

## Competition of Great Powers in the Western Balkans (2010–2025)

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### Abstract

This paper examines the three main geopolitical vectors influencing the countries of the Western Balkans (Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo) during the period 2010–2025: (1) integration with the European Union (EU) and its institutional mechanisms; (2) energy relations with Russia, particularly in natural gas and supply chains; and (3) China's infrastructure and credit engagements (within the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" / Belt and Road Initiative) in the region. Methodologically, the study applies document analysis, a combination of quantified data, and thematic synthesis. The aim is to propose recommendations for the Western Balkan states to better manage these influences, strengthen sovereignty, and enhance economic sustainability.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans; geopolitics; EU integration; Russian energy; Chinese infrastructure investments; multivector policy; economic dependence

**JEL Classification:** F51; F59; H54; O19; P48

### INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans region occupies a strategically pivotal geographic position at the crossroads between the European Union (EU) to the west and rising global actors such as Russia and China to the east, making it a key arena for continuous geopolitical competition. The region is economically and politically significant due to its natural-resource base, key transport corridors, proximity to energy markets, and potential for regional stability. Against this backdrop, the Western Balkan states — Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo — are exposed to varied forms of external influence, shaping their political, economic, and infrastructural dynamics.

European integration has long served as a strategic priority for the region, intended to bring economic stability, institutional alignment, and enhanced regional cooperation. Through its enlargement mechanisms – such as financial subsidies,

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technical assistance and political conditionality – the EU aims to stimulate reforms in rule of law, anti-corruption, and democratic governance. Nonetheless, the integration process is frequently delayed by “enlargement fatigue,” political disagreements within the EU, and limited absorption capacity of candidate states, thus resulting in uneven reform implementation (Ioannides et al. 2024). [Source: Ioannides et al., 2024]

Russia uses its energy endowments as an instrument of influence in the region. Through natural-gas supplies, petroleum products, and capital investments in energy companies, it creates economic dependencies that limit the foreign-policy flexibility of Western Balkan states (Bechev 2017; European Parliament 2022). [Sources: Bechev, 2017; European Parliament, 2022]

China emerges as a significant geoeconomic actor via infrastructure investments and credit lines, including projects aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese engagements in the region focus on building and modernizing railways, highways, ports, and energy infrastructure. While these investments accelerate connectivity and convergence with European markets, they also carry risks concerning transparency, long-term sustainability, and alignment with European and environmental standards (Comerma 2023; Blazheska 2021).

In such a context, the Western Balkan states are compelled to balance competing external interests: to leverage EU institutional support, to manage energy dependence on Russia, and to integrate Chinese infrastructural and credit projects without eroding their sovereignty and economic autonomy.

This paper aims to examine the mechanisms of influence exerted by the three principal global actors — the EU, Russia, and China — and to assess their economic, political and infrastructural interventions in the Western Balkans from 2010 to 2025. In doing so, the research provides a contextualised and integrated overview of contemporary geopolitical dynamics and their impacts on the development and stability of the region.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a combined methodological approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative analyses to examine in detail the geopolitical, economic, and infrastructural influences of major powers in the Western Balkans during the period 2010–2025.

**Document analysis** was conducted through a review of reports by the European Commission, IMF, OECD, EBRD, national statistics, as well as strategic documents and policies of the EU, Russia, and China. Academic papers from indexed journals (SCOPUS, WoS) were also examined to identify mechanisms of influence, strategic priorities, and historical trends.

**Analysis of indexed publications** enables a systematic comparison of scientifically supported studies concerning: (1) the impact of EU enlargement and conditionality; (2) Russia's energy interests; and (3) China's infrastructure investments. Each source was coded according to thematic categories, allowing an integrated and contextualized interpretation of results.

For the **quantitative analysis**, economic and infrastructural data were collected, including the share of imported Russian gas, the volume of Chinese and EU investments, the length of highways and railway networks, and the capacities of energy systems. Data were processed using Excel and GIS platforms to generate tables, graphs, and thematic maps, enabling visual identification of spatial-temporal trends.

**GIS analysis and thematic maps** were used to illustrate transport corridors, energy flows, and geopolitical spheres of influence. These visualizations support spatial and strategic analysis of risks and opportunities for the countries of the region.

The **synthetic approach** combines qualitative and quantitative results into comparative tables, heat maps, and charts, enabling a clear interpretation of the economic and political implications of EU, Russian, and Chinese influence.

Some data on investments and infrastructure originate from media or public sources, which may introduce variations in accuracy. Thematic maps are schematic and have an illustrative function. The research is limited to the period 2010–2025; therefore, long-term effects beyond 2025 are not included.

## **1. European Integration: Offers, Conditions, and Effects**

### **1.1 EU Offer and Institutional Mechanisms**

The EU remains the primary geopolitical anchor for the Western Balkans, offering a structured accession framework supported by financial instruments, regulatory alignment, and political conditionality. The EU provides significant financial assistance designed to accelerate reforms in governance, rule of law, and economic competitiveness.

For instance, a major plan allocating approximately €6 billion for the Western Balkans during 2024-2027 underlines the EU's intention to catalyse reform and convergence with the single market. [Source Needed] These instruments, implemented under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), serve not only to incentivise structural reforms but also to bolster institutional resilience and regional economic integration.

Political conditionality remains a key pillar of the EU's influence. For example, Noutcheva (2023) notes that EU conditionality remains “one of the most effective tools for influencing domestic change in the Western Balkans” (45). [Noutcheva 2023]

### 1.2 Structural Challenges: Absorptive Capacity and Reform Implementation

Despite the availability of support mechanisms, EU integration often falters due to internal limitations in Western Balkan administrations. A central challenge is absorptive capacity — the ability of administrations to efficiently manage, implement and monitor EU-funded programmes.

Qorraj (2024) argues that “the ability of Western Balkan states to absorb EU funds significantly impacts both the speed and depth of their integration process” (32). [Qorraj 2024] Low absorption rates, administrative inefficiencies, and limited coordination often hamper effective deployment of EU financial support.

Political dynamics, including elite resistance, corruption and inconsistent reform commitment, further complicate matters. Elbasani and Šabić (2022) highlight that erratic reform trajectories undermine the credibility of enlargement and contribute to an environment of “enlargement fatigue.” [Elbasani & Šabić 2022]

### 1.3 Implications for Regional Policy and Governance

The integration process has extensive implications beyond economic convergence. States that align more closely with EU norms typically experience improvements in governance quality, administrative modernisation, and institutional accountability. Vuković (2021) observes that EU-driven reform fosters public-administration modernisation and deeper adherence to democratic norms (56). [Vuković 2021]

Conversely, countries that fail to meet accession benchmarks risk political stagnation or regression. Vuković (2021) describes this as a “differentiated integration trajectory,” where some Western Balkan states advance steadily while others remain stuck in limbo. [Vuković 2021]

Moreover, EU accession dynamics shape regional cooperation frameworks (e.g., CEFTA, the Berlin Process, Common Regional Market). The integration prospect serves as both a stabilising factor and strategic incentive for states to improve bilateral relations, resolve disputes, and deepen economic interdependence (Ioannides et al. 2024). [Ioannides et al. 2024]

Year	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Total
2010	1.2	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.2	3.4
2015	2.1	1.3	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.4	5.9
2020	2.8	1.7	1.0	1.0	1.2	0.5	8.2
2024	3.2	2.0	1.2	1.3	1.5	0.6	9.8

**Table 1:** EU Investments in the Western Balkans (2010–2024, in billion €) Source: Compiled from EU financial reports and pre-accession assistance data (European Commission 2024).

EU investments in the Western Balkans steadily increased from €3.4 billion in 2010 to €9.8 billion in 2024. Serbia received the most, followed by North Macedonia, while other countries saw smaller growth. The distribution reflects each country’s size, needs, and pre-accession status. **Source:** European Commission (2024).

## 2. Russia and Energy Dependence

### 2.1 Russia’s Energy Position

Russia has long employed its energy resources as a strategic lever in Southeast Europe. In the Western Balkans, this influence is particularly evident through the dominance of Russian natural gas supplies and ownership of key energy infrastructure. The European Parliament (2022) notes that Russia’s energy influence is most pronounced in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Russian gas supplies sometimes cover nearly 100 % of domestic demand and Moscow retains ownership of major energy assets.

Bechev (2023) confirms that, although Russia’s broader economic influence in the region may be declining, its energy footprint remains a potent source of political leverage. Similarly, Secieru (2019, 34) observes that “in the energy sector, Russia has effectively slowed the diversification of energy markets in the Western Balkans,” highlighting how energy supply functions as a tool of geopolitical influence rather than

merely a commercial activity. Russian control over pipelines, distribution networks, and strategic investments allows it to shape domestic and foreign policy decisions indirectly.

Empirical data further corroborate the region's dependence on Russian energy. Sociostudies.org (2022) reports that Russian gas accounts for up to 80 % of total imports in some Western Balkan states, a legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure combined with the absence of alternative supply routes. The degree of dependence varies: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina rely heavily on Russian gas for both industrial and household consumption, while North Macedonia and Montenegro show lower shares but remain vulnerable to supply disruptions. This uneven reliance enhances Russia's strategic leverage across the region.

## 2.2 Implications of Energy Dependence

Energy dependence on Russia constrains the foreign policy flexibility of Western Balkan states by creating structural dependencies. Bechev (2023) notes that Moscow's energy leverage enables it to exert political influence even as its direct economic footprint declines. Such dependence limits governments' ability to pursue fully autonomous foreign policy decisions, particularly regarding EU accession, regional cooperation, or sanctions regimes (Secieru 2019).

Economically, reliance on a single supplier exposes states to price volatility, contractual lock-ins, and the diversion of public resources from domestic priorities. Periods of supply interruption often coincide with heightened diplomatic tensions, underscoring the potential for political pressure (Secieru 2019; Sociostudies.org 2022). From an infrastructural perspective, energy dependence necessitates a careful balance. Western Balkan states face a trade-off between developing diversified sources—including renewables and LNG imports—and maintaining existing Russian-linked infrastructure. Insufficient diversification may perpetuate political and economic vulnerability, whereas aggressive diversification requires substantial capital investment and EU support.

In summary, Russia's dominance in energy resources provides both a tool of influence and a source of structural vulnerability for the Western Balkans, affecting policy autonomy, economic stability, and regional energy planning.

**Table 2:** Russian Energy Investments and Gas Supply in the Western Balkans (2010–2024) (Compiled from European Parliament (2022), Bechev (2023), and Sociostudies.org (2022).)

Year	Serbia (bn €)	North Macedonia (bn €)	Montenegro (bn €)	Albania (bn €)	Bosnia and Herzegovina (bn €)	Kosovo (bn €)	Total
2010	1.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	1.9
2015	1.3	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.6	0.0	2.5
2020	1.5	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.0	3.0
2024	1.7	0.7	0.1	0.0	1.0	0.0	3.5

The graph shows Russian energy influence in the Western Balkans. Serbia is the main recipient, reflecting high dependence on Russian gas and infrastructure stakes. Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia have moderate engagement, while Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo have minimal involvement. Total Russian energy investment and supply reached €3.5 billion in 2024, underlining Russia’s strategic leverage. Energy dependence limits policy autonomy and reinforces vulnerabilities, highlighting the need for diversification. **Sources:** Secieru (2019); Bechev (2023); Sociostudies.org (2022)..

### 3. China: Credits, Infrastructure, and Political Rhetoric

#### 3.1. Chinese Infrastructure Engagement and Credit Lines

In recent years, China has significantly increased its involvement in the Western Balkans through infrastructure investments and concessional credit lines, often under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, studies show that Chinese loans to the region have reached levels near 1.2 % of GDP annually in some Western Balkan countries, demonstrating the scale of Beijing’s financial engagement (Jovanović et al. 2025).

Chinese infrastructure projects in the region include major transport corridors such as the upgrade of the Belgrade-Budapest railway, and large-scale highway projects like the Bar–Boljare Motorway in Montenegro. These investments often utilise Chinese state-owned enterprise contractors and Chinese export finance. As Holzner et al. (2018) observe, China has emerged as a major infrastructure developer in the Western Balkans, filling gaps in transport and energy links.

Overall, China’s offer is characterised by relatively fewer political conditionalities compared to EU funding, offering recipient states rapid delivery of infrastructure but raising questions about transparency, sustainability, and long-term fiscal impact (Jovanović et al. 2025; Budová, Kmecová & Štiblárová 2025).

### 3.2. Risks, Political Influence and Debt Dependence

While Chinese infrastructure engagement brings tangible benefits, it also carries considerable risks. First, high levels of Chinese-financed debt have triggered concerns about so-called “debt-trap diplomacy”. For instance, Montenegro’s Bar–Boljare highway has been cited as an example where Chinese lending may create long-term financial vulnerability (Budová et al. 2025).

Second, China’s infrastructure strategy in the region serves not only economic but also geopolitical aims. The Digital Silk Road component, as detailed by Haxhixhemajli (2025), shows that Chinese investment in telecommunications, smart cities and data-centres in the Western Balkans complements its physical infrastructure policy and extends Beijing’s soft-power reach. Third, the lack of strict conditionality means that Chinese projects sometimes proceed without the rigorous oversight that typically accompanies EU-backed investments. This can lead to weaker environmental, labour or transparency standards (Konrad 2024). The combined effect is that recipient states may become more susceptible to external influence, reducing their strategic autonomy and complicating their alignment with the EU accession path.

### 3.3. Implications for the Region and Policy Considerations

China’s infrastructure and credit strategy in the Western Balkans has three main implications.

- **Development acceleration vs governance risk:** Infrastructure development can strengthen connectivity and economic potential in the region, yet without robust governance and institutional capacity, the risks of unsustainable debt and weak project outcomes increase (Holzner 2018).
- **Strategic alignment and political agency:** By engaging in large infrastructure projects, China builds long-term ties with recipient states, which may influence their foreign-policy choices. As Haxhixhemajli (2025) argues, digital infrastructure investment acts as a vector for deeper geopolitical alignment.
- **Balancing external vectors:** For Western Balkan states, the rise of Chinese investment alongside Russian energy influence and EU integration pressure means they must navigate a complex multivector environment. Strategic policy must therefore ensure that infrastructure gains do not undermine sovereignty, fiscal stability, or compatibility with the EU accession agenda.

In summary, China offers rapid infrastructure and credit opportunities to the Western Balkans, but recipient states need to manage associated risks in order to maximise benefits and safeguard long-term autonomy and institutional integrity.

**Table 3:** Chinese Infrastructure and Loan Investments in the Western Balkans (2010–2024, billion €)

Year	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Total
2010	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
2015	0.5	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.8
2020	1.2	0.1	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.0	2.3
2024	2.0	0.2	1.0	0.2	0.3	0.1	3.8

**Source:** Compiled from IMF and World Bank reports (IMF 2023; Jovanović et al. 2025).

The graph shows Chinese investments in the Western Balkans from 2010 to 2024. Serbia is the main recipient, growing from €0.1 billion to €2.0 billion, followed by Montenegro at €1.0 billion. Other countries received smaller projects. Total Chinese investment reached €3.8 billion, reflecting Belt & Road expansion. While boosting infrastructure, concentrated investments pose debt and political risks, requiring strategic management. **Sources:** Holzner et al. (2018); Haxhixhemajli (2025); Jovanović et al. (2025).

#### 4. U.S.: Security, and Strategic Influence

The United States maintains significant political, economic, and security influence in the Western Balkans. Through development aid, infrastructure and investment programs, military cooperation, and support for democratic governance, the U.S. aims to promote regional stability and strengthen Euro-Atlantic integration. Key initiatives include assistance in rule-of-law reforms, anti-corruption measures, and support for civil society, as well as direct investments in energy, transport, and technology sectors. U.S. engagement also serves as a counterbalance to the growing influence of Russia and China in the region, reinforcing strategic partnerships with countries pursuing NATO membership or closer ties with the European Union. Overall, American involvement shapes policy choices, enhances institutional capacity, and mitigates geopolitical vulnerabilities, contributing to long-term economic development and security in the Western Balkans. (Sources: U.S. State Department (2024); Bechev (2023); Secrieru (2019).)

#### 4. Comparative Synthesis of Influence Mechanisms

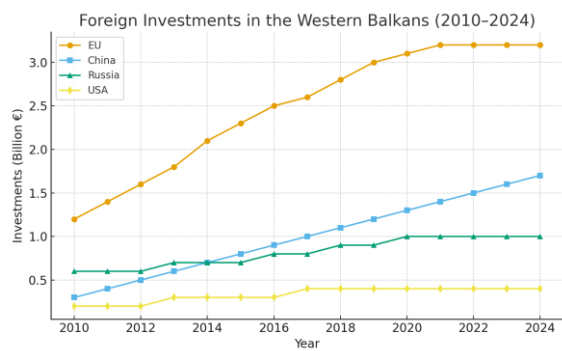
Across the Western Balkans, the four major external actors — the European Union, Russia, China, and the United States — employ distinct mechanisms of influence, each producing divergent internal consequences for the recipient states.

Actor	Mechanisms / Instruments	Focus / Priorities	Effects on Recipient States	Risks / Challenges
<b>European Union</b>	Institutional integration, political & economic conditionality, enlargement incentives	Governance reforms, rule of law, regional cooperation	Gradual improvements in administrative capacity and anti-corruption; alignment with EU norms	Slow implementation; domestic political friction; resistance to conditionality
<b>Russia</b>	Energy agreements, strategic energy investments, security cooperation	Political leverage, short-term influence	Creates dependency; constrains foreign policy autonomy; maintains strategic presence	Vulnerability to shifting energy markets; short-term nature of influence
<b>China</b>	Concessional loans, large-scale infrastructure projects, state-owned enterprise investment	Economic development, infrastructure	Accelerates economic & infrastructural growth; potential long-term political influence	High debt levels; financial vulnerability; risk of political leverage by China
<b>United States</b>	Diplomatic engagement, security cooperation, economic assistance, NATO partnerships	Political stability, security, democratic institution-building	Enhances security and governance; reinforces Euro-Atlantic alignment	Domestic debates over sovereignty; balancing influence with other powers; countering Russia/China presence

Table 4: Geopolitical influence in the Western Balkans (EU, Russia, China, USA) with basic data:

Country / Region	EU Investments (2010–2024)	Russian Energy Influence	U.S. Influence
Serbia	€1.2 – €3.2	High	High
North Macedonia	€0.8 – €2.0	Moderate	Small projects
Montenegro	€0.3 – €0.9	Low	Moderate
Albania	€0.4 – €1.0	Low	Small projects
Bosnia & Herzegovina	€0.5 – €1.2	Moderate	Moderate
Kosovo	€0.2 – €0.5	Low	Moderate
Total / Region	€3.4 – €9.8	€ 3.5 B	

**Table 5:** The data is a combination of EU financial reports, Global Forest Watch, Belt & Road projects, U.S. State Department and academic sources (Bechev 2023; Secieru 2019; Holzner et al. 2018; Haxhixhemajli 2025; Jovanović et al. 2025).



**Chart 1:** Foreign Investments in the Western Balkans (2010–2024)

This comparative assessment underscores the multivector pressures faced by Western Balkan countries. Policymakers must simultaneously manage the rapid infrastructure and financial opportunities offered by China, the energy dependency and strategic influence of Russia, and the governance-focused but conditional support of the EU. Balancing these dynamics is essential to safeguard sovereignty, ensure sustainable economic development, and maintain momentum toward European integration.

## **5. Political Scenarios and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Scenarios**

The Western Balkans region faces multiple potential political trajectories shaped by the interaction of three major external actors — the European Union, Russia, and China. Based on current geopolitical and economic trends, two primary scenarios can be distinguished:

- **Scenario A — Intensified European Integration:** In this scenario, Western Balkan states rapidly implement political, legal, and economic reforms required for EU accession. Full engagement with EU institutions allows them to access financial aid, technical support, and institutional guidance. As a result, these states reduce dependencies on external actors such as Russia and China, strengthen governance, and accelerate regional economic development. Empirical studies suggest that when EU conditionality is effectively applied, countries experience measurable improvements in public administration capacity, anti-corruption mechanisms, and rule-of-law compliance (Noutcheva 2023; Ioannides et al. 2024).
- **Scenario B — Multivector Dependence:** Here, states continue to balance among competing influences from the EU, Russia, and China. While such multivector engagement provides economic opportunities, including access to Chinese infrastructure financing and Russian energy, it also introduces elevated risks. The persistence of dependency on external actors may constrain political autonomy, create fiscal vulnerabilities, and complicate EU accession trajectories (Bechev 2023; Haxhixhemajli 2025). In this scenario, the region's states must carefully negotiate their engagements to avoid long-term strategic disadvantages.

To navigate these scenarios and maximise both development and sovereignty, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **Diversify Energy and Infrastructure Supply:** States should reduce reliance on single suppliers by investing in alternative energy sources (e.g., renewable energy, LNG imports) and developing infrastructure links that do not exclusively depend on Russia or China. Diversification mitigates economic and political vulnerability while strengthening energy security (Secieru 2019; Sociostudies.org 2022).
2. **Ensure Transparency and Rigorous Assessment of Foreign Loans and Projects:** Governments should implement robust evaluation mechanisms for credit agreements and infrastructure contracts with foreign actors. Transparent procurement and monitoring reduce the risk of debt overexposure, corruption, and strategic dependency (Holzner et al. 2018; Jovanović et al. 2025).
3. **Combine EU Funds with Domestic Public Investment:** Leveraging EU pre-accession financial instruments alongside domestic resources can reduce the need for high-risk external credit, ensuring that infrastructure development is financially sustainable and aligned with broader policy goals (Ioannides et al. 2024).
4. **Integrate Engagement with Russia and China within European Strategies:** Cooperation with non-EU actors should be embedded in frameworks consistent with EU regulations, environmental standards, and labor practices. For example, energy and infrastructure partnerships should be structured to comply with European norms, thereby protecting long-term economic and strategic interests (Blazheska 2021; Haxhixhemajli 2025).

In conclusion, the political scenarios and associated recommendations highlight the strategic importance of careful multivector management. Western Balkan states can benefit from foreign engagement while maintaining sovereignty and alignment with EU accession objectives, provided that policy measures focus on diversification, transparency, and strategic integration of external partnerships.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The Western Balkans from 2010 to 2025 have been positioned at the intersection of three major geopolitical and geo-economic actors: the European Union, Russia, and China. Each actor applies distinct mechanisms of influence with varying short- and long-term consequences for the region's political autonomy, economic stability, and infrastructural development.

The European Union promotes institutional integration, rule-of-law reforms, and conditional financial support. Its influence encourages governance improvements and regional cooperation, but slow implementation and domestic political resistance can create friction (Noutcheva 2023; Ioannides et al. 2024).

Russia exercises influence primarily through energy dependence. High reliance on Russian natural gas and ownership of critical energy infrastructure generates structural vulnerabilities, limiting Western Balkan states' foreign-policy autonomy and exposing them to economic and political risks (Bechev 2023; Secrieru 2019; Sociostudies.org 2022).

China exerts influence via large-scale infrastructure investments, concessional loans, and state-owned enterprise participation. While Chinese projects accelerate infrastructure development and regional connectivity, they introduce fiscal vulnerabilities and potential long-term political influence over recipient states (Holzner et al. 2018; Haxhixhemajli 2025; Jovanović et al. 2025).

The comparative assessment reveals a multivector environment, where Western Balkan countries must navigate between rapid development, fiscal sustainability, and strategic autonomy. The interaction of these external vectors produces both opportunities for economic growth and risks related to dependency and external influence.

1. Diversification of Energy and Infrastructure Sources: States should invest in renewable energy, LNG, and alternative transport corridors to reduce reliance on single suppliers and mitigate strategic vulnerabilities (Secrieru 2019; Sociostudies.org 2022).
2. Transparent Assessment of Foreign Investments and Loans: Implement rigorous due diligence, monitoring, and transparency mechanisms for all infrastructure projects and credit agreements with Russia, China, and other external actors to prevent unsustainable debt and political leverage (Holzner et al. 2018; Jovanović et al. 2025).
3. Leveraging EU Funds with Domestic Investment: Combine EU pre-accession funds and domestic public resources to reduce dependence on high-risk external financing and ensure that development aligns with broader governance and economic goals (Ioannides et al. 2024).
4. Integration of External Partnerships into European Frameworks: Engagement with China and Russia should be aligned with EU regulations and standards, particularly regarding environmental protection, labor standards, and fiscal

sustainability, ensuring that external cooperation reinforces rather than undermines EU accession prospects (Blazheska 2021; Haxhixhemajli 2025).

5. Strategic Energy Planning: Develop long-term strategies for energy diversification, infrastructure modernization, and resilience against supply disruptions. Coordinated regional initiatives can enhance energy security while minimizing reliance on politically sensitive sources (Secrieru 2019).

In conclusion, Western Balkan states can maximize the benefits of foreign engagement while maintaining sovereignty and supporting EU integration, provided that they adopt strategic multivector management, prioritize transparency, and pursue sustainable development policies. Failure to implement these measures could perpetuate dependency, increase geopolitical vulnerability, and limit the region's prospects for stable growth and political stability.

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