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**Source / Kaynak:** International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS) / Vol. 7 / No. 1 / May 2025, pp. 20-35.

**DOI:**10.53451/ijps.1567113

**Date of Arrival** : 14.10.2024

**Date of Acceptance** : 07.03.2025

**To cite this article:**

Mahmutaj, Noela “EU-China in the Western Balkans: Different Agendas? ” *International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2025, pp. 20-35,  
DOI:10.53451/ijps.1567113

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## Competing for Influence: EU-China Strategic Engagement in the Western Balkans

Noela Mahmutaj<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The European Union (EU) has significant historical, political, economic, and cultural ties with the Western Balkan states. Integrating the Western Balkan states into the EU is crucial for the region and the EU, strengthening European security as regional developments directly impact the EU. Unlike China, which views the Western Balkans as an economic opportunity, the EU prioritizes democratic governance, the rule of law, and reform-linked financial aid. However, China's influence in the region affects not only the EU's ability to shape policies and governance, but also the approaches and performance of regional and non-regional actors (like the EU, the US, and Russia). This paper examines the competing agendas of the EU and China in the Western Balkans, highlighting how their differing approaches create policy dilemmas for the region's states.*

**Keywords:** EU, China, Western Balkans, foreign influences, European integration.

### Introduction

The Western Balkan region (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia) has become a significant focus for external actors, like the EU, the US, Russia, and China. Each actor has distinct, yet sometimes overlapping, agendas driven by strategic, political, and economic interests. The Western Balkan states hold strategic significance for actors regarding their geographical location, which provides an important connection between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In case of China, to develop and strengthen its position in the region, Beijing uses a global project like the New Silk Road Initiative or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focusing on appealing and vital projects for the region's countries, such as energy, infrastructure, and socio-cultural spheres, which represents a “comprehensive approach to regional security that seeks to engage a region through multiple vectors as part of an overarching security strategy to advance China's power and influence”.<sup>2</sup>

This study has used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data, including academic literature, media reports, and government publications, with quantitative data on investment flows. The comparative analysis of China's and the EU's presence in the Western Balkans and case studies of each Western Balkan state will offer a comprehensive assessment of the extent and limitations of external influences in

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Submission Date: 14 Oct 2024, Acceptance Date: 7 Marc 2025, DOI:10.53451/ijps.1567113

<sup>2</sup> Freeman, Carla P. “China's ‘regionalism foreign policy’ and China-India relations in South Asia.” *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 1 (December 19, 2017): 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1408168>.



the region. The article aims to answer the research question: How do the EU's and China's strategies in the Western Balkans differ? In this regard, understanding foreign actors' policies toward the Western Balkans is crucial for identifying why this region holds such important significance for the EU and China. The main argument is that while the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans prioritizes long-term political reforms and democratic governance, China's influence is primarily driven by vast infrastructure investments. This contrasting approach creates a competitive dynamic that challenges the region to integrate into the EU and may shift regional alignments towards alternative economic partnerships.

The literature review explores the motivations, strategies and impacts of the EU and China in the Western Balkans, highlighting the complexities of their involvement. Scholarly debates on the Western Balkans' geopolitical landscape highlight the competing influences of foreign actors, particularly the EU, the US, China, and Russia.<sup>3</sup> The EU's engagement with the Western Balkans is based on conditionality mechanisms through adopting the rule of law and democratic reforms in exchange for financial assistance and eventual EU membership.<sup>4</sup> However, on one hand, some scholars argue that the EU's conditionality-based engagement has led to significant democratic and economic reforms;<sup>5</sup> while others critics note “enlargement fatigue” within the EU and frustration among Western Balkan states over the slow accession process.<sup>6</sup>

While the EU's involvement in the region is rooted in its enlargement policy, emphasizing political stability, economic reform, and democratic governance,<sup>7</sup> China's engagement is strategic and economic, prioritizing investment projects and infrastructure

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<sup>3</sup> Zeneli, V. (2023) Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process, retrieved from <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union> Accessed 20 June 2024; Mahmutaj, N. (2023). Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans. In: Mihr, A., Sorbello, P., Weiffen, B. (eds) *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8)

<sup>4</sup> Schimmelfennig, F., & Scholtz, H. (2010). Legacies and leverage: eu political conditionality and democracy promotion in historical perspective. *Europe Asia Studies*, 62(3), 443–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668131003647820>

<sup>5</sup> Szolucha, A. (2010). The EU and ‘Enlargement Fatigue’: Why Has the European Union Not Been Able to Counter ‘Enlargement Fatigue’? *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 6(1), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v6i1.124>.

<sup>6</sup> Elezi, G. (2024, April 17). Dealing with “enlargement fatigue” to avoid “patience fatigue” - European Policy Centre. European Policy Centre. <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/dealing-with-enlargement-fatigue-to-avoid-patience-fatigue/>; Timofeev, I. (2023) The Chinese View of the World: Is a Non-Zero-Sum Game Possible?, retrieved from <https://valdaicclub.com/a/highlights/the-chinese-view-of-the-world-is-a-non-zero-sum/> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Schimmelfennig, F., & Scholtz, H. (2010). Legacies and leverage: eu political conditionality and democracy promotion in historical perspective. *Europe Asia Studies*, 62(3), 443–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668131003647820>



development under the BRI project, focusing on large-scale infrastructure investments, trade agreements, and strategic partnerships in the Western Balkans.<sup>8</sup> Through the BRI and the 14+1 format (formerly 17+1), China has expanded its presence in the Western Balkans, funding projects such as highways, railways, etc. Moreover, some scholars argue that China does not impose political or governance conditions on its investments, unlike the EU, making it an attractive partner for some Western Balkan governments that seek fast-track economic growth without political requirements.<sup>9</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, the EU-China dynamic in the Western Balkans aligns with foreign influence, which examines how external actors shape the domestic policies of smaller states through economic, political, and cultural tools. Also, studies on soft power suggest that while the EU relies on institutional integration and governance reforms, China exerts influence through economic interdependence and elite-level diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, scholars analyse how Western Balkan states navigate these competing influences, often adopting a pragmatic, multi-vector foreign policy to extract benefits from both sides, like in the case of Serbia.<sup>11</sup> The research contributes to understanding the current strategic involvement of the EU and China and their different approaches towards the Western Balkans.

### **1. EU's agenda in the Western Balkans**

After the fall of communist regimes in the 1990s, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkan states have made efforts to integrate and strengthen their position in Euro-Atlantic structures (NATO and EU). However, the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans is first motivated by the desire to ensure long-term stability by promoting democratic governance and fostering economic and social development. This approach is part of the EU's enlargement policy and strategy to integrate the Western Balkan states into the European framework. Concretely, to achieve this objective, the EU has provided various programs aimed at implementing reforms and strengthening democratic institutions and the

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<sup>8</sup> Zeneli, V. (2023) Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process, retrieved from <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union> Accessed 20 June 2024; Liu, L. (2021) Beyond the status quo and revisionism: an analysis of the role of China and the approaches of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the global order. *Asian Journal of Political Science*: 29/1, 88-109.

<sup>9</sup> Vangeli, A., & Pavličević, D. (2019). Introduction: New perspectives on China – Central and Eastern Europe relations. *Asia Europe Journal*, 17(4), 361–368. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00560-4>

<sup>10</sup> Zhongping, F., & Huang, J. (2014). China's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a Changing World. ESPO Working Paper 8.

<sup>11</sup> Mahmutaj, N. (2023). Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans. In: Mihr, A., Sorbello, P., Weiffen, B. (eds) *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8)



rule of law. Notably, the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)<sup>12</sup>, initiated in June 1999 and strengthened at the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003, took over elements of the accession process. The SAP sets out the foundation for integrating the region into the EU with a focus on common political and economic goals, although progress evaluation is based on countries' own merits. In this context, another initiative is the Berlin Process, initiated in 2014 to utilise the potential of increased regional cooperation and connectivity in the Western Balkans and bring concrete benefits to the regional citizens. Offering a wide range of projects to increase connectivity and cooperation in the region, as well as good neighbourly relations and interpersonal relationships, while subsequently supporting the EU integration of the region.<sup>13</sup> These initiatives support governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and judicial independence in the Western Balkan countries.

The realisation of these reforms is supported financially by the main program, Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), as a key financial tool of the EU's strategy for facilitating infrastructure projects, economic reforms, and capacity building in the Western Balkan region. Financial help is a key part of the economy and infrastructure in reducing gaps between the EU members and the Western Balkans. Above all, the EU has been the largest provider and supporter of financial and development assistance in the region. During the 2007-2013 period, the IPA was allocated a budget of €11.5 billion.<sup>14</sup> Its successor, IPA II, received a budget of €12.8 billion for the 2014-2020 period.<sup>15</sup> Also, for the multiannual financial framework covering 2024-2027, the budgetary allocations for IPA III have been set at €14.162 billion<sup>16</sup> (including Turkey as an EU candidate country). Overall, the IPA III budget is for research, innovation, sustainable development, and also addressing key issues and challenges such as climate change and regional security. Hence, one key area of EU focus has been infrastructure development. The EU initiative, the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), has funded many projects in transport, energy and digital infrastructure. For instance, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) aims to connect the Western Balkan region

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<sup>12</sup> Stabilisation and Association Process, retrieved from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-process\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-process_en) Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Berlin Process, retrieved from <https://www.berlinprocess.de/> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, retrieved from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en) Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, retrieved from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en) Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, retrieved from [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en) Accessed 20 June 2024.



to the EU's core transport network.<sup>17</sup> The Rail Corridor III between North Macedonia and Bulgaria includes an 89 km-long rail section between Kumanovo and the border with Bulgaria as well as another 103 km-long rail section between Kicevo and Skopje, amounting to around € 282 million.<sup>18</sup> In Albania, the rehabilitation of the Tirana-Durres railway (Mediterranean Corridor) line is funded by this initiative, amounting to € 108 million.<sup>19</sup> While the transport Corridor X, a key Pan-European arterial route running north-south, passes through Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece, it was completed in 2019, amounting to € 1,4 billion.<sup>20</sup> The WBIF is the central mechanism for coordinating EU financial support and prioritizing large-scale infrastructure projects in the Western Balkan region.

Beyond economic investments, the EU is also active in cultural diplomacy to strengthen its regional values and norms. Moreover, EU programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, and COSME help the Western Balkan partners boost their development by creating opportunities for young people and fostering cultural exchange, education, research, and innovation in the region. According to statistics for the period 2015-2022, there were over 2,372 educational projects and over 48,000 people moving (*see the Chart*).<sup>21</sup> In the same line with the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, the EU allocated nearly €80 billion to support research and innovation in the region between 2014 and 2020.<sup>22</sup> In this context, all of these programs and people-to-people connections aim to assist Western Balkan countries in developing infrastructure and strengthening ties with the EU.

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<sup>17</sup> Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), [https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/infrastructure-and-investment/trans-european-transport-network-ten-t\\_en](https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/infrastructure-and-investment/trans-european-transport-network-ten-t_en)

<sup>18</sup> Orient/East-Med Corridor: Construction of Rail Corridor VIII in North Macedonia, Kumanovo - Kriva Palanka Sections, <https://www.wbif.eu/project-detail/PRJ-MKD-TRA-001>

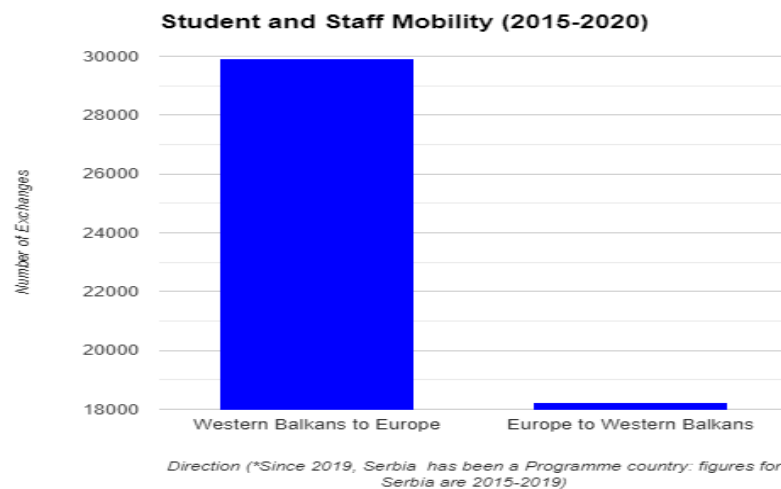
<sup>19</sup> Mediterranean Corridor: Rehabilitation of Tirana - Durrës Railway Line and Construction of New Line to Rinas Branch, <https://www.wbif.eu/project-detail/PRJ-ALB-TRA-002>

<sup>20</sup> Corridor X Motorway (E-75 & E-80) in Serbia, <https://www.wbif.eu/project-detail/PRJ-SRB-TRA-005>

<sup>21</sup> EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+, <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/regional/westernbalkans-regional-erasmusplus-2020.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Horizon 2000, [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-2020\\_en#statistics](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-2020_en#statistics)





Although the Western Balkan countries welcome the EU investments, there is growing criticism in terms of the accession process in the region's countries. The geopolitical landscape has shifted significantly compared to ten years ago, particularly with Ukraine and Moldova knocking on the European door and becoming candidate states. Also, international issues, considering the war in Ukraine, COVID-19, global warming, economic crises, cybersecurity, and the increased presence of other actors like Russia and China, have diverted the EU's focus, placing the Western Balkans lower on its agenda. In light of this, the long ongoing process has fostered frustration among political elites and citizens alike, raising questions about the attainability and desirability of EU membership. For instance, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama stated in December 2017, *"Russia and China have many things to offer. Russia can give you power and energy for the rest of your life if you give up the rule of law. It is not quite uninteresting...if the EU will not run to catch us, believe me, many multi-problems can restart and then it will be much more costly to marry us later"*.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Serbia's Europe minister Tanja Miscevic remarked the EU's "lack of momentum" in integrating the Western Balkans, which has tarnished the bloc's reputation in the region.<sup>24</sup> The slow EU accession process has caused enlargement fatigue within the Union and has led to uncertainty and disillusionment in the Western Balkans. This has not only created an "opportunity" for the EU to reinvigorate its enlargement policy, but has also created an opportunity for other geopolitical actors, particularly China, to use this limited timeframe to increase their influence and presence in the

<sup>23</sup> "EU must 'marry' Western Balkans quickly to avoid new risks – Albania PM", Euractive, (December 2017) // <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/eu-must-marry-western-balkans-quickly-to-avoid-new-risks-albania-pm/> Accessed 04 September 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Minister Miscevic: EU lacked momentum on Balkan enlargement, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/minister-miscevic-eu-lacked-momentum-on-balkan-enlargement/> Accessed 04 September 2024.



region. Thus, the EU's strict conditionality requirements, internal political instability in the EU, and current enlargement resistance among some Member States contribute to the need for a significant new approach to EU membership, both theoretically and practically, that can effectively adapt to shifting international dynamics. In contrast, China's engagement focused on economic cooperation without strong governance or political preconditions may be perceived as more attractive to some Western Balkan states. Unlike the EU's emphasis on democratic reforms, the rule of law, and good governance, China's pragmatic approach could offer a compelling alternative for the Western Balkan states.

## **2. China and Other Actors in the Western Balkans**

The geographical position and resources of the Western Balkans have positioned the region at the centre of attention of other nonregional powers like the US, China, and Russia, which play an important role in establishing the balance of power under the general equilibrium principle in modern international relations. Nowadays, those actors view the economic and political prospects and future of the Western Balkans as their key priorities. However, the EU focuses on establishing democratic institutions and the rule of law, while the US has historically played a leading role in shaping the Western Balkans' post-war trajectory, particularly through security interventions, diplomatic engagement, and NATO expansion. For instance, the US was instrumental in NATO's military interventions in wars in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999), which shaped the region's post-Yugoslav security architecture. Since then, the US has actively supported NATO expansion, leading to a concrete step of Albania joining NATO in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020, as well as being engaged in the process of normalization of political and economic ties between Serbia and Kosovo. Regarding U.S. policy toward the Balkans, Washington is focused on helping the states of the region cement peace and build stability and prosperity by deepening cooperation and advancing their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO and the EU.<sup>25</sup> Important to highlight, the EU and the US remain key partners and both are key security actors through the European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR)<sup>26</sup> and Kosovo Force (KFOR)<sup>27</sup> operations in the Western Balkans. While the EU is the leading trade partner and has strong

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<sup>25</sup>Stability and Security in the Western Balkans: Assessing U.S. Policy, <https://www.congress.gov/118/chr/CHRG-118hhrg53237/CHRG-118hhrg53237.pdf> Accessed 05 March 2025.

<sup>26</sup> European Union Force, <https://www.euforbih.org/>

<sup>27</sup> Kosovo Force, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor>





institutional ties with all six countries through its accession policy, the US retains significant diplomatic influence.

In contrast, Russia, as a traditional actor in the Western Balkans, has refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state, underscoring its enduring role in regional geopolitics and aligning with its broader foreign policy goal of countering Western influence and preventing further EU enlargement, and strongly NATO expansion.<sup>28</sup> Using its historical, religious, and economic ties, Russia's influence is strongest in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska). The Kremlin and Belgrade share Slavic brotherhood and Orthodox Christian values, fortifying their ties. Moscow has also consistently supported Serbia on key international issues, most notably blocking Kosovo's recognition at the UN. This has reinforced Serbia's balancing act between EU accession aspirations and close ties with Russia. There is no doubt that Belgrade, under this Russian presence and influence, has recently emphasized its foreign policy based on two key vectors, i.e "Euro-Russian Serbia". The clarification of this two-vector Euro-Russian policy by Serbia can be seen from the visits of senior leaders of the Serbian and Russian governments, where such visits at a high state-level consolidate the cooperation between Belgrade and Moscow, as well as cooperation in the political, and diplomatic, economic, commercial, cultural, and spiritual fields. Regarding Belgrade's policy towards Brussels, Serbia has hesitated to take any step that would harm its EU accession prospects or openly distance itself from the EU's general foreign policy.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Russia exerts leverage through energy exports, particularly through Gazprom's investments in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For instance, the new gas project in Serbia, the agreement for which was signed in 2017 between Russia's largest company, Gazprom, and that of Serbia, Yugorosgaz; further, the TurkStream pipeline, which runs through Serbia, increases regional dependence on Russian energy.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the Kremlin supports nationalist movements and Eurosceptic narratives in the region, like in Republika Srpska, where Milorad Dodik's pro-Russian stance has hindered Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU and NATO ambitions. While Russia's relationship with other Western

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<sup>28</sup> Timofeev, I.(2023) The Chinese View of the World: Is a Non-Zero-Sum Game Possible?, retrieved from <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-chinese-view-of-the-world-is-a-non-zero-sum/> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Mahmutaj, N. (2023). Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans. In: Mihr, A., Sorbello, P., Weiffen, B. (eds) *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8)

<sup>30</sup> Infrastructure investment in the Western Balkans, <https://wiiw.ac.at/infrastructure-investment-in-the-western-balkans-a-first-analysis-dlp-4621.pdf> /Accessed 20 June 2024.



Balkan states, particularly Albania and Montenegro, is already strained due to their political stance aligned with the EU. Notably, the relationship between Albania and Russia is limited, since one of the main reasons is that the main official documents between the states, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1995, have not yet been ratified.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, after the 2022 Ukraine war, the Western Balkan countries have emerged as a frontline in Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West. This has again put the Western Balkans on the spot, pushing their governments to take a clear stance towards their historical ally. While the EU has tried to give a new methodology to the enlargement process and has reinforced its presence in the region; Russia continues to have its allies; for instance, a large majority of Serbian citizens in particular continue to consider the Kremlin to be their true ally, despite the EU being Serbia's major financial supporter.<sup>32</sup>

However, China has strategically strengthened its influence in the Western Balkan region through two main initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 format (now referred to as the 14+1 format). The 17+1 framework, officially known as China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation (or China-CEEC), was launched in 2012 as a cross-regional cooperation platform based on traditional friendship and the participants' shared desire for cooperation and common development. This project is focused on economy and trade, culture, education, youth exchange, agriculture, tourism, science and technology, health, think-tank exchange, and sub-national cooperation.<sup>33</sup> However, the initiative has recently faced setbacks, notably with the withdrawal of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) in 2022, which perceived it as divisive and redundant.<sup>34</sup> The withdrawal was catalysed by a diplomatic rift between Beijing and Vilnius over the opening of a Taiwanese trade office in Lithuania.<sup>35</sup> Despite initial enthusiasm, the 14+1 format has struggled to produce significant tangible outcomes, specifically when compared to the BRI. In this regard, the BRI aims to secure economic and strategic footholds in the European continent through substantial

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<sup>31</sup> Mahmutaj, N. (2023) Albanian-Russian relations after the Collapse of Communism. Institute of European Studies, UT.Tirana. ISBN 9789928472120, p. 87-88.

<sup>32</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile (2023). Russia and the Western Balkans. Report, European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf). Accessed 07 March 2025.

<sup>33</sup> China-CEEC Cooperation, retrieved from <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/> Accessed 5 September 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Lithuania quits 'divisive' China 17+1 group, retrieved from <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1416061/lithuania-quits-divisive-china-17plus1-group> Accessed 5 September 2024.

<sup>35</sup> China condemns opening of Taiwan office in Lithuania as 'egregious act', retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/china-condemns-opening-of-taiwan-office-in-lithuania-as-egregious-act> Accessed 5 September 2024.



infrastructure investments and the pursuit of bilateral relations with each state in the Western Balkans. Despite its geographical distance, Beijing's involvement in the region is multifaceted, combining economic, political, and strategic motivations. China's BRI project has strengthened its regional cooperation across the world, transforming China into an economic powerhouse through governance and the implementation of infrastructure works.<sup>36</sup> The BRI serves as an instrument of international governance and regional engagement.

In recent years, China has heavily invested in infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans, including highways, railways, energy plants, and ports. According to the data of the Balkan Network of Investigative Journalism (BIRN),<sup>37</sup> Serbia hosts the most Chinese projects, with 61 projects amounting to €19 billion. Bosnia-Herzegovina follows with 29 projects amounting to €5 billion, and North Macedonia has 15 projects worth €654 million. Other countries in the region, such as Montenegro and Albania, have fewer projects, 9 projects amounting to €2.5 billion in Montenegro, and 8 projects amounting to €650 million in Albania. Notably, Kosovo has no Chinese project due to Beijing's non-recognition as an independent state. In this background, from 2009-2021, China invested in 122 projects in the Western Balkans, focusing on transport infrastructure, energy, and technology. Huge investments include a planned expansion of copper mining, as demand for the metal in Serbia, valued at 3.8 billion dollars;<sup>38</sup> and a steam injection oil project in Albania's Patos-Marinza field by the Chinese-owned Bankers Petroleum Company.<sup>39</sup> Some of the notable projects in the region include the 1.5-kilometre-long Pupin Bridge in Belgrade, which crosses the Danube River at \$220 million; the Belgrade-Bar highway in Montenegro, valued at \$1 billion. In North Macedonia, the Chinese company Sinohydro, with the support of Chinese loans, completed a section of Corridor 10 from Miladinovci to Shtip and constructed the highway portion along Corridor 8. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chinese companies have signed multiple contracts with Republika Srpska authorities for the construction of highways such as Banja Luka-Prijedor Novi Grad, Banja Luka-Mlinista, Brcko-Bijelina, and Vukosavlje-Brcko. Moreover, Chinese

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<sup>36</sup> Liu, L. (2021) Beyond the status quo and revisionism: an analysis of the role of China and the approaches of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the global order. *Asian Journal of Political Science*: 29/1, 88-109.

<sup>37</sup> China in Balkan, retrieved from <https://china.balkaninsight.com/> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>38</sup> China's Zijin Mulls \$3.8 Billion Expansion of Serbia Copper Mine, retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-28/china-s-zijin-mulls-3-8-billion-expansion-of-serbia-copper-mine#xj4y7vzkg> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>39</sup> CEO of Bankers Petroleum Albania: Ambitious project to transform Patos-Marinza field, retrieved from <https://euronews.al/en/ceo-of-bankers-petroleum-albania-ambitious-project-to-transform-patos-marinza-field/> Accessed 20 June 2024.



companies are involved in the reconstruction of the tram system in Sarajevo. These projects highlight China's strategic investments focused on enhancing regional connectivity and promoting economic development in the Western Balkans. It's important to recognize that China's infrastructure initiatives in this region are not isolated; they are strategically connected to the broader goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Beyond economic investments, China is also active in cultural diplomacy to strengthen friendly relations with other nations. Thus, the Confucius Institute, a government-funded organisation promoting Chinese culture and language, exemplifies Beijing's strategy to build an efficient communications infrastructure through government-run institutions.<sup>40</sup> The first Confucius Institute in the region was opened in Belgrade in 2006.<sup>41</sup> China's cultural presence in the Western Balkans is the most prominent in Serbia, where the recent establishment of Chinese language schools and two Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad University reflects this. China has also established Confucius Institutes in North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia. As a result, cooperation between some Macedonian universities, such as the Saints Cyril and Methodius University or the Goce Delchev University, and in Albania, the Confucius Institute has been operating since 2013. Institutes regularly organise events promoting the Chinese language, culture, history, and politics.

Furthermore, Republika Srpska has recently sought to include the Chinese language in various educational curricula. This shows that, although it has not produced many results yet, there is some degree of desire on the part of the Chinese to expand their cultural influence in the Western Balkans. Chinese social and cultural influence has also grown as a result of the visa liberalisation that has occurred in the Western Balkan states, which is implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. However, despite the growing economic presence, young people in the Western Balkans view China as a distant country with limited cultural appeal, preferring to migrate to Western Europe. Regarding this, cultural and social ties between the EU and the Balkans are stronger than those with China. However, it is difficult to separate China's soft-power strategy in the Western Balkans from the appeal of China's economic achievements and the economic engagement that it offers.

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<sup>40</sup> Zhou, Y. & Luk, S. (2016) Establishing Confucius Institutes: a tool for promoting China's soft power?, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25:100, 628-642, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1132961

<sup>41</sup> China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans, retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733558\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf) Accessed 20 June 2024.



As China increases investments further, Beijing is more likely to position itself as an important player in the region, as the EU traditionally has been, and this will have real implications; for instance, increasing Chinese investments in the Western Balkans could therefore result in Beijing displacing the Brussels and curtailing or at least restraining its activities in the region, or other players like Russia.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Russia, while Moscow remains a significant actor in the Western Balkans, its influence may be overshadowed by Beijing's increasing presence under BRI, which may limit Moscow's ability to operate in the region. Even though China and Russia have sought to align their mutual interests in much of the post-communist space through the 'docking' of the BRI and the Russian-led economic organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, no such agreement or condominium exists between Beijing and Moscow<sup>43</sup> to date. To sum up, as Chinese investment grows, the balance of power between China and other players (EU, US, and Russia) in the Western Balkans is likely to shift, since China's BRI and other projects could reduce the influence of other players and limit their ability to pursue their interests. Thus, the competition between these players shapes the Western Balkans' political, economic, and security landscape. The region's future depends on whether the EU can accelerate its enlargement process and whether local governments can balance economic opportunities with strategic alignment choices.

### Remarks and Conclusion

Strategic competition in the Western Balkans is defined by the overlapping interests of other external actors, like the EU, the US, China, and Russia. As analysed above, the external players represent distinct economic and political approaches and engagement. The objectives and approaches of the EU and China differ significantly and create a complex landscape in the Western Balkan region. The EU's approach is deeply rooted in its values-based foreign policy, which focuses on democratic reforms, political stability and adherence to the rule of law. In contrast, China's approach prioritises economic cooperation and infrastructure development under its BRI. Unlike the EU, China does not impose political or governance conditions on its investments. It follows a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of the states it engages with, prioritising state sovereignty and maintaining strategic partnerships. Strategic

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<sup>42</sup> Harper, T. (2019). "China's Eurasia: The Belt and Road Initiative and the creation of a new Eurasian power". *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 5, no. 2: 99–121. doi:10.1163/23525207-12340039

<sup>43</sup> Nadège, R. (2019). "A China–Russia Condominium Over Eurasia," *Survival* 61, no. 1: 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1568043>; Mahmutaj, N. (2023). *The New Geopolitical Order in the Black Sea: Russia's Role in the Area*. *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*. 22(3), 45-58.



partnerships have thus become a leading diplomatic tool for Beijing in defence of its political system. In nearly every strategic partnership document, concepts such as non-interference in domestic affairs, different understandings of democracy and human rights, or different development paths are explicitly stated.<sup>44</sup>

However, if Brussels wants to achieve its geopolitical goals in the region, it will have to understand the nature of the competition with China.<sup>45</sup> Chinese investment can benefit Europe only if China respects European interests, especially environmental protection, human rights, and the rule of law. Moreover, the EU remains sceptical of China's growing influence in the Balkans.<sup>46</sup> Western policymakers need to address the development gap between the region and the EU through initiatives such as targeted energy and infrastructure investment plans, sectoral integration frameworks, and, importantly, the first loading of EU law in the membership process.<sup>47</sup> Harmonising European interests with China's strategic ambitions seems unlikely in a multipolar world. Nowadays, both the EU and China, as major international actors, are strong competitors for global dominance. The current world remains confrontational, and the level of rivalry is likely to increase. China is building a new type of international relations, rejecting the zero-sum game, in which the success of some is achieved at the expense of others.<sup>48</sup>

The dual presence of the EU and China in the Western Balkans presents the region with both opportunities and challenges, reflecting their distinct agendas. While the EU's strategy remains rooted in its normative power approach, emphasizing democratic governance, rule of law, and long-term stability, China provides fast-tracked infrastructure investments under the BRI project without imposing political or governance conditions. Moreover, other players like the US and Russia further shape the geopolitical dynamics. The USA's strategic presence, particularly through NATO expansion, ensures regional stability and does not directly replace

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<sup>44</sup> Zhongping, F. and Jing, H. (2014). China's strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world." ESPO Working Paper 8.

[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/181324/China%E2%80%99s%20strategic%20partnership%20diplomacy\\_%20engaging%20with%20a%20changing%20world%20.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/181324/China%E2%80%99s%20strategic%20partnership%20diplomacy_%20engaging%20with%20a%20changing%20world%20.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Shopov V. (2022) Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Robinson, W. (2020). The Trojan Dragon Comes to the Balkans. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 44(2), 29–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599308>

<sup>47</sup> Shopov, V. (2021) Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans, The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), retrieved from <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/> Accessed 20 June 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Timofeev, I. (2023) The Chinese View of the World: Is a Non-Zero-Sum Game Possible?, retrieved from <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-chinese-view-of-the-world-is-a-non-zero-sum/> Accessed 20 June 2024.





the EU's long-term integration agenda. On the other hand, Russia has sought to maintain influence in the region by using historical, cultural, and religious ties, advocating for pan-Slavic solidarity, and opposing NATO expansion. In this regard, Western Balkan states have a multi-actor presence that must navigate between competing foreign interests, balancing economic opportunities with broader geopolitical alignments. The clashing agendas of these external influences place Western Balkan states in a position of strategic vagueness.

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