

Hybrid Threats to Democracy in Europe

Russian and Chinese Influence in the EU Neighbourhood



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PREFACE

Over the last few years, large-scale disinformation campaigns have been organised against the EU and its neighbouring countries, aiming to destabilise and influence democratic processes. As the issue of foreign interference and hybrid threats to democracy is part of the focus for all relevant democracy defenders, the European Network of Political Foundations - ENoP decided to further explore the topic through two main activities — an event and a publication.

The publication Hybrid Threats to Democracy in Europe – Russian and Chinese Influence in the EU Neighbourhood is a continuation of the session ENoP organised on 16 September 2022, as part of the last edition of the International Democracy Day Brussels, which marks the UN International Democracy Day and consists of several events organised every September by ENoP and its partners. The session brought together representatives from EU institutions, and experts from political foundations and their partners, to discuss ways of responding to hybrid threats, focusing on disinformation and foreign election interventions and the influence of China and Russia in this new geopolitical context.

This publication explores different forms of Russian and Chinese influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova, as case studies that encompass a wide range of different forms of foreign influence in the immediate EU neighbourhood.

Jasmina Mršo & Alina Garkova | Editors

TABLE OF CONTENTS

7 Introduction

12

Various mechanisms of Russian and Chinese hybrid threats

and clandestine operationssingle	14
Russia's political influence and the undermining of democratic values in European countries	14
Moscow's cultural influence in Europe as an instrument for the legitimisation of Russian foreign policy	15
Energy dependence on Russia as political leverage for the Kremlin	16
Chinese mechanisms for creating hybrid threats	16

44

References



he states of the European continent have had to face a number of challenges in the last decade that have undoubtedly changed the foreign policy situation in this part of the world. The migration crisis that peaked in the summer of 2015, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (EU) and the coronavirus pandemic are just a few of the factors which have contributed to EU states trying to reassess their foreign and security policy priorities. The biggest impetus for the reassessment of EU positions on European security was the Russian invasion of neighbouring Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. This situation is clear evidence that the long-standing security status quo in Europe is starting to change.

Hybrid threats are a crucial problem in the current international system to which all states in the world must respond, and European countries are no exception in this regard. This can be contextualised by two trends that are currently emerging in the world, namely globalisation and the development of information technology. These two factors play an important role in the successful creation of hybrid threats because they make it possible to create an environment in which states can enforce their own political interests through unconventional means. The process of globalisation enables hybrid threats to operate from hundreds or thousands of kilometres away in a relatively short time. Fake news, for example, can be spread around the world within seconds or minutes.

From a European perspective, it is necessary to point out two state actors that have become challengers to the West and thus the EU in recent years: China and Russia. Although these two countries are in somewhat different positions vis-à-vis the EU, they are united by a common motivation in their efforts. Both Beijing and the Kremlin represent a kind of value alternative to the West, and both countries are dissatisfied with the current balance of power in the international system (i.e. with the position of the USA as the strongest country in the world's power system). Indeed, both China and Russia are seeking to strengthen their power position (Speranza, 2020). As far as different values are concerned, it is no secret that Russia and China do not share the liberal democratic values of the West and the European Union. They are strongly authoritarian political regimes. From this perspective, the hybrid

threats of Beijing and Moscow are a clear threat to the democratic and liberal values of the European Union, as also stated by the European Commission in its report (European Commission, 2016). The strategic thinking of these two countries is somewhat different, which is reflected in the different mechanisms through which these hybrid threats are shaped.

In addition to EU countries, the Western Balkans and Moldova also have to deal with Russian hybrid threats. The strong cultural and historical ties to Russia predispose Moldova to have problems with Russian hybrid operations. The current conflict between Moscow and Kyiv exacerbates this problem. In contrast, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which led to significant deterioration in relations between the West and Russia, the Western Balkan states have faced increased efforts by the Kremlin to gain influence in these countries (Kuczynski, 2019). This is bad news for the EU, as Russia is trying to prevent these states from joining the organisation.

In the context of China's hybrid operations in the Western Balkans, it can be stated that Beijing is not only trying to win over the big states in the international system, but also to win the favour of the smaller states (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019). For this reason, Beijing has focused on the Western Balkans since 2010, and it must be noted that China's influence in the region is growing. This trend can be described as one of the most important changes in Europe in recent years (Shopov, 2022). China's influence has been growing remarkably since 2013, when Beijing started to cooperate with these countries through its Belt and Road Initiative. As part of its investment projects, Beijing has financially contributed to the construction of major infrastructure projects. Examples include the construction of the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia and financial assistance for the construction of highway and railway networks in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Albania (Larsen, 2020). In addition to the increase in economic influence, the growth of Chinese influence is also evident in the political and cultural spheres (Shopov, 2022).

The discussion about hybrid threats began with the increasing influence of Beijing and Moscow in various parts of Europe after 2010, and Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea was a definitive confirmation of this trend. This Kremlin military operation has been described as 'hybrid' by a number of foreign policy and security analysts (Wigell, 2019; Rusnáková, 2017; Lanoszka, 2016; Speranza, 2020). There have been known attempts by the Kremlin to influence election results across the European continent (Stelzenmuller 2017; Brattberg and Maurer, 2018), or there is a strong link between European far-right political parties and the Kremlin. Through these political

parties, Moscow can present its views and effectively undermine the unity of the EU and its democratic institutions (Shekhovtsov, 2017). Russian hybrid threats are also discussed in the context of the disinformation campaigns which Russia wages against the EU and the Western world (Asmolov, 2018). These disinformation campaigns and fake news are essentially aimed at improving the Kremlin's image abroad and justifying its foreign policy actions. A side effect of these subversive efforts is the undermining of democratic values and mechanisms in the targeted countries.

As for China's hybrid threats on the European continent, these are most often mentioned in the context of Beijing's espionage activities or its economic diplomacy. The aim is to improve China's image to the outside world and to bring these states to its side on important foreign policy issues (mostly the question of Taiwan's political status). Regarding espionage activities, there have been attempts to steal technological know-how, as well as cooperation between Chinese technology companies and the Chinese state apparatus for which these companies were supposed to collect sensitive information (in the case of Huawei for example).

There is increasing talk about the need to increase resilience against new security threats posed by Chinese and Russian activities in Europe. At the same time, there have been calls for coordinated action in this area across the European continent. The logical outcome of this process is the Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, published by the European Commission in April 2016. This document states that 'hybrid threats aim to exploit a country's vulnerabilities and often seek to undermine fundamental democratic values and liberties' (European Commission, 2016). This clearly shows that hybrid threats pose a threat to the democratic order in Europe.

It should be emphasised here that the theoretical definition of hybrid wars or hybrid threats was discussed in international relations long before Russia and China began to actively interfere in the internal political affairs of many European countries. In the Anglo-Saxon environment, the first attempt to define hybridity in international relations was made by the American GB Walker in his unpublished 1988 dissertation (Walker, 1988). Another attempt to define hybrid warfare was the 2002 dissertation by William Nemeth, in which the author discussed the hybrid operations of the Chechen rebels who faced the Russian army at the turn of the millennium (Nemeth, 2002). Frank Hoffman can be considered a pioneer in this field who, in his most famous publication of 2007, defines hybrid warfare as 'a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts,

including indiscriminate violence, coercion, and criminal disorder. Actors in hybrid warfare include both states and various non-state actors.' (Hoffman, 2007: 29). It is clear from this definition that hybrid warfare can encompass a wide range of activities.

The term 'hybrid threat' itself is open to interpretation and there is no terminological consensus on it, as well as often being confused with hybrid warfare (Monaghan, 2019). The prevailing view is that hybrid threats are nothing new in international relations, because the desire to use unconventional means has almost always existed and therefore cannot be exclusively associated with Russia and its strategy to control Crimea (Popescu, 2015). An example of the use of hybrid strategies before the collapse of the bipolar world could be the tactics of the Afghan mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet Union (Popescu, 2015). In the context of increasingly frequent hybrid operations by China and Russia around the world, NATO defines hybrid threats as 'a combination of military and non-military, as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, the use of irregular armed groups and the use of regular armed forces' (NATO, 2023). Hybrid threats are thus by definition not linked to the declaration of a state of war. All these operations are conducted when there is peace between the attacking state and the target state.

Although the concept of hybrid threats is often criticised in international relations, the current situation shows that it has its importance. Hybrid threats are evident in the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, where the Kremlin is systematically trying to undermine the EU's unified position in support of Ukraine. In doing so, it deploys tried and tested methods that the Russian regime has also used in the past. In particular, these include the spread of fake news, disinformation campaigns or blackmail through the delivery of energy resources.

VARIOUS MECHANISMS OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE HYBRID THREATS

0 1

he focus of this text is exclusively on state actors whose subversive activities promote their political interests and undermine democratic institutions in Europe. Although subversive actions by non-state actors are discussed in the context of hybrid threats, it is not the purpose of this text to address them explicitly. It is noteworthy that both Beijing and Moscow can also use non-state actors for these purposes and therefore this does need to be given due attention. Indeed, it is non-state actors who help both Russia and China to strengthen their indirect influence in a number of European countries.

Both Russia and China use different mechanisms to promote hybrid threats, primarily to further their own power interests and undermine democratic institutions. As with the theoretical definition of hybrid threats, individual authors have taken different approaches to defining these mechanisms for China and Russia. The debate on the nature of Russian hybrid threats was initiated by a text published in 2013 by Valery Gerasimov, the current Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (Gerasimov, 2013). In this article, which is frequently cited by Western analysts in the context of Russian hybrid threats and hybrid warfare, Gerasimov expressed the idea that future military conflicts will be characterised by the use of fake news and disinformation campaigns to demoralise the target society. Gerasimov also expressed his belief that a state of peace will merge with a state of war, creating a never-ending conflict (Gerasimov, 2013). This article caused quite a stir in much of the professional community. A year later in 2014, British analyst Mark Galeotti decided to respond to General Gerasimov's words in his article, interpreting Russian thinking on the nature of future military conflicts as Gerasimov's doctrine (Galeotti, 2014). However, in 2018 he apologised for this thought process and claimed that Gerasimov's original article cannot be interpreted as Gerasimov's doctrine. In reality, the Kremlin's hybrid threats and hybrid strategy cannot be seen as something invented by General Gerasimov, but it is certainly necessary to address Moscow's hybrid operations (Galeotti, 2018).

Considering Galeotti's words, it is worth recalling that there have been a number of recent publications that have attempted to characterise Russian hybrid threats, such as Clark (2020), Chivvis (2017), and Treverton et al. (2018). Although each of

these theoretical models conceptualises Russian hybrid threats differently, the aforementioned authors agree that the Kremlin essentially deploys five basic tools to undermine democratic institutions and enhance its political power. These include the Kremlin's operations in the information space, clandestine operations, the expansion of political influence, energy dependence, and cultural influence (Chivvis, 2017: 3-4).

The Kremlin's operations in the information space and clandestine operations

As far as the actual mechanisms for creating hybrid threats are concerned, Russia's operations in the information environment are undoubtedly some of the greatest threats to democracy. In particular, Russia's use of disinformation, fake news or the dissemination of false news is aimed at questioning the legitimacy of European democratic institutions on the one hand, and at improving its image and justifying its actions on the international stage on the other hand (Chivvis, 2017). In addition to these activities, a key feature of Russia's hybrid threats is the use of intelligence services to pursue political goals. An example of this is Russia's attempt to overthrow the pro-Western government of Montenegro in 2016 when the Kremlin feared that the country would join NATO. This attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, and Montenegro joined the North Atlantic Alliance a year after this failed political coup (Gardasevic, 2018). Another example of the use of Russian intelligence is the sabotage activities which culminated in the attack on the ammunition depots in Vrbětice (Dvořáková and Syrovátka, 2021). The case of the poisoning of agent Skripal in the UK is also well known.

Russia's political influence and the undermining of democratic values in European countries

Political influence is one of the main tools used by the Kremlin to advance its own interests and undermine democratic institutions. The logic in this case is simple. Moscow looks for actors on the domestic political stage of the target states who represent Russia's interests in these states. As a rule, these are politicians or political parties who are financed and influenced by Russia. These parties represent anti-Western positions and are very often critics of the EU, precisely the characteristics that Moscow reinforces through its actions. Such politicians voice criticism of the West and of the democratic mechanisms that the various states on the European continent – with the exception of Belarus – have at their disposal. Russian Trojan horses in Europe are often discussed in the context of these political parties (Polyakova et al., 2016; 2017).

The second mechanism that Russia often uses as part of its political influence is interference in the electoral process of European states, whereby pro-Russian parties or politicians are supported by the Kremlin in the media, while pro-Western politicians are vilified (Davis, 2018; Brattberg and Maurer, 2018). Russia often uses disinformation campaigns and other information environment operations in these attempts, as was the case in the 2016 US presidential election (Henschke et al., 2020). Finally, Moscow's hybrid activities also include so-called proxy organisations which are used to influence the domestic political situation in a number of European states. These organisations spread pro-Russian narratives on the territory of the targeted states (Chivvis, 2017: 4). These organisations are often linked to pro-Russian political parties. Paramilitary groups can also be an example of such organisations with ties to Moscow. They are financed by Moscow and share pro-Russian views.

Moscow's cultural influence in Europe as an instrument for the legitimisation of Russian foreign policy

Another important aspect in the creation of Russian hybrid threats in Europe is cultural influence. From Moscow's point of view, it is crucial to promote the Russian language and Russian culture, essentially improving its own image. The Kremlin's extended arm in this case is the Russian Orthodox Church, which appeals to the unity of the Orthodox world through Patriarch Kirill and serves as an instrument of Russian foreign policy (Curanovic, 2012; Solik and Baar, 2019). In fact, since 2003 representatives of the Russian government have met regularly with representatives of the Church to discuss current issues together (Treverton et al, 2018: 53). The Russian Orthodox Church defends Moscow's foreign policy positions and is thus an important part of Russia's hybrid threats. It lends legitimacy to all of Russian President Vladimir Putin's political actions, regardless of the fact that these actions blatantly violate international law and place the Kremlin in opposition to the entire democratic world. Indeed, even in February 2022 Patriarch Kirill dared not speak out publicly against Russia's invasion of the territory of neighbouring Ukraine, and in time the Russian Orthodox Church began to publicly defend the war. Perhaps this was because of a fear that the fall of the current Russian regime might lead to the dissolution of this organisation (Luchenko, 2023). Another important instrument of Russian cultural diplomacy is a foundation called Russian World (Russkiy Mir), established by President Putin in 2007. This organisation generally seeks to present and protect elements of Russian culture and the Russian language.

Energy dependence on Russia as political leverage for the Kremlin

An equally important vulnerability that Russia tries to exploit to its advantage is the energy dependence of other countries on energy imports from Russia, thus influencing the policies of these states. This phenomenon is not new. As early as 2005-2006, Russia's Gazprom stopped gas supplies to Ukraine on the grounds that the regime there was unable to fulfil its obligations. In fact, this interruption of supplies had a clear political background, as the Orange Revolution took place in Ukraine in 2004. A similar situation was repeated in the following years, namely in 2008 and 2014. The current situation – created through the invasion by Russian troops of neighbouring Ukraine – shows once again that the Kremlin uses blackmail through its supply of oil and gas as political leverage to achieve its political goals.

Although the concept of hybrid threats has only recently been discussed in a broader context, namely in the context of Russian and Chinese influence operations in Europe, it is important to remember that hybrid threats are by no means a problem which is viewed uniformly. For example, this concept is often confused with the concept of hybrid warfare, which is quite sharply criticised among experts.

Chinese mechanisms for creating hybrid threats

China's mechanisms for creating hybrid threats differ from Russia's. This is primarily because China – unlike Russia – does not share a common history with European states and there are no developed cultural ties between Beijing and EU states that Moscow benefits from in creating hybrid threats. The following activities are the most frequently mentioned in the context of Chinese hybrid threats: foreign direct investment to strengthen Beijing's political influence, espionage and conducting disinformation campaigns (Speranza, 2020).

One of the most tangible tools which Beijing uses to strengthen its influence on the European continent is financial support for large infrastructure projects in European countries. However, it is not only its economic influence that is strengthened by these investments, but also its considerable political capital. First of all, it should be borne in mind that China's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests are incompatible with those of European countries. China has long sought to change the balance of power in the current international system, and the Chinese regime certainly cannot be described as democratic. Moreover, according to Freedom House, these

investments are predominantly non-transparent (Shullman (ed.), 2019), which may raise questions of corruption that undermine citizens' trust in the democratic state apparatus. Moreover, these investments may violate existing legal frameworks, contributing to the weakening of democracy.

Chinese investments not only raise questions related to corruption, but also to technological espionage, as with the example of the Chinese company Huawei. Although this is a recent case from 2019, some analysts have consistently pointed to similar problems related to Chinese capital inflows since 2012 (Kable, 2021: 41). From an economic perspective, foreign direct investment (FDI) should bring technological advances to recipient countries. In the case of Chinese investment, however, this technological know-how is acquired and then used by Beijing (De Gucht, 2012). In his analysis of Chinese investment, Sean O'Connor argues that Beijing invests in key technology areas and subsequently exports those technologies back to China. For example, between 2011 and the first half of 2018, China's FDI in U.S. technology development reached nearly USD 14.5 billion (O'Connor, 2019). It is also common for Chinese employees in European or American companies to provide sensitive information about technological developments to the Chinese government (US Embassy in Georgia, 2020). As with the case of the Dutch company ASML in February 2023 shows, this can indeed happen: ASML accused a former Chinese employee of technological espionage for the Chinese government (Bloomberg, 2023).

Information space operations are a common feature of both Russian and Chinese hybrid threats. A classic case of deliberate misinformation by China to avoid damaging its image within the international system was the outbreak of the global pandemic COVID-19 in late 2019-2020 (Speranza, 2020). By and large, China tries to ensure that its views on important foreign policy issues are adopted in target states. To this end, Beijing has used the Confucius Institutes which it has established in a number of European states. These Institutes serve to strengthen Chinese cultural influence and are located at universities. There are suspicions that views are held in these institutes which are in line with those of the Chinese Communist Party. It is also alleged that academic freedom is restricted on campuses where Confucius Institutes exist. In a sense, this could be considered a Chinese instrument of soft power (Pamment et al., 2019). China is also involved in the funding of some media in Europe, for example in Serbia (Vladisavljev, 2022).

All these mechanisms are used to give Moscow and Beijing political influence in the EU neighbourhood, which can lead to a slowdown of the European integration process, as

shown by the examples of two Western Balkan states, namely Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is also an Eastern Partnership state, which has long been characterised by an unclear geopolitical orientation and which, in addition to its strong historical and economic ties to Russia, has begun to deepen its cooperation with Beijing in the shadow of current events in Ukraine. This state is the Republic of Moldova.



he Western Balkans region is an important strategic location for the EU and other external actors seeking to gain political and economic influence in these countries. This is partly because the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries has turned out to be much more complicated than originally anticipated (Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019). The EU's relative disinterest in the Western Balkans has led to a logical increase in the influence of Beijing and Moscow as well as other authoritarian actors, which may lead to a further slowdown of the European integration process and a weakening of relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. There exist mechanisms through which hybrid threats are being built by Beijing and Moscow in two Western Balkan states, namely Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as these two states clearly demonstrate how Beijing and Moscow proceed in pursuing their political goals.

Chinese hybrid threats in Serbia

China is deepening its cooperation with the Western Balkans mainly in two areas. Firstly, Beijing is using trade cooperation to financially support the construction of large infrastructure and energy projects. Secondly, media and cultural influence – for example through Confucius Institutes – is used to create a link between Chinese society and the Western Balkans (Shopov, 2022). China's growing influence in the region is due to the EU's reluctance to speed up accession negotiations with these states. This fact was alluded to by the former Dutch MP Kees Verhoeven, who argued that the Western Balkan states could cooperate with China or Russia if the EU did not offer these states the prospect of early accession (Zweers et al. 2020: 4).

In this regard, Serbia is China's most important partner in the region and has gradually intensified and developed its relations with Beijing in the last decade. In Belgrade-Beijing relations, China is seemingly creating two hybrid threats that can lead to a slowdown in the European integration process. Firstly, Beijing supports the construction of key energy and infrastructure projects, while investments lack trans-

parency (Shullman (ed.), 2019). The second mechanism through which China creates hybrid threats to Serbia is through the use of the media space.

Mutual cooperation between the two countries dates back to 2009, when China pledged USD 7.5 billion in funding for the construction of infrastructure and energy projects (Vladisavljev, 2022). The first project of this kind in which Beijing participated financially and which represented a new stage in Serbia-China relations was the construction of the Mihajlo Pupin Friendship Bridge. Construction of the bridge was completed in 2014 and was financed entirely by the Export-Import Bank of China. Moreover, the Chinese state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation was responsible for construction (Shullman (ed.), 2019: 25). Although it seems that the construction was beneficial for the citizens of the Serbian capital, this is not entirely the case. Most of the building materials were imported from China and most of the bridge's construction was carried out by local Chinese workers (Shullman (ed.), 2019). After construction was completed, there was a further influx of Chinese capital. In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first visit to Belgrade and during this visit it was agreed that the steel plant in Smederevo would be bought by the Chinese stateowned company Hesteel Group. In 2018, the Chinese mining company Zijin Mining took a majority stake in RTB Bor (Shullman (ed.), 2019). The most ambitious project is the high-speed railway line between Belgrade and Budapest, the construction of which was supposed to start in 2013. In reality, however, construction began in 2022 (Gutierrez, 2023). Nevertheless, the EU is trying to eliminate Chinese influence by supporting other Serbian infrastructure projects, for example with the approval of a second grant for the completion of the Niš-Belgrade railway line at the end of March 2023 (European Investment Bank, 2023).

Regarding Chinese investments in the Serbian energy sector, the most important project supported by Beijing is the construction of a new block (B3) of the Kostolac thermal power plant. In 2013, a contract was signed with Chinese company China Machinery Engineering Corporation and the Chinese government provided Serbia with a loan in excess of USD 600 million (Just Finance International, 2021). Although construction of the power plant began in 2016, it is not yet operational. It will be commissioned in September 2023 and it should have an installed capacity of 350 MW (Serbia Energy, 2022; Dimitrijevic, 2018). However, there are a number of problems related to this project. Firstly, the contract for the construction of this power plant unit was awarded to China Machinery Engineering Corporation in 2013 without a proper tender procedure. Secondly, the available material shows that the plant does not meet EU environmental standards for this type of power plant. Finally, no one

has carried out a thorough analysis of the environmental impact of the operation of this power plant block (Just Finance International, 2021). In addition to this project, Chinese companies were also involved in the revitalisation of the first two units of the Kostolac thermal power plant, which was also associated with environmental problems. The total cost of this modernisation was USD 250 million (Just Finance International, 2021).

Chinese investments in Serbia can be perceived negatively for several reasons. The way China provides its funds to Serbia contradicts the democratic values of the EU (Bassuener, 2019: 4). Such investments can realistically do more harm than good in emerging democracies, according to many analysts. Additionally, for emerging democracies these investments can lead to corruption and undermine democratic values. In these efforts, Beijing prefers to act bilaterally. Since 2012, it has established the 16+1 Platform, which is specifically used to finance Belt and Road Initiative projects (Shullman (ed.), 2019). However, there are no limits to China's economic influence, because both sides announced in 2022 that they would negotiate a free trade area (Ladjevac, 2022).

In the context of the influx of Chinese capital into the Serbian economy, it is noteworthy that as the rapprochement between the two countries has progressed, the authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian government have also increased. Aleksandar Vučić, who has been in power since 2012, has gradually subjugated the media and begun to restrict the activities of NGOs. This fact was also alluded to by the European Commission, with its 2018 report stating that elements of state capture are emerging in Serbia (European Commission, 2018: 3). The question is to what extent these authoritarian tendencies are linked to Chinese investment and to what extent Vučić's behaviour can be described as a completely natural political development. However, the truth is that the Serbian government adopts the methods for the surveillance of its citizens from the Chinese government. For example, in 2018 the Serbian government signed a contract with Huawei to supply 1000 cameras to monitor traffic and citizens on the streets of Belgrade (Shullman (ed.), 2019). Although the government has made assurances that this is a measure to increase the security of citizens, the question is whether the data collected by these cameras will not be misused by the Chinese government. Therefore, elements of authoritarianism are gradually being introduced into the Serbian political system.

China's improved image in Serbia occurred during the coronavirus pandemic which took place between 2021 and 2022. In the spring of 2021, the EU banned the export

of vaccines outside the EU, which was criticised by Serbian President Vučić. In the spring of 2021, a plane carrying Sinopharm vaccines landed in Serbia. Chinese flags flew — perhaps a little unexpectedly — at the airport, even though these vaccines were paid for by the EU. The assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic has also clearly made its mark in the minds of Serbian citizens. In one survey in Serbia, it was revealed that China was perceived as a friendly country by 83% of respondents (Subotic, 2021).

The good relations between Belgrade and Beijing have also been expressed in political terms. Over the past decade, China has proven to be a truly reliable ally for Serbia. In important votes at the UN, Serbia has never voted against China on issues that directly affect it, for example on the repression of the Uyghurs. This has earned criticism from EU leaders, who are asking Serbia to reconsider its position and align itself with EU foreign policy which is one of the requirements in the enlargement process. However, it is not only the issue of repression against the Uyghurs, but respecting the One China policy that is having the desired effect. China has become Serbia's second most important trading partner after the EU (Subotic, 2021).

Another tool that China actively uses is the media, which creates a good image of Beijing to the outside world. China Radio Outlet has set up a Serbian affiliate through which listeners are offered news from China. More importantly, however, is the fact that the Serbian media itself, under the supervision of President Vučić's ruling party, is completely uncritical of China, which creates a very positive image of Beijing in Serbia (Shullman (ed.), 2019: 26).

Chinese hybrid threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As for China's hybrid threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it seems that Beijing's hybrid activities do not pose a direct threat to the democratic direction of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region as a whole. However, the opposite is the case. After the EU missed an opportunity to deepen cooperation with the Western Balkans, local authorities started to look at China as a possible economic partner. Bosnia and Herzegovina is no exception in this respect. The relationship between Sarajevo and Beijing is based on the fact that China will not question the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina in return for Sarajevo's compliance with the One China policy. Consequently, China is well-placed to be a strong economic partner for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the future.

China's economic activities in the country are similar in nature to those taking place in Serbia. However, the situation is more complicated than in Serbia due to the complex power-sharing system. China's economic influence is not as pronounced as in the case of Serbia, but there are also infrastructure and energy projects which raise questions. One example is the modernisation of the coal-fired power plant in Tuzla, which was concluded back in 2017. The EUR 600 million project was financed by the Export-Import Bank of China. This loan has a term of 20 years from completion, raising concerns about excessive debt (Hasic, 2022: 17-18). However, Beijing already has the successful construction of a EUR 530 million coal-fired power plant behind it, namely the Stanari power plant near the town of Doboj in the Republic of Srpska, which was commissioned in 2016. Chinese companies have also been involved in projects related to renewable energy sources. In December 2021, construction of the Ivovik wind farm near Tomislavgrad began. Chinese company PowerChina Resources was responsible for construction and the entire project cost USD 148 million (Prtoric, 2022). The installed capacity of this wind farm is 84 MW.

In addition to these energy-related projects, Beijing is also investing in road infrastructure. The first of these projects is the motorway from Banja Luka to Novi Grad, and the second is the motorway from Vukosavlje to Brčko. In addition, Beijing has expressed an interest in building a motorway from Banja Luka to Split in Croatia (Hasic, 2022). However, the question is whether these commitments would be repayable and whether the Chinese side, which wants to participate in these projects as a direct investor, is merely buying political influence. In the future, these infrastructure projects could be used as political leverage.

In terms of Chinese political influence, which could pose a hybrid threat not only to Bosnia and Herzegovina itself but also to the EU, it is important to mention that China, like Russia, does not recognise Christian Schmidt as the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cvjeticanin, 2022). This in itself may undermine efforts to move the country in a democratic direction, as the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina has a number of powers which contribute to the democratic orientation of the country. It is the High Representative who monitors the compliance with the Dayton Peace Accords, and represents the international community and Bosnia's particular quasi protectorate status.

In addition to these activities, China relies on its Confucius Institutes to teach Chinese language, culture, customs, and traditions. Bosnia and Herzegovina currently has two such institutions: one is located in Banja Luka, the administrative centre of



Railway workers build railways in Serbia. China Railways International and China Construction Company participate in the modernization of the Belgrade-Budapest railroad. 2018

Republika Srpska; and the other is in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo (Cvjeticanin, 2022). However, China's influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is largely limited compared to Serbia. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Bosnia and Herzegovina, like Serbia, has received a shipment of about 50 000 COVID-19 vaccines (Cvjeticanin, 2022). This step by the Chinese government was largely influenced by the lack of vaccine supply from EU countries. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina turned to Beijing to help resolve the situation (Simic (ed.), 2022).

Russian hybrid threats in Serbia

Serbia can be considered the Kremlin's most important ally in the Western Balkans. This is mainly because the two countries have relatively strong cultural ties and their governments hold similar positions on important foreign policy issues. The better-than-average relations between Belgrade and Moscow date back to 2012, when current President Aleksandar Vučić came to power in Serbia. Broadly speaking, the Kremlin applies four hybrid threat mechanisms in Serbia. These are political influence,

information space operations, intelligence operations, and cultural influence to achieve its political goals.

Relations between Belgrade and Moscow are based on mutual support for important issues of international relations. While Russia does not recognise Kosovo's independence, which is widely welcomed by Serbian political elites and society, Serbia's stance on Kosovo is less appreciated by the EU. Indeed, in the EU's annual reports Belgrade has been warned that it will not be possible to move forward with accession negotiations without a resolution of Kosovo's political status (European Commission, 2021). In spite of this, Serbia has already been granted candidate status by the EU. Conversely, Serbia has sided with Russia on the issue of the annexation of Crimea and to some extent in the current situation, where Vučić has formally condemned the Russian invasion but his government has not imposed sanctions on Russia, which is contrary to the general EU position. The Serbian parliament has not even passed a resolution calling the Russian military operation a war (Morina, 2022). Serbian President Vučić has already expressed his opinion after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that the Serbian government would never impose sanctions against Russia (Globsec, 2021). The former foreign minister of the Serbian government at the time also made similar statements (Zoric, 2017). The attitude of the Serbian government and parliament is probably due to the fact that Serbian society perceives Russia as its Slavic brother (Globsec, 2021) and as a counterweight to the North Atlantic Alliance. This military organisation is perceived by Serbs as a hostile organisation which caused them much suffering in the 1990s due to the NATO intervention in Kosovo. This interpretation is part of Russia's narrative about the 'hypocritical West' (Radoman, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that the Serbian political elite is reserved towards the West. After all, support for the country's accession to NATO has long been low among its citizens, hovering at around 25% (Globsec, 2021). However, support for Serbia's political representation on foreign policy issues is not unlimited, as evidenced by votes at the UN. In fact, most recently in February 2023, Serbia voted in favour of a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine.

The current opinion of the Serbian public is undoubtedly due to propaganda from the Kremlin, which – before the war in Ukraine – spread three main narratives through its information channels. Relatively favourable conditions for this propaganda existed in the Serbian media market because, unlike most European states, Serbia did not ban the Russian TV channel Sputnik Srbija from broadcasting on its territory (Panasytska, 2022). The first narrative involves the EU being portrayed very negatively by media close to the Kremlin. The EU is not an actor who will bring Serbia pros-

perity and liberal values, but an organisation which will use Serbia to achieve its own goals (Panasytska, 2022). This is another reason popular support for the country's EU accession has been hovering at around 50% for a long time (Globsec, 2021). The second typically Russian narrative that dominates the media landscape in Serbia is the claim that Moscow's annexation of Crimea was inevitable because a US-led political coup was underway in Ukraine. Serbian society also backs Russia in the current conflict in Ukraine. Three quarters of Serbs believe that the Kremlin had to intervene in the war, otherwise NATO would have expanded. Finally, the third media narrative hypothesises that Serbia would lose its independence by joining NATO or the EU (Panasytska, 2022).

The cultural aspect also plays an important role in creating Russian hybrid threats in Serbia. Indeed, Russia often invokes Slavic cultural roots and the shared values of Serbs and Russians which the Kremlin believes unite the two nations. It is no different in the case of the Orthodox faith, where the Russian Orthodox Church acts as an extension of the Kremlin in the field of foreign policy and openly supports the Kremlin's war campaign in the context of current events in Ukraine. This, of course, has implications for relations between the various autocephalous churches. The Serbian Autocephalous Church maintains relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, and it too has chosen not to openly condemn the Russian invasion of the territory of neighbouring Ukraine, although it had the opportunity to do so. In June 2022, an ecclesiastical procession entitled 'Belgrade Prays for Peace' passed through Belgrade, but not a single church dignitary condemned the Russian invasion (Spiritual Front of Ukraine, 2022).

An important factor that could shape Serbian foreign policy is Serbia's energy dependence on Russian gas supplies, as Serbia gets most of its gas from Russia. While the EU is trying to break its dependence on Russian gas supplies, the Serbian government has actually increased its dependence on Russian gas supplies. At the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, President Vučić signed a contract with Gazprom in May 2022 for the supply of Russian gas over the next three years. There has always been a widespread belief in Serbia that fossil fuel supplies from Russia have been financially advantageous for the country. However, the price was in line with global market prices (Cruz, 2021).

It is questionable whether Russia's influence in this Western Balkan country can be perceived in terms of a hybrid threat, since neither the political representation nor the Serbian citizens see cooperation with Russia as something that could harm Serbian interests. The best indication of this situation is the fact that Belgrade's main foreign

policy documents (National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy) do not mention the Kremlin as a threat (Globsec, 2021). The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Kremlin's unprecedented violations of the norms of international law have not changed the attitude of the Serbian government. Even before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, 91% of Serbian respondents held the view that Russia could not be considered a security threat to Serbia (Globsec, 2021). Support for Russia in Serbian society has not declined, as shown by the results of a recent opinion poll which found that just over 10% of Serbs consider Russia to be the main culprit in the current war in Ukraine. Strikingly, almost two thirds of respondents believe that the West is responsible for the conflict. Finally, one third of the Serbian population also believes that Ukraine should cede part of its territory to Russia (Vuksanovic et al., 2022).

Russian hybrid threats in Serbia are clearly illustrated by this survey. Pro-Russian narratives are successfully reproduced in Serbia, contributing to an almost limitless support for Russia. This is particularly well observed regarding the current conflict in Ukraine, where the majority of Serbian society backs Russia and does not hesitate to express its opinion at demonstrations. The Serbian capital Belgrade was the only capital in Europe where citizens publicly expressed their support for the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. There were two pro-Russian demonstrations in Belgrade in March 2022 (Filipovic, 2022; Euractiv, 2022). It is therefore questionable whether Serbian society is interested in a rapprochement with European states, as the Kremlin's political support and consistent disinformation campaigns seem to shape the social discourse in Serbia.

Russian hybrid threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In contrast to Serbia, the mechanisms which Moscow deploys to operate on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina are quite different. In this case, the Kremlin mainly exploits the weaknesses of the political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which result from the constitutional structure of the country. Moscow cannot exploit cultural or historical ties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead, the Kremlin openly relies on internal ethno-national divisions, which it exacerbates through its actions in destabilising the relatively unstable political situation in the country.

For its subversive activities, it uses its alliance with Milorad Dodik – the current president of Republika Srpska – who makes no secret of the fact that he is not

satisfied with the current distribution of political power in the country and wants to turn Republika Srpska into an independent territorial entity. Relations between Putin and Dodik can be described as above average, given their frequent face-to-face meetings. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Dodik met with Putin eight times in 2018, with one of those meetings taking place before the 2018 elections in Republika Srpska. At this meeting, Putin expressed his support for Dodik (Putin, 2018).

Moscow very often supports Dodik's nationalist tendencies, as several recent examples show. In 2016, Dodik tried to revive celebrations of the Bosnian Serbs' 'statehood day', which is the day when Bosnian Serbs declared independence in 1992. Despite a ban by the Constitutional Court, a referendum was held, which was eventually declared null and void (Rose, 2016). What is interesting about the whole affair is the fact that EU states strongly criticised this unilateral act by Republika Srpska, but the Kremlin stood up for Dodik in this situation (Samorukov, 2016). Russia's questioning of the legitimacy of the current High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt – whose appointment to the post was rejected by the Kremlin – can be considered a hybrid threat (Karcic, 2022). In general, Russia has long had a problem with this office and the Kremlin's political representation would prefer it to be closed completely (Ruge, 2022). Moreover, Russia blackmails its partners in the UN Security Council by threatening not to extend the EUFOR peacekeeping mission.

This support for Republika Srpska by the Russian regime is of course not an end in itself. Milorad Dodik has repeatedly blocked the possibility of Bosnia and Herzegovina becoming a member of the North Atlantic Alliance. Additionally, in the context of the current conflict in Ukraine, Dodik tried to block the adoption of anti-Russian sanctions at national level (Karcic, 2022). Similarly, Dodik has prevented Bosnia and Herzegovina from agreeing to the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory (Ruge, 2022).

The complex distribution of political power in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the reason the state apparatus is essentially dysfunctional, which Moscow also exploits to pursue its own political goals. It is well known that Moscow does not agree with the Western Balkan states becoming members of the North Atlantic Alliance, nor does it want the states to move closer to EU membership. To achieve its goals, Russia needs a paralysis of the state apparatus and therefore supports nationalist forces. As can be seen from the voting results on important issues, Republika Srpska is the entity which vetoes all reforms that could bring the country closer to EU membership.

In 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina had to deal with one of the biggest crises since the end of the war in 1995. Milorad Dodik started creating autonomous branches of political power in the territory and prepared the declaration of independence (Karcic, 2022). The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina called for a resolution condemning such actions. However, the Kremlin was once more against it. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Dodik let it be known that the reason the secession of the territory of Republika Srpska had not yet taken place was precisely because of the invasion of Ukraine. Unlike the other members of the Bosnian Presidency, he did not condemn the invasion. On the contrary, Dodik supported Putin in his war campaign (Brezar, 2022).



oldova, the poorest country in Europe, faces heightened security concerns in the context of the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia, as it is neither a member of the EU nor a member of NATO. This makes it an ideal target for hybrid threats from both the Kremlin and Beijing, which exploit the opaque investment environment for their economic interests. It is worth recalling that Moldova has had to deal with major corruption scandals in the past. These reasons all make Moldova naturally more vulnerable to the imposition of foreign political influence.

Russian hybrid threats in Moldova

Moldova, the poorest state in mainland Europe, has strong historical and cultural ties to Russia. Although it is a state that does not share a land border with Russia, Moldova is considered a 'Near Abroad' country in official Russian government documents (Way, 2015). This term is used by Moscow to refer to all the states of the former Soviet Union. In these countries, the Kremlin has its strategic interests. The common denominator of these states is the fact that there are Russian-speaking minorities on their territories, a direct consequence of the collapse of the USSR. The desire to protect Russian minorities in the 'Near Abroad' is one of the defining vectors of Russian foreign policy (Roberts, 2017). However, in the case of Moldova it is important to keep in mind that since the conflict in Transnistria, a Russian military contingent of several hundred soldiers has been stationed on the territory of this separatist Moldovan region. In view of the war in Ukraine, there is a growing fear that Russia could use similar tactics in Moldova and try to annex this territory in the medium term. These are all factors that need to be considered when assessing the Kremlin's hybrid threats in Moldova.

The Kremlin seemingly uses almost all the mechanisms at its disposal to create hybrid threats in Moldova, even as the current Moldovan government tries to resist Moscow's subversive actions. In doing so, the Kremlin takes advantage of the long-term fragility of the local political system and the fact that public opinion has long been divided into two relatively equal camps: one which wants to bring

Moldova closer to the West; while the other leans more towards Russia. This is also reflected in the frequent changes of government in Moldova. Until 2009, Vladimir Voronin was the president whose foreign policy tended towards Russia (Morar and Dembinska, 2021). From 2009 onwards, there were regular changes in government positions. Igor Dodon — who led the country from 2016 to 2019 — was a key figure for the Kremlin to exert its political influence upon. The policy of exchanging cheap natural gas supplies from Russia in exchange for the promotion of Russian interests was disingenuously defended. For example, although Moldova had signed an association agreement with the EU in 2014, Dodon was about to terminate the existing agreement in 2017 (Morar and Dembinska, 2021). The denunciation of this agreement would lead to the fulfilment of the long-term foreign policy goals of Moscow, which has long been an opponent of the enlargement of the EU and NATO towards Russia's borders.

Not surprisingly, Moscow also decided to support Dodon in the media and financially in the 2021 presidential elections. Before the elections, Dodon warned about the growing influence of foreign powers and let it be known that foreign-funded NGOs posed a similar threat. After the elections, however, it emerged that Dodon himself had been supported by the Kremlin in his election campaign. The support is reported to have involved the sum of USD 300 000 (Cuschevici (ed.), 2022), and these funds are said to have come from six different Russian banks. On the day Dodon received the money, the Moldovan politician met with former Russian vice-president Dmitry Kozak. Dodon had made the trip to Russia as a member of one of the parliamentary commissions responsible for developing friendly relations with the Russian Federation (Cuschevici (ed.), 2022).

This example clearly shows Moscow's interference in the electoral process of a foreign country, which naturally undermines citizens' trust in democracy and is a violation of the country's sovereignty. Dodon was charged with treason and corruption in 2022. He was subsequently sentenced to house arrest. This decision left two strong political allies of Russia on Moldova's domestic political stage: the current president of the Republic of Transnistria Vadim Krasnoselsky; and the president of the pro-Russian ŞOR Party llan Shor.

The relationship between Transnistria and Russia is another pillar for the creation of Russian hybrid operations in Moldova. Transnistria is dependent on the Kremlin's material and financial support, as it is a so-called de facto state that cannot act independently in international relations (Kosienkowski, 2019). Therefore, Moscow issues



Building with Russian and Transnistrian flag in Tiraspol inside the breakaway state of Transnistria, 2021

Russian passports to the citizens of Transnistria, allows them to study at universities, among other things. Although Krasnoselsky is a staunch Kremlin ally, he did not publicly support Vladimir Putin after the Russian invasion began (Welt, 2022: 2).

Moldova's current political representation is trying to bring the country as close as possible to the EU through its actions, and shortly after the Russian invasion began the Moldovan government applied to join the EU. In light of Russia launching an all-out war against Ukraine last year, EU leaders decided to grant Moldova candidate status. This was confirmed in June 2022. These Moldovan government activities have naturally not escaped the attention of Moscow, which is trying to prevent this scenario from taking place. As a result, demonstrations have recently occurred across the country to overthrow the current pro-Western government and President Maia Sandu. Russia is believed to be involved in these anti-government actions through its Federal Security Service (FSB). These protests began in the autumn of 2022 and bore their first fruit for Russia when the government led by Natalia Gavriliţa resigned on 10 February 2023 after a wave of protests (Tanas, 2023). The Kremlin reportedly involved citizens of other states – such as Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro – in these protests. The demonstrations brought together

supporters of the party of Ilan Shor, who has proven ties to the Kremlin. Although he is now in exile in Israel, there is a suspicion that these subversive actions are being financed by the Kremlin.

Russian hybrid operations are not only carried out through clandestine operations. The Kremlin's spread of disinformation in order to destabilise the target society also plays an important role. In Moldova, there is a certain segment of society that is willing to adopt Russian narratives. This allows the Kremlin to effectively manipulate public opinion. The Moldovan population which absorbs news from Russian information websites is characterised by being from the lower social strata. The economic vulnerability of the majority of Moldovan society is a weakness that is not only exploited by the Kremlin in its disinformation campaigns in Moldova, but is also turned into a powerful tool in the hands of Moldovan pro-Russian politicians (Cenusa, 2023).

In general, there are three identifiable Russian narratives that have long taken place in Moldova. These are the dichotomy of neutrality and accession to NATO, the assumption of a sovereign Moldova, and the possibility of deeper cooperation with the West (Cenusa, 2023). Overall, Russian narratives are present throughout Moldovan society. According to a recent poll, almost one fifth of Moldovan society sides with Russia, and more than one third of Moldovans believe that Crimea is a legitimate part of the Russian Federation (CBS Research, 2023). This is despite the Moldovan government's efforts to limit the influence of Russian propaganda. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the central government in Chisinău decided to ban Russian-language broadcasts, and news from Russian-language media (Necsutu, 2022). However, this has clearly not been enough to eliminate the influence of Russian propaganda on Moldovan territory. This is particularly evident in the cases of Gagauzia, a Moldovan autonomous region, and Transnistria, a de facto state on the territory of Moldova. In both cases, the populations are majority pro-Russian. Moreover, the fact that the regulation does not apply to the territory of these two entities plays a role, which is why 62% of people in Gagauzia believe the Russian media (Salaru, 2022).

As for Moldova's energy dependence on Russian fossil resources, dependence on Russian gas before the Russian invasion was almost 100%. Moreover, Moscow supplied gas at a price far below market value, as this price was linked to the oil price (Cenusa, 2021). However, this changed with the rise of pro-Western President Maia Sandu, who has made no secret of her ambitions to lead the country into the

EU. The Kremlin threatened to cut off gas supplies to the country in October 2021 and has intensified its pressure over time while demanding the repayment of USD 7 billion in debt (Deen and Zweers, 2022). This is just one piece of evidence that Russia is using energy supplies as a coercive tool to advance its own interests. In fact, Moscow capped supplies at only 30% of the contracted amount in October 2022, only to increase them by 10% a month later. The whole problem of fossil fuel supply in Moldova lies in the ownership structure of the Moldovan gas utility. MoldovaGaz is majority-owned by Gazprom, and the distribution network is routed through the territory of the Republic of Transnistria (Hedenskog, 2022: 5). However, Russian pressure has had the opposite effect of what was expected. The Moldovan government has signed an agreement with Romania to supply gas and electricity if Russia stops supplying these resources (Sabadus, 2022).

Chinese hybrid threats in Moldova

Unlike Russia, China's capabilities to conduct hybrid operations are not great. Nevertheless, China is trying to exert its influence through the means of economic diplomacy. Chişinău started opening up to China in 2015, when the Chinese stateowned company China Shipping Group launched its container shipping services in Moldova. In 2017, Moldova also began negotiating a free trade zone with Beijing. In order to develop mutual trade relations, 12 Chinese companies joined the Chişinău Business Forum (Davi, 2020). The most interesting project – prepared in 2017 – is undoubtedly the contract for the construction of 300 km of roads connecting Ukraine with the north of Moldova, after which the transport infrastructure around the capital Chişinău will be created. This entire investment will cost the Moldovan government USD 400 million. However, this project – like others in the Belt and Road Initiative – raises doubts about the transparency of such investments (Lambert, 2020). China has seemingly not been very successful so far, despite its efforts to gain political influence through investments.

IMPLICATIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE
EUROPEAN UNION REGARDING
CHINESE AND RUSSIAN HYBRID
ACTIVITIES IN THE EU
NEIGHBOURHOOD



iven the hybrid threats posed by Beijing and Moscow in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, the question arises as to how EU states should respond to these hostile activities by both actors. The response of EU states to hybrid threats from Beijing and Moscow has evolved over time. The EU first published the Common Framework for Countering Hybrid Threats, which was a European Union response in coordination with the North Atlantic Alliance. This was followed by the Joint Communication on 'Strengthening Resilience and Enhancing Capabilities to Counter Hybrid Threats' in 2018, and a year later by the Council's Conclusions on 'Complementary Measures to Strengthen Resilience and Counter Hybrid Threats' (European Commission, 2020: 3). These three documents formed the basis for the fight against hybrid threats at European level. In addition, in recent years the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have been established.

The destabilisation of the Western Balkans through indirect hybrid operations must very seriously be taken into account by EU leaders. Countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have increasingly been targeted by revisionist monstrosities from Russia and China in recent months and years. These states are trying to take advantage of the relatively frozen process of European integration and are offering these states a possible alternative. However, it is important to realise that by cooperating with these states both Beijing and Moscow are primarily defending their own political interests. Furthermore, the Kremlin is effectively using ethnic disputes and a complicated political system to prevent the adoption of the reforms that would be necessary for EU accession and the possible accession of the Western Balkan states to NATO. Russia's stoking of ethnic disputes could lead to an escalation of tensions and renewed conflict not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also in Kosovo.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHINESE AND RUSSIAN HYBRID THREATS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

- In the case of Chinese economic investments in the Western Balkans region, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina should adopt a foreign-investment-screening mechanism similar to that which exists in the EU member countries. EU leaders should support these efforts taken by the Serbian and Bosnian governments.
- The highest level of transparency needs to be required from Chinese investors and it must be monitored whether investments are made in accordance with EU regulations.
- In order to reduce China's economic influence, possibilities for cooperation between EU countries and the Western Balkan countries must be expanded in key areas such as technological development and infrastructure projects.
- In the case of Serbia, the benefits of eventual EU membership must be further emphasised by EU leaders.
- Serbia needs to be politically or economically forced to change its stance on anti-Russian sanctions, in order to align its foreign policy with that of the EU.
- A clear strategy needs to be presented to bring the Western Balkans into the EU, in order to unblock the European integration process of these countries and to prevent both Russia and China from taking advantage of this situation.
- Sanctions need to be imposed on Milorad Dodik for his attempts to violate the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Financial support should be provided for soft projects aimed at countering disinformation in the Western Balkans.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHINESE AND RUSSIAN HYBRID THREATS IN MOLDOVA

The situation is more complicated in Moldova in terms of Russian and Chinese hybrid threats. The country is extremely vulnerable to the promotion of hybrid threats through all the mechanisms used. At the same time, there is a risk that the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv will spread from the territory of neighbouring Ukraine to the territory of Moldova because the Kremlin maintains a military contingent in Transnistria. The country's current pro-Western political representation is currently under enormous pressure from the Kremlin. In addition, Moldova is extremely dependent on Russian gas imports and the country is politically divided. Moreover, in recent years China's economic influence has increased on the territory of Republic of Moldova.

- Provide maximum financial assistance to Moldova to combat the effects of inflation which fuel social unrest.
- Provide Moldova with information from EU intelligence services to enable

 Moldovan intelligence to respond quickly to an attempted coup by Russia.
- Continue to support the Moldovan government in its efforts to reduce Moldova's dependence on Russian gas supplies.
- Support the Moldovan government's reform efforts in anti-corruption and other areas as much as possible.
- Focus on closer economic cooperation between the EU and Moldova to prevent the uncontrolled growth of Chinese economic influence in the country.
- Provide more funding for Moldova's infrastructure projects and technological development.
- Strengthen mutual cooperation in the field of security, as Moldova is neither a member of the EU nor a member of NATO.

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ABOUT ENoP

The European Network of Political Foundation serves as an umbrella network and information hub for political foundations on topics related to democracy and development cooperation. ENoP brings together 53 political foundations from 23 European countries, active in Europe and with over 130 local offices in partner countries. Although independent in nature, ENoP is a cross-party network and its broad spectrum of affiliation corresponds to the political representation in the European Parliament. As such the Network reflects the political diversity of the European democratic landscape and gives ENoP a unique approach.

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