Resilience. Enlargement. Union.
Neighbourhood. International Relations.

WHITE PAPER

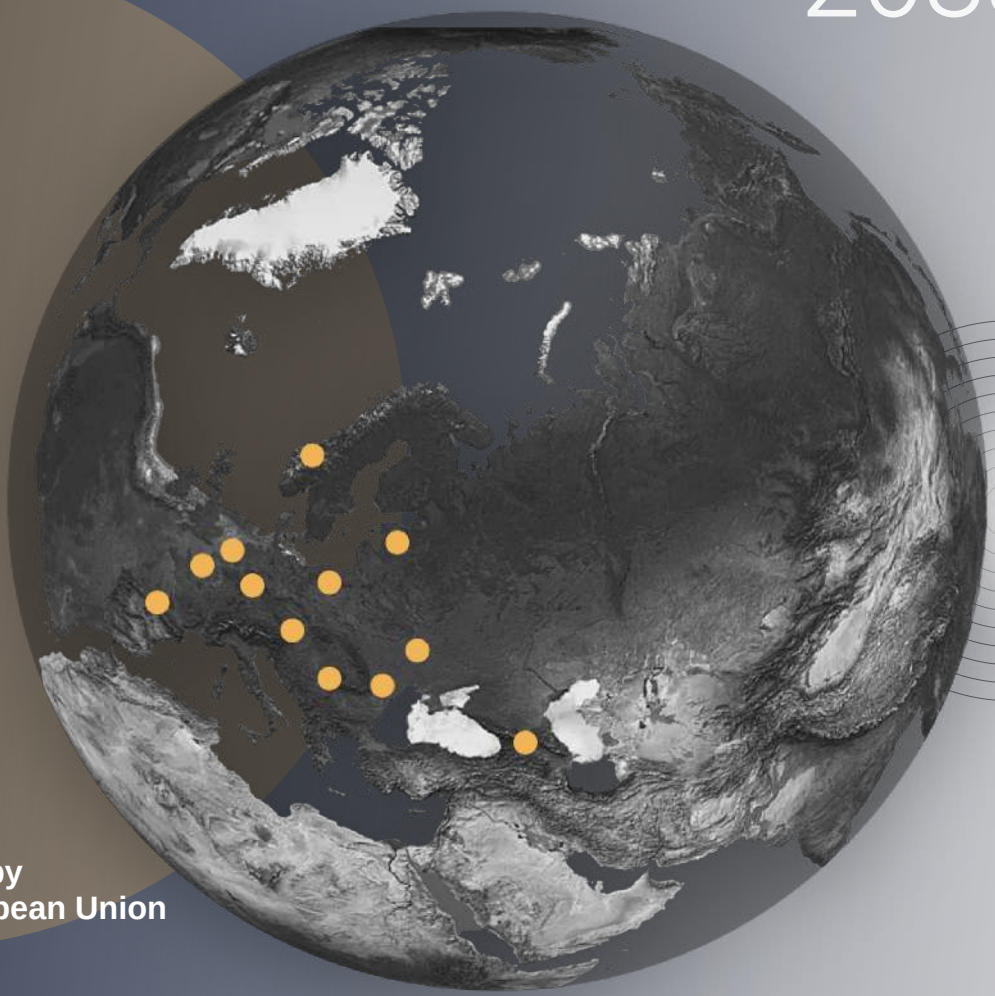
Bouncing forward on the accession track

Reinforcing EU support for candidate countries in the face of malign foreign interferences

Editor: Steven Blockmans

Authors: Tamar Gamkrelidze · Iulian Groza · Tinatin Akhvlediani

HORIZON 2035



Funded by the European Union

REUNIR – D8.1 – WHITE PAPER ON STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR FUTURE INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO MORE RESILIENT EU EXTERNAL ACTION TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS & EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

PROJECT NUMBER:	101132446
PROJECT ACRONYM:	REUNIR
PROJECT NAME:	Future-proofing EU security, enlargement and eastern neighbourhood policies for a new age of international relations
WORK PACKAGE:	WP8 - Proposals for future integrated EU external action towards the Western Balkans and Eastern neighbourhood
EDITOR:	Steven Blockmans (CEPS)
AUTHORS:	*Tamar Gamkrelidze (COE-N)* *Iulian Groza (IPRE)* *Tinatin Akhvlediani (CEPS)*
CONTRIBUTORS:	*Louise Amoris (USN)* *Florian Bieber (UG)* *Laure Delcour (USN)* *Adrian Ermurachi (IPRE)* *Paul Flachenecker (GPPi)* *Stas Ghileţchi (IPRE)* *Tony Lawrence (ICDS)* *Adam Łazowski (COE-N)* *Mihai Mogîldea (NaUKMA)* *Anna Osypchuk (NaUKMA)* *Lura Pollozhani (UG)*

Funded under the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, project ID No. 101132446. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Enlargement will be central to the EU's geostrategic positioning over the next decade. Given malign foreign interference and growing security uncertainties, the EU must ensure that the resilience of candidate countries and the Union as a whole reinforce one another. This requires a flexible and pragmatic approach to strategic autonomy that includes stronger defence capabilities, tools against economic coercion, and instruments for democracy promotion.

In the face of growing threats posed by third state actors, the EU has recently revisited its policies in the security, economic, and democracy domains, including through the March 2025 Joint White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030, the 2025 update of the European Economic Security Strategy, the 2025 European Democracy Shield, the October 2026 Communication on 'Preparing for a Wider Union', and the forthcoming European Security Strategy. These policy documents seek to reduce vulnerabilities to existing and emerging threats across Europe and strengthen EU strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, they remain largely EU-centred and exhibit significant structural asymmetries that fail to adequately address the threats. For example, despite the EU's commitment to the gradual integration of candidate countries into segments of the Single Market, few measures support their participation prior to accession, with insufficient consideration of the specific regional dynamics of the Eastern Neighbourhood trio (EN3) and six Western Balkan candidate (WB6) countries.

Based on a four-level analysis of threats, uncertainties, foresight by 2035 and EU policy gaps, this White Paper proposes a series of flexible approaches to help candidate countries bounce forward on their track towards full EU membership. These approaches incorporate innovative elements to mitigate threats posed by third states and shore up resilience. They aim to reinforce European strategic autonomy while advancing enlargement as a means of strengthening the EU's collective security and capacity to act. To this end we propose the following key recommendations, covering security, the economy and democracy, which are expanded upon in the final section of the Paper:

- **Conclude a pre-accession security compact with each candidate country to integrate security and defence into EU enlargement**, under Article 37 TEU and anchored in the new European Security Strategy. This would be the core of an EU+ pre-accession security architecture. The EU would thus associate the candidates with the forthcoming emergency security protocol; recognise them as contributors to European defence readiness; and match EU support with full CFSP alignment and domestic resilience-building reforms.
- **Strengthen the EU's operational and strategic presence in EN3 & WB6 candidate countries** by expanding defence, cyber, and hybrid cooperation, reducing external dependencies, and reinforcing long-term resilience under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty and US reorientation.
- **Ensure sustainable access to long-term and low-cost finance** and anchor EU support mechanisms for durable economic resilience while pairing this with credible domestic policies in the WB6 and EN3. Also fast-track integration of candidates into the EU's energy infrastructures while investing in renewables, storage, and interconnectors to strengthen long-term energy security.
- **Embed economic security priorities** (e.g. supply chains, critical infrastructure, and FDI screening) into enlargement policy and support the adoption of economic security frameworks to strengthen resilience while advancing accession alignment with the EU acquis.
- **Align the EU's democratic resilience agenda with its enlargement policy** by systematically integrating EN3 and WB6 candidate countries into governance and security frameworks as co-producers of democratic resilience, thereby ensuring co-ownership and shared responsibility.
- **Strengthen electoral resilience against hybrid electoral capture.** The EU should move beyond disinformation and cybersecurity to address the full chain of hybrid electoral capture. The Hybrid Rapid Response Teams should become a standing, on-request instrument for candidate countries, combining FIMI analysis with financial-intelligence cooperation to trace cross-border flows (incl. crypto).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2
1. INTRODUCTION 4
2. A DYNAMIC THREAT LANDSCAPE FOR THE NEXT 10 YEARS 6
2.1. INTERLINKED VULNERABILITIES 6
2.2. SECURITY THREATS 8
2.3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC THREATS 12
2.4. THREATS TO DEMOCRACY 13
3. EU POLICY SUPPORT TO CANDIDATE COUNTRIES FOR THE NEXT DECADE 15
3.1. SECURITY COMMITMENTS 15
3.2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE 18
3.3. DEMOCRACY SUPPORT 20
4. RECOMMENDATIONS 23
4.1. HARD SECURITY 23
4.2. ECONOMY 25
4.3. DEMOCRACY 25
5. ENDNOTES 27

1. INTRODUCTION

Enlargement will be integral to the EU's future and security over the next decade. It will shape the Union's long-term geopolitical position and its capacity to respond to existing and emerging threats, both internal and external, and help to deepen and widen its strategic autonomy. As security interests and enlargement policy are intertwined,[1] candidate countries should already be given structured, progressive and strategically coherent access to EU policies, programmes and industrial cooperation before full membership.

This task is complicated by the fact that the quest for greater European strategic autonomy has no single, clearly articulated blueprint. There are competing approaches to ensuring Europe's capacity to defend itself, its ability to resist external coercion, and its resilience to subversive activities aimed at undermining its democracies.

The EU response to Russia's 2022 escalation of its war against Ukraine marked an unprecedented step towards strengthening strategic autonomy and developing a common approach to security and foreign policy. It combined the granting of candidate status to the Eastern Neighbourhood trio (EN3) of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia with the revitalisation of enlargement for the six Western Balkan candidates (WB6): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The underlying logic is that the EU can define and secure its political interests globally despite external attempts at malevolent influence.

Russia acts as the principal malign actor to the EU and its candidate countries. It is sustained by Belarus, Iran and North Korea in its war of aggression and increasingly enabled by China.[2] Türkiye, as a NATO ally, and certain Gulf states, motivated by status, diplomatic diversification and economic gain, compete with the EU in specific domains, from defence procurement to infrastructure finance. Under the second Trump administration, the US has increasingly behaved as a spoiler of the EU and its relations with candidate countries.

Internally, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is complicated, and to some degree contested, by the transatlantic orientation of most Member States. As NATO members, they rely on transatlantic security arrangements and are reluctant to challenge US interests or behaviour. Some Member States and institutions nonetheless seek to advance their own interests in European security and defence in coalitions that strengthen strategic autonomy, notably France, Germany, Italy and, to a degree, Poland.

These interactions form part of a broader geopolitical contest over the EU's future strategic direction. They shape how external actors seek to influence and constrain the EU's strategic autonomy and, equally importantly, how the EU's internal political choices and institutional actions coalesce around Member States' shared strategic interests. This could potentially deepen and widen integration across the EN3 and WB6, which are extensively exposed to security, socio-economic and democratic threats from external actors.

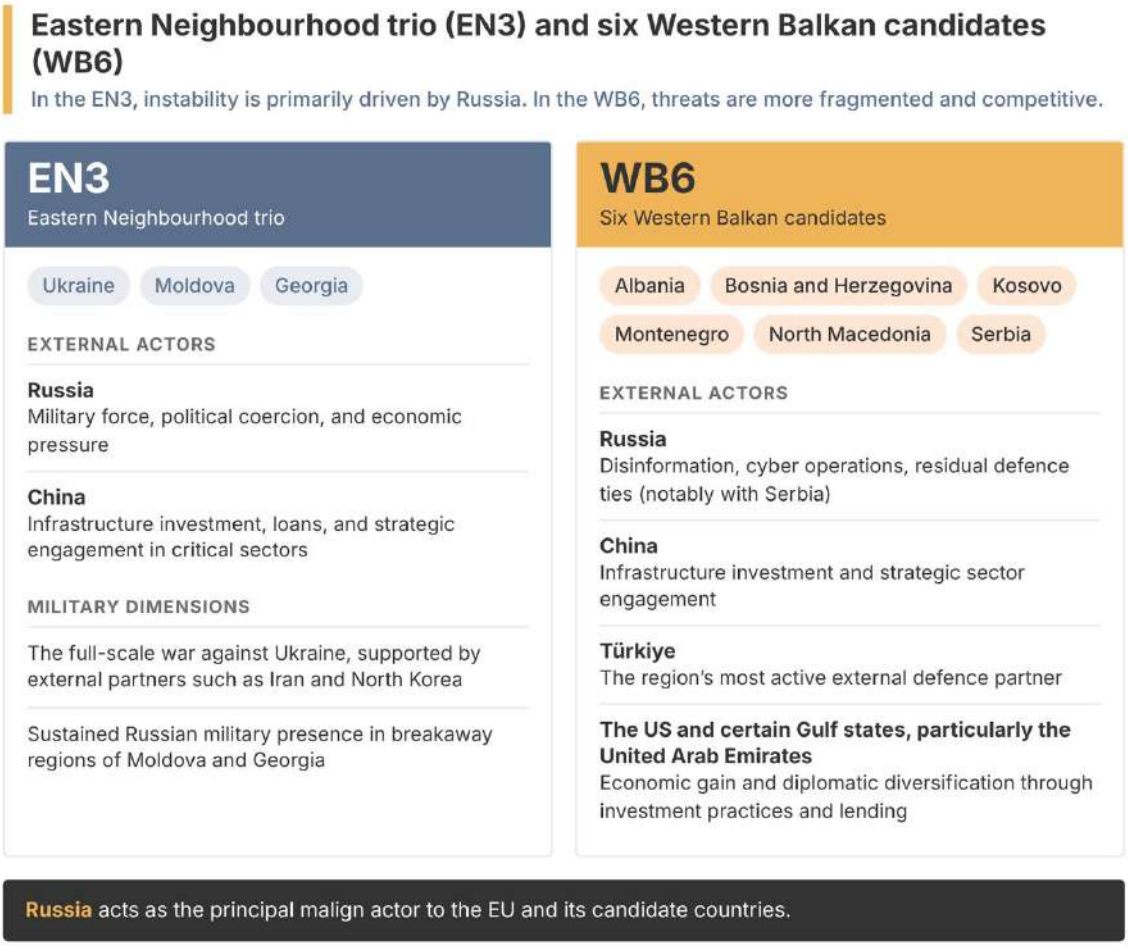
In the EN3, instability is primarily driven by Russia, whose influence combines military force, political coercion, and economic pressure into a single integrated system. Military dimensions include the full-scale war against Ukraine, supported by external partners such as Iran and North Korea, as well as sustained Russian military presence in breakaway regions of Moldova and Georgia. These dynamics are reinforced by cyberattacks, disinformation, electoral interference, and political financing targeting democratic institutions, as well as economic coercion through energy dependency, trade embargoes, and corruption networks. China plays a secondary but structurally significant role through infrastructure investment, loans, and strategic engagement in critical sectors, shaping long-term dependencies without direct military involvement.

In the WB6, threats are more fragmented and competitive but similarly span the security, economic, and political domains. Russia remains a destabilising actor through disinformation, cyber operations, residual defence ties (notably with Serbia), and linkages with divisive actors in Republika Srpska. China expands its presence primarily through infrastructure investment and strategic sector engagement. Türkiye, as the region's most active external defence partner, competes with EU-led defence-industrial cooperation. The US and certain Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates, pursue economic gain and diplomatic

diversification through investment practices and lending, increasing financial dependency and corruption risks.

In response to existing and emerging threats, the EU has revisited its security, economic and democracy policies. Key instruments include the March 2025 Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, the June 2023 European Economic Security Strategy, which was updated in November 2025, and the 2025 European Democracy Shield. Together with other policy documents (e.g., the forthcoming European Security Strategy), they articulate a renewed strategic vision and threat assessment, introduce new financial mechanisms and operational tools, and amplify the EU's prowess as a security actor. They are also meant to keep enlargement aligned with merit-based accession, so that candidate countries advance in line with their progress and contribute to the EU's strategic autonomy and collective security as well as benefiting from gradual integration.

These policies nonetheless remain largely self-centred and structurally asymmetric. They pay insufficient attention to the specific dynamics of the EN3 and WB6, remain ad hoc, and contain only limited elements of gradual integration. Left unaddressed, these shortcomings are likely to aggravate security uncertainty across Europe.



2. A DYNAMIC THREAT LANDSCAPE FOR THE NEXT 10 YEARS

2.1. Interlinked vulnerabilities

Vulnerabilities of EU Member States and candidate countries in the security, socio-economic, and democratic domains are increasingly interlinked and shaped by intensified geopolitical competition orchestrated by third state actors. Russia, the principal malign actor, and China, increasingly its enabler, deploy mutually reinforcing instruments that affect all three dimensions simultaneously. These range from military coercion and hybrid operations to economic leverage and infrastructure dependency, as well as political influence, elite capture, normative contestation and instrumentalised cultural diplomacy. Other external actors, notably Türkiye, a NATO ally, and several Gulf states, pursue their own strategic and commercial interests in the same space; their engagement is competitive, which deepens dependencies where governance is weak. In parallel, US disengagement/estrangement adds additional layers to the threat and uncertainty environment. Together, these (f)actors create and exacerbate uncertainties across the EN3 and WB6.[3] In this context, the EU enlargement process is shaped by internal reforms and the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and sustained external influence across all three domains: hard security, the economy, and democracy.[4]

In the EN3 and WB6, uncertainty emerges primarily from the interaction between EU engagement, domestic conditions, and external actors, where causal mechanisms and combined effects are difficult to trace and predict. This constitutes operational uncertainty – “known unknowns”. At the same time, the region is also shaped by radical uncertainty – “unknown unknowns” – at a broader systemic level, including non-linear enlargement trajectories and possible long-term disengagement by the US, NATO, or the EU, where the long-term future of the region and EU integration remains open and unclear, as developments may take very different and unpredictable paths.

Moreover, external influence accumulates in layered, fragmented, and often contradictory ways, which leads to a hybridisation of influence. The EN and WB become simultaneously exposed to multiple external actors pursuing different logics – economic investment, security provision, information influence, elite capture – without these being coordinated. This results in governance systems that are not neatly aligned with any single geopolitical bloc but are instead patchworks of dependency, where resilience is eroded through accumulation rather than sudden rupture.

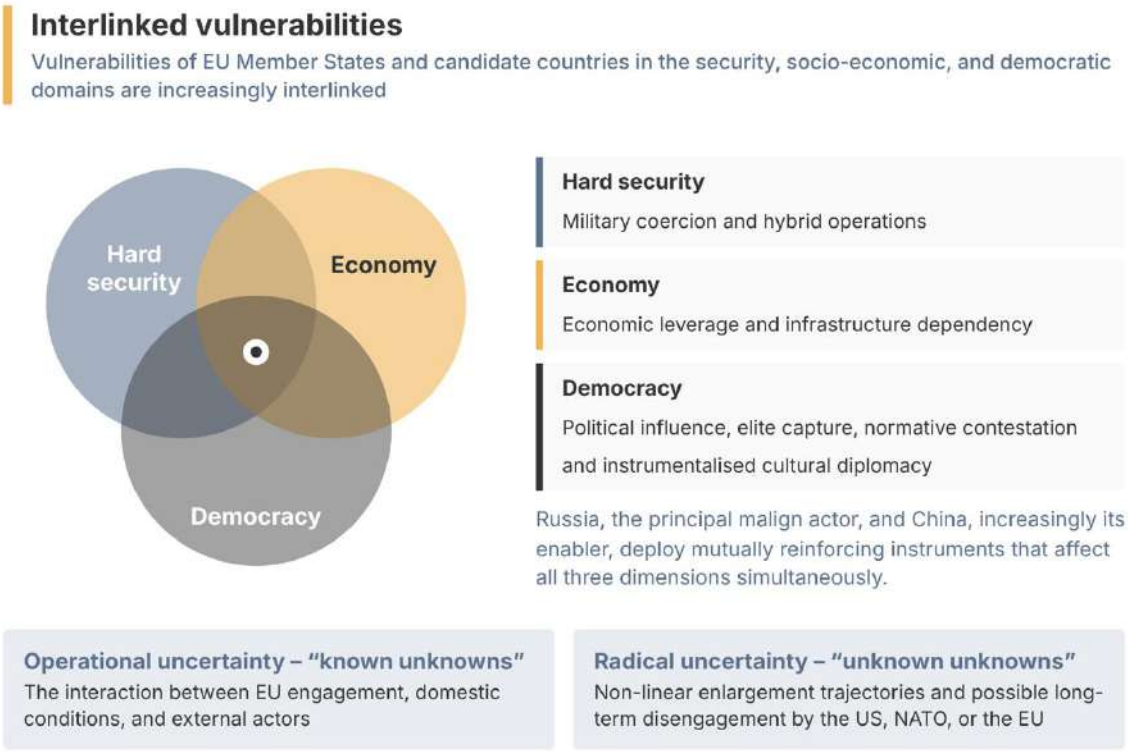
While Russia consistently appears as the most persistent destabilising actor - with China, Türkiye, and some Gulf states recurrently present - there is rarely structured cooperation among external powers or fully strategic, unified long-term projects of domination. Instead, what drives influence is often opportunism: actors exploit openings created by economic crises, institutional weakness, or geopolitical withdrawal. This can be characterised as ad hoc, emerging alignment through opportunistic behaviour in shared spaces of weakness.

Domestic fragility is a key enabling condition for external influence. External actors do not create instability in isolation; they amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities such as political polarisation, economic inequality, institutional decay, or contested legitimacy. This shifts the focus from external actors as primary causal drivers to a more relational understanding in which internal resilience is the key enabling factor. Foreign influence as an external input is thus co-produced through domestic governance weaknesses and societal fractures. Diaspora communities increasingly represent both vectors of resilience and channels of external influence. They can contribute to political and economic stability through remittances, transnational networks, and civic engagement, while also being exposed to external influence operations, particularly through information manipulation, financial coercion, and political mobilisation campaigns.

At the same time, there is a non-linear relationship between integration and resilience. EU enlargement is not uniformly stabilising across EN and WB futures. While it is transformative and resilience-enhancing, it might become shallow, transactional, or normatively diluted. In extreme cases, it might lose its democratic

content altogether. Enlargement can therefore shift from a transformative project to a geopolitical label detached from substantive institutional convergence, which may even coexist with democratic backsliding.

Structural disengagement is often the primary driver of long-term geopolitical transformation, through strategic absences, withdrawals, and discontinuities rather than actions alone. The most consequential developments are not what external actors do, but what they stop doing: NATO withdrawal, declining US engagement, EU enlargement fatigue, or reduced investment capacity. These absences generate systemic openings that are then filled in uneven and unpredictable ways.



Public Threat Perception in the EN3 and WB6

In Moldova, security concerns are also closely linked to Russia, particularly through hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, and the unresolved Transnistrian conflict. However, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, Moldovans remain strongly attached to constitutional neutrality. Some 42.2 % of respondents support neutrality with only 3.6 % who support NATO membership. Limited support for NATO membership does not translate into opposition to practical security cooperation: 61.4 % supported cooperation with NATO on counterterrorism, 60.5 % on peacekeeping missions and 59.6 % on combating disinformation. At the same time, EU integration is increasingly viewed as a source of geopolitical stability, with around 18.3 % explicitly identifying EU accession as the preferred path to strengthening national security.[5]

For Ukraine, security perceptions are dominated by the ongoing war with Russia. Almost 95 % of Ukrainians hold negative view of Russia,[6] while 61.6 % believe Russia would violate peace agreement and attack again.[7] Ukrainians view Western support as essential to their security, with 64.1 % expecting increased weapons supplies and financial support from NATO[8] and 34.9 % identifying increased military assistance as the EU's primary security and defence contribution.[9] Support for NATO membership remains substantial, with 61.2 % of likely referendum participants favouring accession, while support for the EU accession is higher and stands at 69.2 %.[10]

In the WB6 perceptions of external actors are highly fragmented and strongly shaped by geopolitical alignment, historical ties, and domestic ethnic divisions. Albania and Kosovo display overwhelmingly pro-European preferences, with 92 % and 83 % of respondents respectively supporting EU accession, followed by Montenegro (68 %), North Macedonia (67 % while trust in the EU is relatively higher at 80 %) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (64 %). Serbia stands apart, with only 31 % supporting EU membership and 40 % of citizens expressing trust in the EU compared with 58 % for Russia and 56 % for China.[11] Trust in external actors exhibit divided attitudes across the WB6. In Albania and Kosovo trust in NATO at 93 % and 88 % respectively, surpasses trust in the EU. In Macedonia trust in NATO stands at 69 %, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina it reaches 53 %. Montenegro, meanwhile, exhibits 73 % trust in the EU, trust in China is lower at 65 % but remains considerable.[12]

Across the region, the US is generally viewed as a key external partner, although perceptions very considerably across the WB6. Its support is particularly strong in Albania and Kosovo, where it is overwhelmingly seen as the principal political partner (88.5%)[13]. Albania similarly identifies the US as its main political partner (68 %)[14]. Trust in the US is also highest in Albania and Kosovo at 88 % in each, followed by North Macedonia – 62 %, Montenegro – 47 %, Bosnia and Herzegovina – 32 %, whereas Serbia records the lowest trust, at just 16 %.[15]

2.2. Security threats

The threat environment facing the EN3 and WB6 candidates is the structural condition under which the next decade of enlargement will unfold. Russia's primacy to 2035 holds whatever the outcome of the war in Ukraine, and the most exposed candidates have written it into doctrine: Moldova's 2023 National Security Strategy calls Russia and its proxies "the most dangerous and persistent source of threat".[16] A successor leadership within the same strategic culture is at least as plausible as a strategic break, and turbulent succession cannot be excluded.

A cross-cutting variable, the US strategic reorientation, further unsettles assumptions about who guarantees European security on its periphery. Repeated questioning of NATO's Article 5, reported US preferences to leave KFOR, prospective troop withdrawals from the Western Balkans and Germany, a reduced US military presence on NATO's eastern flank and the Greenland narrative make this a structural rather than transient feature.[17]

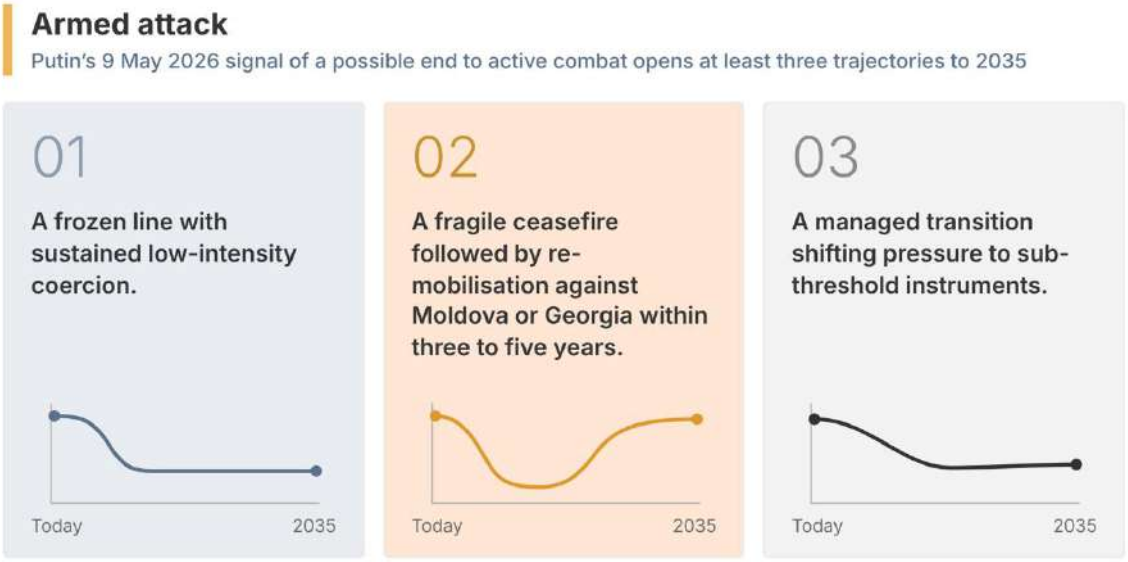
Russia deploys six military instruments of malign influence: armed attack, armed presence, sub-threshold attack, military training, arms transfers and defence cooperation.[18] The EN3 face mainly coercive presence, armed aggression and sub-threshold operations; the WB6 face defence cooperation, training and arms transfers channelled through Serbia and Republika Srpska. Together they aim less at seizing territory along a single axis than at converting candidate countries into contested spaces where European integration becomes costly and politically reversible.

Armed attack

In the EN3 the threat is existential. Russia's war on Ukraine, now in its fifth year, has institutionalised attacks on civilian energy infrastructure, most visibly the Kakhovka dam. The seizure of the Zaporizhzhia plant has made nuclear safety an instrument of coercion. Belarus serves as a permanent staging ground and North Korean troops are integrated into Russian operations, normalising third-party entry into a European war. Moldova and Georgia face a graduated version of the threat but have diverged in their response: Moldova has anchored its European course in its Constitution and deepened security cooperation with the EU, while Georgia's authorities no longer actively pursue membership, accommodating Russian pressure and turning a security threat into a driver of democratic backsliding. In the WB6, armed attack is a low-probability, high-consequence contingency, given Serbian claims over northern Kosovo and an Article 5 spill-in risk that NATO membership alone does not resolve.

Putin's 9 May 2026 signal of a possible end to active combat opens at least three trajectories to 2035:

- A frozen line with sustained low-intensity coercion.
- A fragile ceasefire followed by re-mobilisation against Moldova or Georgia within three to five years.
- A managed transition shifting pressure to sub-threshold instruments.[19]



Armed presence

Coercive presence destabilises the EN3 without a declaration of war. The illegal stationing of Russian forces in the Transnistrian region of Moldova and in Georgia's occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the upgraded Ochamchire naval base and nuclear signalling create a standing coercive field constraining Chisinau, Tbilisi and Kyiv. In the WB6, the decision of the Serbian government to raise its troops standby to combat readiness during the 2022 row with Kosovo over vehicle licence plates, and again after the September 2023 deadly shootout near the Banjska monastery, show calibrated escalation at the edge of what is permissible. Georgia, Moldova and Kosovo sit at the low end of the resilience spectrum, while Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia rely on NATO's Article 5, a guarantee the EU cannot replicate for non-NATO candidates before accession.

Three pathways to 2035 merit planning:

- Consolidation: a frozen line in Ukraine frees Russian forces to harden occupation infrastructure into multi-domain hubs.
- Displacement: US withdrawals and the KFOR drawdown create a vacuum that Russia or Serbia could exploit, shifting the centre of gravity to the WB6; Türkiye, a KFOR contributor that has twice held its command and also serves in EUFOR Althea, would more likely expand its role within NATO and EU frameworks, containing the vacuum while diluting EU influence.
- Recession (less likely): regime transition or economic strain forces a partial Russian drawdown, opening windows for negotiated demilitarisation that the EU is ill-equipped to seize.[20]

Sub-threshold attack

Cyber operations are the most active instrument and the least reciprocated by European capabilities. In the EN3 Russia is the sole documented culprit, targeting state institutions, critical infrastructures and elections. In the WB6 the portfolio is more diverse, from Iran-attributed operations against Albania to Russia-aligned activity around Montenegro's NATO accession, the 2023 Banjska incident and Republika Srpska–Wagner contacts. This competitive sub-threshold layering complicates attribution and pushes defence costs onto the states least able to bear them.

All nine candidates score below the EU aggregate on cybersecurity, seven by more than 20 %. Ukraine, however, has developed high operational resilience under wartime pressure, a capability the EU has yet to fully integrate. By 2035, infrastructure targeting during peace negotiations, Russia's use of criminal proxies for sabotage, and Chinese leverage through telecoms and surveillance systems, such as Huawei 'Safe City' in Belgrade, could widen the attack surface faster than candidate capacity grows. Turkish and Gulf commercial footprints are better managed as economic-security and governance risks, through investment screening and procurement transparency.

Military training

Training shapes the long-term orientation of candidate security establishments. In the EN3 it runs through Russian exercises with proxies in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. In the WB6 it is institutional: Serbia's parliament retains observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) while the country hosts NATO Partnership for Peace exercises, a multi-vector posture that its pre-accession framework should resolve. Russian training support, though reduced since 2022, has not ended. The aim here is the slow cultivation of an elite habituated to non-Atlanticist security thinking, built to outlast any single government.

Two dynamics matter to 2035:

- The first is what we call substitution. In 'Turkish substitution', as US and Western engagement recedes, Türkiye, already the region's most active external defence partner, could fill the WB6 vacuum. This could shift influence over doctrine, procurement and officer networks away from the EU. Chinese substitution on the other hand - in Serbia especially - would carry genuine risks for Euro-Atlantic alignment.
- The second dynamic is inversion. In 'Ukrainian inversion', Ukraine has become Europe's most battle-experienced source of training doctrine and defence R&D, notably in drone, electronic and counter-UAS warfare. The EU needs an arrangement channelling Ukrainian instructors and lessons into its academies. The UK and Norway, acting bilaterally, have moved faster.

Substitution is about who fills a Western vacuum; inversion is about whether the EU institutionalises what it learns from Ukraine.

Arms transfers

Arms transfers link candidate country security to extra-regional war economies. In the EN3 they sustain Russia's war: Iran and North Korea supply weapons, China supplies dual-use goods, and entities in several third countries have been sanctioned for onward transfers. In the WB6 the flow runs to Serbia from China (its largest military donor in 2023), Russia and Belarus.

Türkiye's Bayraktar TB2 exports to Albania and Kosovo are different. First, they come from a NATO ally, and their relevance lies in procurement dependency and European industrial competitiveness, not hostile intent.

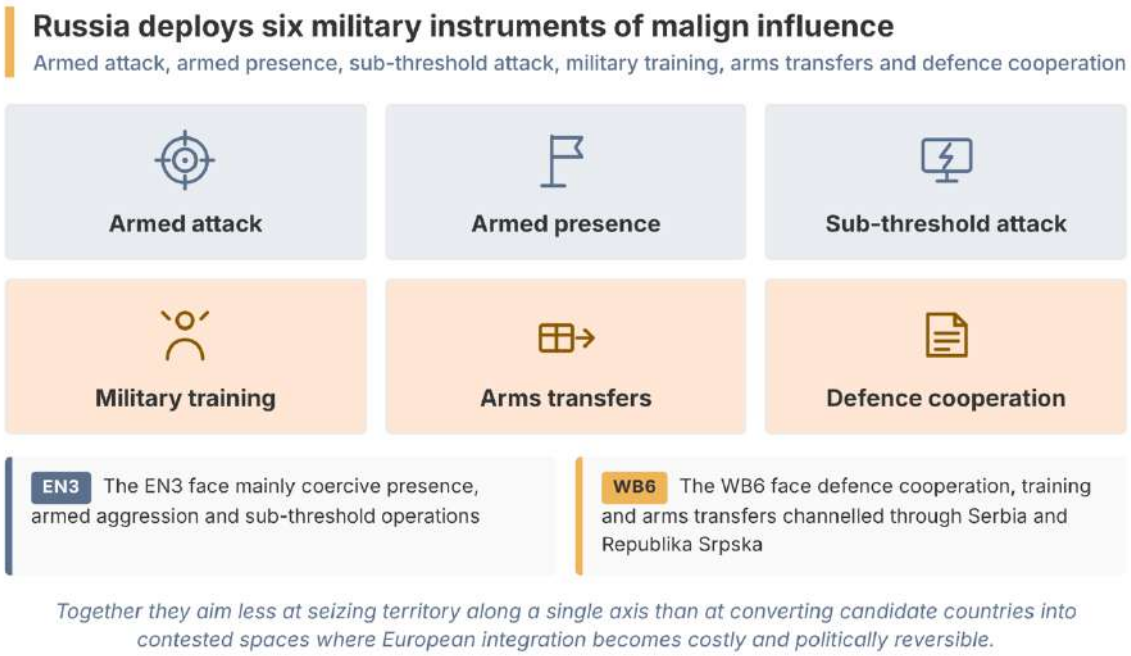
Because these transactions occur between third actors, every candidate scores low on resilience; only the EU, through sanctions, export controls and an expanded industrial offer, can reshape incentives.

The key variable to 2035 is whether the EU's SAFE loan instrument and Drone Defence Initiative reach candidates before Türkiye commercially, and China strategically, lock in next-generation procurement cycles. This window may narrow, and as sanctions-evasion networks migrate through Central Asian, Caucasian and Gulf nodes, the EU will need secondary-sanctions capacity comparable to that of the US.

Defence cooperation

Defence cooperation formalises what the other instruments do informally. Russia's agreements with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia cement occupation, and those with Iran and North Korea underwrite its war economy. In the WB6, the Russian Ministry of Defence office in Belgrade and Serbia's observer status in the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly are modest in scale but politically significant for a candidate country whose European path depends on an unambiguous defence orientation. Resilience is low across all candidates because this cooperation is transacted between third states.

The test to 2035 is whether the EU's Security and Defence Partnership network expands beyond Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and North Macedonia before competing frameworks crystallise, from Russia-China-Iran-North Korea ties to Serbia's partnership with China.[21] The map is crowded and not all of it coherent. Ukraine's March 2026 defence agreements with Qatar and the UAE signal its emergence as a security provider, extending European expertise outward. Serbia, the only European country buying advanced Chinese weapons, holds a comprehensive strategic partnership with China spanning the security domain. Georgia elevated its relations with China in June 2026 and extended cooperation to policing, raising questions about compatibility with CFSP alignment.



2.3. Socio-economic threats

Region-specific socio-economic threats target the vulnerabilities of the EN3 and WB6. In the EN3, Russia mainly deploys the manipulation of energy dependencies, trade embargoes, passportisation, borderisation, corruption schemes, and the weaponisation of remittances and migration. In the WB6, threats mainly involve investment in strategic sectors and critical infrastructure, unsustainable loans and corruption fuelled by non-transparent tenders, exploited chiefly by China, Türkiye and some Gulf states, notably the UAE. Their nature and evolution are likely to differ over the coming decade.

Russia is the principal source of socio-economic threats in the EN3, leveraging its historical dominance. Energy supplies and trade restrictions have been used to exert pressure and constrain autonomous development. Passportisation and borderisation restrict access to homes, land and essential services and deepen displacement and socio-economic divisions. Diaspora and remittance flows offer further leverage.

China's leverage stems from loans and investment in transport, banking, energy, telecommunications and even defence, giving access to critical infrastructure that could be weaponised. Türkiye's investments in transport, energy and telecommunications boost connectivity but also give it influence over critical infrastructure, creating risks for long-term economic security. The UAE is expanding in the WB6 through corrosive capital practices, notably in Serbia. Circumventing procurement rules and offering loans that are hard to service fuels corruption and creates easily weaponised dependencies.

Under the Trump administration, US engagement in several candidates is associated with strategic investments that bypass competitive procurement or rely on project-specific legislation and preferential treatment. Examples include the Sazan Island resort and Skavica Dam in Albania; the Southern Gas Interconnection in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Bechtel-Enka projects in Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Such opaque procedures risk entrenching governance practices that run counter to the EU reform agenda and can hinder accession.

The US-Ukraine Minerals Agreement safeguards Ukraine's sovereign control over its subsoil resources and endorses its EU accession commitments. Given the weak transparency of US-promoted investments in the WB, the governance and implementation of the associated Reconstruction Investment Fund warrant close attention.

Together, these instruments risk worsening socio-economic challenges and undermining EU integration in the WB6 and EN3 in the next decade. Russia's direct influence over Ukraine and Moldova is likely to diminish substantially, as both have broken free from Russian trade and energy dependencies. Divisions in breakaway and occupied territories, as well as corruption, will however remain significant instruments. Georgia, whose dependencies on Russia are rising, is the exception: unless it changes course, Russian leverage will grow alongside passportisation, borderisation and corruption. Risks from China, Türkiye and some Gulf states will also grow with their presence, especially in the Western Balkans, and if current trends persist the US could itself become a source of socio-economic threats.

Structural vulnerabilities, weak diversification, limited fiscal space and social fragilities will continue to limit the capacity of candidates to absorb shocks. This could lock them into dependencies on powers willing to weaponise these shocks to weaken reform incentives, policy autonomy and integration. Economic resilience will thus increasingly be a matter of economic security, not solely a development objective.



2.4. Threats to democracy

Democratisation in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy can no longer be understood solely as technical alignment with EU norms or as linear, accession-driven modernisation. It unfolds amid technological change and geopolitical contestation covering territorial conflicts, hybrid threats, energy coercion, disinformation and, in some cases, full-scale war instigated by external actors. Geopolitics thus shapes the trajectory, pace and quality of democratic reform.

Direct influence operations that hinder democratisation are associated with Russia, China, Türkiye and several Gulf states, each pursuing their own strategic interests, often against democratic consolidation and European integration, in candidate countries whose domestic environments are particularly susceptible.[22] External actors also exploit subnational governance asymmetries, autonomous regions, contested territories and peripheral communities as entry points for destabilisation, information manipulation and parallel governance structures.

Russia works through both narrative penetration and direct interference. In media-captured environments it embeds pro-Russian, anti-Western narratives via sympathetic domestic ecosystems (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska). It combines disinformation with electoral manipulation, vote-buying, support for pro-Russian parties and the instrumentalisation of frozen conflicts (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine). In Moldova especially, hybrid electoral capture combines illicit financing, coordinated disinformation, proxy parties and crypto-enabled transfers, alongside attempts to undermine the constitutional anchoring of EU integration. Narratives of 'Ukrainisation' or Western-orchestrated regime change are used to justify backsliding (Moldova, Georgia). Interferences of this kind in Moldova's 2024 presidential election and EU referendum, and in the September 2025 parliamentary elections, showed both the scale of this threat and the capacity to withstand it. Proactive enforcement against Russia-financed vote-buying networks, supported by an EU Hybrid Rapid Response Team, helped protect the outcome. The EU replicated the model in Armenia ahead of its June 2026 elections.

By contrast, China prioritises elite cooperation, governance training, strategic partnerships and media diplomacy, promoting elements of digital authoritarian governance (Serbia, Georgia, Montenegro, Albania) while posing as a mediator for a multipolar order (Ukraine). Türkiye's engagement is more selective and culturally embedded, backing specific actors through religious and historical ties (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and balancing support for Ukraine with pragmatic engagement with Russia, fragmenting the geopolitical environment without systematically undermining democratic institutions.

Cultural and religious diplomacy is a parallel channel operating through identity formation, elite socialisation and normative contestation. Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran and certain Gulf states use religious institutions, educational exchanges, cultural centres and heritage promotion to shape attitudes and cultivate aligned networks. Russia mobilises the Orthodox Church and 'Russkiy mir' (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Georgia, Moldova); China uses educational exchanges and elite seminars (Serbia, Georgia); Türkiye, Iran and Gulf states use mosque construction, heritage restoration and religious education (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia).

In the next decade, democratisation may depend not only on domestic reform and alignment choices but, more importantly, on a wider environment of contestation involving NATO dynamics, EU enlargement uncertainty and the role of the US. External conflict spillovers, particularly the war in Ukraine, may heighten the securitisation of governance, reinforce executive authority in the name of stability and encourage exceptional measures that weaken checks and balances.

By 2035, AI, algorithmic content distribution and digital surveillance are likely to have exacerbated democratic vulnerabilities, intensifying information manipulation, electoral interference and polarisation while enabling greater political control. These outcomes are not technologically predetermined, however: they depend on how technologies are governed and deployed and on the capacity of democratic institutions to anticipate risks.

3. EU POLICY SUPPORT TO CANDIDATE COUNTRIES FOR THE NEXT DECADE

The EU has revisited its security, socio-economic and democratic policies since 24 February 2022 to respond to unfolding threats. It has been particularly innovative on security. The March 2025 Joint White Paper on the Future of European Defence – Readiness 2030 and, prospectively, the 2026 European Security Strategy, address gaps in military readiness and defence-industrial integration. In the socio-economic domain, the June 2023 Economic Security Strategy, updated in November 2025, targets structural vulnerabilities, strategic dependencies and long-term resilience in the EU. In the democracy domain, the European Democracy Shield (EDS), presented by the Commission in November 2025, responds to hybrid threats, foreign influence, social resilience and democratic backsliding.

Despite their unprecedented scope, these policy documents remain largely EU-centred and structurally asymmetrical and do little to address problems beyond the Union. They insufficiently address emerging threats, capability shortcomings and the specific dynamics of the EN3 and WB6. Even the most outward-looking security instruments like the European Peace Facility (EPF) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations concentrate their benefits on a narrow group of partners and remain conditional. In its annual Enlargement Package, the Commission assesses the level of readiness of candidates achieved over the preceding year and encourages them to do more but stops short of formulating the mix of assisting measures that the EU will bring to bear. As a result, EU policies are fragmented and lack credible pre-accession support mechanisms to shield candidates from foreign pressures and shore up the societal resilience needed to sustain the EN3 and WB6 through enlargement.

3.1. Security commitments

The March 2025 White Paper and the accompanying Roadmap from October 2025 configure the EU as a capability-builder rather than, so far, a security guarantor for candidate countries over the next decade. This asymmetry may explain why the current defence architecture, however ambitious, cannot alone meet the demands of an enlargement that runs through a war and active foreign malign influence across nine candidates. Three structural gaps map onto the threat portfolio:

- The void in the EU's legal architecture exacerbates risks of armed attack and armed presence by leaving candidates without any agreement-based security commitment before accession.
- The readiness gap lowers the marginal cost of every threat instrument by removing a European deterrent that would otherwise raise it.
- The defence-industrial gap feeds arms-transfer and defence-cooperation threats and allows all six instruments to be projected without an EU counter-doctrine.

Article 37 TEU agreements and the emergency security protocol

Article 42.7 TEU is the core collective-defence clause in EU primary law. It has gained prominence since the Commission President re-anchored it at the 2026 Munich Security Conference as an obligation within the Treaty. The operationalisation of the mutual defence clause will be taken forward by the new European Security Strategy, starting with an Article 4 NATO-type emergency security protocol outlined in the September 2026 State of the Union address.

The absence of commitments to candidate countries comparable to Article 42.7 produces a structural asymmetry. While candidates align progressively with the CFSP/CSDP acquis, they receive no reciprocal security commitment when their European trajectory is most exposed to reversal. No legal duty to extend guarantees before accession exists. Yet the argument is one of strategic interest. The asymmetry is a liability for the EU itself, as it is the policy space into which Russia projects its military instruments. It weakens the

credibility of the offer to and the resilience of the candidates the Union seeks to anchor. Since candidate countries are gradually being integrated into parts of the Single Market, including the emerging defence industrial market, and given that the mutual defence clause will apply to each acceding state, the question arises as to how the EU will frame its growing security guarantees in legally binding commitments prior to accession.

The EU-Ukraine Joint Security Commitments of June 2024, including consultation within 24 hours in the event of future aggression, offer a political precedent. What can be graduated is not the clause but the EU's commitments to candidates until accession, set down in bilateral CFSP agreements concluded on the basis of Article 37 TEU. This would start with association with the emergency security protocol and deepen as accession advances.

The value lies not in an automatic defence clause but in what it offers before and during a crisis: structured consultation, joint contingency planning, intelligence and classified-information sharing and integration into European air-defence coverage. For Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, NATO's Article 5 remains the primary guarantee; for Ukraine, Moldova and other non-NATO candidates, the approach would carry far greater weight.

European defence projects of common interest

No security commitment is credible without the capabilities to honour it. Closing the gap therefore between what the EU has promised since 2022 and what it can deliver is a precondition for a credible pre-accession commitment. Europe's collective defence problem is not primarily a money problem. The binding constraints are industrial capacity, interoperability and political will. European NATO members remain dependent on the US for air and missile defence, ISR, deep precision strike, manpower and the nuclear umbrella.

While the approval of five European defence projects of common interest (Eastern Flank Watch, EU Federated Integrated Air and Missile Defence including Early Warning, Drone and Counter-drone European Resolve, SPACE, and Integrated Maritime and Seabed Defence) is laudable, the EUR 325 million in EDIP start-up funding is modest.[23] Member States will deliver most of the capabilities through NATO planning, and candidates are excluded, Ukraine being the exception as a participant in four of the five projects. In a parallel development, Moldova is now joining Ukraine as the second candidate country involved in EU defence procurement through SAFE.[24]

The new ESS should resist equalising investment not only across domains but across geography, prioritising deployment where marginal returns to security-side resilience are highest, namely the two EN3 states most exposed to Russian pressure.[25] The Commission now acknowledges that candidates other than Ukraine will play an important role for Europe's security and that it is important 'to consider ways to link them early on with defence readiness actions'.[26] This is a step in the right direction. Section 4 sets out the next ones.

A defence-industrial base that includes candidates by design

Readiness 2030 sets a precedent for integrating a candidate's defence industry into the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base, but only for Ukraine: its industry stands on the same footing as EU industry for SAFE common procurement, and military mobility corridors extend into its territory. The EUR 90 billion Ukraine Support Loan, established as a form of enhanced cooperation among 24 Member States by Regulation (EU) 2026/467, with an indicative EUR 60 billion for defence procurement, completes the model. This de facto industrial pre-accession has outpaced political pre-accession.

Implementation is nonetheless pending. Few joint projects had moved beyond planning by the third quarter of 2026; the EUR 200 million Romania-Ukraine drone co-production project was still in procurement and the EDIP Ukraine Support Instrument (EUR 300 million) had only just started under the EUR 1.5 billion work

programme adopted on 30 March 2026. Integration runs mainly through bilateral Member State-Ukraine arrangements, while the EU-Ukraine Drone Alliance launched in July 2026 has yet to deliver joint production. The most scalable arrangement is the model in which Denmark and other donors finance Ukrainian manufacturers producing for Ukraine's forces.[27] Unless the EU adds scale and predictability, Ukraine's defence-technology base may be drawn towards non-European capital, including US-backed ventures.

The 'Danish model' has not been extended to other candidates. All are eligible for SAFE common procurement and the Regulation provides for bilateral agreements opening it to their industries but Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia and Montenegro have only Security and Defence Partnerships; only Serbia and Ukraine have Administrative Arrangements with the European Defence Agency; and no candidate is yet a fully eligible European Defence Fund partner with funding access.

The EU thus has a Ukraine policy, a four-partner policy and a pre-condition rule for Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. EDIP's alignment-as-precondition logic is coherent but exposes a tension between strategic autonomy and gradual integration: SAFE's rule that at least 65 % of component value originate in the EU, EEA-EFTA or Ukraine treats other candidates' industries as third-country suppliers. Extending the Ukrainian approach through bilateral agreements would reinforce both.

The EU should selectively adapt Ukraine's wartime procurement practices. The volume is not marginal: Ukraine's projected 2026 production capacity of USD 55 billion[28] is 55 times its level in February 2022, making it the largest latent EDTIB asset on the continent, to be integrated by design rather than exception.

The gaps are thus not conditionality itself but the lack of a vision through which non-aligned candidates can earn eligibility.

- First, the access gap: industrial participation in SAFE, EDIP, EDF and cooperation with the EDA depend on bilateral agreements and, in practice, on meeting the alignment threshold, with no milestones for the rest.
- Second, the reciprocity gap: European contractors have committed modestly to localisation in Ukraine.
- Third, the posture gap: the flagship European defence projects of common interest protect Member State territory, with limited mechanisms for covering similarly exposed candidates.

The new ESS and 'Preparing for a wider Union' communication

Two policy documents are key. The forthcoming European Security Strategy, as the EU's overarching security framework, builds on 'Readiness 2030' and the accompanying roadmap. The 2026 State of the Union address put its rationale bluntly: "hybrid threats facing Europe are less and less hybrid and less and less threats".[29] The Commission's Communication 'Preparing for a wider Union' of 6 October 2026 presents enlargement as "a long-term investment in Europe's peace, security, prosperity and global standing".[30] Together, these initiatives could close part of the readiness gap if the strategic enablers instrument is financed (see below) and the defence-industrial gap is addressed. But they leave the legal-architecture gap wide open.

The emergency security protocol, presented in the State of the Union address as "Europe's own Article 4", is a consultation mechanism for sub-threshold incidents rather than a defence commitment for sub-threshold incidents, and so speaks directly to the instruments dominating the EN3 threat portfolio. Because it commits states to convene rather than defend, it could be extended to candidates through agreements based on Article 37 TEU. Associating them with it, at least for incidents on their territory with cross-border effects, would give them a voice when hybrid crises strike and constitute the first rung of agreement-based commitments before accession.

The European Security Council, proposed to work with partners such as Canada, Norway, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, would already cross the EU's membership line and should open to other willing and ready

candidates through an EU+ Security Forum. It should become a standing format in which European security decisions are shaped with the states on whose territory they will be tested.

The European instrument for strategic enablers, covering air and missile defence, strategic transport, refuelling, space and cyber, targets several dependencies analysed above, though deep precision strike and the nuclear dimension remain outside its scope. The March 2026 authorisation of negotiations on Ukraine's participation in Govsatcom shows candidates already entering EU space security programmes.

The Commission's October 2026 review recognises candidates, notably Ukraine and Moldova, as contributors to EU security. It calls for their gradual participation in EU security structures and programmes ahead of membership, including Security and Defence Partnerships, the European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR), EPF assistance measures, CSDP missions, the Hybrid, FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) and Cyber Diplomacy Toolboxes, Hybrid Rapid Response Teams, and SAFE and EDIP. It also calls for the debate on more efficient CFSP decision-making to be held before rather than after future enlargements.

Three limitations remain:

- First, the legal-architecture gap stays open: neither the elements of the new European Security Strategy outlined so far, nor the Commission's review of its internal functioning, offers candidates a security commitment before accession.
- Second, decision-making still constrains delivery: under the current Treaties, no departure from unanimity is possible for military operations and the EDF, though the Commission advocates for the use of *passerelle* clauses for the adoption of decisions on sanctions, human rights and civilian CSDP missions and, where blockages persist, enhanced cooperation, which delivered the Ukraine Support Loan.
- Third, ongoing CSDP missions and operations in enlargement countries must be terminated on accession, although some of the actions could be continued under different EU instruments. Their transition needs planning well before accession.

3.2. Socio-economic assistance

Socio-economic resilience, defined as the capacity to withstand shocks, cope with external pressures and recover sustainably while progressing along the accession track, remains a central challenge for both the WB6 and EN3. Persistent macro- and microeconomic vulnerabilities, weak diversification, constrained fiscal space and social fragilities heighten exposure to foreign malign interference and create entry points for economic coercion. Socio-economic resilience is thus no longer a purely developmental objective but increasingly intertwined with economic security.

Association Agreements

Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) for the WB6 and Association Agreements with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) for the EN3 provide legally binding frameworks that bolster resilience. SAAs, though less ambitious than DCFTAs, have stimulated foreign direct investment and trade, but domestic policies, competitiveness and non-alignment with EU standards limit the gains from Single Market access. The DCFTAs with Moldova and Ukraine have been particularly effective in diversifying trade away from Russia and embedding EU standards. Georgia shows that a DCFTA cannot boost trade when non-tariff barriers persist, such as costly transport without a land border, limited production capacity and swings in foreign policy, including towards the Eurasian Economic Union.

Solidarity Measures

After the invasion, the 2022 Temporary Protection Directive gave millions of displaced Ukrainians residence and access to work, healthcare and education, but its extension beyond 2026 is uncertain, with some Member States preparing legislation to phase out the special measures. The introduction of solidarity lanes at customs and the adoption of Autonomous Trade Measures (ATMs) enabled Ukraine to maintain export flows despite Russian blockades. The politicisation of trade, with farmers' protests in neighbouring Member States, and the temporary nature of the ATMs created uncertainty for business planning, exposing weaknesses in short-term crisis instruments. The 2025 DCFTA review offered a more sustainable solution: less ambitious than the ATMs in the short term, but more beneficial for long-term resilience, and illustrating the need to combine control power instruments such as DCFTAs with protean power instruments such as ATMs. In energy, the emergency synchronisation of Ukraine's and Moldova's grids with ENTSO-E and support for renewables and interconnectivity significantly reduced dependence on Russian energy. In the Western Balkans, however, political obstruction and delayed transposition of EU energy directives, notably in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, show the limits of EU instruments where domestic will to diversify is lacking.

Financial Support

Macro-financial assistance, particularly in emergency form, has provided rapid liquidity and fiscal relief. Medium- to longer-term support comes through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, the Global Europe envelope of the general budget, and the new reform-oriented facilities for the WB6, Ukraine and Moldova, whose ex-ante and ex-post conditionalities are meant to accelerate reform and, for Ukraine, reconstruction. Key questions remain about the EU's consistent application of conditionality and candidates' political will and capacity to meet the requirements.

Ukraine's reconstruction is a special case. The EU is its largest financial provider, including through the EUR 50 billion Ukraine Facility and the EUR 90 billion Ukraine Support Loan, yet needs are estimated at USD 588 billion over the next decade.[31] The Ukraine Investment Framework, with EUR 9.6 billion in guarantees and blended-finance grants, aims to mobilise up to EUR 40 billion in investment, but this requires private capital and the active participation of European companies. Otherwise, EU support risks creating opportunities for firms from competing geopolitical powers, reinforcing their threat instruments rather than returning benefits to the EU's investments and the accession of the EN3 and WB6.

The EU's Toolbox

Overall, the EU's extensive toolbox, from financial assistance and market access to regulatory alignment and capacity-building, has strengthened resilience, but its effectiveness is constrained. The temporary and ad hoc nature of crisis-response mechanisms generates uncertainty. In addition, weak governance and limited administrative capacity reduces the ability of candidates to absorb EU funds. The new facilities also add administrative burdens and raise questions about the credibility of conditionality. The European Court of Auditors reports persistent delays in project preparation, implementation and monitoring that have slowed integration into the EU's core transport network,[32] a challenge that will grow under the 2028–2034 MFF. Twinning and TAIEX, which transfer expertise through long-term administrative partnerships and short-term, demand-driven assistance, help build the institutional capacity needed to absorb funds.

A more strategic, predictable and integrated approach is therefore needed, embedding candidate support more systematically in the upcoming MFF. Conditionality must also be applied consistently: freezing support to Georgia and cutting foreseen support to Bosnia and Herzegovina under the new facility are good examples, but the absence of a freeze for former President Vučic's Serbia has questioned the credibility of the EU's approach.

European Economic Security Strategy

The 2023 European Economic Security Strategy (EESS) responds to the weaponisation of economic interdependencies, prioritising risks to supply chains, critical infrastructure, technology and economic coercion around three pillars: promoting competitiveness, protecting economic security and partnering with like-minded countries. Later tools include investment screening, export controls, outbound investment monitoring and research security, with further measures in 2024 and 2025 on high-risk sectors and dual-use technologies. The strategy aims not at decoupling but at de-risking: maintaining openness while reducing strategic dependencies.

Similarly, the European Commission's Political Guidelines for 2024-2029 hold that the dichotomy between economy and security belongs to the past and that enlargement is a geopolitical imperative. Socio-economic resilience in candidate countries should therefore be treated as integral to the EU's own economic security: as Russia's invasion showed, instability, weak governance and fragility can translate into disrupted supply chains, susceptibility to external influence and reduced alignment with EU rules. Integrating the EESS more strongly into enlargement policy is both necessary and timely. It implies aligning financial instruments, conditionality and policy priorities with economic security objectives, while ensuring predictability and local ownership by the WB6 and EN3. This would let the EU deploy instruments of control power (rules, standards, conditionality) and protean power (flexibility and support for locally grounded resilience) more coherently. Candidates should adopt the EESS' policies and tools, which in turn promotes their accession paths.

Linking resilience more explicitly to the economic security agenda would reduce exposure to interference by Russia, China, Türkiye and the Gulf states, limit the scope to exploit economic dependencies and ensure the benefits of EU engagement are retained within the candidate countries.

3.3. Democracy support

To address novel challenges that existing control mechanisms cannot handle, the Commission launched the European Democracy Shield. The initiative addresses FIMI, disinformation, polarisation and AI-amplified challenges through election initiatives (the European Cooperation Network on Elections, the June 2025 integrity checklist, the Cybersecurity Reserve), legislation (NIS2, the Cyber Resilience Act, the political advertising regulation) and media freedom instruments (the European Media Freedom Act, the anti-SLAPP Directive), building on the Digital Services Act and related frameworks. These are designed primarily for EU application and do not formally extend to candidate countries, despite indirect spillovers.

The EDS is supported by the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, established on 24 February 2026. The ECDR works "as a dedicated hub for exchange and operational cooperation among EU institutions and Member States, [...] and is open to associate, candidate and potential candidate countries to support them and foster mutual learning".[33] On 13 October 2026, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine were associated with the Centre.[34] Candidate countries may thus be integrated into specific instruments but are not formal members of the governance framework. Associative participation nevertheless lets them collaborate with EU institutions and Member States against FIMI and disinformation and supports electoral integrity through observation missions.

Candidate countries therefore take part in electoral support, media funding and resilience-building, but largely as recipients rather than co-creators. The most advanced innovations (e.g. European Citizens' Panels, the Citizens' Engagement Platform, the Civic tech hackathon) are not systematically extended to them. The EU therefore promotes democratic resilience externally while keeping control of regulatory and innovative instruments internally, a partial and differentiated model of integration.

Projected Innovative Tools

The ECDR consolidates fragmented initiatives, linking civil society, fact-checkers and researchers through real-time information sharing, early-warning systems and rapid response. The Stakeholder Platform formalises engagement with independent actors and protects journalists and fact-checkers under threat, while the European Network of Fact-Checkers and EDMO extend capabilities to candidate countries such as Ukraine and Moldova. AI-based detection of deepfakes, bot-driven amplification and coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and a common research support framework, will also be deployed. Citizen-engagement innovations, including the forthcoming EU Digital Identity Wallet, do not extend to candidate countries, which benefit from selected EU methodologies and analytical frameworks. Access to advanced operational tools such as algorithmic transparency mechanisms and predictive analytics therefore remains limited.

Legislative and Operational Tools

The EDS gives candidates a framework to align with EU standards, share expertise and contribute to collective responses: capacity-building, joint training, exercises, coordinated monitoring and early warning, and access to the FIMI Toolbox and early-warning protocols. Legislative instruments such as the AI Act, the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act serve primarily as reference frameworks. Because EU regulations apply only to Member States, engagement rests on alignment rather than legal obligation, reflecting partial participation without full integration.

Mechanisms, such as the Rapid Alert System, crisis protocols and restrictive measures against non-EU actors engaged in FIMI operationalise the securitised approach and give candidate countries practical experience through EU-led exercises and networks of fact-checkers and media observatories.

Societal Resilience

The asymmetry is most pronounced in societal resilience, designed around long-term education and media-literacy initiatives for EU populations with diverse information sources. In candidate countries, educational institutions are often subject to state or ruling-party control. Local strongmen may influence even urban populations, and access to alternative information is limited. Societal resilience, most urgently needed in candidate countries, is thus the least adequately addressed, and the framework largely overlooks cultural and religious influence by external actors,[35] potentially creating a vacuum for malign influence.

The EDS is relatively strong on the long term: it includes the 2026 Education Package and EU Citizenship Competence Framework (covering only Member States), the Media Resilience Programme extending literacy to adults, seniors and rural populations in the EU and candidate countries, and EDMO, now scaled to include candidates. Short-term actions, such as awareness campaigns, pilot *protean* civic tech projects and citizens' panels, are limited, and the Civic Tech Hackathon, local-authority pilots and the MLEG do not include candidate countries, leaving them mainly recipients of recommendations.

This limits immediate support to communities facing urgent threats, particularly where authoritarian control restricts access to information and participation and weakens responsiveness during protests and state-led repression. Emergency mechanisms or targeted support in cases of violence or imprisonment of protesters are essential to protect those who defend democratic values. Long-term resilience alone cannot prevent threats intended to sow fear and subordinate local communities.

Securitisation of the EU's Democratic Resilience Agenda

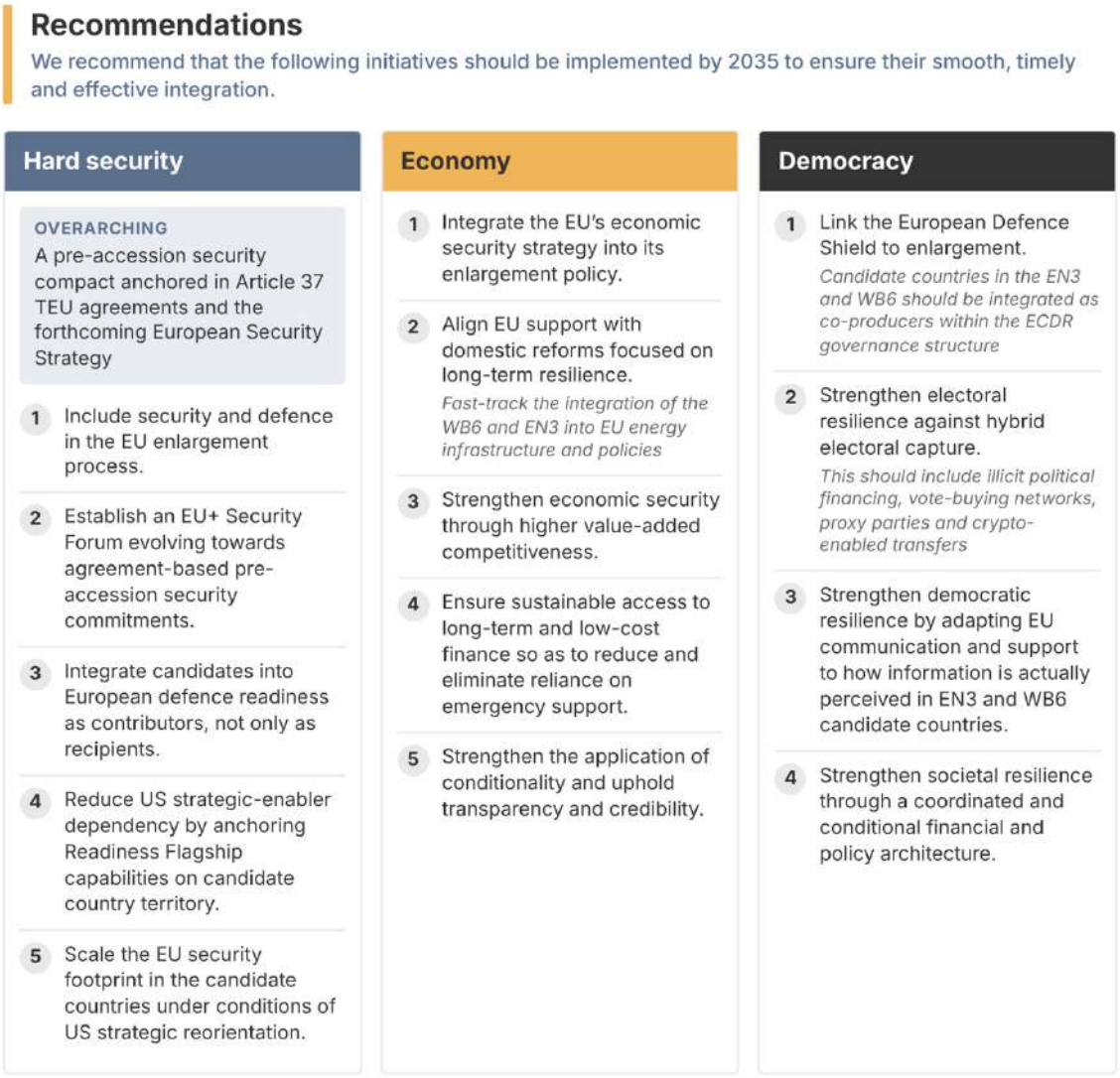
The EDS frames democratic resilience as a matter of security and defence, treating FIMI, disinformation and hybrid campaigns, particularly by Russia, as existential risks. Building on the 2020 European Democracy Action Plan and the 2023 Defence of Democracy package, it stresses the need to "leverage international partnerships for collective responses against FIMI, including through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, EU-NATO cooperation and Security and Defence Partnerships".[36] EU discourse holds that "democratic resilience and defence reinforce each other", presenting investments in cybersecurity, critical infrastructure and counter-hybrid technologies, funded through the European Defence Fund, Digital Europe and Horizon Europe, as safeguarding democratic institutions.[37]

This shifts the meaning of democratic resilience. Rather than a normative agenda grounded in pluralism, accountability and the rule of law, democracy becomes an instrument of security policy, a means to stability rather than an end in itself. It allows more selective interpretations of democratic standards, where deviations can be tolerated if framed as necessary for security.

External democracy promotion is also undermined. Conditionality loses effectiveness where security concerns dominate, especially where elites instrumentalise them to justify departures from reform, and securitising narratives can override reform incentives. Securitisation intended to safeguard democracy may thus be counterproductive and contribute to its gradual erosion.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

REUNIR's four-level analysis of threats, foresight, uncertainties and policy gaps shows that the EU should adopt flexible and innovative approaches. These include minilateral formats beyond its institutional confines to tackle third state actor threats across the security, socio-economic and democracy domains, and strengthen EN3 and WB6 resilience. We recommend that the following initiatives should be implemented by 2035 to ensure their smooth, timely and effective integration.



4.1. Hard security

As an overarching recommendation, the EU and each of its candidate countries should **conclude a pre-accession security compact** anchored in the forthcoming European Security Strategy. Candidate status should trigger structured security cooperation, defence-industrial integration and security commitments that deepen gradually, from crisis consultation to joint contingency planning and capability integration, set down in a compact between the EU and each candidate under Article 37 TEU. Where EU-wide agreement is difficult, such compacts should be complemented by minilateral arrangements among willing Member States and candidates, within the limits of the Treaties.

More specifically, the research reveals a need to:

1. **Include security and defence in the EU enlargement process.** Security should become the political core of the EU's offer, **with measurable security-related benchmarks under Chapter 31**. This includes full CFSP and CSDP alignment including on sanctions, abandonment of multi-vector postures or CSTO-style affiliations, interoperability, cyber readiness, democratic oversight of the security sector and critical-infrastructure resilience. Security and defence deliverables should also feature in the new accession roadmaps, alongside a Security and Defence Roadmap as an opening benchmark for the fundamentals cluster, with candidates embedding reform in national strategies and legislation.
2. **Establish an EU+ Security Forum evolving towards agreement-based pre-accession security commitments.** The EU's High Representative should create an implementation-oriented EU+ Security Forum, linked to the proposed European Security Council. This would enable willing Member States and candidate countries to cooperate on joint procurement, cyber defence, integrated air and missile defence, maritime security and defence-industrial cooperation. This would then evolve into a framework for implementing the compacts, starting with consultations under the emergency security protocols. Candidates would participate as full members, with a suspension clause for non-compliance measured by CFSP alignment rates and sanctions transposition. A new generation of Security and Defence Partnerships should offer graduated access to lethal European Peace Facility assistance, expanded classified-information exchange, participation in CSDP planning and, pending the compacts, a consultation clause modelled on the 24-hour clause of the EU-Ukraine Joint Security Commitments.
3. **Integrate candidates into European defence readiness as contributors, not only as recipients.** First, SAFE and its successor should be opened to the defence industries of candidates meeting the alignment criteria, through bilateral agreements and the European Competitiveness Fund. The Commission recommends opening this to candidates under strict conditions,[38] with blended envelopes conditioned on Chapter 31 benchmarks. Second, the Danish model should be scaled into an EU instrument supporting 'Build with Ukraine' joint ventures, with EU and EIB war-risk guarantees. This would help to ensure that integration of candidate producers into EDTIB supply chains is matched by European investment in co-production. Third, Ukrainian instructors and veterans should join EU military training programmes and CSDP missions, as the Commission also proposes, and contribute to European Security and Defence College curricula. Finally, Ukrainian and Moldovan expertise on hybrid threats and FIMI should inform the European Centre for Democratic Resilience.
4. **Reduce US strategic-enabler dependency by anchoring Readiness Flagship capabilities on candidate country territory.** The five European defence projects of common interest should be developed as cooperative, complementary architectures with graduated and selective candidate country participation. Candidates should be associated with the European Instrument for Strategic Enablers, which is to be fully aligned with NATO. The cooperative track should focus on sensor integration, early-warning interoperability and counter-drone architecture along the eastern flank and in the Baltic and Black Sea areas, complementing the NATO Defence Planning Process. Ukraine and Moldova should be phased into the Eastern Flank Watch and European Drone Defence Initiative, allied Western Balkan states into the European Air Shield, and military mobility corridors should further connect Moldova as well as Ukraine, as the Commission envisages.
5. **Scale the EU security footprint in the candidate countries under conditions of US strategic reorientation.** The EU should expand the operational footprint of CSDP missions and EU Security Hubs to offset US reorientation and the space it opens for malign actors, complementing rather than replacing NATO and planning the transition of missions that will end upon accession of the host states to the EU. PESCO cyber and hybrid rapid response teams should include candidate country experts. The Black Sea network for joint responses to FIMI, suggested by the Commission, should be

established with Moldova and Ukraine as founding participants. The Black Sea Maritime Security Hub should also be operationalised, with early-warning and rapid response mechanisms.[39]

These specific recommendations feed into the overarching idea that the compacts would be reciprocal. The EU would associate candidates with the emergency security protocol, with a right to request consultations, and with the European Security Council through the EU+ Security Forum, upgrade Security and Defence Partnerships and open its defence-industrial and readiness instruments. The compacts would deepen as (pre-)accession advances, while candidates commit to full CFSP alignment, including on sanctions, and defence reform under democratic oversight.

4.2. Economy

1. **Integrate the EU's economic security strategy into its enlargement policy.** The EU should align its support toolbox, financial assistance and reform priorities with the risk areas of the European Economic Security Strategy: supply chains, critical infrastructure, technology and economic coercion. This means prioritising investments and reforms that reduce strategic dependencies and enhance diversification. It also means supporting candidates in adopting FDI screening, export controls and research security, adapted to their capacities, to advance accession while reducing the scope for external actors to exploit vulnerabilities.
2. **Align EU support with domestic reforms focused on long-term resilience.** EU support, such as pre-accession assistance, should address structural challenges, including weak safety nets, youth unemployment, brain drain, lack of affordable SME finance and energy insecurity, rather than short-term fixes, paired with credible domestic policies. The EU should fast-track the integration of the WB6 and EN3 into EU energy infrastructure and policies, invest in renewables and storage, and expand interconnectors.
3. **Strengthen economic security through higher value-added competitiveness.** A targeted policy mix should encourage innovation and R&D, long-term low-cost capital beyond bank lending, technical and managerial skills and integration into European value chains. In consultation with the EU, candidates should identify strategic sectors and value-chain segments with realistic competitive advantages, strengthening productivity and convergence with the EU.
4. **Ensure sustainable access to long-term and low-cost finance.** The EU should keep providing, under the current and upcoming MFF, systemic, continuous funding mechanisms that reduce reliance on emergency support and prevent a vacuum filled by actors offering risky, opaque terms. For Ukraine, whose reconstruction needs far exceed the Ukraine Facility, the EU should set out a strategy for scaling up support, including private investment and the potential use of frozen Russian assets, coupled with stronger absorption capacity.
5. **Strengthen the application of conditionality and uphold transparency and credibility.** Access to funds must depend on meeting conditions, using the ex-ante and ex-post mechanisms of the new Facilities. Conditionality should apply consistently across the whole accession process to incentivise judicial, anti-corruption and governance reforms. The EU must also enforce high transparency standards in public procurement and investment, clearly differentiating itself from opaque practices by actors such as China.

4.3. Democracy

1. **Link the European Defence Shield to enlargement**. The EU should align the operational capacities of the European Centre for Democratic Resilience with enlargement policy to reduce vulnerability to destabilisation and political interference by malign external actors, while connecting internal resilience governance and external assistance by providing equal access to EDS tools. Candidate countries in the EN3 and WB6 should be integrated as co-producers within the ECDR governance

structure, progressively participating as operational contributors, with structured participation mechanisms for candidate-country institutions, experts and civil society.

2. **Strengthen electoral resilience against hybrid electoral capture.** The EU should move beyond disinformation and cybersecurity to address the full chain of hybrid electoral capture. This encompasses illicit political financing, vote-buying networks, proxy parties and crypto-enabled transfers, including those targeting diaspora voters. The Hybrid Rapid Response Teams should become a standing, on-request instrument for candidate countries, combining FIMI analysis with financial-intelligence cooperation (national Financial Intelligence Units, the EU Anti-Money Laundering Authority and Europol) to trace cross-border flows (incl. crypto).
3. **Strengthen democratic resilience by adapting EU communication and support to how information is actually perceived** in EN3 and WB6 candidate countries. The EU should not assume that all actors interpret messages in the same way. Instead, it should take account of competing narratives that shape how people understand democratic institutions, reforms and EU engagement. Competing narratives can act as influence operations that trigger local grievances. In particular, external actor-driven cultural and religious influence operations can weaken trust in institutions, elections and reform.
4. **For visibility,** the Commission/EEAS should raise public awareness of EU support through the proactive engagement of Heads of EU Delegations, amplified by candidate country authorities. Tangible results of EU support can be communicated through a sustained social media presence, engagement with local and national media, and regular meetings with students, activists, journalists, civil servants, religious leaders, civil society and rural communities. These activities can also help to address citizens' concerns and fears.
5. **For long-term impact,** the European Commission, through the EDS, should expand cooperation with European cultural and language institutions (e.g. British Council, Goethe-Institut, Institut français, Instituto Cervantes, Polish Institute, etc.) to fund online language courses for rural students and pupils, summer and winter schools, youth exchanges and cultural immersion in Member States.
6. **For short-term intervention,** the EDS should establish a flexible, accessible and responsive emergency fund for legal assistance and political protection in the context of democratic backsliding. This could be delivered through Europe-based human rights and policy organisations to provide representation and protection for detained youth activists, journalists and protesters, improve monitoring of violations and help create conditions for institutional self-correction.
7. **Strengthen societal resilience through a coordinated and conditional financial and policy architecture.** The EU should combine accession leverage with the strategic use of candidates' membership in non-EU institutions, including the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission. Indirect support can also be provided through IFIs such as the World Bank, EBRD and EIB, aligning external financial assistance with democratic conditionality and linking EU assistance to measurable accession-related progress.

5. ENDNOTES

[1] See also European Commission (2026), 2026 Communication on EU enlargement policy – 'A stronger Europe through enlargement', COM(2026) 690 final, 4 November 2026.
[2] European Commission, *Preparing for a wider Union*, Commission Staff Working Document, SWD (2026) 705 final, 6 October 2026, p. 112. See also NATO (2024), Washington Summit Declaration, 10 July, paras. 24–26, which describes the People's Republic of China as "a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine".
[3] The paper draws on the REUNIR theoretical framework, informed by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018) p.31, which defines "uncertainty" as incalculable and unforeseen circumstances arising from the unprecedented range of political, social, and security factors it encompasses. In such moments, uncertainty does not simply disrupt the status quo; it becomes a driving force for evolution and reform. It compels actors to channel their inner 'protean power', i.e. to step beyond their comfort zones, challenging established playbooks and encouraging the creation of new solutions, as the status quo itself becomes more dangerous.
[4] REUNIR Working Papers Nos. D3.1, D4.1, and D5.1 comprehensively mapped and No. D7.1 projected uncertainties if those threats are left unaddressed. *See*: Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), *Military Threat Assessment in Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkans*, REUNIR Working Paper No. 3.1.; Akhvlediani, T. et al. (2025), Socio-economic Threat Assessment in Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkan Countries, REUNIR Working Paper No. 4.1; Burmester, I., et. al. (2025). *Political threat assessment in Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkan countries*, REUNIR Working Paper No. 5.1.; Flachenecker, P., *et al*. (2025), *Anticipating foreign malign influence in EU candidate countries: scenarios and forecasts until 2035*, REUNIR Working Paper No. D7.1.
[5] Sanda Sandu (2026), *Public Perceptions of Security in the Republic of Moldova*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 7 October 2026. https://www.kas.de/documents/267235/0/Raport_Securitate_2026_ENGL+%281%29.pdf/2ac53b08-a311-a415-c591-2f77da3734b7?version=1.0&t=1792487758001.
[6] Razumkov Centre (2026), Results of a Sociological Survey Conducted by the Razumkov Centre and Commissioned by the Kyiv Security Forum, 25 April 2026.
[7] Razumkov Centre (2026), Over 60% of Ukrainians believe that Russia will violate the peace agreement and attack again – a survey by the KSF, 22 April 2026.
[8] New Europe Centre / Info Sapiens (2026), *How Ukrainians Assess NATO in 2026*.
[9] New Europe Centre / Info Sapiens (2026), From Assistance to Partnership: How Ukrainians See the EU's Security and Defence Role, 7 October 2026.
[10] Interfax-Ukraine (2026), 'Support for EU accession edges down among Ukrainians, backing for NATO rises above 60% – poll', 6 August 2026.
[11] WeBalkans (2026), 'Annual Perception Surveys 2026', 19 June 2026. https://webalkans.eu/en/annual-perception-surveys-2026-published/.
[12] See: 1. Western Balkans SecuriMeter (2025), 'Key Findings: Confidence in NATO', https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/inc/get_indic.php?id=354&cat_id=2; 2. Western Balkans. SecuriMeter (2025), 'Key Findings: General', https://www.rcc.int/securimeter/key_findings_2025. 3. WeBalkans (2026), 'Annual Perception Surveys 2026', 19 June 2026, https://webalkans.eu/en/annual-perception-surveys-2026-published/.
[13] Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (2026), International Relations, 'Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, and Ideological Positioning', survey conducted in July 2026 among 900 respondents, 1 October 2026, https://www.kas.de/en/web/kosovo/single-title/-/content/international-relations-kosovo-serbia-dialogue-and-ideological-positioning.
[14] International Republican Institute (2026), 'IRI Survey Shows Albanians Strongly Support European Integration and Prioritize Economic Issues', 16 July 2026, https://www.iri.org/news/iri-survey-shows-albanians-strongly-support-european-integration-and-prioritize-economic-issues/.
[15] WeBalkans (2026), 'Annual Perception Surveys 2026', 19 June 2026. https://webalkans.eu/en/annual-perception-surveys-2026-published/.
[16] Parliament of the Republic of Moldova (2023), Decision no. 391 of 15 December 2023 approving the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova.
[17] Lawrence, T. (2026), Investing in Security: A Policy Agenda to Strengthen the EU's Future Members, REUNIR Working Paper No. 3.3. pp. 1-3.

[18] The six instruments are defined in REUNIR Working Paper Nos. D3.1. p. 4 and pp. 14-22 and their resilience implications are assessed in Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), *Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood & Western Balkan Countries to Military Threats*, REUNIR Working Paper No. 3.2.
[19] These trajectories constitute analytical assessments developed for this White Paper. They build on the WP7 foresight analysis while incorporating geopolitical developments that have occurred since the completion of the WP7 research. They should be understood as analytical extensions rather than as part of the structured foresight scenarios presented in D7.1, pp. 24-35 (Scenario Analysis, Section 2.5.); see also the scenario narratives in Annexes B-C, pp. 70-81.
[20] These pathways constitute analytical assessments developed for this White Paper. They are informed by the preceding threat analysis, expert judgement, and geopolitical developments since the completion of the WP7 foresight research. They are intended to complement the structured foresight scenarios presented in D7.1, without forming part of them.
[21] The 2035 'strategic test' framing and the mapping of competing external poles are analytical assessments developed for this White Paper, building on the REUNIR Working Paper No. D7.1 foreign-malign-influence foresight.
[22] REUNIR Working Paper No. 5.1.
[23] Council of the EU, 'European defence industry: Council identifies the first five projects of common interest', Press Release No. 745/26, 28 September 2026.
[24] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova (2026), Press release on the first joint military procurement of the Republic of Moldova and Romania, November 2026, available at: https://www.army.md/en/press-releases/first-republic-moldova-and-romania-become-partners-joint-military-procurement.
[25] This prioritisation is an analytical assessment developed for this White Paper, drawing on the D7.1 Eastern Neighbourhood scenario analysis, in which Russia is identified as the most consistent destabiliser across the EN3 scenarios. See also REUNIR Working Paper No. D7.1, pp. 28-35.
[26] SWD (2026) 705 final, pp. 120–121.
[27] Danish Ministry of Defence (2025), 'New agreement opens the door for Ukrainian defence companies to produce in Denmark', 29 June 2025, available at: https://www.fmn.dk/en/news/2025/new-agreement-opens-the-door-for-ukrainian-defence-companies-to-produce-in-denmark/.
[28] National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine (2026) 'Ukrainian Defense Industry: Scale, Effectiveness, Results', Press-release 28 January 2026. https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Diialnist/7384.html.
[29] von der Leyen, U. (2026), *2026 State of the Union Address*, SPEECH/26/1868, Strasbourg, 16 September 2026.
[30] European Commission (2026a), *Preparing for a wider Union, Communication*, COM(2026) 705 final, 6 October 2026, p. 1.
[31] See World Bank, *Fifth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA5)*, February 2022-December 2025, 28 February 2026, available at http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099022026094036395.
[32] European Court of Auditors (2026), special report 6/2026: Western Balkans Investment Framework – EU support addresses connectivity needs, but integration into the core transport network is slow, Special report 16/2026: Western Balkans Investment Framework | European Court of Auditors.
[33] European Commission (2025), *European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*, JOIN (2025) 791 final, Brussels, 12 November 2025, p. 4.
[34] COM(2026) 690 final, p. 9.
[35] REUNIR Working Paper No. 5.1.
[36] JOIN(2025) 791 final, p. 10.
[37] Ibid., p.28.
[38] SWD(2026) 705 final, p. 121.
[39] Ibid., p. 112.

PROJECT FACTSHEET

REUNIR

Resilience · **E**nlargement · **U**nion · **N**eighbourhood · **I**nternational **R**elations

Future-proofing EU security, Enlargement and Eastern neighbourhood policies for a new age of international relations

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has ended the post-Cold War European security order, creating new realities in countries neighbouring the EU and shattering illusions in several member states about the Kremlin's true intentions in wider Europe. By granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the EU has rejected a Russian sphere of influence and instead determined where its future borders should lie. But this decision has not yet led to policies tailored to effectively respond to a geopolitical context which also sees China and other state actors competing for influence. The Eastern Partnership still needs to be fitted with security and connectivity components. In the accession process, existing formats had already reached their limits with, inter alia, the obstructionism by certain member states that is linked to the divisive issue of EU internal reform. This has cost the EU a lot of credibility in the Western Balkans and will take years to resolve.

REUNIR, a 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 (the Western Balkan six + the three Eastern European candidates), 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 strengthen the EU's external action.

The project is coordinated by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels. The other members of the consortium are: College of Europe (Poland), GPPi (Germany), ICDS (Estonia), Maastricht University (Netherlands), University of Graz (Austria), Université Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle (France), NTNU (Norway), BCSP (Serbia), National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), IPRE (Moldova) and New Vision University (Georgia).

You can read all REUNIR publications and blogs and listen to our podcast through the REUNIR website:
reunir-horizon.eu

Funded by
the European Union

Bouncing forward on the accession track

Enlargement will be central to the EU's geostrategic positioning over the next decade. Given malign foreign interference and growing security uncertainties, the EU must ensure that the resilience of candidate countries and the Union as a whole reinforce one another. This requires a flexible and pragmatic approach to strategic autonomy that includes stronger defence capabilities, tools against economic coercion, and instruments for democracy promotion.

PARTNERS

Funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme
Grant Agreement No. 101132446

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.