

Russia and the Western Balkans

Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference

SUMMARY

The Western Balkan countries have emerged as a frontline in Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West. While the Russian Federation has strong historical ties with the Western Balkans, and holds a certain soft-power attraction for the region, its influence and economic impact there are declining. Meanwhile, the EU and NATO presence in the region is advancing, and investment and aid from the EU-27 and other players, such as China, have been dwarfing Russian investment.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has put the Western Balkans on the spot again, pushing their governments to take a clear stance towards their historical ally, while the EU has tried to give new impetus to the enlargement process and has reinforced its presence in the region. While polls show considerable support for EU membership across the Western Balkans, a large majority of Serbian citizens in particular continue to consider Russia to be their true ally, despite the EU being Serbia's major financial supporter.

The legacy of the Yugoslav Wars – a complex political architecture with precarious balances between fractious ethnic and religious communities – has proved fertile ground for the Kremlin's influence and interference, especially since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia has used the media and information sphere, stepped up its political and economic influence and mobilised proxy organisations to project its narratives, protect its interests and slow the region's integration into Western institutions.

This briefing updates and expands on a [publication](#) from June 2022.



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Geopolitical confrontation

The Western Balkans, a term used to refer to six countries in south-eastern Europe that are covered by [EU enlargement policy](#) (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo,¹ North Macedonia, and Serbia) have emerged as a frontline in Russia's geopolitical [confrontation](#) with the West. Some academics 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 the US's failure to engage with Russia after the end of the Cold War backfired, giving Russia the energy to focus on consolidating its authoritarian rule over its own territory and on restoring its influence in the former Soviet Union states and beyond.

The influence of Russia as traditional partner for the Western Balkan countries has grown, reflecting a certain '[enlargement fatigue](#)', as a realistic path towards EU membership has proved rather slow. No new members have joined the EU since Croatia in 2013. Disillusionment with [slow progress towards EU accession](#) and economic stagnation have created an opening for other geopolitical players. At present, all six Western Balkan countries are still on track to join the EU, and four of them – Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – are actually in accession negotiations, which have, however, been stalled for years. The 2022 [Balkan Barometer](#) showed, however that support for EU membership had declined slightly across the Western Balkans, with 60 % of the population of the six Western Balkans countries endorsing EU accession in 2022 (compared with 62 % in 2021).

Russia's war on Ukraine has put the Western Balkans back in the spotlight, pushing their governments to take a clear stand on Russia. In parallel, the EU has been under new pressure to move the enlargement process forward, [opening enlargement negotiations](#) with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, approving [candidate status](#) for Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022 and nearly doubling the size of the EU peacekeeping mission in that country ([EUFOR](#)). Neither the [2020 accession methodology reform](#) nor the stronger political steer, reflected not least in the EU-Western Balkans summit declarations, seem however to have been able to rekindle the enlargement flame. Some experts point to a shift from 'enlargement fatigue' towards '[enlargement resistance](#)'. War in Ukraine has also increased immigration from Russia and Ukraine towards the Balkans. More than 104 000 Russians and 18 000 Ukrainians have [moved](#) to Serbia since Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Russians are welcome in Serbia: nearly 80 % of Serbs reportedly [oppose](#) sanctions against Russia.

Furthermore, Russia's war on Ukraine seems to have tipped EU-27 [public opinion](#) in favour of swiftly granting EU accession to Ukraine (which, together with Moldova, became a [candidate](#) for EU accession in June 2022), but not to the countries of the Western Balkans. Despite successful EU-Western Balkans summits (most recently in [Zagreb](#), 2020, [Brdo](#), 2021 and [Tirana](#), 2022), there are still issues and political agreements, regarding regional cooperation and normalisation of [Belgrade-Pristina relations](#), that have not yet been fully addressed or implemented, despite EU mediation efforts. [Experts](#) point out that the recent [Ohrid Agreement](#) between Kosovo and Serbia on the Implementation Annex of the [Agreement on the path to normalisation of relations](#) could remain without practical follow-up, like the [2013 Brussels Agreement](#), as the parties gave only tacit consent without actually signing it. The main point agreed between Belgrade and Pristina, the setting up of an association/community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo, remains unfinished, 10 years after the Brussels Agreement while, in an interview in February 2023, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti [said](#) that 'Belgrade wants another Republika Srpska' and that 'the bitter experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Republika Srpska should not be forgotten'.

For Serbia, in particular, the conflict in Ukraine has not changed the country's pro-Russian stance. Analysts have [stressed](#) that, according to recent [polls](#), 'Putin is the world leader that Serbs admire the most and 95 % of Serbs see Russia as a true ally, compared to only 11 % who see the EU that way, despite the EU being Serbia's major financial supporter'. Furthermore, 68 % of Serbs [stated](#) that they believed 'NATO, not Vladimir Putin, was responsible for the war in Ukraine', with 82 % opposed to Serbia imposing EU sanctions on Russia. Historic grievances, simmering ethnic tensions, high

[unemployment](#), a [youth exodus](#), 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, energy investment and economic influence

Cultural and historical ties give Russia considerable soft power, particularly among the Serb population, concentrated mainly in Serbia, the Republika Srpska (one of the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Kosovo. Historical ties go as far back as the [pan-Slav 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, Russia [condemned](#) the NATO bombing of Serbia and firmly opposed Kosovo's 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 manifested as '[vaccine diplomacy](#)', supplying both medical material and vaccines.

Figure 1 – Western Balkan countries: NATO membership and EU accession progress

Albania	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 1912 (from Ottoman empire)
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP Yes	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Candidate
Bosnia and Herzegovina	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 1992 (declared), 1995 (settled)
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Federal Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP No	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Candidate
Kosovo	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 2008 (declared)
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP No	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Potential Candidate
Montenegro	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 2006
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP Yes	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Candidate
North Macedonia	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 1991
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP Yes	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Candidate
Serbia	
	INDEPENDENCE DATE 2006 (final dissolution of former Yugoslavia)
	GOVERNMENT TYPE Parliamentary Republic
NATO MEMBERSHIP No	EU ACCESSION PROGRESS Candidate

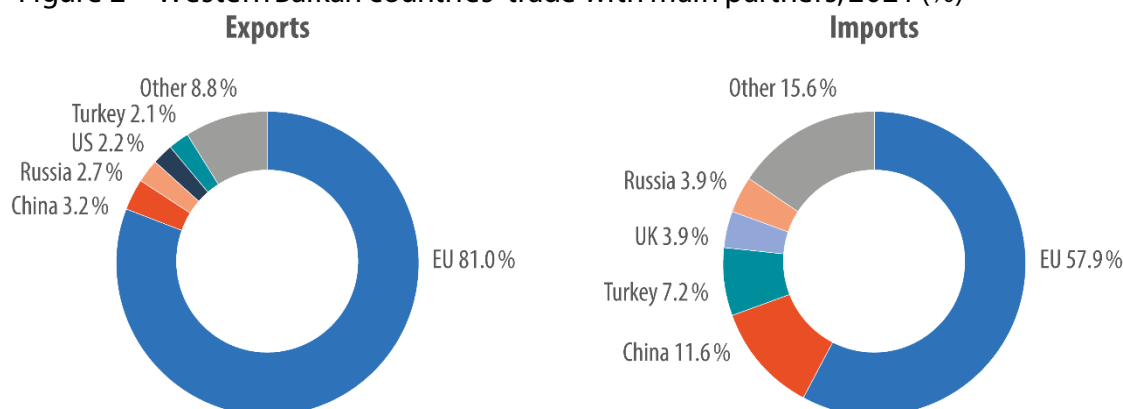


Source: CSIS, NATO, EEAS, 2023.

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 gross domestic product (GDP) is declining across the region. Moscow still has a series of local allies, including politicians such as [Milorad Dodik](#), President of Republika Srpska and member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tri-partite presidency, and Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia. In April 2022, Serb ministers in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Council of Ministers [blocked](#) a decision to apply sanctions and deny Russia and Belarus access to funds from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); Milorad Dodik meanwhile announced the stepping up of energy cooperation with Russia. On 13 January 2023, Dodik [awarded](#) Vladimir Putin the highest award of Republika Srpska, the order of Republika Srpska, for his support for the Dayton Agreement, thanks to which the creation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was made possible. On 29 May 2022, while the EU has pressed for sweeping bans on Russian energy, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that his country had signed an [agreement](#) on a new 3-year gas contract with Russia.

Data from the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators [show](#) that Russia's energy influence is greatest in Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it supplies close to 100 % of gas needs and owns several assets, such as the Lukoil petrol 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 put in place. The IAP is intended to carry natural gas from Albania's Fier via Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina 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 building 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 by the end of 2023, when the link from Nea Mesimvria in Greece is [scheduled](#) to be completed. 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 2). However, [experts](#) caution that Russia's major presence in strategic sectors is making the region's governments vulnerable to its pressure and accentuating the risk of state capture.

Figure 2 – Western Balkan countries' trade with main partners, 2021 (%)



Data source: [DG TRADE](#) and Eurostat, 2021.

Russian influence and interference in the Western Balkans

Although the Western Balkan region lies [beyond](#) what Russia considers its immediate sphere of interest, the Kremlin has found it easy and useful to use the tools of foreign influence and [interference](#) in the region, especially following its invasion of Crimea in 2014, in order to protect its interests and project its narratives. Targeted and low-cost (asymmetric) operations in the information space, including [\(dis\)information campaigns](#), cyber-attacks and clandestine operations, combined with the support of proxy organisations and the use of political and economic influence, have been effective in exploiting structural vulnerabilities and societal and political divisions in all six Western Balkan countries.

Russia has used these hybrid strategies to pursue [three objectives](#) in the region, with varying degrees of intensity and success over time: i) preserve the status quo, where convenient for Russian interests (i.e. in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina); ii) undermine the EU and [NATO](#), slowing down full integration into Western institutions; and, to a lesser extent, iii) protect Russia's economic interests (and those of its elites).

Sputnik Srbija, the online news website in Serbian established under the umbrella of the Russian state news agency Sputnik (now under EU [sanctions](#)²), has been [recognised](#) as one of the main channels of Russian influence in the Western Balkans media space over the years. It has the potential to reach audiences that speak Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian, and its content is very often republished by local media, which find it convenient to use the well-written and free-of-charge articles offered by Sputnik Srbija to feed information voids. An analysis of the [narratives](#) promoted by Sputnik Srbija has identified patterns corresponding with the foreign policy objectives listed above. These include reputational attacks against the EU and NATO, the undermining of pro-Western governments in the region, and the fuelling of feelings of governmental weakness and regional instability among the population, portraying any change in the status quo as a deliberate operation by hostile forces to ignite a new regional conflict. Along the same lines, in November 2022 the media group [Russia Today](#) (RT), also state-controlled and under EU sanctions, [launched](#) a multimedia website in the Serbian language, dubbed RT Balkan; television broadcasting is expected to begin in 2024.

Beyond the media, the Russian Orthodox Church has also been identified as a powerful vehicle of [influence](#) for Russia in the region. Slavic brotherhood and shared Orthodox Christianity values are used to [fortify](#) the Kremlin's ties with political leaders, churches and independent groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and among Orthodox minority groups in non-Christian countries, such as Albania and Kosovo. Oligarchs with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and far-right elements of Russian society, such as [Konstantin Malofeev](#), actively contribute to Russian soft power efforts in the Balkans. Through his [St Basil the Great Charitable Foundation](#), the largest Orthodox charity in Russia with a reported budget of [US\\$40 million](#), his media outlet, [Tsargrad TV](#), and conservative think-tank [Katehon](#), Malofeev has supported [family values](#) campaigns, promoted pan-Slavic views, pushed a variety of [conspiracy theories](#) against Western-friendly politicians in the region, and published [articles](#) justifying Russia's 'civilisational role' in the Balkans.

The [Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre](#) in Nis, registered as a non-profit organisation, is also seen as a powerful [tool for influence](#) in the region, and has been seen by Western officials as a potential base for [covert operations](#) for Russia. Among other activities, it organises [youth educational camps](#) in Russia and Serbia, denounced by some [researchers](#) as indoctrination and radicalisation centres. Its connections with radical nationalist groupings, such as Serbian Honour and St George of Loncari have also been [exposed](#) as part of the Russian destabilisation toolkit.

Over the years, the Kremlin has been [accused](#) of being behind a number of clandestine operations in Western Balkans countries aimed at undermining their integration into NATO (i.e. [Montenegro](#) and [North Macedonia](#)), or influencing election results (Bosnia and Herzegovina). It should be noted

that the connection to Russian security services has not been proved, and the nature of events remains contested.

The degree of permeability to foreign influence and interference across the region varies, reflecting the different internal vulnerabilities of the six Western Balkan countries in several domains (societal, economic, and political). According to a [permeability index](#) developed for a study by the [NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence](#), North Macedonia and Albania were identified as least vulnerable countries, while [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) appeared to be the most vulnerable country, followed by Serbia. Interestingly, North Macedonia and Albania, together with Montenegro, have displayed a high [degree of alignment](#) with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) over the years, while [Serbia](#) has pursued a complex and contradictory policy, and Bosnia and Herzegovina presented the lowest degree of alignment in recent years, although [in 2022](#) it showed a higher degree of alignment (81 %).

These differences in [foreign policy alignment](#) became highly visible after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While all Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, have supported UN resolutions condemning Russia's aggression, their positioning on EU sanctions has been less homogenous. Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia promptly joined the EU's [sanctions](#) regime against Russia, while Montenegro [adopted](#) 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, as did [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#).³ Serb member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's collective presidency and current chair Željka Cvijanović [said](#) in February 2023 that he would 'vehemently oppose any change in the relations with Russia'. Russia remains Serbia's biggest arms supplier, but is in increasing [competition with China](#). Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on its ally Russia is among obstacles to a speedier European Union accession bid, [said](#) Serb Prime Minister Ana Brnabić on 10 February 2023, describing the move as the 'condition above all conditions' set by the EU-27.

[EU candidate or potential candidate countries](#) are invited and expected to align with EU common foreign and security policy, including sanctions policy, but are not legally obliged to do so before accession. The EU can exercise political pressure on them, but cannot apply economic conditionality, since accession financial instruments (such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance – [IPA](#)) are [conditional](#) on fundamental values – democracy, human rights and rule of law – and are not directly linked to a country's foreign policy positions.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament supports the EU membership prospects of all Western Balkan countries. On 26 April 2022, 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'. 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 in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)). MEPs are concerned that Russian investment in the region poses high risks for corruption and state capture. They have also called on [Serbia](#) to align its foreign policy more closely with the EU.

In June 2020, the European Parliament [decided](#) to set up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation ([INGE](#)), tasked with offering a long-term approach to addressing evidence of foreign interference in the democratic institutions and processes of the EU and its Member States. The final report, [adopted](#) in plenary on 9 March 2022, condemned Russia's disinformation campaigns, hybrid threats and efforts to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans, and expressed concern about the role played by the Orthodox Church in these countries.

The report called for the European External Action Service (EEAS) to strengthen the role of the EU delegations and EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions in third countries in order

to reinforce their ability to detect and debunk disinformation campaigns orchestrated by foreign state actors, and to fund education projects strengthening democratic values and fundamental rights. MEPs also called for the issue of malicious foreign interference to be addressed within the then forthcoming Strategic Compass of the EU (adopted later that same month). The work of the INGE committee is being followed-up and expanded by its successor, [INGE2](#) committee, which is currently preparing a new [own-initiative](#) report.

In its [recommendation](#) of 15 March 2023 'taking stock of the functioning of the EEAS and for a stronger EU in the world', the Parliament called urgently for the EEAS and EU delegations to be equipped with 'tools to increase public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy activities in third countries', pointing in particular to the need to counter disinformation and propaganda. MEPs highlighted the increasing need to fight espionage and malicious foreign influence, used increasingly to undermine the democratic order in the EU and in countries in the EU's vicinity.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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.
- ² Despite being under EU sanctions, both Sputnik and RT continue to operate from Serbia, although their relevance seems to have [diminished](#) over the last year.
- ³ Although the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Council of Ministers) [announced](#) its alignment with the EU's sanctions against Russia, the [opposition](#) of the Republika Srpska's leadership in the country's three-member presidency has resulted in the sanctions not being implemented.

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