



FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Introduction

The concept of "foreign malign influence" has historically been restricted to the realm of intelligence. However, in present times, it is understood as a "hostile effort initiated by, under the direction of, or with significant backing from the government of a foreign country, employing overt or covert means" (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). This definition offers a more comprehensive perspective on the issue. Moreover, it explicitly highlights that such activities are specifically designed to impact policy-making and public discourse on a broader scale. Nevertheless, these actions may significantly destabilize societies and skew policy-making processes, leading to distorted policy outcomes. "Foreign malign influence" refers to actions or activities intended to harm or undermine the interests of a specific country or group of countries. In the Western Balkans, Russia and China have engaged in activities perceived as harmful or detrimental to the region's interests, its aspirations for EU integration, and the broader Western world. The Western Balkans region, characterized by deeply polarized and post-conflict societies divided along ethnic, national,

religious, and political lines, presents fertile ground for Russian and Chinese influence.

This influence is heavily focused on geopolitical orientation and targets both the public and political elite. When aimed at the public, it is primarily manifested through disinformation campaigns.

Public sentiment in Western Balkan countries has persistently oscillated between the East and the West, as their foreign policies have attempted to balance the geopolitical interests of various powers. The region's strategic significance renders it more critical than its size might imply, with the presence and influence of the United States and the European Union on one side, and Russia and China on the other.

The ongoing global crisis resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine has emphasized the importance of Western Balkan countries. However, it has also underscored internal vulnerabilities that stem from political, national, and social fragmentation. These weaknesses can be easily exploited to further

divide the countries, especially those with Orthodox Christian and Slavic heritages that have maintained strong ties with Russia throughout history.

This paper explores the methods through which malign influence is employed and how it shapes the contemporary political landscape in the region. Additionally, it examines the strategies the European Union currently utilizes and might employ in the future to counteract this influence. In particular, the paper provides an in-depth understanding of the region's intricate geopolitical position and delves into the key issues on a country-by-country basis where malign influence is manifested. It identifies the most susceptible countries while

simultaneously unveiling the factors that contribute to their resilience. It starts by taking a closer look into the strategies of malign influence in the Western Balkans, continues with the analysis of the geopolitical response of the EU, and questions the effects of its immediate response after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The paper particularly elaborates on the importance of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue given that this issue represents one of the most important entry points for Russia in the region. The final chapter presents one of the policies in which the malign influence of third parties was most clearly manifested and caused the trend of significant deviations from the EU's positions in the WB6.

Examining the strategies of malign influence in the Western Balkans 6

The European Parliament, in its Resolution on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union (including disinformation), warned that conflict could expand to Western Balkan countries (European Parliament, 2022). This report recognized the Serbian Orthodox Church as a cause of *"tensions between ethnic groups in the Western Balkans to inflame conflicts and divide communities."* Also, European Parliament noted that they are alarmed that Hungary and Serbia are helping China and Russia with their geopolitical objectives and recommends convening dialogues with Western Balkan civil society and the private sector to coordinate anti-disinformation efforts in the region.

The key factor that has exposed the contours of Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans is the conflict in Ukraine. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its involvement in the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, relations between Russia and the West have become increasingly strained (Consilium, n.d.-c). This has led to a more assertive Russian foreign policy in Europe (Consilium, n.d.-a), including in the Western Balkans. For example, Russia has

sought to strengthen its economic and political ties with Serbia, a traditional ally, and has also sought to undermine Western presence in the region through various means, including the use of disinformation campaigns.

One way in which Russia has been exerting malign influence in the Western Balkans is through its support for separatist movements and its efforts to undermine the sovereignty of states in the region (McBride, 2022). More precisely, Russia has been supporting separatist movements in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to undermine the stability of these countries and undermine Western presence. Additionally, with strategically organized disinformation campaigns they have induced political, national, and religious divisions to promote their interests in the region and stop them from potentially joining the EU and the NATO alliance. The main narrative spread is appealing to the far-right nationalist groups advocating that WB countries with strong historical ties with Russia, must return to traditional values within the wider Orthodox community, under Russian motherhood as protector of the faith.

Another example of these malign activities can be detected in Montenegro. Such narratives present Montenegrins as a part of the Serbian nation, which is a negation of Montenegrin identity, culture, and history, which can be observed in reporting of media supporting this narrative.

At the same time, China has also been increasing its presence in the Western Balkans. Through its “One Belt, One Road” initiative, China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the region, including ports, roads, and railways. While these investments have brought much-needed development to the Western Balkans, they have also raised concerns about Chinese influence and the potential for Beijing to use its economic leverage to advance its strategic interests (OECD, 2018).

These projects, which are often financed through loans from Chinese banks, can lead to countries becoming heavily indebted to China, potentially giving Beijing leverage to influence their foreign policies (Gelpert et al., 2021).

Although Russia and China have sought to increase their influence in the Western Balkans through various means, their activities have not been consistent across all countries in the region. Instead of detailing these methods by country, we will provide an overview of their activities based on similarities by actor, i.e., Russia and China.

Russia’s activities in the Western Balkans have primarily involved supporting separatist movements and using disinformation campaigns to sow division and promote their interests. Examples of this can be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Russia has been accused of backing Bosnian Serb separatism, and in Kosovo, where Russia has been accused of supporting Serbia’s separatist movements. Russia has also used its media outlets to spread disinformation in North Macedonia, attempting to undermine the country’s integration with Western institutions. In Serbia, Russia has focused on strengthening its economic and political ties and has provided economic assistance, including loans and investments. Additionally, Russia has sought to maintain strong economic and political ties with Albania and Montenegro through proxies and other channels.

China, on the other hand, has focused on making significant investments in infrastructure projects in various countries, such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. These investments have brought economic benefits but have also raised concerns about the potential for China to exert influence through its economic leverage. In Serbia, China has become an important trading partner and has invested in several infrastructure projects through Chinese loans. Furthermore, China has attempted to increase its cultural influence in countries like North Macedonia and Serbia through

initiatives that promote the study of the Chinese language and culture abroad. In Kosovo, China has not had a significant presence or investment projects; however, it has attempted to increase its presence by bidding unsuccessfully.

While the activities of Russia and China in the Western Balkans differ by country, their overarching goal remains the same: to exert influence over the region and undermine Western interests.

However, even with the strong presence of Russia and China in the WB, the latest Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) report, Balkan Barometer for 2022 (*Balkan Barometer 2022*, 2022), showed that the EU maintains its primacy economic partner across the region as the most preferred block for citizens of all economies to further improve trade and investment relations with, with 69% of respondents, only 4% less

than in 2020. Turkey is the second, favored by 41%, albeit a 5-point increase since the 2020 round, while China and Russia are close third and fourth trade and investment partners, preferred by 35% and 33% of respondents, respectively.

Overall, it is evident that the influence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans has the potential to harm the EU integration aspirations of these countries. After examining the various penetration points of malign influence in the Balkans, the following sections of the paper will discuss the geopolitical awakening and the response to this influence, as well as provide examples of such responses. While both Russia and China have brought some economic benefits to the region through their investments, loans, and other activities, their influence could also disrupt the process of EU integration and potentially undermine the stability and sovereignty of states in the region.



The EU's Geopolitical Awakening Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Geopolitical tension in the Western Balkans has been intensifying for decades, with the influence of authoritarian powers such as Russia and China eroding the region's fragile democracies. The war in Ukraine has temporarily overshadowed other actors while emphasizing the risk of Russian influence and raising fears of yet another war in Europe. The already strained relations between Russia and the West have further deteriorated due to the conflict in Ukraine, causing concerns about escalating tensions in the Western Balkans to rise.

Russia has traditionally supported Serbia in the region to maintain pockets of instability in the Balkans, which often diverts attention from EU reforms and agendas. Examples of Russian influence maintaining instability include the case of Kosovo, where Russia not only refuses to recognize the country but also hinders the limited progress achieved through the EU-facilitated dialogue. Additionally, the situation in Montenegro following the government's collapse due to a dispute over relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and disruptions caused by separatist leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are significant concerns. Serbia's ongoing relationship with Russia

generates apprehension in the region and the EU.

The war in Ukraine has prompted a geopolitical shift within the EU, highlighting the strategic importance of the Western Balkans. However, the potential for Russia to exploit unresolved disputes in the region to undermine the West remains a threat. This volatile region, in which Russia's influence is strong, has become further securitized due to the ongoing conflict in Europe. Following the war in Ukraine, a significant geopolitical shift in Western policy toward Russia has occurred. All Western Balkan countries—except Serbia—have taken political steps to align with EU foreign policy by joining robust sanctions against the Kremlin. Serbia's hesitancy to align with the EU on this matter has been a notable setback, allowing Russia to retain its power in the region.

As the war in Ukraine continues, pressure on Serbia to impose sanctions persists, making it politically challenging to navigate between Russia and the West. Russian influence in Serbia is deeply rooted and multi-layered, extending through state-controlled media that channels disinformation, amplifies illiberal narratives, nurtures nationalist

discourse, and diverts attention from unaccountable and captured political systems.

The impact of the war in Ukraine has been tremendous. Albeit, the EU has continued to herald a strengthened reform approach, the fear of the Russian extended influence at the detriment of the region's fragile stability has been at the center of attention throughout the past year. The candidate status for Ukraine (Consilium, n.d.-d) and Moldova (Consilium, n.d.-a) shortly after the application process has raised pressure to respond to the application of Bosnia and Herzegovina (EEAS Press Team, 2022), even though it did not fulfill the criteria set by the EU Commission and was hardly making any political effort in this regard (BiEPAG, 2023). Nevertheless, granting candidacy status was the right political decision as it not only provides a positive incentive for the country but also sends encouraging messages for the region's stalled enlargement. Similarly, the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia - especially the efforts of France to overcome the Bulgarian veto have not only lost their momentum but have not yet given

any tangible results on the ground. Lastly, the visa liberalization approval for Kosovo albeit to enter into force in 2024 (Council of the EU, 2022) is a decision that was pushed wide by the war in Ukraine albeit on hold since 2018.

Thus, the response of the EU to the Western Balkans was lukewarm and without any clear long-term strategy. After geopolitically reacting to the membership application of Ukraine and Moldova, the decision to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina the candidate status, slow-paced progress toward Albania and North Macedonia, and the confusing decision on visa liberalization, was a low-hanging fruit which doesn't create any significant turning point (Bechev, 2022).

In addition to the above-described steps, the EU has multiplied its efforts in reviving the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The renewed EU and U.S. pressure toward Kosovo and Serbia for a final deal has been immense, in the hope to find a solution that will provide a security guarantee for the West - at least during this period when most of the political and military capital is being invested in Ukraine (Faulconbridge, 2022).

The Kosovo – Serbia Dialogue: Solving the dispute and keeping Russia out

The fear of yet another war has been looming on the horizon in the region as tensions between Kosovo and Serbia continue to flare up (De Launey, 2022). The level of sensitivity about Kosovo -Serbia Dialogue has increased drastically after the war in Ukraine, albeit the EU and the U.S. have been already witnessing the 'generate instability to guarantee stability' game in the past. With negotiations hitting the breaking point, the lack of political power and strategy of the EU to push the countries toward the final deal, the space for Russia to maintain its strong position of influence not only politically but also through dynamic disinformation campaigns aiming to destabilize the region.

One of the biggest challenges for the EU is the Kosovo – Serbia issue which has produced tensions and instability to the detriment of the region. The war in Ukraine has increased security concerns over a potential conflict erupting in the northern part of Kosovo seriously jeopardizing the already limited progress made in the Brussels Dialogue (Sheftalovich, 2022). A deal on Kosovo, brokered by the EU as part of the French-German plan backed by the U.S. would likewise go a long way in changing the region for the better, as it would close one of the biggest Russian

entry points in the region. It would remove the most serious obstacle for both Kosovo and Serbia on the path to EU membership (Bechev, 2023). Furthermore, the solved dispute between Serbia and Kosovo would provide a unique opportunity for the latter to integrate into NATO once the five non-recognizers, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, accept the settlement. That would take away one of the biggest levers of Russia. Albeit Russia would extensively use whatever outcome from the process, especially under the auspices of the UN Security Council. The Russian right to veto would not only block Kosovo but it allows other possibilities for Russia to continue drawing parallels between Kosovo and Serbia (Prelec & Emini, 2023).

Clearly, the EU has the more powerful long-term levers for both Serbia and Kosovo, but its political will to use them should not depend on and be solely driven by Russia. A geopolitically motivated process for the sake of the tick boxes exercises provides short wins but hardly any long-term results. Furthermore, it prolongs the reform process in the region and provides a unique opportunity for the enablers such as Serbia to maintain the Russian alternative and use it as leverage against the EU.

Foreign policy alignment with the EU

One of the policies in which the malign influence of third parties was most clearly manifested is the foreign policy of the WB6, especially in the context of its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The countries of the WB 6 have very clearly made EU membership one of their foreign policy priorities decades ago. Along with the fulfillment of the economic and legal criteria, as a part of the Copenhagen Criteria, a part of the political criteria concerns the gradual alignment of the foreign policy of candidate countries with EU foreign policy, which is also one of the EU negotiation chapters and an area where progress is assessed in annual country reports made by the European Commission. All these candidate countries have an obligation of approximation of their foreign policies with the CFSP under the Stabilization and Association Agreements signed by each of them with the EU. Still, some hardly pass this test of political and symbolic commitment to the EU, their cooperativeness in terms of coordination and joint action, as well as their willingness to make continuous investments in the development of specific diplomatic and bureaucratic capacities to deal with the broader international context. The malign influence causes the trend of significant deviations from the EU's foreign policy positions.

The short comparative analysis that follows demonstrates which of the WB countries, to what extent, and in what way have been affected by the malign influences that cause a lesser degree of alignment with the EU. This insight is based mostly on the data and assessments presented in the reports of the EC on the progress achieved by these countries in the last decade.

Albania with its pronounced Euro-Atlanticism also has an almost impeccable record in alignment with the EU requirements in the CFSP (Džananović, 2020, p. 4) . Over the years, the degree of alignment has been complete - a fascinating 100%(European Commission Staff, October 12, p. 122). One single request of the EU where Albania has refused to side with the EU by failing to comply with it concerns the country's relationship with the United States of America. Its commitment to this relationship, in conflict with EU positions, is manifested through a bilateral immunity agreement signed with the US in 2003, guaranteeing the exemption of US citizens from the International Criminal Court (the so-called Article 98 Agreement). The provisions of this bilateral agreement, in the opinion of the EC, completely ignore the EU's guiding principles for bilateral immunity agreements.

Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo , Montenegro, and North Macedonia have all signed identical bilateral agreements with the USA.

Montenegro has also achieved 100% alignment with decisions of the Council of the EU and High Representative declarations and has joined all restrictive measures imposed by the EU. It is particularly noteworthy that Montenegro has also joined the measures imposed against Russia after it annexed Crimea and continued so after Russia's aggression against Ukraine (European Commission Staff, 2022b, p. 122). Montenegro has aligned its positions with those of the EU in the UN General Assembly, where it followed EU positions and supported the motion for a resolution on sanctions against Russia. The country voted for the suspension of the Russian Federation in the UN Human Rights Council. In March 2022, the caretaker government adopted three decisions on the practical implementation of restrictive measures against Russia and established a coordination body that should monitor the implementation of international measures on the crisis in Ukraine. The implementation of those decisions is ongoing, including the identification and temporary confiscation of 44 properties owned by 34 Russian citizens in several municipalities of Montenegro. For a long time, the country has been a model for the region, but the growing political polarisation within the country created an impasse in key reforms,

and Montenegro risks missing the next step on the path to the EU (N1/HINA, 2022).

North Macedonia has achieved substantial success in the realization of its foreign policy priorities over the past few years – about the EU and NATO as well as its neighbors and regional partners – and is on the whole taken as a positive example of a transformed foreign policy within EU and NATO integration processes. The degree of alignment with the CFSP has ranged between 73% (European Commission Staff, 2016, p. 78) and 96% until 2021 (European Commission Staff, October 19). While it did not join the measures against Russia after the annexation of Crimea, North Macedonia demonstrated a balanced diplomatic approach by supporting all the international resolutions in favor of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The country's alignment rate reached 100 % in February 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It immediately aligned fully with the EU restrictive measures on Russia and Belarus, including the outstanding sanctions imposed following the illegal annexation of Crimea. EU restrictive measures are being implemented. North Macedonia expelled eleven Russian diplomats and on at least two occasions refused overflight permission to 106 Russian government planes. It also aligned with all the EU statements submitted at international organizations (UN, OSCE, and Council of Europe), including the EU position in UNGA when voting on resolutions regarding

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its humanitarian impact.

Kosovo is the youngest Balkan state and the last to apply for EU membership (Deutsche Welle, 2022). It is recognized by 23 of the 28 EU member states. This fact has led to several significant precedents in its treatment by the EU, but also by some other international organizations. The Stabilization and Association Agreement for Kosovo was signed in 2016 between Kosovo and the EU as a single legal person, rather than its member states. Furthermore, this is the only SAA that has not been ratified by EU member states¹. Kosovo's status concerning the EU is that it is an SAA signatory and a potential membership candidate. The SAA with Kosovo, however, does not stipulate the obligation to align with the CFSP and the EC reports on the country's progress do not include the chapter on Foreign, Security and Defence Policy and its alignment with the EU. All the alignment with the EU is self-initiated.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, an EU membership candidate since December 2022, and **Serbia**, a negotiating candidate since 2014, struggle most to align their foreign policies with the EU due to malign influences.

Over the last ten years, BiH has achieved an average alignment rate of 67% (Džananović, 2020, p. 6).

The misalignments were related to Russia and the restrictive measures taken by the EU after Russia annexed Crimea. In 2021 the alignment further declined, mainly due to disagreements within the Presidency, to reach 43% by August 2021 (European Commission Staff, 2021). The country did not align with EU Council Decisions on restrictive measures related to the Russian Federation, China, Venezuela, and Syria. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, BiH has improved its alignment with EU statements and restrictive measures. BiH joined several EU statements at multilateral fora and restrictive measures, upon the political initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Restrictive measures, however, remain a matter of political contestation as the then Republic Srpska member of the three-partite Presidency (Milorad Dodik) advocated for a neutral stance on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. That caused significant hindrances to their implementation, including not banning flights from Russia or the broadcasting of Russian state-sponsored media. As of August 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina's alignment rate was 81%. BiH misaligned with EU Council decisions and declarations related to the Russian Federation (in one case), China, Iran, and Syria (European Commission Staff, 2022a, p. 116). In the United Nations General Assembly, BiH sided with the EU and voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Dodik, now president of the Republic

¹ The EU has issued a special directive to clarify that the signing of this agreement does not mean that the EU recognizes Kosovo*.

Srpska entity, adamantly refuses any thought of BiH introducing sanctions on Russia. He does not shy away from emphasizing the continuation of his good relations with Putin, and even awarded Putin with a „medal of honor“ on behalf of Russia, on its part, continues the practice of receiving political delegations from Republic Srpska ².

Despite the much-discussed Turkish presence in BiH, its influence has never been in collision with Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU course. On the issue of Iran's human rights situation discussed at the UNGA's Third Committee session in November 2022, this time over the regime's violent women's protest crackdown, BiH abstained and thus did not follow the EU's position on the matter.

In addition to having the lowest alignment percentage in the region, the case of **Serbia** is particularly indicative of the downward trend in alignment. For example, an alignment of 89% was achieved in 2013, compared to 52% in 2018 or 53% in 2019 (Džananović, 2020, p. 13). The main reason for this decline is its disagreement with the EU's decisions and restrictive measures concerning Russia, even though the Law on Restrictive Measures and the Implementation of International Sanctions was enacted back in 2016. Serbian authorities tend not to oppose

Russia's positions on a broader international level (Venezuela, China, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Zimbabwe), (Džananović, 2020, p. 13).

For reasons of principle, Serbia has been supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine but has nevertheless not joined measures against Russia. Serbia maintained the same trend after the Russian invasion of Ukraine - it aligned with several EU positions in international fora (including in the UN General Assembly (UNGA)), but has failed to align with any sanctions against the Russian Federation and has not aligned with the majority of High Representative (HR) declarations on this matter. What is more, Serbia has continued its close relations with Russia, and some statements and actions by high-level Serbian officials went directly against EU positions on foreign policy. In 2021, Serbia's alignment rate with 135 relevant HR declarations on behalf of the EU and Council decisions on restrictive measures (sanctions) reached 64%. As the EU expanded measures against Russia, this rate dropped to 45 % by August 2022.

Belgrade also maintained its close relations with Moscow, including by receiving senior Russian officials who are on the EU sanctions list. Serbia aligned with some sanctions against Belarus, as well as with the sanctions

² The Republic Srpska entity parliament Delegation was received in Moscow by the Duma President on eve of first anniversary of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

against Myanmar. Serbia voted for the suspension of the Russian Federation in the UN Human Rights Council.

Serbia continued to develop intense relations and strategic partnerships with Russia. Parts of Serbian media have been engaged in a strong pro-Russian disinformation campaign. High-level representatives of Serbia made statements going against EU positions on Russian aggression. At the outset of the Russian invasion, Air Serbia doubled the number of flights to Russia; they were subsequently reduced to the pre-aggression frequency.

The practice of frequent high-level contact with Russia, including regular bilateral visits, was maintained (European Commission Staff, 2022c, p. 136)³.

Serbia also maintains close contacts and cooperation with other countries, such as China, the US, and Turkey. The Serbian President was received

by his Chinese counterpart in Beijing in February 2022. In April 2022, a Chinese anti-aircraft missile system was delivered to Belgrade. Serbia has also intensified contacts with the Non-Aligned Movement and hosted a ministerial meeting in Belgrade in November 2021.

A few years ago, cooperation has been established and arrangements were made for the purchase of arms with the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The EU has had its concerns about the Cooperation and Joint Action Agreement signed between the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia and the Russian Federal Security Service, as this agreement was believed to pose a risk to the implementation of the Agreement on Security Procedures in Exchanging Classified Information signed with the EU.

Defying the EU warning, Serbia also signed a Free Trade Agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in October 2019 (European Commission Staff, 2019).

³ In November 2021, the Serbian President met with his Russian counterpart in Sochi and discussed the energy supplies and the gas arrangement, whereby Serbia was granted a highly preferential price. The Serbian PM and the Minister without portfolio visited Moscow in November 2021. In October 2021, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs was invited to Belgrade to join for the first time a non-aligned movement meeting as an observer and the Russian Deputy PM also visited Belgrade. In February and in April 2022, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Duma visited Belgrade. Serbia's Minister of Interior visited Moscow in December 2021 and August 2022. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov's June 2022 Belgrade visit was cancelled due to the lack of overflight authorisation from several other European countries. At the margin of the September 2022, UNGA Serbia's President met with the Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Serbia's Foreign Minister signed a plan of consultations for 2023-2024 with his Russian counterpart.



Conclusion and recommendations

The Western Balkans region's geopolitical importance goes far beyond its size. The antagonism of global powers that has been mounting for decades has already significantly corroded the region's progress on the EU's path. Authoritarian powers, such as Russia and China offer cooperation and support that appears less demanding in terms of standards, but also more tolerant of certain political and democratic deviations that many countries in the WB 6 suffer from. The EU's immediate response after the Russian invasion of Ukraine was indeed geopolitical, but not too elaborated or far-reaching. The current shape and methodology of the EU's engagement in the region do not eliminate the risks and the malign influences the region is facing. What follows are the suggestions on ways to adapt the EU's approach and make it more effective in reducing the malign influence in the Western Balkans.

- 1. EU enlargement is a geostrategic instrument:** Therefore, strengthening the EU presence and support is imperative not only to maintain the democracy course but also to build resilience against the illiberal external actors in the region.
- 2. Economic development is the key:** The European Union should further invest in the Western Balkans by providing access to EU structural funds, promoting good governance, and supporting the rule of law. This would help counterbalance the influence of Russia and China and reaffirm the EU's commitment to the region's integration process.
- 3. Alignment with the EU in foreign, security, defense, and other policies:** European Union, membership candidates and potential candidates form a strong block of more than 30 countries. Speaking with one voice is not only important as a fulfillment of the countries' obligation to align with the EU, but also as a geopolitical message of consolidation. "EU+9" concept in foreign, security and defense,

as well as in some other policy areas marks a new chapter in the approach to enlargement for both sides. It signals determination and commitment to the process of both sides and indicates irreversibility of integration.

- 4. Regional cooperation matters:** Encourage and invest in building the regional cooperation infrastructure in the Western Balkan countries politically and economically. Good neighborly relations forged through trust-building measures and campaign to resolve open bilateral issues, as well as inclusive regional collaboration will create a solid basis for the six Western Balkan countries to address shared challenges, speed up the integration process and foster resilience against external influences.
- 5. Build resilience by providing a counter-narrative to disinformation and digital authoritarianism:** Develop and implement comprehensive media literacy programs at the national and regional level to help citizens recognize and combat disinformation. In addition, providing a compelling counter-narrative to respond to digital authoritarianism from Russia and China will significantly contribute to regional-level resilience.
- 6. Develop and enhance cybersecurity measures:** Strengthen cybersecurity infrastructure and capabilities in the Western Balkan countries to protect against cyberattacks and digital threats that may originate from external actors. Including Western Balkans in the EU, cybersecurity infrastructure will immensely contribute to building cybersecurity capacities, especially the preparedness to respond to cyber-attacks.
- 7. Push for improved transparency in foreign investments:** Increase transparency and accountability in foreign investments, particularly those from the illiberal actors – corrosive capital coming from Russia and China, by implementing stringent due diligence processes and adhering to international standards.
- 8. Provide support for civil society:** Strengthen and support civil society organizations in the Western Balkans to build a strong foundation for democracy and promote citizens' participation in decision-making.

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Information about the International Visegrad Fund

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal

contributions of all the V4 countries. Other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.

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Information about THINK BALKANS

The 'Enhancing Think Balkans – knowledgehub for Western Balkans EU integration and regional cooperation' project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project' and the project "Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS" supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS)** will remain project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMINS)**, **Balkan Research Institute** from Kosovo*, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)** from Poland, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT)** from Hungary, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM) from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project's goals.

The project duration is 12 months, that is, from October 2022 to October 2023.

Based on the lessons learned, this project proposal aims to promote active participation in policy-making and foster democratic debate based on relevant data and information by further: 1) promoting cooperation among think tanks, CSOs and experts in the WB as a successful regional model; 2) strengthening the cooperation with the WB MFAs through the establish network of contact point and include their opinions and ideas in specifying the details of the topics chosen to be analyzed through this project; 3) providing V4 expertise on security, resilience and EU enlargement in general in light of the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the expressed interest of the Associate trio countries to join the EU; 4) using the potential with the establishment of Think Balkans to strengthening people-to-people links between the WB and V4; 5) cultivating interregional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest.

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