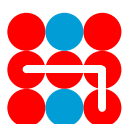


Western Balkans: Domestic, regional and international trends creating hybrid threat potential



Hybrid CoE Trend Reports highlight trends and theme clusters related to hybrid threats. They provide multiple perspectives on current security challenges and generate academic discourse on the topic. They aim to distinguish between what constitutes a threat, what appears to be a threat but is not necessarily one, and what has the potential to become one.

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The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

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Responsibility for the views expressed in this paper ultimately rests with the authors.

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Summary

This report examines four interrelated trends that will shape the Western Balkans over the next three to five years and create hybrid threat potential. They are: the risks of partial and uneven EU enlargement; the expansion of geopolitical competition; Serbia's pivotal but uncertain regional trajectory; and the persistent governance and societal vulnerabilities that enable malign influence. Although each Western Balkan state has its own political trajectory and resilience profile, the crosscutting vulnerabilities are sufficiently deep for domestic and external actors to seek to exploit them with limited resistance.

While the EU has renewed its enlargement agenda and introduced new instruments to support gradual enlargement, progress remains slow, technocratic and vulnerable to political blockage. Without clearer timelines, consistent conditionality and visible interim benefits, enlargement risks losing its transformative leverage. Instead, it could entrench "stabilitocratic" governance patterns, as well as widening divergence across the region. At the same time the Western Balkans are operating in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment in which external actors exploit ambiguity, weak institutions and gaps in Euro-Atlantic engagement. Serbia's strategic positioning will be particularly consequential, as its domestic political trajectory and regional posture will shape both stability and the scope for hybrid threat activity. Structural challenges, including corruption, state capture, media fragility, and demographic decline, will continue to reduce the cost of interference and amplify the effectiveness of hybrid threat tactics across the region if left unchecked.

In this context, policy responses must focus on restoring the credibility and predictability of EU integration, reducing critical dependencies and illicit financial channels, and strengthening institutional and societal resilience across the Western Balkans. Enhanced support for democratic institutions, regulatory frameworks and media freedoms will be critical if long-term instability is to be countered and the region's European trajectory reinforced. Without such shifts, hybrid threat actors could sustain and expand their ability to exploit the region's vulnerabilities.

Introduction

The Western Balkans region includes Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo,¹ North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The region's internal dynamics have been shaped by shared historical experiences, particularly the legacies of Yugoslav dissolution and the conflicts of the 1990s. These legacies continue to shape political identities, institutional trust and patterns of cooperation, often producing tension between state-centric governance and enduring transnational political and cultural communities. The Western Balkans thus comprises overlapping transnational, political and historical communities that cut across formal borders. Ethnonational ties, diasporic linkages, and shared narratives of conflict and victimhood continue to shape political agendas, as well as providing opportunities for hybrid threat actors to exploit.

During the six years since the last Hybrid CoE report on the Western Balkans² the region has continued to face several challenges, including EU accession fatigue, regional destabilization exacerbated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and border skirmishes. Antidemocratic forces have exploited ethnic diversity, stoking

conflict and reviving old grievances, particularly around Kosovo's independence, and the futures of BiH and Montenegro.

However, the last six years have also seen some developments that point in a different direction. North Macedonia became a NATO member in March 2020, and all six countries have continued accession discussions with the EU. Those of Montenegro and Albania are the most advanced, with ambitions to secure membership within the next two to four years. Readiness for NATO membership varies across the three non-member states, from high in Kosovo to deeply polarized in BiH. There is no political desire in Serbia to join NATO, though there are low levels of public support.³

Recent polling suggests that with the exception of Serbia, strong support for the EU and NATO remains across the region, albeit with some scepticism that EU accession will be achieved.⁴ The EU remains the region's largest trade and investment partner, but Russian and Chinese investments, alongside dependence on Russia for energy and China for telecommunication infrastructure projects,

1 Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008 following almost a decade of international administration under UN Security Council Resolution 1244. It has since gained diplomatic recognition from more than 100 countries. Serbia does not officially recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state, still considering it an autonomous province within Serbia (the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija); however, Serbia accepts the governing authority of Kosovo's institutions as part of the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Relations between Serbia and Kosovo remain tense, and Northern Kosovo, where many ethnic Serbs live, remains politically sensitive.

2 Cristina Juola and Hanna Smith (eds), 'Hybrid CoE Trend Report 2: Western Balkans', Hybrid Centre of Excellence, March 2020, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-2-western-balkans/>.

3 Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić has declared that the country is not interested in NATO membership, and anti-NATO rhetoric is a staple of mainstream populist political discourse. See, for example, Mustafa Talha Öztürk, 'Serbia will not join NATO: President', Anadolu Agency, 14 March 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-will-not-join-nato-president/2535096>.

4 'Western Balkans Regional Poll, May–July 2025', Centre for Insights in Survey Research, <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-may-july-2025/>.

grants them significant influence over the region's weak economies.⁵

This report highlights four interconnected trends which have the potential to affect the whole region, and through which hybrid threat activity could manifest itself over the next three to five years. These trends were shaped by two Hybrid CoE Expert Pool meetings held in the autumn of 2025, which brought together experts from academia, think tanks, and government and multilateral institutions to identify key trends and potential threats, vulnerabilities and opportunities that hostile actors could exploit to destabilize the region. This report contains the results of these consultations and discussions, alongside the conclusions of a series of short papers which were commissioned from external experts in 2024 and 2025.

The following is an overview of the trends this paper discusses:

- **Trend one: Managing the risks of partial EU enlargement.** Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has re-energized enlargement rhetoric and introduced the EUR 6 billion Reform and Growth Facility to accelerate convergence. Yet the process remains technocratic, slow and vulnerable to political blockages from EU member states. This undermines incentives for reform and risks entrenching "stabilitocracies", or semi-authoritarian regimes that profess EU alignment while circumventing meaningful institutional change. Two states (Montenegro and Albania) are likely to become EU member

states over the next two to four years, with the remaining four currently on slower trajectories. Partial and gradual integration carries the risk of disillusionment for the states left behind if it is unaccompanied by predictable pathways, clear timelines and political inclusion.

- **Trend two: Multi-alignment in the Western Balkans.** The rise of geopolitical and geoeconomic competition has reduced the region's predictability and eroded long-standing assumptions of Western primacy. Russia, China and some Gulf states have deepened their influence in some countries by invitation; meanwhile, Western credibility has been challenged by slow EU enlargement, inconsistent conditionality and a more transactional US foreign policy posture. This increases scope for competing narratives and hybrid interference.
- **Trend three: Serbia at a crossroads.** Serbia is the region's geopolitical swing state. It is economically central, diplomatically agile and strategically ambiguous. There are growing indications that Serbia-linked actors are engaging in hybrid threat activity at home and abroad, thereby creating destabilization risks in the Western Balkans and beyond. The trajectory of Serbia's domestic politics, particularly in the run-up to the forthcoming elections (in either 2026 or 2027), will be decisive for the region's stability.

5 Ana Krstinovska, 'Chinese Influence in North Macedonia', CEPA, 30 September 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-north-macedonia/>.

- **Trend four: The enabling environment.**

Governance weaknesses, including state capture, democratic backsliding, corruption, media capture and politicized institutions, create an environment ripe for exploitation by hybrid threat actors. Demographic decline and youth emigration further erode the region's long-term resilience. Organized crime groups, illicit financial flows and weak regulatory systems amplify these vulnerabilities. Together, this creates opportunities for hybrid threat actors to exploit and will continue to undermine democratic development in the region.

These dynamics point to a Western Balkans region caught between stalled European integration, intensifying multipolar pressures and persistent internal fragility. Partial EU enlargement without credible timelines risks deepening political stagnation and public disillusionment, while external actors and domestic power brokers exploit weak governance and institutional erosion. In this context Serbia's strategic ambiguity assumes outsized significance: its political direction will either anchor regional stabilization or accelerate fragmentation.

Trend one: Managing the risks of partial EU enlargement

The Western Balkans occupy a strategically sensitive position at the intersection of the European Union, NATO and competing external actors. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 the region has emerged as a test case for the EU's capacity to project security, norms and long-term strategic influence. Over the next four years the Western Balkans are likely to experience significant divergence in political trajectories, with two states on track for EU membership and the remaining four trailing behind them. This divergence could have a significant impact on the region if it creates structural divisions or a perpetual "waiting room" for the states left behind.

The EU enlargement project

The Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003⁶ affirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lay within the European Union. More than two decades later EU accession remains an unfinished process.

All six countries have applied for EU membership, but progress remains uneven. Montenegro and Albania are currently the most advanced candidates, with ambitions to

secure membership within the next two to four years. In the other four countries momentum is weaker or obstructed by structural and political constraints. Serbia's accession process has stalled amid democratic backsliding and selective foreign-policy alignment; North Macedonia's path has been constrained by bilateral disputes, particularly with Bulgaria; Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was granted candidate status in 2022 but has yet to open formal negotiations; and Kosovo, though an applicant since 2022, has yet to be granted candidate status.⁷

The EU's enlargement strategy in the Western Balkans is designed to promote long-term political stability by exporting norms related to democracy, the rule of law and foreign policy alignment, particularly with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Recent data indicate substantial convergence: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and BiH have a 100 per cent CFSP alignment rate.⁸ Serbia lags behind, with an alignment rate of 67 per cent in 2025⁹ – significantly lower than its neighbours,¹⁰ but a marked improvement on the 47 per cent recorded in 2024.¹¹ Beyond

6 The Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003 was a pivotal moment in the Western Balkans' European integration. It confirmed the European perspective for all Western Balkan states, setting the stage for their eventual EU membership. For more information see, 'EU–Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003 Declaration', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/pres_03_163/PRES_03_163_EN.pdf.

7 '2025 Enlargement package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners', EU Commission, 4 November 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2584.

8 'Alignment with EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans', European Western Balkans, 19 September 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/19/alignment-with-eu-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans-serbia-at-47-other-countries-at-100/>.

9 Ibid.

10 Belgrade continues to avoid alignment with EU positions related directly or indirectly to Russia, especially sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine, as well as on certain positions concerning China.

11 'Alignment with EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans', European Western Balkans, 19 September 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/19/alignment-with-eu-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans-serbia-at-47-other-countries-at-100/>.

enlargement conditionality, the EU remains a key security actor in the region through missions such as EUFOR Althea in BiH and EULEX in Kosovo,¹² and through its facilitation of conflict management mechanisms, most notably the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, which aims to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Public attitudes towards EU membership across the Western Balkans have improved markedly in the last decade. Support rose from 39 per cent in 2016 to 64 per cent in 2025, while the proportion viewing EU membership as “bad” fell from 20 to nine per cent.¹³ However, aggregate figures mask substantial national variation. Trust in the EU is highest in Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania (around 80%), more limited in North Macedonia and BiH (approximately 50%), and significantly weaker in Serbia, where only 37 per cent of respondents express trust in the EU, while 57 per cent express distrust.¹⁴ These disparities reinforce the political salience of accession in some states while constraining EU leverage in others.

In Albania and Montenegro, the frontrunners for EU accession, EU alignment has driven tangible institutional change which might not have occurred without accession initiatives. This includes the introduction of judicial vetting in Albania and sustained improvements in regulatory capacity in Montenegro.¹⁵ However, progress has been more limited in other areas and countries, resulting in criticism of the EU’s approach. Analysts argue that the process has been overly technocratic, slow and unable to deliver transformative political change,¹⁶ with EU conditionality sometimes inadvertently entrenching informal power networks and state capture.¹⁷ In this context, the concept of “stabilitocracy”, describing states that maintain formal pro-EU orientations while tolerating democratic erosion, has gained traction.¹⁸ Critics further highlight the EU’s reluctance to publicly call out democratic backsliding in the region.¹⁹ An example is Serbia, where EU decisions to advance accession chapters despite

12 EUFOR Althea aims to retain peace and stability in BiH. EULEX acts as the formal second security responder in Kosovo after the Kosovo Police.

13 ‘Balkan Barometer 2025 Public Opinion’, Regional Cooperation Council, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings_2025/2/public. Similarly positive views can be found in the Spring 2025 Eurobarometer conducted by the EU and available here: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372>.

14 ‘Trust in the EU in the Western Balkans: Highest in Montenegro, lowest in Serbia’, European Western Balkans, 28 May 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/05/28/trust-in-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans-highest-in-montenegro-lowest-in-serbia/>.

15 ‘2025 Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners’, European Commission, 4 November 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en.

16 ‘Special Report 01/2022: EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persists’, European Court of Auditors, 10 January 2022, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=60343>.

17 Richter, Solveig and Natasha Wunsch, ‘Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 27, Issue 1: 41–62, (2020).

18 Wouter Zweers, Giulia Cretti, and Myrthe de Boon, ‘The EU as a promoter of “stabilitocracy” in the Western Balkans?’, Clingendael Institute, 8 February 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans>.

19 Ibid.

democratic backsliding have contributed to a loss of leverage, prompting the Commission to adopt a more critical tone in recent assessments.²⁰

Beyond conditions within the Western Balkans themselves, EU–Western Balkans relations are increasingly shaped by internal constraints within the EU. Enlargement remains subject to unanimity among member states, exposing the process to domestic political pressures, bilateral disputes and enlargement fatigue in some capitals. Concerns about migration, fiscal transfers, rule-of-law enforcement, and institutional effectiveness have limited several member states' willingness to support a rapid expansion of the Union.²¹ In parallel, the acceleration of accession processes for Ukraine and Moldova has introduced capacity and sequencing challenges, raising the risk of the Western Balkans facing relative de-prioritization, despite strong rhetorical commitments. The next three to five years are unlikely to resolve these internal constraints, weakening the EU's ability to provide clear timelines even where candidate performance improves, and creating a structural credibility gap that hybrid threat actors can exploit.

Implications of partial enlargement

Looking ahead, there is a risk that partial or staggered enlargement in the Western Balkans could generate a structural paradox. For successful candidates such as Albania and Montenegro accession would lock in reform trajectories and anchor domestic institutions within EU governance frameworks. For the remaining four countries there is a risk that being left in a “waiting room” for a long time could erode reform incentives, deepen political fatigue and weaken the credibility of the EU accession process. Unless actively managed, this asymmetry could undermine the EU's broader strategic objective of stabilizing and integrating the region as a whole.

This dynamic is likely to reshape geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans unevenly. While EU membership would significantly constrain the scope for external influence in Albania and Montenegro, it may simultaneously incentivize actors such as Russia and China to concentrate their efforts in the remaining non-member states. In Serbia, BiH and Kosovo in particular, external actors are likely to intensify attempts to discredit EU enlargement and weaken the perceived credibility of eventual membership. This in turn risks reinforcing a fragmented geopolitical landscape in which EU leverage is diluted by competing sources of financing, energy dependence and political alignment.

20 Berta López Domènech, 'A turning point in the EU's approach to Serbia?', European Policy Centre, 6 November 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/a-turning-point-in-the-eus-approach-to-serbia/>.

21 Piotr Buras and Engjellushe Morina, 'Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU', European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 November 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/>.

Some of the seeds for such future activity have already been sown. For example:

- Russia has long been critical of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, portraying it as coercive and destabilizing. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has argued that EU accession requires states to align themselves with EU foreign policy, effectively forcing them to choose between “the West or Russia”,²² and he has also accused Western actors of “increasing tensions” and “undermining peace and stability” in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Kosovo.²³ Russia has also systematically used its state-backed media ecosystem in the Western Balkans to critique the EU and the West more broadly. Studies of Kremlin-linked outlets such as *Sputnik Srbija* show that the EU is consistently portrayed as “hegemonic”, “weak” and internally divided.²⁴ These narratives also depict EU-aligned states in the region as having lost sovereignty to Western control and as politically corrupt or dysfunctional.²⁵
- China by contrast rarely criticizes the EU in overtly rhetorical terms but instead advances a structural critique through its alternative development model. Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans is often framed in direct contrast with EU conditionality, emphasizing a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs and a willingness to overlook governance, labour and environmental standards.²⁶ This implicitly casts EU accession requirements such as rule-of-law reforms and regulatory compliance as overly restrictive and politically intrusive. The speed and flexibility of Chinese financing contrasts strongly with what many regional actors perceive as the EU’s slow and bureaucratic processes. Chinese-backed projects frequently bypass EU procurement, environmental and state aid rules, creating friction with accession requirements and highlighting the perceived rigidity of EU norms.²⁷ An example is Montenegro’s Bar–Boljare motorway, which was financed by a nearly EUR 1 billion Chinese loan, attracting criticism concerning its economic viability

22 See, for example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s 2018 statement, ‘The EU demands that every prospective EU member-state join the EU’s common foreign and defense policy [...] either they side with the West or Russia’, reported in this article: <https://europeanforum.net/lavrov-blames-the-west-for-increasing-tensions-in-western-balkans-is-moscow-flexing-its-muscles-in-the-region/>.

23 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed in a September 2025 speech at the United Nations General Assembly that the West was undermining peace and stability in the Western Balkans. He portrayed Russia’s activity in the region as “consistent in defending Serbia’s sovereignty”. For more information see, ‘Lavrov accuses West of undermining Peace in the Balkans at UN’, Sarajevo Times, 28 September 2025, <https://sarajevotimes.com/lavrov-accuses-west-of-undermining-peace-in-the-balkans-at-un/>.

24 ‘Russia’s Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija’, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 30 April 2020, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-narratives-toward-the-western-balkans-analysis-of-sputnik-srbija/56>.

25 Ibid.

26 ‘China’s strategic interests in the Western Balkans’, European Parliament, June 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI%282022%29733558_EN.pdf.

27 Vladimir Shopov, ‘Eyes Wide Shut: How to Read China’s Playbook in the Western Balkans’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 4 November 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/eyes-wide-shut-how-to-read-chinas-playbook-in-the-western-balkans/>.

and governance transparency, while demonstrating China's readiness to deliver large-scale funding without the conditionality associated with EU support.²⁸

To tackle these risks, the EU has developed an approach of "gradual" or "progressive" integration. Rather than relying solely on the distant promise of full membership, this model seeks to embed candidate countries in key elements of the EU system earlier in the accession process, thereby sustaining momentum for reform and reducing vulnerabilities to external influence. The EUR 6 billion Reform and Growth Facility (2024–2027), launched in April 2024, seeks to accelerate economic convergence by offering partial access to EU benefits prior to accession, conditional on the delivery of tangible socioeconomic and rule-of-law reforms defined in national Reform Agendas.²⁹ Front-loaded benefits include phased access to the EU single market (for example, participation in sectors such as energy, digital services or transport), integration into EU programmes and funding instruments (such as the Single Market Programme, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and increased pre-accession funding), and participation in EU agencies and regulatory bodies.

Crucially, because these benefits are conditional on measurable progress in rule-of-law reforms, governance standards and regulatory alignment, they can function as an early-stage resilience mechanism against hybrid

threats. By strengthening judicial independence, transparency in public procurement and regulatory oversight, gradual integration reduces the entry points through which external actors can exert undue influence. At the same time deeper integration into EU economic and institutional structures diminishes dependence on alternative sources of financing and political support, narrowing the strategic space available to Russia and China.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans are entering a phase of increasing differentiation driven by uneven progress towards EU accession. Since 2022 the EU has placed renewed strategic emphasis on enlargement and has delivered tangible gains, particularly in foreign policy alignment and sectoral reform in Albania and Montenegro. Nevertheless, progress across the region remains uneven. Internal EU constraints, the largely technocratic nature of conditionality and inconsistent political signalling have limited the capacity of enlargement to drive deeper political transformation in several candidate countries. There is therefore a risk that a two-tier dynamic could evolve, with some states moving into the EU's institutional frameworks, while others face prolonged uncertainty that risks weakening momentum for reform and increasing opportunities for hybrid threat actors.

Divergent accession trajectories also risk exacerbating geopolitical fragmentation and increasing exposure to external influence and

28 Urban Jakša, 'Debt-Trap or Diversification? Montenegro's Highway and the Limits of China's Leverage', *China Observers*, 25 February 2026, <https://chinaobservers.eu/debt-trap-or-diversification-montenegros-highway-and-the-limits-of-chinas-leverage/>.

29 'Commission welcomes political agreement on the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans', European Commission Press Release, 4 April 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_24_1688/IP_24_1688_EN.pdf.

hybrid interference in countries left outside EU structures, particularly Serbia, BiH and Kosovo. In this environment hybrid threat actors could seek to exploit ambiguity rather than opposition to accession by eroding trust in EU promises and amplifying the domestic incentives for strategic ambivalence.

Instruments of gradual EU integration, such as conditional financial support and partial access to EU policies, offer important tools to sustain engagement and reduce the space for hybrid threat actors. For example, increased access to the EU's energy market and infrastructure can reduce reliance on external suppliers, particularly Russian energy. Similarly, closer integration into EU digital and media frameworks can strengthen regulatory oversight and reduce exposure to disinformation ecosystems. Expanded opportunities for labour mobility, education and business integration also help anchor public support for the EU path by delivering visible socioeconomic gains. The success of these measures will depend on visibility, consistency and credible political commitment.

Recommendations

There are many opportunities for countries in the Euro-Atlantic community to increase their support to the Western Balkans to counter hybrid threats. Examples are investing in rule-of-law institutions, supporting media freedoms, and providing long-term funding to civil society and think tanks. The latter option

would also allow the Euro-Atlantic community to understand the vulnerabilities within societies better and develop effective targeted counter-measures.

There is enormous potential for EU accession to deliver long-term, substantive and sustainable change in the region, including reducing the space for hybrid threat actors to exploit. To do this, improved mechanisms are required to hold political leaders to account for lack of progress in reforms. To reduce "waiting room" dynamics, clearer interim milestones should be established with consistent conditionality and transparent criteria for rewards and suspensions. More should be done to make gradual integration more visible across the region, including highlighting the benefits of opportunities such as market access, mobility and infrastructure connectivity. Guardrails should be included in any such measures to protect against elite capture of funds.

The EU's leader-oriented approach to the region reinforces and legitimizes the position of some Western Balkan political elites who seek to use the EU's public endorsement to reinforce their grip on power. In some states it may also fail to deliver structural transformative change, as it excludes political and ethnic groups outside the ruling parties. An alternative approach would combine elite engagement with increased support for civil society and media organizations to deliver bottom-up and top-down improvements.

Trend two: Multi-alignment in the Western Balkans

Recent shifts in the global order have added complexity to the foreign policy trajectory of states in the Western Balkans. The West's gravitational pull has weakened as a result of the slow EU enlargement process, global developments such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and US retrenchment.³⁰ In some parts of the region this has led to fragmented security guarantees and overlapping spheres of influence,³¹ with strategic ambiguity becoming more appealing, as it allows greater room for manoeuvre without the need to accept conditionality.³² In this new era of growing multipolarity, Western Balkan states may seek a different balance between their traditional security guarantors (the EU, NATO and the US) and alternative actors such as Russia, China and the Gulf States. Although this may not necessarily lead to an immediate increase in hybrid threat activity in the region, it does increase risk and create vulnerabilities which could be exploited later.

A multipolar world: Multiple alliances and transactional relationships

While the EU, NATO and the US remain the dominant security and economic anchors for the Western Balkans, the region has increasingly

become an arena where these actors coexist and compete with Russia, China and the Gulf States. In many cases this multipolarity manifests itself as strategic ambiguity. It is pragmatic rather than ideological, providing a way for the region's governments to use competing power centres to maximize autonomy, resources and diplomatic leverage.

The clearest example of this "strategic ambiguity" is Serbia, where the government remains formally committed to EU accession and relies on the EU for the majority of trade, investment and regulatory alignment. At the same time Belgrade has refused to impose sanctions on Moscow and relies on Russia and China for diplomatic backing on Kosovo. Serbia is China's comprehensive strategic partner,³³ but it has also signed a fighter jet deal with France and lithium supply agreements with EU industries.³⁴ Rather than choosing sides, Serbia has embedded strategic ambiguity into its foreign policy, enabling Belgrade to extract benefits from all sides while avoiding irreversible alignment.

In BiH the central government cooperates closely with the EU, NATO and EUFOR Althea to uphold the Dayton Agreement³⁵ and preserve its territorial integrity. However, Republika

30 Blerim Vela, 'The Balkans in the multipolar moment', New Eastern Europe, 3 March 2026, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2026/03/03/the-balkans-in-the-multipolar-moment/>.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ljudmila Cvetkovic and Andy Heil, 'What Is Behind Serbia And China's "Ironclad Friendship"?' Radio Free Liberty / Radio Free Europe, 7 May 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-xi-visit-china-relations-vucic-russia/32936674.html>.

34 Dragan Stavljanin, 'Vucic's Delicate Balancing Act', Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 9 September 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/vucic-balancing-act-serbia-foreign-policy-russia-china-eu/33109901.html>.

35 The Dayton Agreement, formally known as the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the peace settlement that ended the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and established Bosnia and Herzegovina's postwar political and constitutional order.

Srpska (RS), one of BiH's entities, maintains close political alignment with Russia and is a permissive environment for pro-Russian influence activity. Examples are the use of RS territory for paramilitary and training camps linked to Russian networks,³⁶ the Kremlin's diplomatic support for secessionist narratives used by the leader of RS³⁷ and the amplification of Kremlin narratives through RS-based media ecosystems.³⁸

The cumulative effect of growing support for multipolarity in the Western Balkans is the erosion of the once dominant narrative that Euro-Atlantic orientation is the only credible strategic path for the region. This narrative must now contend with growing scepticism, competing identities and political actors who actively leverage ambiguity for domestic gain. This has created space for competing geopolitical narratives, particularly those promoted by Russia, China and the Gulf States, all of which position themselves as more reliable and less conditional partners than Western states.

The appeal of the 'other'

While there is clear geopolitical and geoeconomic competition in the region, this is often less simple than one side being seen as "good" and the other as "bad". Western influence in the region is a necessity, as the Western Balkans has strong economic ties with Europe; by contrast Russia, China and the Gulf States are expanding their footprints in some countries by invitation.

Russia uses energy, economic, political, cultural, media, NGO, religious, and security levers in the Western Balkans to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration, stoke conflict, undermine trust in democratic institutions and the rules-based international order,³⁹ and portray Russia as a historical ally and force for good in the region. This activity is particularly marked in Serbia and Serbian communities but also disseminates into Serbian-speaking populations (particularly in BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia). Alongside Serbia, Republika Srpska in BiH functions as a hub for the Russian presence in the region.⁴⁰ Russian state media and affiliated content ecosystems have a strong reach in parts of the region, often

36 'Moldova detains 74 people over an alleged Russia-backed unrest plot around key election'; Associated Press, 22 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-russia-arrests-plot-election-293ee902e878ce1efcca339759eb06d0>.

37 Evan Sing, 'Illiberal Partners: How Russia Foments Sedition and Secession in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska', Stanford University International Policy Review, 30 January 2025, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/sipr/content/illiberal-partners-how-russia-foments-sedition-and-secession-bosnia-and-herzegovinas>.

38 'Security And Geopolitical Crisis In Bosnia And Herzegovina: Russian Influence, Secessionist Policies Of Republika Srpska And International Responses – Analysis', Support4Partnership, 28 January 2026, <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/security-and-geopolitical-crisis-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-russian-influence-secessionist-policies-of-republika-srpska-and-international-responses-analysis>.

39 Samuel Greene et al., 'Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them', European Parliament, pp. 6, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

40 'Hybrid Boot: Russian Influence in the Western Balkans', Center for Western Balkans Studies, 29 October 2025, <https://cfwbs.org/hybrid-boot-russian-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.

via local relays, online portals, Serbian-language amplification networks, Sputnik Serbia, and the Balkan version of Russia Today (RT), which is accessible in Serbia and BiH.⁴¹ The Kremlin also leverages the partnership between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) to further its influence in Serbia, Montenegro, BiH, and Kosovo.⁴² The Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid (MOC-AO) is also subject to Russian influence.⁴³

China promotes itself as a reliable economic and political partner in the Western Balkans. This is often framed as a counter-offer to that of the West and supported by persistent criticism of EU and Western initiatives.⁴⁴ Beijing has financed infrastructure projects,⁴⁵ provided loans and, through military cooperation⁴⁶ with Serbia, provided arms and other military equipment. It has promoted its Digital Silk Road (DSR)⁴⁷ initiative across the region, resulting in

41 RT is only available in six other languages (Arabic, English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish), underscoring the region's importance to the Kremlin. The Russia Today Balkan website is available via this link: <https://rt.rs/>.

42 Harun Karcic, 'Russia's Influence in the Balkans: The Interplay of Religion, Politics, and History', Berkley Center, 24 June 2022, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russia-s-influence-in-the-balkans-theinterplay-of-religion-politics-and-history>.

43 In 2023 the Macedonian president warned of its ties to the Russian Secret Service. For more information see Angel Dimoski, 'President says has reports of Russia-affiliated people within MOC-OA, business, parties', MIA, 30 June 2023, <https://mia.mk/en/story/president-says-has-reports-of-russiaaffiliated-people-within-mocoabusiness-parties>.

44 For example, in August 2024 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a report on alleged US meddling in third countries, which referenced specific cases of election interference in the Western Balkans. In Serbia the US was said to have "interfered in the entire election process", as well as working with NGOs and the media to "fabricate China-related fake news, slandering projects undertaken by the Chinese side and hyping up so-called environmental protection, labour and corruption issues". The same report accused the US of supporting NGOs in Kosovo to create tensions with Serbia. See, 'The National Endowment for Democracy: What It Is and What It Does', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202408/t20240809_11468618.html. These accusations led to disinformation campaigns against prodemocracy groups in Serbia and Kosovo, often in alignment with Russian narratives stirring tension in Kosovo. For more information see Tijan Đorđević, 'Russian-Chinese tailwind for settling scores with NGOs', Istinomer, 2 September 2024, <https://english.istinomer.rs/analyses/russian-chinese-tailwind-for-settling-scores-with-ngos/>.

45 A recent case in Montenegro showed how a highway project could swell into a debt mountain. For more information see, Lela Sceanovic, 'Montenegro Exits Deal That Hedged Mammoth Chinese Highway Loan', RFE/RL, 21 July 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-exits-deal-chinese-highway-loan/32469505.html>.

46 'China's Expanding Influence in the Balkans: Strategic Implications of Military Cooperation with Serbia', Lansing Institute, 17 July 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/07/17/chinas-expanding-influence-in-the-balkans-strategic-implications-of-military-cooperation-with-serbia/#:~:text=Arms%20Market%20Expansion:%20Serbia%20has%20purchased%20Chinese,and%20showroom%20for%20its%20weapons%20in%20Europe>.

47 The DSR seeks to enhance digital infrastructure, internet connectivity and trade, and to facilitate connections with Chinese technology companies.

strategic cooperation with Serbia and RS in BiH⁴⁸ and in technology projects in Montenegro.⁴⁹ China's soft power in the region is growing, with Confucius Institutes⁵⁰ in five of the six states,⁵¹ alongside cultural centres, friendship associations, chambers of commerce, and Academies of Science. Chinese state-owned radio and television companies have struck deals allowing public television stations in Albania,⁵² BiH, Montenegro, and Serbia to broadcast some Chinese programmes free of charge.⁵³ The bulk of China's activity in the region takes place in Serbia, where China is the biggest single investor, and the two countries have developed

a "no strings partnership".⁵⁴ Chinese influence in Serbia spans politics, digitalization, security⁵⁵ (including the "Safe City"⁵⁶ project⁵⁷), and culture.⁵⁸

Iran's activities in the Western Balkans are selective, transactional and opportunistic. It is not a major investor in the region, as sanctions and banking restrictions limit large-scale engagement. Tehran's closest ties are currently with Serbia, despite it being predominantly Orthodox Christian and historically anti-Iranian during the wars of the 1990s. The relationship is driven by mutual non-recognition of Kosovo which has secured significant goodwill towards

48 Cooperation with China is mainly through Republika Srpska. Huawei has worked with Telekom Srpske and has been linked to smart-city cooperation in Sarajevo. For more details see Anda Bologa, 'China is Wiring the Western Balkans', CEPA, 25 March 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/china-is-wiring-the-western-balkans/>.

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is generally more cautious towards Beijing.

49 Anda Bologa, 'China is Wiring the Western Balkans', CEPA, 25 March 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/china-is-wiring-the-western-balkans/>.

50 Operated by China's Ministry of Education, they offer Chinese language courses, cultural programmes, scholarships, university student exchanges, and study trips for journalists. For more information see Dominika Urhová, 'The Demise of Confucius Institutes: Retreating or Rebranding?', China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), 5 September 2024, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-demise-of-confuciusinstitutes-retreating-or-rebranding/>.

51 There is no Confucius Institute in Kosovo, as Beijing does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state.

52 Li Xia, 'Albania and China Sign Agreement on Broadcasting of TV Programs', China Internet Information Center, 20 October 2019, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2019-10/20/content_75320400.htm.

53 Ana Krstinovska et al., 'China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles', Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2023, https://www.kas.de/documents/281657/281706/Belegexemplar+2023+China%E2%80%99s+Influence+on+the+WB_EN.pdf/.

54 Ibid.

55 Stefan Vladislavljev, 'Chinese Influence in Serbia', CEPA, 2 September 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-serbia/>.

56 Jonathan E. Hillman and Maesea McCalpin, 'Watching Huawei's "Safe Cities"', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 4 November 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/watching-huaweis-safe-cities>.

57 This includes Chinese-backed camera networks, opaque procurement, weak safeguards and repeated efforts to normalize biometric surveillance. The project has been expanded in Serbia despite public controversy and legal concerns. For more information see Anda Bologa, 'China is Wiring the Western Balkans', CEPA, 25 March 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/china-is-wiring-the-western-balkans/>.

58 A new Chinese cultural institute is currently being built in Serbia and will be the largest of its kind in Europe.

Iran in Belgrade.⁵⁹ Iran's links in BiH date to the Bosnian War, when Iran supplied arms, trainers and humanitarian aid to Bosniak forces. More recently, however, Iran's activities in BiH have been limited to the cultural and academic spheres, including through the Iranian Cultural Center in Sarajevo.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Albania represents the hardest counter to Iranian influence. Since 2016 it has hosted several thousand members of an Iranian opposition group under US protection. This has made Albania an adversary of Tehran. Iran has conducted cyberattacks on government systems in Tirana,⁶¹ leading to Albania cutting diplomatic ties in 2022.⁶²

The **Gulf States**, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, have deepened their influence in the Western Balkans through a combination of cultural diplomacy, political engagement,⁶³ religious outreach,⁶⁴ and investment.⁶⁵ Their activities are often framed as supportive partnerships that respect local sovereignty, in contrast with Western conditionality. Their activities include financing religious institutions, philanthropy,⁶⁶ real estate,⁶⁷ and strategic investments. While the Gulf States are not seeking to destabilize the Western Balkans, their influence contributes to a more crowded and less predictable geopolitical environment,

59 Giorgio Cafiero, 'Iran Forges an Unusual Alliance in the Balkans', *Stimson*, 16 November 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/iran-forges-an-unusual-alliance-in-the-balkans/>.

60 For more information see, 'Iranian Soft Power and Religion in Bosnia: A Conversation with Harun Karčić', Berkley Center at Georgetown University, 28 February 2022, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/iranian-soft-power-and-religion-in-bosnia>.

61 Una Hajdari, 'Iranian hackers target Albania in retaliation for hosting dissidents', *POLITICO*, 21 June 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-hackers-target-albania-servers-in-retaliation-hosting-dissidents/>.

62 Borzou Daragahi, 'Albania cuts ties to Iran over massive cyberattack', *The Independent*, 7 September 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/albania-iran-cyberattack-diplomats-us-b2161799.html>.

63 In February 2025 the Qatar Chamber and Tirana Chamber of Commerce signed an MoU to promote Qatari investment in Albanian energy, tourism, agriculture, and infrastructure. For more information see, 'Qatar and Tirana Chambers ink agreement', *Zawya*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/gcc/qatar-and-tirana-chambers-ink-agreement-et4h2a4z>.

64 Saudi Arabia developed a deep presence during and after the Bosnian War through humanitarian aid, mosque reconstruction, and educational and religious institutions. In recent years Saudi engagement has diversified to include a USD 22 million donation to build a central library at the University of Sarajevo, as well as investment and tourism cooperation. For more details see Hikmet Karcic, '30 years of Saudi Arabia–Bosnia and Herzegovina diplomatic ties', *Arab News*, 3 October 2023.

65 Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, et al., 'Relations between The Gulf Cooperation Council and The Western Balkans', in *Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans* (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19582.7>.

66 See, for example, Saudi Arabia's USD 22 million donation to build a central library at the University of Sarajevo.

67 One example is Belgrade Waterfront, a UAE-funded real estate project valued at USD 12–13 billion, including residential towers, high-end retail and hospitality, and commercial space. The project has been developed by Eagle Hills, an Abu Dhabi-based developer working in partnership with the Serbian government. For more details see, 'Eagle Hills announces major expansion of Belgrade Waterfront, \$13bn luxury project', *Construction Week*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.constructionweekonline.com/news/eagle-hills-announces-major-expansion-of-belgrade-waterfront-13bn-luxury-project>.

adding new layers to the region's information and identity landscape.

Perceptions of the United States in the Western Balkans

The United States remains an indispensable security actor in the region, yet Washington's recent strategic retrenchment and deal-making logic has reduced expectations of US diplomatic stewardship. This shift in US foreign policy was particularly visible in Washington's dealings with Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik in 2025, which culminated in the lifting of US sanctions against him.⁶⁸ Regional stakeholders widely interpreted the "Dodik deal"⁶⁹ as a departure from Washington's previous stance and legitimizing Dodik's obstructive tactics.⁷⁰ The decision was made just a few months after Dodik was convicted by a federal Bosnian court of undermining the Dayton Agreement,⁷¹ banned from holding political office and stripped of

his post as president of RS.⁷² The episode has since become emblematic of a broader trend: the perception in the region that the US is increasingly inclined towards ad hoc personality-driven diplomacy rather than long-term strategic engagement.

The suspension and large-scale reduction of USAID funding under the Trump Administration also had major political, economic, institutional, and societal consequences across the Western Balkans. USAID was a primary external funder of independent media, anti-corruption organizations, women's rights groups, rule-of-law NGOs, and EU integration support programmes. The January 2025 funding freeze resulted in shortfalls in income for many civil society organizations (CSOs), causing layoffs, programme closures and the suspension of watchdog mechanisms.⁷³ The scale of the cuts was unprecedented: in Kosovo 18 projects worth USD 162 million were frozen;⁷⁴ In Serbia up to USD 80 million in funding for civil

68 Dodik was sanctioned in 2017 for obstructing the US-brokered Dayton Peace Agreement.

69 The "Dodik deal" refers to a series of behind-the-scenes negotiations in 2025 aimed at de-escalating tension in Bosnia and Herzegovina and creating short-term stability. The outcome of the negotiations was the lifting of US sanctions on Milorad Dodik.

70 Christian Edwards, 'US lifts sanctions on Putin-backed Bosnian Serb strongman after Trump allies' lobbying', CNN, 30 October 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/30/world/milorad-dodik-sanctions-trump-intl>.

71 The Dayton peace agreement was signed in 1995 to end the war in Bosnia. Under the terms of the Agreement BiH consists of the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the ethnic Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, under a central government. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) oversees the civilian aspects of the Agreement, including state-level laws and institutions. Dodik has refused to implement several orders from the OHR.

72 'Court confirms prison sentence for Bosnia Serb leader Dodik, who rejects case', Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 1 August 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/court-confirms-prison-sentence-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik/33492110.html>.

73 Florent Bajrami and L Lazar Semini, 'Frozen USAID funding strands groups that support marginalised people in the Western Balkans', AP News, 6 February 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-western-balkans-usaid-marginalized-groups-e11430cac2b340da5958d8e3fc5b1c88>.

74 Brian Kelly, 'USAID funding freeze leaves the marginalized and vulnerable out in the cold in Western Balkans', European Interest, 7 February 2025, <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/usa-id-funding-freeze-leaves-the-marginalized-and-vulnerable-out-in-the-cold-in-western-balkans/>.

society was frozen;⁷⁵ and in North Macedonia approximately USD 72 million across 22 projects was suspended.⁷⁶ Beyond the financial damage the funding cuts have significantly eroded US soft power in the region, creating a void for other external actors to fill and an opportunity for some politicians to discredit NGOs and independent media as agents of foreign influence.⁷⁷

Conclusions

Some Western Balkan governments are diversifying their alliances, balancing between the EU, NATO and the US on one hand and Russia, China and emerging non-Western actors on the other. This trend is reinforced by the growing perception that the West's security commitments are no longer absolute. US strategic retrenchment, the Trump administration's transactional approach to diplomacy and episodes such as the 2025 "Dodik deal" have deepened uncertainty about the US's long-term reliability. Meanwhile, the suspension of USAID funding has undermined democratic resilience by weakening civil society, independent media and rule-of-law institutions, all of which are key pillars of Western influence.

Meanwhile, alternative actors are consolidating their presence. Russia continues to exploit linguistic, cultural and religious ties, particularly among Serb communities, to erode trust in democratic institutions and impede Euro-Atlantic integration. China has expanded its economic and digital footprint, especially in Serbia, through large-scale investment,

surveillance technologies, and educational and cultural initiatives. The Gulf States have increased their religious, cultural and financial presence. These developments challenge the once dominant assumption that the Western Balkans naturally gravitates towards a Euro-Atlantic future. Instead, the region is characterized by geopolitical and geoeconomic competition and a more transactional approach to international partnerships.

Recommendations

Multi-alignment in the Western Balkans provides opportunities for hybrid threat actors to deepen their engagement. However, it is important in tackling this problem to note that the end state should not be Western hegemony but Western primacy. Policymakers should not demand binary alignment ("them or us") as, particularly in the case of China, many Western countries are also seeking to balance security concerns with economic opportunity. Instead of forcing states in the region to choose a side, more could be done to upskill partners on the risks associated with deepening Russian and/or Chinese engagement and highlighting examples of the consequences. This engagement should focus on constraining the harmful forms of multi-alignment such as corruption, elite capture and security ambiguity.

There is a clear opportunity for the Euro-Atlantic community to provide more incentives for countries in the Western Balkans to be an ally rather than to hedge. This includes efforts to make Europe the easier, faster and more

75 Sava Mitrovic, 'USAID funding cuts and their impact on the Western Balkans: What's at stake for democracy and EU enlargement', European Forum, 27 January 2026, <https://europeanforum.net/usaaid-funding-cuts-and-their-impact-on-the-western-balkans-whats-at-stake-for-democracy-and-eu-enlargement/>.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

credible partner in the sectors that matter most to the region. For example, accelerating the disbursement of the EUR 6 billion Growth Plan fund and tying it to visible projects in areas such as connectivity, cloud capacity, digital public services, clean industry, and secure research could deliver significant benefit for the region, as well as reducing Beijing's opportunity to fill the void.

Clearer and faster progress on EU accession could act as a "carrot" for the region but will be difficult to achieve. Alongside the "carrot" the EU enlargement "stick" could be more forcefully applied in a small number of cases,

including screening strategic dependencies before countries join, and treating Chinese surveillance systems, sanctioned research ties, opaque procurement, and risky telecom vendors as enlargement-related issues to be considered as part of the accession process.

Targeted support to improve counter-disinformation capabilities across the region would reduce Russia's and China's opportunity to exploit local vulnerabilities. Sustained media and digital literacy initiatives in particular, alongside pre-bunking campaigns focusing on wedge issues, would go some way towards tackling the regionwide problem.

Trend three: Serbia at a crossroads

Serbia occupies a central and highly influential role in the Western Balkans, not merely as the region's largest economy but as a self-positioned anchor state that actively constructs and instrumentalizes "regionhood" to consolidate its influence. This is evident in its leadership of regional initiatives, deep economic ties with neighbouring states and cultivation of political networks across the region. Serbia leverages unresolved regional disputes, and especially the status of Kosovo, to reinforce its role as both a gatekeeper and broker within the region, shaping the pace and direction of integration processes. With elections due to take place over the next 12 months, Serbia's future political direction will have a profound impact on the wider region.

Why does Serbia matter?

Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Serbia emerged as one of its principal successor states, initially forming the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with Montenegro in 1992 before Montenegro became an independent state in 2006. The breakup of Yugoslavia led to the establishment of several independent states in the Western Balkans – Slovenia, Croatia, BiH, North Macedonia, and later Kosovo – through a series of political negotiations and

armed conflicts. During this period Serbia was closely involved in regional developments, both as a federal republic within the former Yugoslavia and through its political and military engagement in conflicts in Croatia, BiH and Kosovo. These processes were shaped by a combination of competing nationalist aspirations, territorial disputes and international intervention. Serbia's historical, political and societal ties with neighbouring states have therefore remained significant and continue to influence regional relations and cooperation.

Serbia is the largest economy in the Western Balkans and is expected to become the largest in Southeastern Europe by 2027.⁷⁸ It is a popular investment destination for the EU alongside companies from China, Russia and the Middle East that have developed infrastructure, real estate and investment projects. EU countries remain Serbia's largest trade partner, with 62 per cent of total trade, though China is the largest single investor.⁷⁹ Russia controls a large part of Serbia's oil and gas value chain following Gazprom's 2008 takeover of the Serbian oil company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS). However, Russia has agreed to relinquish control of NIS and is negotiating an exit following the US sanctions which were applied to the company in October 2025.⁸⁰

78 'Serbia 2026: Economic breakthrough in an era of growing global and regional challenges', Ifimes, 13 January 2026, <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/serbia-2026-economic-breakthrough-in-an-era-of-growing-global-and-regional-challenges/5738#>.

79 'Serbia-China trade surges in H1 2025; Investment and strategic cooperation expand', Serbia Business, 1 September 2025, <https://serbia-business.eu/serbia-china-trade-surges-in-h1-2025-investment-and-strategic-cooperation-expand/>; 'EU trade relations with the Western Balkans: Facts, figures and latest developments', EU Trade and Economic Security, accessed on 18 March 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/western-balkans_en.

80 Maziar Motamedi, 'Russians agree to quit Serbian oil company as US sanctions bite', Al Jazeera, 11 November 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/11/russians-agree-to-quit-serbian-oil-company-as-us-sanctions-bite>.

Serbia has sought to remain diplomatically agile and balance its relationships with the EU, the US, Russia, and China under its “four pillars” foreign policy doctrine, which promotes balanced cooperation with all four geopolitical actors.⁸¹ Although the Serbian government has continued to declare that EU membership is a strategic goal, this has not been supported by progress on accession.⁸² The most recent assessment from the EU Commission noted that “there is an anti-EU narrative evident not only in Serbian media outlets but also used by political office holders, including at the highest levels.”⁸³ The same report highlighted serious concerns about democratic backsliding, the rule of law and media freedoms, alongside a lack of political will to implement changes.⁸⁴

Serbia has been a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme since 2006. Despite its active PfP cooperation, Serbia does not seek NATO membership, maintaining a position of military neutrality. This neutrality is not passive; instead, it allows cooperation with individual partners while refraining from active membership of collective defence

organizations. A military strategic partnership was agreed between Russia and Serbia in 2013, followed by a military-technical agreement in 2014. Until Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 both countries regularly conducted joint military exercises,⁸⁵ though Serbia has consistently conducted far more military exercises with Western/NATO partners than with Russia.⁸⁶ Serbia has expanded its military cooperation with China in recent years, including the procurement of Chinese-made drones and missiles and a joint military training exercise in 2025.⁸⁷

Belgrade maintains strong connections with Serbian communities across the region, largely in Kosovo, BiH, Montenegro, and to a much lesser extent North Macedonia. Since 2020 the Serbian government has sought to promote the “Serbian World” concept across the wider region. Modelled on Putin’s “Russian World”, it is a soft-power concept built on ethnic unity, Orthodox identity and a shared narrative of historical victimhood which suggests that belonging transcends state sovereignty.⁸⁸ Anti-Western rhetoric is a key part of this narrative, which

81 ‘Četiri stuba srpske spoljne politike’, Radio Television of Serbia, 30 August 2009, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/123741/cetiri-stuba-srpske-spoljne-politike.html>.

82 Serbia’s EU accession process has stalled, with only two chapters provisionally closed and no new chapters opened recently due to a lack of progress in reforms.

83 ‘Serbia 2025 Report’, European Commission, 4 November 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf.

84 Ibid.

85 ‘Russian-Serbian ties: secret services, economy, and military’, Defence 24, 3 January 2026, <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/russian-serbian-ties-secret-services-economy-and-military>.

86 ‘EWB: Serbia maintains moratorium on military exercises with the West’, N1, 25 March 2024, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/ewb-serbia-maintains-moratorium-on-military-exercises-with-west/>.

87 Stefan Vladislavljev, ‘Serbia Deepens Military Ties With China Amid Global Distractions’, China Observers, 19 July 2025, <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-quiet-signal-serbia-deepens-military-ties-with-china-amid-global-distractions/>.

88 ‘The Serbian World crisis and Russia’s search for a new Balkan foothold’, Lansing Institute, 12 November 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/11/12/the-serbian-world-crisis-and-russias-search-for-a-new-balkan-foothold/>.

continues to be promoted by senior Serbian political figures.⁸⁹ Despite being sanctioned in the EU, outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today remain active in Serbia, promoting messaging consistent with the Kremlin's strategic objectives. The recent establishment of the Russian Historical Society in Serbia⁹⁰ further contributes to the increasing dissemination of Russian narratives in the country and across the region.

Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 and Serbia's continuing refusal to recognize it is the region's most destabilizing geopolitical issue, creating structural weakness and a bottleneck for broader regional integration. Serbia's nonrecognition keeps Kosovo in a weakened state and gives Serbia leverage, as it ensures Kosovo cannot progress its EU accession ambitions. It also ensures that trade barriers, customs disputes and transport blockages persist, and that North Kosovo remains economically fragmented and vulnerable to criminal networks.⁹¹ There are also regional stability implications, most significantly in neighbouring BiH, with Republika Srpska's secessionist narrative emboldened by a failure to normalize Kosovo–Serbia relations, and the risk that escalation over Kosovo would destabilize BiH's Dayton Agreement.⁹² Further

afield, the "Kosovo issue" generates support for Serbia from international partners, including Russia, China and Iran, all of which support nonrecognition.

A changing political environment?

In early 2025 nationwide student-led protests began in Serbia in response to the collapse of a canopy in the Novi Sad railway station which resulted in the death of 16 people. The protests were driven by concerns about corruption and government negligence in relation to the incident. By March 2025 the protests had become the largest in Serbia's history. They have since evolved into a broader protest movement. Regular gatherings are still held in cities across Serbia, though turnout fluctuates and is generally lower than the peak in 2025. These ongoing protests consistently accuse the government of corruption, abuse of power and authoritarianism, with demands for systemic reforms, accountability for the disaster and snap parliamentary elections.

In response to the protests the Serbian government has consolidated its influence over state institutions and maintained a hard line towards protesters. In March 2025 the Serbian deputy prime minister credited Russia's

89 'Serbian minister visits Moscow, accuses EU of "anti-Russian hysteria"', France 24, 23 August 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220823-serbian-minister-visits-moscow-accuses-eu-of-anti-russian-hysteria>.

90 'Opening of the Russian historical society in Serbia: Confirmation of brotherhood ties and an important political message', International and Security Affairs Centre, 3 November 2025, <https://www.isac-fund.org/en/programmes/regional-initiative-to-combat-disinformation/analysis-of-the-news-opening-of-the-russian-historical-society-in-serbia-confirmation-of-brotherhood-ties-and-an-important-political-message>.

91 Marina Vulović, 'The Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia', Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 17 March 2023, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C17_KosovoSerbiaRelations_Web.pdf.

92 'The Western Balkans: Controlled Instability?', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 December 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/the-western-balkans-controlled-instability/>.

intelligence services with helping Belgrade respond to the protests,⁹³ and later in the year Russian media blamed EU member states for fuelling the unrest via “subversive activities”.⁹⁴ Human rights observers have documented the use of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, attacks on media freedoms, and pressure on civil society organizations by the Serbian authorities.⁹⁵ In response to the government crackdown the European Commissioner for Enlargement publicly questioned the “sincerity of Serbia’s commitment to the EU path”,⁹⁶ noting that the EU had a “problem in Belgrade”.⁹⁷

Although it initially appeared the protests could undermine Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić’s tenure, this risk seems now to have faded. Vučić has thus far refused to schedule an early election and may continue to do so until

the constitutional deadline in 2027 to attempt to wait out the protest movement. Meanwhile, the protesters are planning for the long term, including transitioning from civic mobilization to political engagement.

Serbia-linked hybrid threat activity

In recent years actors linked to Serbia have conducted hybrid threat operations in the region and farther afield, including efforts to interfere in neighbouring states’ political processes; spreading anti-EU rhetoric and disinformation; supporting separatist actors (especially in BiH); and promoting nationalist agendas that undermine regional integration.⁹⁸ Some of this activity such as training camps in support of a Russian plot to interfere in Moldova’s elections⁹⁹

93 ‘Serbia deputy prime minister says Russian spies help put down protests’, Reuters, 21 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-deputy-prime-minister-says-russian-spies-help-put-down-protests-2025-03-21/>.

94 ‘Russian intelligence accuses EU and independent media of fuelling unrest in Serbia’, European Western Balkans, 15 September 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/09/15/russian-intelligence-accuses-eu-and-independent-media-of-fuelling-unrest-in-serbia/>.

95 ‘Serbia/Kosovo Events of 2025’, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/serbia/kosovo>.

96 Katarina Baletic, ‘European Commission, MEPs Criticise Serbia Over Protest Crackdown’, Balkan Insight, 9 September 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/09/european-commission-meps-criticise-serbia-over-protest-crackdown/bi/>.

97 ‘Kos on the situation in Serbia: “We have a problem in Belgrade”’, European Western Balkans, 8 September 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/09/08/we-have-a-problem-in-belgrade/>.

98 ‘European Parliament Resolutions on Western Balkan Countries: Growing concern over Serbia’s destabilising influence in the region’, European Centre for Research, Transparency, and Accountability, August 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/301602/Nedeljkov_Policy%20paper_EUCRTA_EP%20resolutions%20on%20Serbias%20influence%20in%20the%20region.pdf.

99 In September 2025 Moldovan police arrested 74 people in connection with a Russian plot to interfere in the country’s elections, most of whom had allegedly travelled to Serbia and Republika Srpska in BiH for training before being arrested. According to media reports a training camp had been established near Loznica in Serbia, with Russian and Belarusian instructors teaching tactics for orchestrating street unrest, breaking police cordons and using weapons. For more information see, ‘Moldova detains 74 people over an alleged Russia-backed unrest plot around key election’, Associated Press, 22 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-russia-arrests-plot-election-293ee902e878ce1efcca339759eb06d0>, and ‘Infrastructure of Russian Influence in the Western Balkans’, Digital Forensic Center, <https://dfc.me/en/infrastructure-of-russian-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.

appears to be connected with Russia and the close cooperation between Russia's and Serbia's intelligence and security agencies.¹⁰⁰ Other activities appear to have no link to Russia.

Across several neighbouring states the authorities and civil society groups have alleged interference activities by Serbia-based or Serbia-linked networks, ranging from coordinated information campaigns to political mobilization and intimidation. The degree of state involvement varies by case and is often contested; the operational effect, however, is to increase uncertainty and polarization during politically sensitive periods. For example:

- In Montenegro, activity linked to Serbia includes mobilizing and transporting large numbers of voters from Serbia into Montenegro ahead of elections,¹⁰¹ information operations,¹⁰² and the establishment of Serbian cultural institutions that reinforce Kremlin narratives.¹⁰³
- In Kosovo, Serbian individuals have sought to undermine democratic processes,¹⁰⁴ erode sovereignty and amplify ethnic tension.¹⁰⁵
- In BiH, Belgrade's close partnership with Republika Srpska includes political and institutional destabilization, paramilitary training¹⁰⁶ and cross-border influence

100 Russia has a significant operational presence in Serbia, with examples of several Russian intelligence officers who have been recalled from duty or declared *persona non grata* in EU countries reappearing in Serbia in different guises (see, for example, Carl Schreck, Mark Krutov, Riin Aljas, and Sergei Dobrynin, 'Exclusive: Suspected Russian Spy Seeks Top Security Post in Serbia, Central Asia', Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 11 March 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-spy--suspects-belgium-expelled-gru-svr-osce-serbia-central-asia/33342428.html>) and a marked increase in the number of Russian diplomats based in Serbia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see Katarina Baletic, 'Moscow boosts its Belgrade mission', European Focus, 7 February 2024, <https://europeanfocus.eu/moscow-boosts-its-belgrade-mission-russia-serbia/#:~:text=Since%20the%20beginning%20of%20the,Foreign%20Affairs%20Ministry%20data%20shows>).

101 'Dangerous Interference by Serbia in Local Elections in Montenegro', Academy for Democratic Development, 29 September 2024, <https://regionaladd.org/dangerous-interference-by-serbia-in-local-elections-in-montenegro-aleksandar-vucic-undermines-regional-stability/>.

102 'Montenegro's president accuses Serbia of meddling in election', Reuters, 2 September 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/montenegros-president-accuses-serbia-meddling-085931460.html?guccounter=1>.

103 Vanja Čalović Marković, 'The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans: Montenegro as a Test Case', National Endowment for Democracy, 31 July 2024, <https://www.ned.org/the-struggle-against-authoritarian-influence-in-the-western-balkans-montenegro-as-a-test-case/>.

104 'Kosovo PM Accuses Serbia of Election Interference', TIR-FAX News, 9 March 2025, <https://www.tirfaxnews.org/2025/03/allegations-kosovo-pm-accuses-serbia-of-election-interference/>.

105 Much of this activity has taken place in northern Kosovo and has been supported by significant cooperation between Serbian state structures and proxy actors, including intelligence and espionage operations. For more information see Beytush Gashi, 'Serbia's Efforts to Destabilize Kosovo: Hybrid Warfare Tactics and the Role of Serbian Intelligence and Security Services', KOHA, 7 April 2025, <https://www.koha.net/en/veshtrime/perpjekjet-e-serbise-per-te-destabilizuar-kosoven-taktikat-e-luftes-hibride-dhe-rol-i-i-shepbimeve-te-intelgjences-dhe-sigurise-serbe>.

106 'Moldova detains 74 people over an alleged Russia-backed unrest plot around key election', Associated Press, 22 September 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-russia-arrests-plot-election-293ee902e878ce1efcc a339759eb06d0>.

efforts designed to weaken BiH's unity and governance.

- In Albania, Serbia has conducted espionage operations,¹⁰⁷ and pro-Serbian information operations have sought to influence public perceptions.¹⁰⁸

These examples show that Serbia-based and/or Serbia-linked actors are using hybrid threat tactics, both alongside the Kremlin and as independent endeavours. The objective of this activity is to destabilize the region, sow confusion, and undermine trust in governments and multilateral organizations. In most cases Belgrade has denied involvement in or knowledge of the hybrid threat activity.

Conclusions

Serbia's combination of economic weight, diplomatic agility, military neutrality, and influence over co-ethnic communities gives it an outsized capacity to shape regional outcomes. This capacity is currently exercised through strategic balancing: deep economic integration with the EU; expanding security and technological cooperation with China; enduring links with Russia; and resistance to full alignment with Euro-Atlantic norms. Persistent governance weaknesses, democratic backsliding and the instrumentalization of nationalist narratives have limited domestic reform while enabling a more assertive regional posture. The unresolved question of Kosovo's independence

remains the most significant structural fault line, constraining regional integration and amplifying spillover risks, particularly for BiH, while anchoring Serbia's relationships with external actors opposed to Kosovo's recognition.

The trajectory Serbia chooses over the coming electoral cycle will be decisive for regional stability. Continued political stagnation, coupled with links to hybrid threat activities abroad, risks entrenching insecurity, polarization and weakened trust in democratic institutions across the Western Balkans. For Euro-Atlantic policymakers the challenge lies in managing Serbia not only as an EU candidate country but as a regional power whose actions can either anchor stability or accelerate fragmentation. This will require a calibrated approach that combines clearer political conditionality, stronger responses to democratic erosion and hybrid interference, and sustained engagement with Serbian society beyond governing elites.

Recommendations

Serbia has yet to incur EU accession-related costs linked to the recent growth in hybrid threats from within its borders. One way for the Euro-Atlantic community to nudge Serbia in the desired direction is to define explicit red lines for hybrid threat activities which exploit Serbian territory and communicate this (including the consequences for accession progress and funding incentives) to Belgrade. Such a response would allow the Euro-Atlantic community to

107 Nen Si, 'Head of State Intelligence Service: We opposed hostile operations by Russian and Serbian espionage', Euronews, 17 July 2024, <https://euronews.al/en/head-of-state-intelligence-service-we-opposed-hostile-operations-by-russian-and-serbian-espionage/>.

108 'Albania's Special Commission on Disinformation intensifies efforts', Albanian Times, 26 September 2024, <https://albaniantimes.al/albania-special-commission-disinformation/>. 'Disinformation Report: Albania in 2024', SEE Check, 5 June 2025, <https://seecheck.org/index.php/2025/06/05/disinformation-report-albania-in-2024/>.

move away from improvised responses towards graduated deterrence. Another option is to provide additional resources such as joint investigative task forces to investigate future suspected hybrid threat activity, with the aim of establishing responsibility and removing plausible deniability.

Several governance deficiencies in Serbia require long-term support from the Euro-Atlantic community, including media freedoms, the rule of law, anti-corruption, and election integrity. Any such programmes should contain strong safeguards against elite capture and focus on delivering tangible long-term changes to governance and integrity.

Trend four: The enabling environment

There are several overlapping governance weaknesses in the Western Balkans that create a fertile environment for destabilization, elite capture and hybrid interference. Across the region incomplete postconflict state building, unresolved questions of sovereignty and identity, and prolonged uncertainty about EU accession have produced fragile institutional ecosystems in which formal rules exist but are weakly enforced. Key vulnerabilities include politicized judiciaries, systemic deficiencies in public procurement and oversight, media capture, and entrenched patronage networks linking political elites, economic actors and organized crime. These conditions erode public trust, reduce accountability and create permissive space for corruption, disinformation and coercive influence.

Governance vulnerabilities and corruption

Despite a variety of political and public-sector reforms, partly intended to make progress towards EU integration, polling suggests that populations within the Western Balkans still see corruption as one of the region's biggest problems.¹⁰⁹ Assessments conducted by Transparency International support this, revealing a mixture of slow and limited progress

in strengthening integrity systems, along with democratic backsliding that strongly augments corruption levels.¹¹⁰ There are marked differences across the six countries, with recent improvement in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, and decline in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH. The European Commission's Rule of Law Reports highlight that even where reforms are underway, enforcement is inconsistent and reversible, particularly in Serbia, North Macedonia and BiH.¹¹¹

In a 2024 Freedom House report all the Western Balkan countries were classified as hybrid or transitional regimes, meaning they combined formal democratic features with increasing authoritarian practices. Serbia recorded the sharpest decline among the assessed countries, with key institutions (media, judiciary, regulatory bodies) described as "effectively captured" and misused for partisan gain. Montenegro, North Macedonia and BiH also saw declines, while Albania and Kosovo stagnated rather than improved.¹¹² These changes were not unique to the region: they replicate patterns seen in other regions, with Freedom House reporting a twentieth consecutive year of declining democratic

109 'Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion', Regional Cooperation Council, 2023, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/.

110 Isabelle Büchner, 'Between anti-corruption reform and decline: Examining key actors, strengths and weaknesses in the Western Balkans and Türkiye's national integrity systems', Transparency International, 2024, https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/2024_NISReport_BetweenAnti-CorruptionReformAndDecline_English.pdf.

111 'Rule of law reports for Western Balkan countries highlight lack of effective fight against corruption', European Western Balkans, 29 August 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/08/29/rule-of-law-reports-for-western-balkan-countries-highlight-lack-of-effective-fight-against-corruption/>.

112 'Nations in Transit 2024: A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy', Freedom House, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>.

governance,¹¹³ and the V-Dem dataset indicating a global wave of autocratization.¹¹⁴

Although all the Western Balkan states have adopted legal frameworks aligned with EU standards, judicial independence remains fragile. Key challenges include political interference, staffing shortages and administrative backlogs.¹¹⁵ For example, Albania has adopted a new justice sector strategy but continues to face political interference that undermines it. In North Macedonia judicial reforms are hampered by a lack of funding and staff shortages, which reduces public trust and creates backlogs; in Serbia political interference is a major driver of low public confidence in the judiciary.¹¹⁶ The result is a regionwide enforcement gap that enables corruption and organized crime to persist, with limited legal consequences.

The fragmented and constrained information environment

The information environment in the Western Balkans is shaped by systemic media capture

and weak editorial independence, reducing the capacity of media systems to act as checks on power and creating vulnerabilities for hybrid threat actors to exploit. Across much of the region major television networks, print outlets and advertising markets are either directly controlled by political actors or indirectly dependent on them through opaque ownership structures, state advertising and regulatory pressure.¹¹⁷ Public service broadcasters are often formally independent but in practice subordinated to ruling parties, while private outlets operate within narrow commercial and political margins that discourage investigative reporting. This creates a system in which critical coverage exists but is diluted, fragmented or delegitimized by polarizing narratives.¹¹⁸

Polling shows that Western Balkan societies are highly vulnerable to disinformation,¹¹⁹ driven by low media literacy¹²⁰ and the challenging media environment. Although disinformation is often framed as an external threat, research shows that the main perpetrators are domestic

113 Ibid.

114 'Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?', V-Dem Institute, 2025, https://v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.

115 Dr. Pavel Usvatov, Alina Monceanu, and Dr. Mahir Muharemović, 'Rule of Law Report 2025'. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2025, <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/rule-of-law-report-2025>.

116 Ibid.

117 For more details see the European Commission's enlargement reports available for each country here: https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/enlargement-reports-2024-commission-outlines-progress-and-priorities-candidate-countries-2024-10-30_en.

118 Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi, 'Nations in Transit 2024: A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy', Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>.

119 Gjorgji Mitrevski et al., 'The effect of disinformation and foreign influences on the democratic processes in North Macedonia in 2023', Metamorphosis Foundation, 2024, https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/the-effect-of-disinformation-and-foreign-influences-on-the-democratic-processes-in-north-macedonia-in-2023/.

120 Marin Lessenski, 'Media Literacy Index 2023', Open Society Institute, 2024, <https://osis.bg/wpcontent/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>.

politicians and editors.¹²¹ In addition to these domestic actors several regional and external actors seek to influence the media environment. Serbian-language media networks operate across multiple Western Balkan states to create a shared information space that often reinforces nationalist and revisionist narratives.¹²² Russian state and proxy outlets, frequently relayed through local partners, tabloids and online portals, have embedded themselves within this ecosystem, amplifying anti-Western messaging, legitimizing authoritarian governance models and framing regional instability as the result of Western interference rather than domestic governance failures.¹²³ Alongside this, Chinese state media partnerships with regional outlets, academic institutions and public broadcasters promote favourable coverage of China's role in the region.¹²⁴

A further layer of vulnerability lies in the structural characteristics of the region's media market. Across the Western Balkans many outlets operate with limited staff, tight financial margins and high pressure to generate rapid online content, leading to a reliance on syndicated material and insufficient verification procedures.¹²⁵ This dynamic unintentionally amplifies external influence: research shows that Russian state outlets such as *Sputnik Srbija* and RT Balkan achieve significant reach not through direct audience dominance but because their content is systematically republished by local media, sometimes even by public broadcasters.¹²⁶ This structural vulnerability extends across the region. One example is Albania, where public opinion is strongly pro-EU and pro-NATO, but a recent study found that weak editorial safeguards and a "copy-pasting culture" enabled the circulation of foreign disinformation narratives.¹²⁷

121 'Monitoring Influence & Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans', Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Monitoring-Influence-and-Disinformation-Campaigns-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>.

122 Mato Brautović and Romana John, 'The Role of the Media in Russian and Serbian Influence Operations: A Case Study on Cross-Border Narrative Shaping in the Western Balkans', *Medijske studije / Media Studies*, 28 February 2025, <https://ojs.srce.hr/medijske-studije/article/view/29586>.

123 Mirjana Jevtovic and Milos Katic, 'How Russia Spreads Fake News in the Balkans', *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 22 September 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-fake-news-disinformation-balkans/33126528.html>.

124 Chris J. Dolan, 'China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans and How the West Should Respond', *Small Wars Journal*, 11 May 2025, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/11/05/chinas-rising-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.

125 'Media Capture in the Western Balkans: From Captured States to Captured Media', *Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity (SELDI)*, May 2024, <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Resources/Reports-and-papers/Media-Capture-in-the-Western-Balkans-From-captured-states-to-captured-media>.

126 Tihomira Doncheva, 'Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media', *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, April 2020, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/tracking-russias-narratives-in-the-western-balkan-media/53>; 'Sputnik Srbija Piggy-Backing on Local Outlets', *EUvsDisinfo*, 12 November 2021 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/sputnik-srbija-piggy-backing-on-local-outlets/>.

127 'Report on Anti-NATO and Anti-EU Disinformation in Albanian Media', *BIRN Albania*, 28 October 2024, <https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/birn-albania-report-on-anti-nato-and-anti-eu-disinformation-in-albanian-media-launched/>.

Security vulnerabilities

Conflict remains a very real security concern in the region, including tension between Kosovo and Serbia,¹²⁸ as well as domestic disputes within BiH. Polling shows that populations in Serbia and BiH are most concerned about the threat of regional conflict (around a third reported it as a concern), but even in Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia the figure was between 13 and 18 per cent.¹²⁹

Organized crime is also a threat in the Western Balkans, with groups engaged “in a variety of illegal activities, ranging from drug production and trafficking, counterfeit good production and smuggling, money laundering, to cybercrime”.¹³⁰ The region’s location along major migration and drug trafficking routes is a key enabler of this activity. Organized crime is reported to have “a corrosive impact on state institutions”, including links with political elites.¹³¹ Illicit financial flows amount to an average of six per cent of the region’s gross domestic product, driven by corruption, tax evasion and organized crime.¹³² This weakens

democratic governance and the rule of law, hindering economic growth.

Societal vulnerabilities

During the last two decades the region’s population has decreased by nearly 2.5 million, with one in five Western Balkan citizens now living abroad. The region’s population is expected to shrink by a further three million by 2050.¹³³ There are multiple reasons for this, including weak institutions, poor governance standards, corruption, environmental degradation, delays in the EU accession process, economic challenges such as sluggish growth, persistent structural unemployment, and limited opportunities for advancement. Many young people also choose to leave in pursuit of better education, higher-quality healthcare and improved earning prospects.¹³⁴

Emigration and low birthrates have created a rapidly ageing population across all six states, creating economic and political challenges. It also creates a reliance on foreign workers to fill critical gaps. In 2023 Serbia issued 52,000 work

128 The EU-facilitated Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue has been unable to deliver progress on normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, and has been hampered by credibility issues, including the nonrecognition of Kosovo by five EU member states.

129 ‘Western Balkans Regional Poll, May–July 2025’, International Republican Institute, 11 September 2025, <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-may-july-2025/>.

130 Wouter Zweers, Jérôme de Ryck, and Barbora Šliogerytė, ‘Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans’, Clingendael Report, March 2025, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Clingendael_Security_and_Stability_Scenarios_for_the_Western_Balkans.pdf.

131 Ibid.

132 Aliya Shibli, ‘Tackling illicit financial flows in eastern Europe’, *The Banker*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.thebanker.com/content/71e4c633-0b94-5622-8dd2-ee38278afda3>.

133 Paulina Wankiewicz-Kłoczko, ‘The Vanishing Balkans: The Region’s Demographic Crisis’, Centre for Eastern Studies, 5 March 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-03-05/vanishing-balkans-regions-demographic-crisis>.

134 Isabelle Marchais, ‘Depopulation in the Western Balkans’, Institut Jacques Delors, 20 July 2023, <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/les-balkans-occidentaux-en-voie-de-depeuplement/>.

permits to foreign citizens, of whom 39 per cent were Russian, and 20 per cent were Chinese. Across the rest of the region foreign workers primarily come from South and Southeast Asia.¹³⁵

The Western Balkans are among the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse regions in Europe. All six countries contain multiple large minorities, often territorially concentrated and historically polarized. Populist politicians exploit divisions within these societies and portray minority ethnic groups as a threat, thereby promoting ethnic rather than civic definitions of society.¹³⁶ This fosters an environment which is conducive to radicalization and extremism,¹³⁷ as well as vulnerabilities to external actors seeking to exacerbate tension.

Conclusions

The enabling environment for hybrid threats in the Western Balkans is shaped by structural vulnerabilities that cut across governance, institutions, society, and the information space. Despite incremental reforms related to EU integration, the region continues to face entrenched corruption, media capture, political polarization, demographic decline, and weakened checks and balances. These challenges generate a persistent gap between formal democratic institutions and their real-world performance.

This creates an environment with many vulnerabilities for hybrid threat actors to exploit. Weak institutions allow corruption and state capture to flourish; captured media landscapes enable disinformation; polarized societies are more susceptible to radicalization; and stagnating EU accession processes reduce incentives for reform. While these vulnerabilities vary by country, all six Western Balkan states exhibit overlapping weaknesses that can be and have been leveraged by hybrid threat actors.

Recommendations

Anti-corruption progress in the region is fragile, easily reversed and dependent on political will. An option to address this is to strengthen EU-backed integrity and rule-of-law mechanisms by fully utilizing instruments such as the Democracy Shield (which is available to candidate countries) and incorporating anti-corruption benchmarks into interim accession milestones. Beyond anticorruption programmes Democracy Shield initiatives could also be applied more effectively in the region to support counter-disinformation and election protection initiatives. Where democratic backsliding occurs, the Euro-Atlantic community could do more to call it out and ensure that conditionality measures are applied.

135 Paulina Wankiewicz-Kłoczko, 'The Vanishing Balkans: The Region's Demographic Crisis', Centre for Eastern Studies, 5 March 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-03-05/vanishing-balkans-regions-demographic-crisis>.

136 Wouter Zweers, Jérôme de Ryck, and Barbora Šliogerytė, 'Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans'. Clingendael Report, March 2025, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Clingendael_Security_and_Stability_Scenarios_for_the_Western_Balkans.pdf.

137 Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Johanna-Maria Hülzer, and Gillian Wylie, 'Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region: Key findings and implications for research', PAVE Publications, 16 January 2023, pp. 7–8, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/violent-extremism-western-balkans-and-mena-region-key-findings-and-implications-research>.

Support for independent media, including long-term funding rather than short grant cycles, could be increased to reduce the risk of media capture. Any external funding should recognize that many local media markets struggle to be commercially viable¹³⁸ and require stable backing to deliver long-term results. Media literacy and digital resilience across all age groups require investment through school curricula, public campaigns and partnerships with civil society. Ideally, these programmes should be regionally coordinated to ensure scalability and cross-border coherence. Clear communication strategies should also be adopted by states across the region and the EU to counter disinformation, articulate the benefits of meaningful reforms and improve public trust.

Ideally, increased resources to counter foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) within the EU would support improved strategic communications from governments in the region.

Enhanced regional cooperation among civil society organizations (CSOs) should be encouraged through dedicated coordination platforms designed to mitigate the impact of donor withdrawal and improve sustainability. Such a system would allow CSOs to deliver important programming such as support for interethnic reconciliation initiatives that address societal fractures exploited by hybrid threat actors, including community-level dialogue programmes and cross-border civic exchanges.

138 'Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans', 2020, <https://journalift.org/resources/sustainability-of-professional-journalism-in-the-media-business-environment-of-the-western-balkans/>.

Conclusions

Security and stability in the Western Balkans matter to the Euro-Atlantic community: the region is geographically adjacent to the EU, institutionally intertwined through accession processes and security missions, and politically exposed to contestation. The region's vulnerability to hybrid threats is the product of an enabling environment in which external and domestic actors can convert ambiguity, institutional weakness and identity politics into sustained leverage.

Over the next three to five years the four trends this paper highlights will interact to shape the hybrid threat landscape in the Western Balkans.

1. The EU enlargement trajectory will continue to function as a strategic signal.

If milestones are predictable, benefits are visible, and conditionality is consistently applied, the enlargement process can reinforce resilience by incentivizing institutional reform and aligning political expectations. Where timelines remain uncertain, or where progress appears to be decoupled from performance, the process could have the opposite effect: reform fatigue may deepen, elite bargaining and "stabilitocratic" governance may increase, and citizens may become more receptive to narratives that frame Euro-Atlantic integration as unattainable or unwanted. Hybrid threat actors do not need to block enlargement entirely to gain an advantage in this scenario. Instead, they can benefit by sustaining ambiguity, amplifying cynicism,

and widening the gap between promises and lived experience.

2. The trend of increasing multipolarity does not automatically imply regional realignment away from the Euro-Atlantic community, but it does reshape the operating environment. Some Western Balkan governments are increasingly adept at hedging and are seeking to leverage competing partnerships for financing, technology, energy, diplomatic support, and domestic legitimacy. This can become harmful when it entrenches opaque procurement, deepens critical dependencies, normalizes surveillance or coercive technologies, or allows political finance and elite capture to undermine accountability. The central risk is not the existence of multiple external relationships; it is the normalization of dependencies and informal channels that weaken accountability and expand the space for coercive influence.

3. Serbia's trajectory will remain pivotal, with direct implications for regional stability and hybrid threat dynamics. As the largest economy and a central political actor in the Western Balkans, Serbia's posture shapes the strategic environment for its neighbours and affects the status of unresolved disputes, particularly around Kosovo and BiH. In the coming years Serbia's domestic political evolution, especially approaching the forthcoming elections, will influence whether its regional role trends towards stabilization

or a posture in which strategic ambiguity, nationalist narratives and permissive grey-zone activity become more pronounced.

4. Most consistently across the region the enabling environment will continue to determine whether hybrid threat operations are costly and risky, or cheap and repeatable. Entrenched corruption, politicized institutions, media capture, weak procurement oversight, and persistent links between political and economic patronage networks create permissive conditions for both domestic and external manipulation. Organized crime and illicit finance amplify these vulnerabilities by providing parallel structures for coercion, intimidation and influence-buying, often with plausible deniability. Societal factors reinforce the challenge: demographic decline and emigration reduce long-term capacity; polarized identity politics and low trust in institutions increase susceptibility to information manipulation.

Together, these dynamics show **a region facing converging pressures:** uneven integration prospects; competing external narratives and dependencies; the destabilizing potential of unresolved disputes; and structural weaknesses that undermine deterrence by denial. **Over the next three to five years there is likely to be increased hybrid threat activity,** including information operations, economic and energy leverage, and political interference, interspersed with episodic security incidents

around known flashpoints. The strategic effect sought by hybrid threat actors is to degrade decision-making cohesion, entrench mistrust and keep the region's strategic direction uncertain.

For Euro-Atlantic institutions the Western Balkans will remain a practical test of whether resilience can be built at scale under conditions of contestation. This will require three shifts.

- 1. First,** the EU should create predictable integration pathways and deliver visible interim benefits tied to demonstrable reforms, ensuring citizens across the region feel real progress.
- 2. Second,** Western Balkan states should seek to identify and reduce critical dependencies, shut down illicit finance channels that enable elite capture and deniable influence, and treat high-risk procurement, surveillance technologies and opaque strategic investments as both security and governance issues.
- 3. Third,** with support from the Euro-Atlantic community Western Balkan states should increase investment in the institutions that hybrid threat actors target first, including: strengthening judicial capacity; supporting independent regulators; protecting media freedoms; and reinforcing cross-border civil society networks so they can withstand donor volatility.



Hybrid CoE

The European Centre of Excellence
for Countering Hybrid Threats