over political opponents (Petrović 2025, p. 167).

Chinese initiatives often result in controversial infrastructure projects that become a burden for national economies due to opacity and corruption.

In Montenegro, the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway became a source of economic vulnerability. The project, financed through loans from the Chinese Exim Bank, led to significant debt burdens and included conditions that could allow the Chinese side to claim strategic assets of the country in case of default (Ranković 2025, p. 127). The agreement was concluded non-transparently, creating numerous corruption risks and threats to environmental standards (Ranković 2025, p. 127).

In North Macedonia, the implementation of the Skopje – Ohrid highway project (also known as Kičevo – Ohrid) built by Chinese companies became a symbol of corruption and inefficiency (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 154). The project was accompanied by major political scandals in 2015, revealing abuse schemes. Although the country later distanced itself from some Chinese initiatives under Western pressure, China maintains a symbolic presence through cultural diplomacy and media cooperation (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 154).

Beyond financial risks, Chinese investments often pose threats to the environment and labour rights. In Serbia, Chinese companies became the largest exporters, yet their activities – particularly in the extractive sector – are often linked to raw material exports and disregard for environmental standards (Petrović 2025,

p. 169). Experts warn that Serbia risks becoming a site for "dirty technology production," as Chinese projects frequently receive regulatory exemptions (Petrović 2025, p. 169).

The war has drastically changed perceptions of China in Ukraine. Experts increasingly view it in the context of a so-called "axis of evil" (along with Iran and North Korea) due to its support for Russia, noting that it primarily acts in its own interests (Osypchuk et al., 2025, p. 188). China helps Russia circumvent sanctions and establish supply channels for weapons and ammunition components, creating a direct threat to Ukraine (Osypchuk et al., 2025, p. 189).

In Georgia, attitudes toward China are ambivalent. On the one hand, it is recognised as a source of investment and opportunities for economic and trade diversification (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 59). However, the growth of economic ties is also seen as a threat that may bring opaque business practices, exacerbate corruption, and undermine democratic governance (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 59). Experts also point to risks of falling into debt dependency and fear that deepening cooperation with China could be used by the government for a geopolitical pivot away from the West when democracy weakens (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 67).

In Moldova, China is perceived as a secondary player, whose economic presence (e.g., in infrastructure and telecommunications) does not translate into significant political influence (Groza, 2025, p. 102).

Thus, Chinese influence in the regions is systemic: it not only creates financial dependence but also offers local elites an alternative development model that demands neither rule of law nor transparency, complicating the countries' European integration. China's geopolitical stance regarding the Russia–Ukraine war generally fuels Russian aggression, which threatens the very statehood of Ukraine.

5.1.3. United Arab Emirates

The influence of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), similar to that of China, is perceived of as being primarily economic, but associated with risks stemming from the opacity of agreements and potential threats to democratic governance standards (Ranković 2025, p. 128).

In Serbia, the role of the UAE is the most controversial and is often described by experts as an example of "corrosive capital." Large-scale real estate projects, such as *Belgrade Waterfront*, as well as the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, have become symbols of this cooperation, which is frequently characterised by non-transparent contracts, forced demolitions, and the adoption of preferential legislation favouring foreign investors at the expense of public interests (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 163). During focus groups, citizens linked these investments to sharp increases in urban rental prices and gentrification that displaces local residents (Petrović 2025, p. 171). In addition, loans from the UAE constitute a significant share of Serbia's external debt, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of such financial obligations (Petrović 2025, p. 163).

In Montenegro, investments from Gulf countries, including the UAE, also raise concerns due to their lack of transparency. A frequently cited example is the 2025 investment agreement regarding Ulcinj's Great Beach, which was marked by opaque procedures and questionable motives. The acquisition of the Porto Montenegro complex by UAE investors is viewed by experts as part of a broader regional model of elite real

estate development serving geopolitical interests and risking the erosion of transparency and democratic oversight (Ranković 2025, p. 128).

In Albania, the UAE has emerged as a new influential actor, expanding its presence through investments in strategic assets such as ports. At the same time, respondents point to the provision of surveillance technologies by the Emirates, indicating the growing complexity and diversification of external interests in the country (Kuçi, 2025, p. 22).

5.1.4. NATO

The North Atlantic Alliance is perceived as a key guarantor of security in most of the countries studied, particularly in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. For Ukraine, NATO membership remains a desired goal enshrined in the Constitution. With the new administration in the United States, concerns have grown in Ukraine regarding the stability of Washington's support and Alliance unity in the face of the Russian threat (Osypchuk, Sachenko, Suslov 2025, p. 186). Nevertheless, Ukraine sees NATO membership as a key guarantee of its security in the future. Despite Georgia's official course towards NATO membership, authorities use the fear of war to suggest that active rapprochement with NATO could provoke new aggression, creating a paralysis of will in parts of society and scepticism about the feasibility of accession (Pollozhani et al., 2024, p. 55). Moldova is a unique case in the EN region, where security integration with NATO lags behind European integration due to Russia's successful exploitation of war fears and the deeply rooted myth of neutrality as the country's security guarantee.

In the WB perceptions of NATO stand out in Serbia, where the Alliance is seen as an enemy due to the NATO bombings and the lack of transitional justice within the country. The quantitative data is striking. Only 3 % of Serbs support full Alliance membership (IRI, 2024, p. 97), while only 10 % hold a positive view of NATO (IRI, 2024, p. 99). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, support for integration into NATO and the EU is polarised: it is significantly higher among Bosniaks and Croats than among Serbs (Buljubašić 2025, p. 29). The Alliance is seen as a potential stabilising factor, and cooperation with it (notably through training) is still regarded as a safeguard, while NATO itself retains trust, especially among security professionals (Buljubašić 2025, 2025, p. 34). At the same time, NATO's overall presence in the country is perceived as limited (Buljubašić 2025, p. 47).

In Albania, NATO is viewed as a "security umbrella" providing the country with global insurance (Kuçi 2025, p. 13). Some 64 % of respondents assess Alliance membership as "very positive" for the country (IRI, 2024, p. 98). In Kosovo, the presence of KFOR remains vital, and NATO membership is a strategic objective for the country (Loshaj 2025, pp. 72, 88). Support for Alliance membership here stands at 88 %, the highest figure among all countries in the region (IRI, 2024, p. 97).

In North Macedonia, Alliance membership is seen as a strong deterrent against external aggression (2025, p. 147), although positive attitudes toward membership are more moderate – about 32 % consider it "very positive" (IRI, 2024, p. 98), roughly half the level in Albania. In Montenegro, NATO membership is a cornerstone of the country's defence architecture (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 121), yet only 28 % of citizens view it as very positive (IRI, 2024, p. 98).

5.1.5. United States of America

The United States remains a key external actor for most countries in both regions, generally perceived as the primary security guarantor and strategic ally. However, perceptions of its reliability and engagement are undergoing significant transformations. Unlike NATO, which is viewed through the lens of collective security, the US as a distinct state actor is often assessed in terms of its capacity for decisive bilateral action and effective sanctions policy, especially where EU approaches are considered too soft or bureaucratic.

In the Western Balkans, the US role is often contrasted with that of the EU in crisis management. For example, experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina emphasise that the US is seen as a more decisive actor compared to the EU, notably through the imposition of sanctions (together with the UK) on destabilising politicians such as Milorad Dodik, which had a tangible impact, unlike the cautious stance of Brussels (Buljubašić 2025, p. 45). In Kosovo, the US continues to be regarded as an essential ally, and any signs of potential weakening of transatlantic ties or withdrawal of American troops provoke deep concern about the emergence of a security vacuum (Loshaj 2025, p. 77).

At the same time, field research has revealed growing anxiety and uncertainty regarding the future of US foreign policy under the Trump administration. This trend is observed across both regions. In North Macedonia, experts note a decline in confidence in the US as a reliable ally, describing the situation as a "shaking of the pillar" on which the country has long relied for democracy and stability (Pejić Nikić 2025, 2025, p. 148). Similar sentiments prevail in Georgia, where respondents point to the closure of USAID programmes and the general retreat of the US from actively promoting democracy as a signal that Washington is ceasing to be a reliable partner for civil society amid domestic political crises (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 55). In Moldova, the suspension of USAID assistance has also affected the visibility of American support, although the US is still identified as a strategic partner (Groza 2025, p. 102).

In Ukraine, perceptions of the US are closely linked to the existential need for military and financial assistance. Experts emphasise critical dependence on the continuation of support, noting that any disruptions in the supply of weapons or intelligence, or pressure to enter unfavourable economic agreements, are seen as a threat to national security and the ability to resist aggression (Osypchuk *et al.,* 2025, p. 189).

An exception to the general pattern of perception is Serbia, where the US (together with Albania) is seen by the public as the greatest threat to the country, sharply contrasting with the positive attitudes toward Russia and China (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 164).

5.1.6. Turkey

Across the Western Balkans, Turkey is generally perceived as a supportive but ambivalent external actor, whose influence is primarily exercised through soft power, economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, and selective security cooperation, rather than overt political interference. In contrast to Russia or Serbia, Turkey is rarely framed as a directly destabilising actor, although interviewees in several countries raised concerns about its long-term strategic intentions and indirect political leverage (Ranković 2025, p. 134).

In Kosovo, Turkey is increasingly seen as a security partner and arms supplier, including Bayraktar drones (Loshaj 2025, p. 90). Despite officially close relations, experts in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina express serious concerns about Ankara's "soft power." Through its organisations (such as TIKA) and educational institutions, Turkey attempts to influence the identity of the local Muslim population by promoting conservative values. Concern centres on the fear that Turkey could seek to alter Kosovo's secular character or revive forms of political Islam, although such influence is not considered systematic or immediate (Loshaj 2025, p. 80).

In Montenegro, Turkey is perceived primarily as an economic and cultural actor, with a growing presence that is visible but not openly political. Interviewees consistently described Turkish influence as operating within the bounds of Montenegro's sovereignty and EU integration process. However, concerns remain about opaque investments, grey-zone economic practices, and potential future leverage (Ranković 2025, pp. 133–134).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey's role is perceived as predominantly cultural and religious, particularly through support for Islamic institutions and symbolic engagement, rather than deeply political or involving security (Buljubašič, 2025, p. 31).

Among the general population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey is regarded as the top foreign ally, with 22 % holding this view overall (IRI, 2024, p. 54). In Kosovo, 88 % of the population hold a favourable opinion of Turkey (IRI, 2024, p. 60), reflecting a gap between elite caution and popular sympathies. The popularity of Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is notable: he is the most popular foreign politician in Albania (71 % positive), as well as in North Macedonia (66 %), Bosnia and Herzegovina (61 %), and Montenegro (56 %) (IRI, 2024, p. 64). In Kosovo, he ranks behind the US president but still enjoys the highest level of popularity in the region – 82 %. Only in Serbia does he trail behind Vladimir Putin (80 %) and Xi Jinping (73 %), yet still retains significant favourability at 41 % (IRI, 2024, p. 64). These data may indicate the population's favourable attitudes toward non-democratic governance.

In the EN countries, perceptions of Turkey differ significantly from the Balkan context, focusing on security and geopolitical balancing. In Ukraine, Turkey gained considerable trust due to the closure of the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits and the provision of Bayraktar drones at the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion.

Turkey plays a significant geopolitical role in the wider Black Sea region, yet it does not seem to directly shape Moldova's European integration, even though it generally supports the process. Turkey engagement in the Gagauzia region is particularly noteworthy, as it serves to counterbalance Russia's influence through aid, investments, and close relationships with local leaders. Its involvement has been key in preventing Russian attempts to destabilise the area by discouraging separatist initiatives or geopolitical tensions with the Moldovan authorities (Groza 2025, p. 102).

5.1.7. Other Actors: Iran, North Korea, Belarus, Hungary

Beyond the major global players, respondents single out a group of state actors—Iran, North Korea, Belarus, and Hungary—that pose specific security and political threats to individual countries in the WB and EN.

Iran, North Korea, and Belarus are involved in varying degrees in the war against Ukraine on Russia's side. North Korea is the most intensively engaged among them, through large-scale supplies of weapons (missiles, ammunition, etc.) and manpower, having entered into direct combat with the Ukrainian armed forces. Iran, in turn, provides Russia with critical military capabilities, particularly drones and missiles (Osypchuk *et al.*, p. 189). In the Ukrainian context, Belarus is perceived not as a sovereign actor but as a Russian satellite, whose territory serves as a staging ground for aggression. Experts characterise it as "a sword hanging over Ukraine's head," forcing Kyiv to divert significant military resources to the northern border to deter a potential renewed invasion (Osypchuk *et al.* 2025, p. 188).

In Albania, Iran is identified as a source of cyberattacks and disinformation, a perception reinforced by the large-scale attack in 2022, which exposed the vulnerability of state institutions to hybrid influence (Kuçi 2025, p. 11). In North Macedonia, experts link waves of anonymous bomb threat messages to Iranian actors and classify this country, alongside North Korea and Belarus, as part of a group of states undermining the international order (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 147).

Hungary, despite its EU membership, is assessed by experts in several WB countries as a disruptive actor. In North Macedonia, it is considered a systemic threat to democracy due to the export of illiberal practices and support for the VMRO-DPMNE party, particularly through media investments (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 153). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary is viewed as an amplifier of Russian influence by backing anti-constitutional challenges (Buljubašić 2025, p. 31), while the EU's lowering of democratic conditionality creates a "moral hazard," legitimising Hungary as a role model for local elites (Buljubašić 2025, p. 42).

To sum up, Russia, supported by other malign actors such as North Korea, Belarus, and Iran, remains the primary and most multifaceted threat, employing hybrid warfare, disinformation, and proxy actors to destabilise the regions. China's influence, while primarily economic, is increasingly viewed as a systemic challenge, entrenching corruption and authoritarian practices through opaque infrastructure deals. Other actors, such as Turkey and the UAE, present a more nuanced picture, in which economic engagement is often accompanied by concerns about political leverage and transparency.

Countering these diverse threats requires a comprehensive strategy that prioritises building internal resilience, a process in which the EU can play a pivotal role. To effectively mitigate malign influence, the EU must adopt a more proactive and principled stance, leveraging the accession process as a transformative tool that strategically promotes mutual security and prosperity.

5.1.8. Spoilers from within: Serbia and Georgia

Both the WB and EN have cases that may seem like Russia's Trojan horses — Serbia and Georgia, respectively. However, both countries should be regarded as multi-level actors, in which the government, the public, and civil society may have divergent stances on Russia, the EU, and their neighbours.

Serbia's government keeps a pragmatic approach of balancing between Russia and the EU. Refusing to align with the EU's sanctions against Russia (Jevtić, 2024) and paying a visit to Moscow on Russian WWII Victory Day (Baletic, 2025), President Vučić continues to declare that Serbia is on its way to the EU (Brzozowski, 2025). Moreover, Serbia even covertly authorised the shipment of Serbia-produced ammunition to Ukraine

(Dragojlo, 2025). However, putting declarations aside, both the Serbian government and society lack commitment to EU integration: on the former's side democratic backsliding and a foreign policy that aligns more with China and Russia than the EU; on the latter's side, the lowest support in the region for EU membership (IRI, 2025, p. 91). Under these circumstances, it is civil society and expert communities who share the strongest adherence to the EU and are suspicious of Russian influence (Pollozhani et al., 2025). Meanwhile, 41 % of the general public in Serbia views Russia as the most important ally, demonstrating a strong pro-Russian sentiment among part of the population (IRI, 2025, p. 57). Thus, the citizens are divided, and the conflicting messages of the government speak to this polarisation and reinforces it.

In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, Serbia is perceived as the most important threat (IRI, 2024, p. 55). As one of the respondents put it, "Serbia, with Russian backing, remains the most credible destabilising actor in the region" (Kuçi 2025, p. 13). According to Pollozhani et al. (2025), the perceived threats from Serbia vary: a mediatory role for Russian influence (p. 13), potential spillover effects of Serbia-Kosovo tensions (p. 123), the Serbian Orthodox Church (p. 129), and an idea of the Serbian World based on the Russian World as a sphere of influence (p. 161). Moreover, experts from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina stressed that for their countries, Serbia poses an existential threat due to non-recognition of Kosovo and "discursive sponsor[ship] of Republika Srpska's exclusionary narratives" (Buljubašić 2025, p. 33).

The case of Georgia is different. There are two clear camps here: an anti-EU autocratic government and a pro-EU society, including civil society representatives. In 2024, the Georgian government took a contradictory stance, formally declaring its aim of EU membership while suspending the accession process until 2028 (Davalou & Naughtie, 2024). Meanwhile, 74 % of local citizens support Georgia's EU membership (EU NeighboursEast, 2025), and 67 % find the government's decision on suspension unacceptable (JAM News, 2025).

While no respondents from the EN trio see any threat from Georgia to its neighbours, the Georgian government under Russia's influence is perceived as a threat to the Georgian people's aspirations for EU membership (Pollozhani et al., 2025, p. 62). In a country where a fifth of its territory is occupied by Russia and 77 % of citizens believe that Russia poses the greatest political threat (IRI, 2023, p. 36), the government increases trade with Russia and mirrors Russian authoritarian practices and ideological theses (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2025).

6. EUROPEAN UNION AS THE MAIN EXTERNAL ACTOR IN THE REGIONS

The EU remains a crucial external actor in the WB and EN CCs. The reason is rather locally driven than geopolitical: the EU, through the accession process, possesses (potentially) transformative power, namely its capacity and political will to foster reforms and economic development in CCs. Despite the challenges, membership is still favoured by the absolute majority of populations in both regions (Pollozhani et al., 2024), except in Serbia, where the number of citizens who support EU accession equals those who oppose it — 39 % (IRI, 2025, p. 91). The interviews and focus groups (Pollozhani et al., 2025), complemented by the Balkan Barometer survey (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024, p. 56), provide evidence that citizens expect positive

outcomes from EU accession, including reforms and economic prosperity. Such a unique position opens the door for the EU to strengthen CC resilience and, consequently, its own, by countering malign influence from external actors. Moreover, the more transformative the EU's actions are, the less vulnerable and more resilient CCs will be to external malign influence.

However, EU membership aspirations do not automatically mean a pro-Western geopolitical orientation. For instance, in four Balkan states - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia - support for keeping up relations with Russia varies from 52 % (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) to 86 % (in Serbia)(IRI, 2025, p. 78). In Serbia, more citizens favour a pro-Russian foreign policy course (35 %) than a pro-Western one (26 %) (IRI, 2025, p. 78). In the EN, the government of Georgia, a country where 77 % of citizens held a pro-Western position (IRI, 2023, p. 50), demonstrated that geopolitical alignment should not be taken for granted and shifted its foreign and domestic policy course from the EU to Russia (Kakachia & Kakabadze, 2025). Thus, the reasons for this divergence should be further analysed.

First, it is not only the EU but also MS that affect perceptions of the EU. In this regard, while the issue of Kosovo recognition is more indicative for the WB, the case of Hungary as a Russian intermediary and promoter of illiberalism was mentioned across both regions. In North Macedonia, Hungary is "increasingly seen by experts as a more immediate and systemic threat to democratic development than Russian interference" that "exports illiberal governance models, with Viktor Orbán serving as a mentor figure to local political elites" (Pejić Nikić 2025, p. 153). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, experts identify Hungary's role as an "amplifier of [Russia's] influence" (Buljubašić, 2025, p. 31). Ukrainian experts mention Hungary in the context of political threats to Ukraine from within the EU (Osypchuk et al., 2025, p. 196). Similarly, North Macedonia's bilateral tensions with Bulgaria have reached a low point, with 27 % of local citizens perceiving Bulgaria as "the most important threat" (IRI, 2025, p. 59). Hence, populations in at least some CCs do not see coherent policies from EU MS and extrapolates this to the EU per se.

Second, the duration of the accession process affects public attitudes, making citizens more sceptical about the EU membership perspective for their country. This connection is evident in the cases of North Macedonia and Serbia, which received candidate status in 2005 and 2012, respectively. In both countries, the most popular response to the question of completed accession was "never," with 35 % and 27 % support (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024, p. 57). However, this connection is not linear since respondents from Montenegro, where 25 % believe in EU membership by 2035 and 18 % — by 2030, and whose candidate status was granted in 2010, are almost as optimistic as citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which became a CC in 2022 (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024). Although such fatigue from delayed accession can be observed only in the WB, it still contributes to the EU's overall image across the regions.

Third, the shortcomings of the EU's policy in the WB and EN trio undermine its positive impact. Experts and citizens who participated in the interviews and focus groups identified a list of drawbacks of current EU policy across the administrative, political, socio-economic, and security spheres (see Table 2) (Pollozhani et al., 2025). While administratively the EU lacks cooperation with local non-state actors, resulting in an insufficient understanding of the local context and poor communication, its major political challenge is a lack of political will to prioritise democratic values over stability and push reforms by strict conditionality. At the same time,

the EU's bureaucratic susceptibility to short-term, quick results has led to programmes that do not tackle the complex structural vulnerabilities of local economies. Finally, the EU's security policy for the case countries lags behind its CDSP and relies heavily on NATO.

Table 2 The shortcomings of the EU's policy in the WB6 and EN3

Administrative realm	• Lack of inclusion of the local voices in the programme development process • Programmes are not always rooted in the needs and processes on the ground • Overconcentration on the national-level changes while ignoring need for local changes • Lack of direct cooperation with non-state actors • Focus on acquis communautaire compliance rather than on real long-term results • Poor communication of the programmes and their results
Security realm	• Overreliance on the NATO
Socio-economic realm	• Programmes do not address structural vulnerabilities of the local economies
Political realm	• Stabilitocracy and double standards instead of strict conditionality • Support for weak state institutions • Lack of support for political parties' capacity building

Thus, it is the EU that is responsible for its image in CC societies. Since expectations of the EU's transformative power are high, its policies and how the EU addresses the challenges of implementing them shape not only public attitudes toward the EU but also the opportunity structure for malign influence from other external actors. Additionally, the EU should recognise that it acts in countries that are geographically grouped but have diverse popular perceptions and EU integration paces. Hence, the EU's policy approach should be reconsidered and shifted from control power to protean power tools, making it more context-grounded, tailored, and flexible.

7. CONCLUSION

Based on the interview and focus groups data in all nine CCs, the perception of the malign external influences is directed inwards. This means that malign influences are seen as closely connected with their respective region, i.e. coming somehow from within the region. Publics and experts in the EN3 regard Russia as the leading malign external actor, and in the WB, Russia is accompanied – and mimics many of its approaches – by Serbia. Such perception of the malign external influence's closeness is manifested and reflected differently in public perceptions in these countries, including expectations of the EU and its role in resisting malign influences and boosting enlargement. This Paper also demonstrates that it is misleading to lump the CCs

together geographically, as the differences between the WB6 and EN3 are substantial and speak against such a strategy. However, there are patterns and trends that transcend these regions and highlight CC responses to the external influences, with special attention paid to Russia. It is also not surprising that there are similarities in their interactions with the EU enlargement process, and lessons to be learned and shared between the regions.

Across the WB and EN, the EU serves as an important external actor. Still, its significance is anchored mostly in domestic expectations rather than in abstract geopolitical alignments. For political elites and broader publics alike, the EU is associated with access to funds, markets, legal and institutional standards, and thus with the prospect of internal modernisation and improvement. Through the conditionality embedded in the accession process, it is seen as an external driver of institutional reform and socioeconomic development, even if at times its strategic narrative as a "geopolitical actor" remains contested or weakly articulated.

At the same time, the desire to join the EU does not mean a coherent pro-Western geopolitical identity. In some of the WB countries, support for EU accession coexists with a strong preference for maintaining ties with Russia. This overlap between "Europeanness" and pro-Russian sentiments highlights the layered and often contradictory nature of foreign policy orientations in the region. The credibility of the EU's offer also impacts these attitudes, because lengthy, open-ended accession talks and delays in key decisions foster frustration and cynicism about the Union's willingness to admit new members. In cases such as North Macedonia and Serbia, the perceived stagnation of the enlargement process has contributed to declining trust in the EU and growing doubts about whether membership will ever become a reality.

It is true that on the EU side, the inconsistent conditionality and mixed messages on enlargement, together with some lack of rewards for compliance that are visible to the general public, dilute the Union's transformative impact in the WB and, to a lesser degree, in the EN trio. The resulting gap between expectations and delivered outcomes creates fertile ground for alternative external actors. Among these, Russia stands out as the most comprehensive and disruptive source of threats. It relies on a broad repertoire of tools – from hybrid operations and disinformation campaigns to the use of proxy networks – and is increasingly supported by other non-democratic regimes such as North Korea, Belarus, and Iran. China, by contrast, is primarily present through infrastructure finance, trade, and investment, yet its growing footprint is increasingly viewed as a systemic challenge: opaque deals, weak oversight, and debt-generating projects risk reinforcing corruption and authoritarian governance practices. Other regional players, including Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, project influence through a mixture of economic engagement, religious and cultural ties, and elite-level networks. While their involvement often brings tangible investment, it also raises concerns about political leverage, patronage, and limited transparency, further complicating the EU's ability to act as the uncontested reference point for reform and security in these regions.

In her article discussing the geopoliticisation of the EU, Giselle Bosse (2022) raises the question of whether this could come at the expense of its values if Brussels may go "soft" on democratic and rule-of-law standards to fast-track strategic allies. The dilemma between geopolitical urgency and the EU's normative commitments is real, but our evidence from the WB and EN suggests that trading values for speedy enlargement would ultimately be self-defeating.

The Union's distinctive added value in both regions of our study lies precisely in its transformative potential, because citizens and elites still associate EU accession with reforms, rule-of-law consolidation, and socio-economic modernisation, and to a much lesser degree with some abstract geopolitical alignments. If Brussels were to "go soft" on democratic and rule-of-law benchmarks in order to fast-track strategically important candidates, it could undermine the credibility of this transformative promise. As a result, it would just reduce the EU to one more transactional power among many others. The experience with Hungary, whose illiberal turn is perceived by experts in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine as amplifying Russian influence from within the EU, already illustrates how "import" of unresolved governance problems can erode the EU's internal cohesion and its external attractiveness.
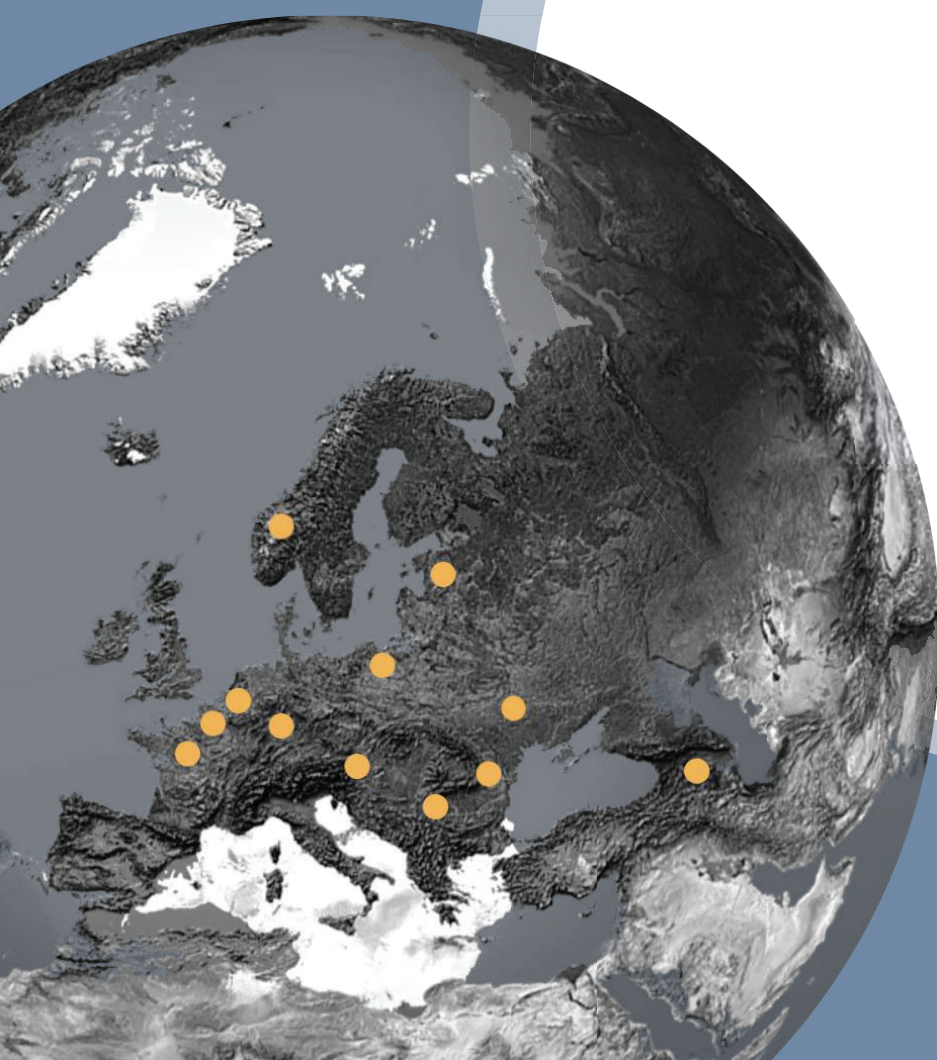
At the same time, our data from the WB shows that simply insisting on values without addressing the politics of delay is equally problematic. Protracted and unpredictable accession trajectories fuel scepticism and "never-membership" expectations in countries such as North Macedonia and Serbia. It also weakens pro-EU constituencies and opens new doors for rival actors such as Russia and China. Rather than relaxing standards, EU should make its value-based conditionality more credible, predictable and visibly linked to enhanced security and resilience for candidate states.

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