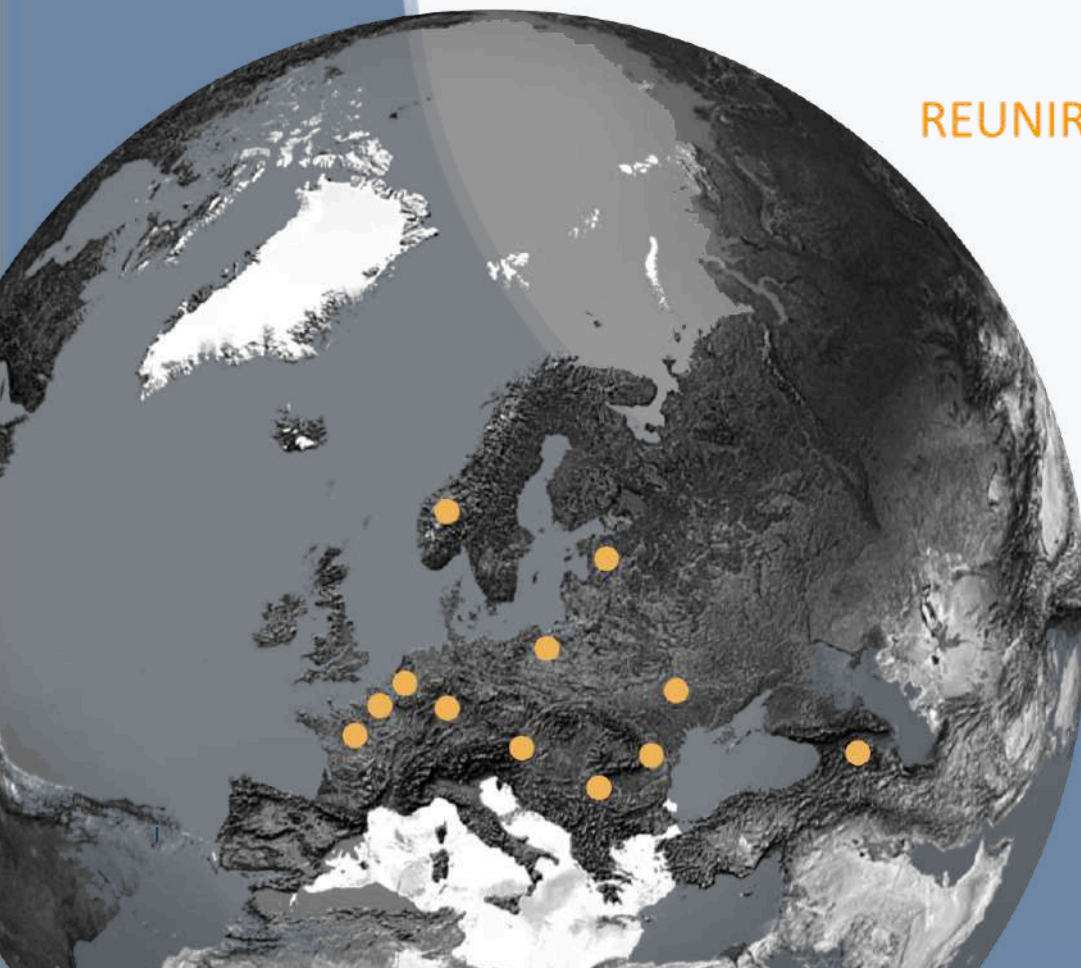




**RATIONALES IN THE DARK: EMPIRICAL
OVERSIGHTS IN ASSESSING RUSSIAN
AND CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS AND EU'S EASTERN
NEIGHBOURHOOD**

REUNIR – OCCASIONAL PAPER



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REUNIR – OCCASIONAL PAPER ON RATIONALES IN THE DARK: EMPIRICAL OVERSIGHTS IN ASSESSING RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EU’S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically engages literature on Russia’s and China’s respective engagement in foreign influencing operations in the Western Balkans and the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood countries. It zooms in on how sources depict the motivation of Moscow and Beijing to conduct these operations, finding that despite a growing body of literature on the methods and consequences of such influence, the underlying rationales of the authoritarian actors remain insufficiently investigated. Through a review of 51 policy and scholarly sources, we identify recurring assumptions about Russian and Chinese rationales—ranging from geopolitical strategy and regime preservation to economic leverage and identity formation—but find these explanations often lack empirical substantiation. This gap in evidence-based inquiry poses risks for policy-making, as it may result in ineffective or misaligned countermeasures. We recommend greater transparency about epistemic limits, encourage triangulated research methods, and advocate for the integration of scenario planning to navigate persistent uncertainties in assessing malign foreign influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although scholarship and policy commentary on Russia's and China's foreign influencing (meaning deliberate activities by foreign states intended to manipulate political, social, economic, or informational environments to advance the influencing actor's strategic interests) in the Western Balkans and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood has proliferated in recent years, the deeper rationale behind these campaigns remains understudied. This oversight is more than an academic gap: it risks steering policymakers toward ill-informed countermeasures that fail to address the real drivers of malign influence.

Understanding the rationale behind foreign policy decisions is not an easy task: foreign policy preferences are shaped by a variety of factors, including security and economic concerns, domestic political pressures, historical experiences, the psychology of leaders, and other factors (Hudson 2014; Jervis 2017; Prier 2017). Additionally, foreign policies are not monolithic, coherent endeavours but the aggregate of the actions of – sometimes more, sometimes less streamlined – agencies and people (politicians and bureaucrats) with differing rationales. In addition, finding reliable data on the motivations behind foreign policy actions is inherently difficult, especially in closed, authoritarian systems, such as China and Russia. Even where motivations are communicated to the outside, one can never be quite sure if these statements reflect an actual rationale or a legitimization strategy for an action. Perhaps because of this complexity, foreign policy analysis largely focuses on the substance of policies, relegating the rationale behind them to an afterthought or treating them as self-evident.

For policy makers, this can become a serious pitfall: misjudging the motivations (or the scale of intent) of other actors risks designing counter policies that do not stand a chance to alter the adversaries' behaviour or to adequately prepare for its impact. An obvious case is the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Prior to the invasion, one dominant assumption – which we as the authors of this paper subscribed to ourselves – of the Russian rationale was its intention to prohibit NATO and EU membership of Ukraine (Friedrich and Balbon 2022). As scholars pointed out in the aftermath of the invasion, this neglected Russia's imperialist goals (Oksamytna 2024). This failure to grasp Russia's true intent is arguably one part of why European countries were ill-prepared for Russia's eventual full-scale offensive. Other historical examples of failures to analyse the motivations of foreign actors range from misinterpretation of Saddam Hussein's intentions preceding the invasion of Iraq, to the British misreading of Argentine intentions in the Falklands. As such, while never the sole reason for mistakes, misreadings of other actors' intentions have undeniably contributed to suboptimal foreign policy outcomes.

In the same vein, the (hybrid) influencing operations of Russia and China in the Western Balkans and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood are of pressing concern to EU policy makers, but the rationale for Moscow and Beijing to employ them are ill-understood. Some scholars acknowledge that gaining deeper insight into *why* states engage in malign influence – whether through disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, or cyber intrusions – would be crucial as it informs the EU's ability to anticipate, interpret, and counter their actions. However, such approaches remain underrepresented.

We therefore reviewed 51 English language policy reports, scenario reports, and journal articles on Russian and Chinese influencing in three countries in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia). In our selection we focused on publicly available resources on malign influencing rationales which feed into the policy cycle (including journal articles and think tank reports). Given that we found only very few resources that explicitly dealt with Moscow or Beijing's intent for foreign influencing in only the nine selected countries, we expanded our search to reports which dealt with Russian and Chinese influencing in these countries generally. We limited our search to work that focused on Russia or Chinese influence in either the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood or the Western Balkans, excluding other geographies.

We find that Russia's and China's rationale to pursue influencing operations is rarely empirically assessed but often treated as a self-evident truth that does not need to be questioned. We illustrate the rationales commonly assumed and the methodologies (not) employed in the literature we reviewed before concluding with recommendations.

2. RUSSIA'S AND CHINA'S RATIONALES FOR FOREIGN INFLUENCING: COMMON EXPLANATIONS AND GAPS

Our interest in how scholars make sense of China's and Russia's motivations for influencing stems from a sense of confusion we experienced when first encountering the literature. We read a number of recurring, at times contradictory, explanations, many of which are difficult to follow due to a lack of transparency about methodology that renders it widely unclear how they were arrived at. Amid this confusion, we aimed to do two things: firstly, make sense of what existing research claims in substance, and secondly, understand and scrutinize how these arguments were made. Before we turn to the latter, it is worth highlighting the existing explanations for China's and Russia's rationale for pursuing influencing operations.

Russia

Researchers' explanations of the Russian rationale for foreign influencing often remain vague and riddled with assumptions. The 'geopolitical interest' frequently cited as main motivation for Russian influencing is often not further substantiated. This interest may be self-explanatory when it comes to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, which Moscow considers part of its sphere of influence and should therefore be prevented from drifting out of its orbit, but is less so when it comes to the Western Balkans. What is more, scholars tend to question the scale of the Russian ambition, mostly assuming it is equally high everywhere. Due to this oversight, there is little distinction between places of (high) interest and those where Moscow simply exploits opportunities. Scientific engagement with the motives of the closed-off Russian decision making is increasingly difficult.

Russia in the Eastern Neighbourhood

Most authors agree that Russia's motivation for foreign influencing in the Eastern Neighbourhood is primarily (geo)political, describing it as the pursuit of 'geopolitical interests' and 'great power status' – without necessarily filling these terms with further meaning. Countries in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union are described as the main theatre where these interests play out, since this 'near abroad', as it is called in Russia, is still considered a 'sphere of influence' in Moscow. The loss of Russian influence in some of the near abroad, including through democratic "colour revolutions"² contradicted Russian interests (Nilsson and Weissmann 2024); therefore, Moscow now strives to regain its clout through foreign influencing and to obstruct EU and US efforts to integrate the region (Bechev, de Waal, and Smorukov 2024). Whether regime preservation (Matthews et al 2021, Cohen and Radin 2019) as a domestic political motivation plays a role is contested among scholars: Some argue that liberal democracy is considered an existential threat (Aukia and Kubica 2023) and avoiding the spill-over of successful democratic transitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood to Moscow therefore an important motivation, while others, such as Delcour and Wolczuk, stress: "geopolitical interests (rather than fear of democratic contagion) drive illiberal power's objections to any developments that are perceived as weakening its leverage over the 'target countries'" (2015, p.15).

Other authors argue that a reaction to threats – "real or perceived" (Monaghan 2017, p.87, also Göransson 2021) – emanating from the West, mainly from NATO expansion (Mendiguren 2023) and EU enlargement, motivates Russia. Some claim that Russia's desire to expand beyond its borders is essentially serving a *defensive* posture given the lack of a natural land barrier in the European part of Russia's territory (Beebe, Episkopos and Lieven 2024). One variant of this explanation, offered by

² Term used for democratic revolutions in countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union. Russia uses this term to allege that these revolutions were incited by the West to topple legitimate regimes with the aim of weakening Russia. See, e.g., Solovei (2015).

Smith (2022), argues that Russia is constantly seeking to define its identity, a process euphemistically described as Russia’s “restless soul” – is it a Western country, an Eastern one or its own ‘civilization’? – and that it had settled on an imperial identity which drives its expansion.³ A more concrete analysis of Russia’s drivers for its military actions in the Eastern Neighbourhood, e.g., Moscow’s war objectives in Ukraine, reveals these objectives to be “inconsistent and contradictory” (Charap and Holynska 2024).

Russia in the Western Balkans

Most authors apply the same logic to Moscow’s motivations in the Western Balkan countries: a historical and geopolitical interest by Russia in the region (Jozic and Baric 2023, Jagiello 2021, Mahmutaj 2023, Larsen 2020, Loshaj 2024, Bechev 2024) – without necessarily substantiating why Russia’s ‘geopolitical interests’ concern this particular region, or how Russia’s historical interest and influence in this region translates into the present. Loshaj (2024) claims somewhat arbitrarily that the Western Balkans are part of an outer sphere of countries not considered direct satellites, but still under Russian influence. Like for the Eastern Neighbourhood, identity-based arguments are made: Bechev references an agenda to create bonds with other Orthodox countries but describes this as “playing a secondary role” (2024b, p.6). McBride (2023) contends that Moscow has a trauma from being exposed as irrelevant during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, which it now seeks to rectify.

Others hold that Moscow considers the region is not necessarily a sphere of influence, but a theatre for strategic competition with the West (Malaj and Mahmutaj 2023, Jagiello 2021, Metodieva 2019), therefore wanting to be a spoiler for the EU (Vulovic 2023, also Stronski and Himes 2019). Similarly, some stress a desire to prevent these countries from joining Western sanctions (Bechev 2024a, Bagheri and Bagheri 2020), while Jagiello (2021) emphasizes the importance of control over the supply paths for raw materials to Europe that run through the region.

China

There is a more active debate among researchers on China’s rationale for foreign influencing in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans than is the case for Russia, with authors trying to substantiate whether Beijing’s mainly economic activities are politically motivated – and both sides putting out arguments in their favour. An additional consideration is that contrary to Russia, neither region discussed here is as crucial to China’s core interests which lie elsewhere. It is therefore a possibility that while these regions are of geostrategic importance, Beijing’s approach to these countries is not fundamentally different to its activities in other parts of the world – which does not mean that China’s approach or motivation is apolitical or benign.

³ Other scholars arrive at the same conclusion, arguing that Russian imperialism as a major driver of, e.g., its invasion of Ukraine, but stress that this imperialism remains ill-understood in US and European policymaking and research (see Sonin 2024, Oksamytna 2024, Hendl et. al 2023).

China in the Eastern Neighbourhood

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, authors in our sample focus mostly on China's economic motivations, which are described as advancing Chinese exports, investments and deepening trade relations in the frame of the Belt and Road Initiative (Lucas 2022). According to authors, Beijing seeks to use these countries as a backdoor into the EU single market (Brattberg et al 2021, Bielinski, Markiewicz and Oziewicz 2019, Kaczmarek and Jakobowski 2015), with some assessing that foreign influencing also serves to exert indirect influence over the EU (Lucas 2022). Garlick and Qin (2022) compare Chinese and European scholars' assessments on the extent to which China's economic influence also serves political goals – finding that Chinese scholars tend to underemphasize the political motivations for its economic investments in the Eastern neighbourhood, while European scholars tend to overlook how similar China's engagement with the Eastern Neighbourhood is to other regions of the world.

Others also debate whether China seeks political leverage from its economic engagement (Turcsányi and Leonte 2019, Matura 2019), with some contending the creation of a positive China image is considered at least one rationale for its engagement in the region (Brattberg et al 2021, Kaczmarek and Jakobowski 2015). Others see China's activities as part of a campaign to reorganize the international order (Akdemir 2020), creating a new "normal" in international relations (Vangeli 2018a and 2018b), though they disagree over the question whether China's motivations are malign and directed against the West.

China in the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans, scholars primarily explain China's economic motivations as leveraging the strategic location of the Western Balkan countries to create a "friendly corridor" (Stojkovski et al 2021) for the Belt and Road Initiative between the Mediterranean and the EU single market (Conley et al 2020, Zweers et al 2020, Krstinovska 2021, Zeneli 2023), thereby generating an entry point into the EU (Lagazzi and Vit 2017, Stanicek and Tarpova 2022, Zeneli 2023).

As with the Eastern Neighbourhood, researchers debate about the political motivations behind China's economic activities. The majority finds that there are political drivers to Beijing's actions – ranging from distracting from EU integration by purchasing critical infrastructure (Larson 2020) to spreading an authoritarian system with economic means (Dzihic and Eder 2022) and trying to build a counter-hegemony against the West in the Western Balkans (Tüysüzoglu 2022). Other authors bring this into a larger context - Beijing's "struggle for other countries' recognition" (Li 2020 p.3) being part of ensuring domestic legitimacy of the Communist Party domestically or promoting its value model to secure allies in international organizations (Krstinovska 2021). In contrast, Mardell argues that "China's footprint in the Western Balkans does not mount a fundamental challenge to European integration or regional stability" (2020, p. 12).

3. MEASURING RATIONALE – A CRITICAL REVIEW

We recognize the methodological challenges that come with the secrecy and complexity of foreign policy decision-making. However, it is curious that even though these obstacles are well known, the rationales of China and Russia rarely feature as primary objects of research in our sample but are still mentioned, without being sufficiently substantiated. This creates a strange dissonance: it seems that the rationale of China and Russia is important enough to be included by most authors but rarely deemed important or contested enough to receive explicit scholarly attention. To get a better understanding of the arguments presented above, it is useful to take a closer look at the methodological approaches used to understand the rationales of China and Russia. To do so, we have further typologized the same sample of 51 studies along their methodology.

Content and Discourse Analysis

Some scholars employ content and discourse analysis to explore the motivations of foreign influence. This approach involves a systematic examination of official government documents, including policy strategies, investment plans, and other state-issued materials, as well as transcripts of speeches and statements given by government officials and politicians. By analysing these texts, researchers attempt to derive insights into how governments officially communicate the strategic intentions and priorities behind their foreign policies (see e.g. Charap and Holynska 2024; Pomianowski 2023; Akdemir 2020; Bechev 2024; Krasniqi et al. 2023). As a method, content analysis allows for a structured assessment of official discourse, enabling scholars to trace patterns in rhetoric, policy objectives, and strategic narratives. As such, it provides valuable and new empirical insights. However, given that governments are also strategic communicators, there are two fundamental problems with such analysis: firstly, it is difficult to discern whether strategic documents display the actual rationale of governments for certain actions or if they primarily communicate a legitimization narrative for them. Secondly, while these documents discuss overt influence strategies such as trade or investment, they do not discuss covert influencing strategies such as the spread of disinformation. As such, while providing some useful insight, analyses of public documents, speeches and statements remain inherently limited.

Interviews

Another methodological approach used to investigate the motivations behind Chinese and Russian foreign influence involves conducting interviews with experts and government officials from both countries (e.g. Lagazzi and Vit 2017; Loshaj 2024; Matthews et al. 2021). This method is based on a plausible research logic: by obtaining insights from individuals directly involved in foreign policy decision-making or those who closely observe such processes, scholars can retrieve original data on the rationale behind foreign influencing operations. Interviews are also a method of choice for

policy-oriented writing – a majority in our sample – which usually places less emphasis on methodology. However, this approach is not without its limitations. A key challenge in interviewing government officials is similar to the issue encountered when analysing official government documents: strategic communication. In particular, in the Russian context, access to interviewees is increasingly challenging and may well put both researcher and respondent at risk. For this reason, these interviews are often rather conducted with government officials in the “receiving” countries of malign influencing, rather than the “senders.” This is less risky but generates different insights overall. Additionally, interviewing experts does not produce direct knowledge of the actual motivations behind foreign influencing rationales but rather generates second-order knowledge - insights into how experts interpret and make sense of these motivations. Furthermore, in many interview-based studies, the rationale behind influencing operations is only one part of the analysis, with other parts focusing on influencing methods and consequences. Because of insufficient quoting, it often remains open to what degree claims are substantiated by interview results or drawn from other sources. Therefore, these insights can still be useful, but they should be taken with a grain of salt.

Mixed Methods Approaches

A number of studies, including policy reports, employ mixed-methods research designs, combining approaches such as expert interviews with open access data analysis (e.g. trade data and FDI) or content analysis of official strategic documents (e.g. Cohen and Radin 2019; Brattberg et al. 2021; Krstinovska et al. 2023). The underlying assumption of such research designs is that the weaknesses and biases inherent in any single method can be mitigated by triangulation with complementary methodologies. By integrating multiple data sources and analytical techniques, mixed-methods research enhances the reliability and validity of findings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of foreign influence operations. These studies are among the most methodologically sophisticated within the field and thus represent a promising avenue for future research. However, despite their strengths, these studies also share a key limitation: they tend to focus more on the methods and consequences of foreign influencing than systematically interrogating the underlying rationale behind such operations (see e.g. Cohen and Radin 2019). As argued previously, this is not a method-inherent problem, but rather a reflection of a research agenda that disregards the importance of empirical investigations into the rationale of Russia and China.

Scenario Planning

Scenario planning has become a popular method for anticipating the trajectories of Russian and Chinese influence. In scenario processes, analysts identify critical uncertainties, arrange them into scenario matrices, and elaborate internally consistent narrative futures through facilitated expert discussion. By doing so, they explore alternative futures for Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood (Forbrig and Przybylski 2020; Sikorsky and Hugh 2023; Zweers et al. 2025; Demiri

2022). As such, the method offers valuable analytical advantages. By obliging participants to articulate and scrutinize the causal chains that link Russian or Chinese motivations to tactics and outcomes, scenario planning renders implicit hypotheses explicit. As a “safe rehearsal space” for policymakers, the technique can expose oversights and allow stress-testing of counter-influence measures without incurring real-world risks. However, in existing scenarios, Russian and Chinese intentions are typically regarded as fixed parameters instead of empirical variables. Therefore, these exercises are useful for making assumptions visible but cannot determine whether the underlying motivational claims are correct. As such, while scenarios cannot resolve the question of what ultimately drives China and Russia, they can be used to illuminate why variance in motivations matters. For instance, if designed with explicit, contrasting motivational premises, scenario planning exercises could help decision-makers to craft and test counter-measures that remain robust vis-à-vis different motivational logics.

Analytical Fallacies and Biases

In sum, there are three overarching biases and analytical fallacies in the sample studied here which future research can address. Firstly, a major issue is the overall tendency to treat motivations as an afterthought. This does not reflect a bias in methods, but a bias in research agendas. In many cases, rationales are still mentioned in passing but remain unsubstantiated. This leaves a knowledge gap, which can lead to ill-informed policymaking. Secondly, availability bias means that for pragmatic and methodological reasons, scholars rely on easily accessible sources, such as political speeches and official statements. As argued above, those are instructive but inherently limited, particularly when it comes to systems that are as difficult to penetrate as the ruling regimes in Moscow and Beijing. Finally, conceiving of foreign policy as a monolithic and coherent enterprise constitutes an analytical fallacy: foreign policy emerges from the aggregation of actions by various agencies and individuals—politicians and bureaucrats—whose rationales frequently diverge. It is therefore misleading to overly homogenize these complex processes.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis reveals that while there is an extensive body of literature on foreign influencing it largely neglects the question of rationales as a dedicated research focus. The existing scholarship assigns various motivations for China’s and Russia’s foreign influencing behaviours, but these explanations remain underdeveloped in terms of systematic empirical investigation. This is a problematic oversight: if we continue to base policy on flawed assumptions, we risk designing counter-policies that are ineffective. Accordingly, the methodological shortcomings detailed above are not only technical research problems, but they also constitute a deeper political risk.

A review of the literature suggests a variety of interpretations of Russia’s rationale for engaging in foreign influence. In the case of the Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia’s interests are frequently attributed to imperial ambitions, efforts to obstruct Euro-Transatlantic integration, regime preservation, and other strategic concerns. In contrast, explanations for Russia’s activities in the Western Balkans are comparatively less clear but generally revolve around strategic competition with the West. For China, explanations for its influencing operations are predominantly framed in economic terms, with scholars emphasizing investment strategies, market access, and trade considerations. However, we found a more serious scholarly engagement with Beijing’s political motivations behind its economic actions, striving to understand to what extent China’s rationales are malign, though in sum they remain inconclusive.

A critical issue is that while many of these explanations appear plausible, most of them have not been subjected to authoritative empirical testing. There is an argument to be made whereby the malign intent of non-democratic and, at least in Russia’s case, imperialist regimes which have openly declared a desire to expand their global reach or launched a full-scale war on a neighbouring country (Oksamytna 2024, Klyszcz, Lee and Sherr 2024) is somewhat of a safe assumption for policy makers. However, it should then be the work of researchers and scholars to substantiate and differentiate where, when and how this malign intent is most pronounced, where it is opportunity-driven, and where it is a core foreign policy interest as well as who within a regime is driving this agenda. We currently lack sufficient systematic, evidence-based inquiry and empirical data to answer these questions.⁴

This gap in knowledge has significant policy implications, as it can lead to a disconnect between the intended objectives of counter-influence strategies and their actual effectiveness. Without a clear understanding of the motivations behind foreign influencing, policymakers risk designing interventions that fail to address the underlying drivers of such activities. Conversely, a differentiated picture can help policy makers prioritize in a setting where Russia is setting little or large fires everywhere, and Beijing is investing in economic ties and political dependencies around the world.

With these challenges and mitigation strategies in mind, we recommend the following:

- 1. Making knowledge gaps explicit.** It is not always possible to generate empirical knowledge on the rationale behind foreign influencing, particularly when it comes to closed, authoritarian systems. In cases where such knowledge is impossible to attain, policymakers will have to rely

⁴ As part of the REUNIR project, threat and resilience assessments conducted in the military, socio-economic and political spheres in the nine countries discussed here aim to fill some of these empirical gaps (see Lawrence et al. 2025a and 2025b, Akhvlediani et al. 2025a and 2025b, Burmeister et al. 2025 and Amoris et al. 2025). Gozalishvili (2026) specifically zooms in on Russian information strategies.

on assumptions. Where assumptions are made, they should be clearly marked as such. This transparency is imperative to avoid an impression of objective knowledge about rationales, which can lead to a false sense of security about potential counter policies. Instead, being transparent about the limitations of one's knowledge inspires continuous challenging of assumptions and the consideration of a multiplicity of plausible alternatives.

- 2. Encouraging careful, mixed-methods research.** The use of triangulated methodologies, combining qualitative and data-driven approaches, can enhance the robustness of findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of foreign influence rationales. Such research is desperately needed to gain a better understanding of the rationales of malign foreign influencers to design better counter policies. For instance, a careful analysis of real-world FDI flows can help to judge, whether there are contradictions with official statements on the purpose of FDI. Importantly, sound empirical evidence for claims is not reserved for the world of academia: a number of the most methodologically robust reports we found in our sample were not peer-reviewed publications, but research articles published by think tanks.

- 3. Utilizing scenario planning techniques.** Given that the above-mentioned knowledge gaps are to some degree inevitable, it is best to consciously work with uncertainties, rather than ignoring them. To this end, methods of futures studies offer a variety of approaches such as structured scenario exercises that are used to explore a variety of futures and allow to strategically plan accordingly (Bressan and Korb 2024). Even though interrogations into the motivations of foreign policy actors must not necessarily focus on the future, scenario exercises can still be used to explore a variety of plausible present motivations and to ask, what counter policy is needed to address each. As such, scenario exercises on futures can help navigate uncertain rationales, or degrees of intent, and improve preparedness for different variations.

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ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR’s foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of ‘protean power’ unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU’s ‘control power’ in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU’s support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU’s external action.



