

Russia's influence in the Western Balkans

The countries in the Western Balkans are traditionally a focus of Russian interests. The Russian Federation has strong historical ties with the Western Balkans and holds a relative soft-power attraction for them, yet its influence and economic impact in the region are declining, as investment and aid by the EU-27 and other players, such as China, have been dwarfing Russian investment.

Geopolitical confrontation

The Western Balkans, together with the European Neighbourhood, have emerged as a front in Russia's geopolitical [confrontation](#) with the West. Some argue that this confrontation is deeply rooted in shared geography ([Robert Kaplan](#)), others, that it is an expression of different political systems, values and ideologies ([Zbigniew Brzezinski](#)). Brzezinski believes that America's failure to engage with Russia after the end of the Cold War has backfired, giving Russia the energy to focus on securing its authoritarian rule within its own territory and on restoring its influence in the former Soviet Union states and beyond.

The [Balkan 2021 Barometer](#) shows constant support for EU membership across the Western Balkans, with 62 % of countries endorsing EU accession in 2020 (59 % in 2019 and 56 % in 2018). However, disillusionment with [slow progress towards EU accession](#) and economic stagnation are creating an opening for other geopolitical players. All six Western Balkan countries are still on track for joining the EU, but [progress](#) has faltered recently, with only two countries – Montenegro and Serbia – actually in accession negotiations. Furthermore, the Russian war on Ukraine seems to have tipped EU-27 [public opinion](#) in favour of swiftly granting EU accession to Ukraine, but not the Western Balkans. Despite successful EU-Western Balkans summits (most recently in [Zagreb](#), 2020, and in [Brdo](#), 2021), some countries, such as [Albania](#) and [North Macedonia](#), have not even opened accession negotiations. Simmering ethnic tensions, high [unemployment](#), [exodus of youth](#), and shaky [constitutional arrangements](#) in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), are creating an opportunity for Russia to leverage its already substantial influence in the region.

Russia's soft power and economic influence

Cultural and historical ties give Russia considerable soft power, particularly among Serbs. Historical ties go as far back as the [pan-Slavic movement](#) of the 19th century and Russia's [support](#) for Serbian independence from the Ottoman Empire. Russia entered World War I on Serbia's side; in the Kosovo* conflict, it [condemned](#) the NATO bombing of Serbia and firmly opposed Kosovar independence. Russia uses its status as a permanent UN Security Council member in Serbia's favour. In [1994](#) and [2015](#), Moscow vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs, the latter resolution qualifying the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide. During the pandemic, this soft power also manifested as '[vaccine diplomacy](#)'.

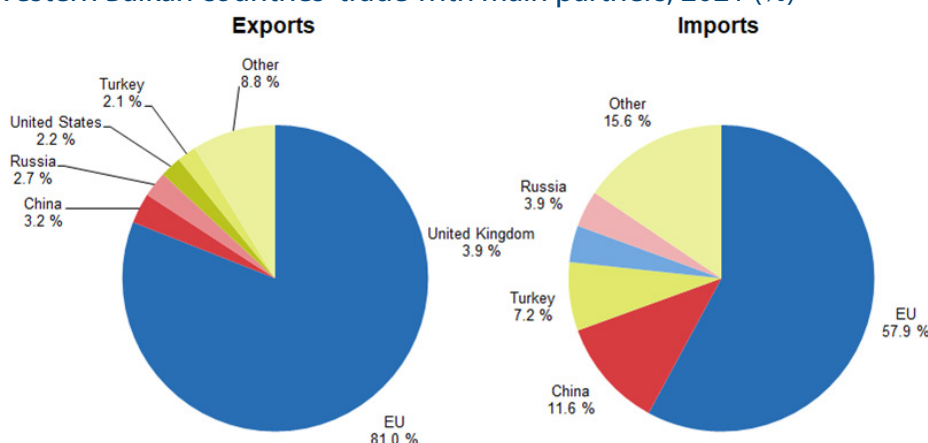
Although Russian [investment](#) in the region has increased in absolute terms, Russia's economic footprint as a share of the total economy in the Western Balkans has shrunk or stagnated in the wake of international sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea. Even though Russian economic influence is heavily concentrated in the energy sector, its share as a percentage of GDP is declining across the region. Russia's energy influence is biggest in Serbia, North Macedonia and BiH, where it supplies close to 100 % of gas needs and owns several assets, such as the Lukoil gas stations network. Russian Gazprom's [South Stream pipeline](#) would have consolidated Moscow's dominance of gas markets, but it was [abandoned](#) in December 2014 after the European Commission [ruled](#) that it contravened EU legislation.

On the other hand, Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania currently consume little or no Russian gas, and future supplies are likely to come from Azerbaijan rather than Russian fields, via the [Trans-Adriatic Pipeline](#) (TAP). Montenegro will probably have to wait several years before the connecting [Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline](#) (IAP) is

*This 'At a glance' note has been produced at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions, in the framework of the cooperation agreement between the Parliament and Committee.
It updates a [publication](#) by Martin Russell from July 2017.*

put in place. The IAP is planned to carry natural gas from Albania's Fier via Montenegro and BiH to Split in Croatia. The 520 km-long pipeline would be bi-directional and have an annual capacity of 5 billion cubic metres. The [Western Balkans Investment Framework estimates](#) that constructing the 94 km-long IAP in Montenegrin territory will cost €207 million. In Fier, the IAP would connect to the TAP, built to transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz II field in Azerbaijan to Europe. The first deliveries of Azeri gas to Italy via the TAP were made in 2021. In North Macedonia, Azeri gas is expected to start competing with Russian supplies from 2023. Outside the energy sector, where Russia's presence is gradually declining, Russia's economic presence through trade is dwarfed by that of the EU-27 (see Figure 1). However, [experts](#) caution that Russia's major presence in strategic sectors is making the region's governments vulnerable to its pressure and is accentuating state capture risk.

Figure 1 – Western Balkan countries' trade with main partners, 2021 (%)



Data source: [DG TRADE](#) and Eurostat, 2022.

Progressive alignment with EU foreign policy: case of sanctions against Russia

Western Balkan countries are also facing the '[asymmetric assault](#)' on democracy, launched by Russian media outlets, such as the Sputnik news agency, which set up a base in Belgrade in 2014. Despite [Soviet-era disinformation campaigns](#) and [diplomatic efforts](#), the majority of the Western Balkan population [supports](#) EU accession and pro-Western policies. In the past, Serbian public opinion was supportive of closer ties with Russia: a [poll](#) carried out in mid-2016 by NSPM magazine showed that 72 % were in favour of an alliance with Russia, compared to just 8 % for NATO. However, a February 2022 [poll](#) concluded that half of Serbs want to stay neutral when faced with a choice between the EU and Russia. This foreign policy alignment became highly visible in February 2022, when Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia joined the EU's [sanctions](#) against Russia, while Montenegro [announced](#) it would adopt them in April. The Serbian government adopted [conclusions](#) in which it voiced support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine but refrained from applying the EU sanctions. Russia remains Serbia's biggest arms supplier, yet is in increasing [competition with China](#). On 29 May 2022, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that his country had signed an [agreement](#) on a new three-year gas contract with Russia.

European Parliament position

The Parliament supports the EU prospects of all Western Balkan countries. On 26 April 2022, the [Parliament's President, Roberta Metsola](#), observed that the EU must 'think of ways to accelerate the enlargement process in the Western Balkans', because 'stability in the immediate neighbourhood is vital for the EU's own stability'. The Parliament has voiced concern about Russia's influence in the region and its attempts to destabilise both the region as a whole and individual countries within it (for instance, [BiH](#)). The Parliament is concerned that Russian investment in the region poses high risks for corruption and state capture. It has also called on [Serbia](#) to align its foreign policy more closely with the EU. The Parliament also expects that the European External Action Service and the European Commission would improve coordination and address [disinformation and hybrid threats](#) that seek to undermine the region's EU prospects.

(*) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

