



Foreign Malign Influence in the Western Balkans and the EU's Eastern Neighborhood – Six Scenarios for 2035





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This booklet presents six scenarios for 2035, developed to investigate potential threats from the geopolitical ambitions of foreign state actors to the democratic resilience of (potential) candidate countries for EU membership in the Western Balkans and EU's Eastern Neighborhood.

The scenarios were not designed to predict the most likely future. To the contrary, they were developed to explore challenges that could stem from underrated ways in which foreign influence from non-democratic state actors could undermine democracy and EU accession prospects in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine. As such, they deliberately push beyond the boundaries of what is currently considered probable.

The scenarios build on expert survey assessments about critical uncertainties and underrated future threats. They were developed in the first half of 2025 with participation of REUNIR researchers in a facilitated foresight process that sought to integrate expertise on the military, economic and political dimensions of resilience and foreign influence. The full methodology with definitions of key concepts can be found in a separate working paper, alongside an analysis of the results (REUNIR Working Paper D7.1, Flachenecker et al. 2025).

Scenario Visualizations based on the REUNIR project publication

"Anticipating Foreign Malign Influence in EU Candidate Countries:

Working Paper D7.1 on Scenarios and Forecasts until 2035", by Paul Flachenecker, Zsófia Ágota Heidrich, Valeriya Barakhvostova, Niklas Balbon, Sarah Bressan, and Philipp Rotmann, REUNIR Project, December 2025.

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Western Balkans 2035 Scenarios

1. "Nationalist EU+ without NATO"
2. "Hybrid Boom"
3. "Authoritarian Crisis"

Eastern Neighborhood 2035 Scenarios

1. "Nuclear Umbrella"
2. "Emerging from Chaos"
3. "Dream Team"



Western Balkans 2035

“Nationalist EU+ without NATO”

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, the EU has enlarged, admitting nine new members including the Western Balkans and post-war Western Ukraine. NATO has dissolved. EU accession happened with relaxed requirements on democracy, rule of law and economic reforms. As a result, the EU includes a mix of democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes. Countries are marked by low democratic resilience against foreign authoritarian interference.

The United States has fully withdrawn its troops from Europe and pushed for border changes in the Western Balkans. Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro as EU members have slid into instability with emergency laws, coups, and secessionist movements supported by external state actors, particularly Russia.

Recession plagues European economies. Populist and nationalist leaders dominate EU institutions. Under pressure from Russia and U.S. isolationism, EU enlargement is not a transformative project anymore but has become a pragmatic option to stabilize the Western Balkans and strengthen the EU's geopolitical standing. Symbolic projects like the Athens–Belgrade–Berlin high-speed rail sought to signal cohesion, but mass protests and re-emerging ethno-nationalism have exposed the Union's limits. Europe in 2035 is weaker: larger but less coherent, deeply divided, and isolated from its former partners across the Atlantic.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- Enlargement with relaxed democratic conditionality leaves ample space for external influence, as democratic protection and resilience are low.
- The U.S., after withdrawing troops from Europe, re-enters the Balkans disruptively by pushing border changes and backing controversial political comebacks.
- Russia exploits discontent, instrumentalizing the Orthodox Church and using disinformation to stir up protests against political agreements, ensuring instability persists despite EU enlargement.

Timeline of Key Developments

2026-2027

In 2026, Marine Le Pen wins her appeal in the court case on the embezzlement of EU funds. The United States proposed border changes in the Western Balkans that would remove Kosovo from the EU enlargement process and tie it to Washington as a protectorate, with annexation as the final aim. The Trump administration also presses for border changes inside NATO. In 2027, Serbia introduces emergency laws and postpones presidential elections, while the EU stays silent. Germany forms a new coalition government that consists of the far-right AfD and the Christian democratic CDU. Marine Le Pen is elected President of France. With national sovereignists taking over, the enlargement logic begins to shift: conditionality weakens, and accession is reframed as a geopolitical tool to preserve influence.

2028

Economic recession hits Europe. Growth stalls, unemployment rises, and households experience a decline in living standards. Governments struggle to respond, being caught between austerity pressures and mounting public anger. The downturn erodes the EU's capacity to inspire reforms in candidate countries. With prosperity as the main incentive for accession gone, the EU's traditional leverage weakens. By the end of 2028, accession is still on the agenda but now framed less as integration into a prosperous club, and more as a geopolitical Union. This change comes amid an increasingly aggressive Russia on one side, and an isolationist U.S. on the other side.

2035

In June, the Athens–Belgrade–Budapest–Berlin TGV line opens, marketed as proof of Europe's ability to integrate Southeast Europe. In December, the Treaty of Budapest is signed announcing the long-awaited end of the war in Ukraine. Nine candidate countries, including Western Ukraine and Kosovo, join the EU. Kosovo's inclusion reflects the unifying power of geopolitical confrontation with the U.S., as the five EU states who have not previously recognized Kosovo's independence are forced to change their position to block an impending U.S. annexation of Kosovo. Le Pen and Weidel celebrate the treaty as a pragmatic Europe securing its periphery. Yet in Serbia, mass demonstrations erupt, fueled by the Orthodox Church and orchestrated by Russia. Enlargement is achieved, but it does not bring stability. The Union is larger, but less cohesive.

2034

European Parliament elections bring modest gains for progressive parties but do not reverse nationalist dominance. That same year, the Council adopts the “green line regulation,” allowing countries with unresolved territorial disputes to join, explicitly recalling Cyprus's accession. This is the decisive break with the traditional model of conditionality in the past. What once would have been an obstacle is now reframed as manageable after accession.

2029-2030

On NATO's 80th anniversary, the last U.S. troops leave Europe, marking the de facto end of the alliance, with its official dissolution following soon. With transatlantic security guarantees gone, Europe faces a historic vacuum. The same year, European Parliament elections deliver a sweeping victory of nationalist forces, with Viktor Orbán elected president of the Parliament. Between 2029 and 2030, J.D. Vance wins the U.S. presidency, cementing Washington's isolationist turn. Meanwhile, Montenegro has been working towards a future in the EU.

The developments culminate in unexpected tensions, when Montenegro undergoes a soft coup: Spajić and Abazović flee into exile, reinstating Milo Đukanović's regime. The coup is co-orchestrated by the U.S. in need of Đukanović's influential network in the region, as Montenegro's most influential post-independence politician. U.S. isolationism and Balkan instability convince right-wing leaders in EU capitals to adopt a pragmatic approach to enlargement. Accession is no longer viewed as a transformational project but as a way to stabilize fragile neighbors and increase Europe's geopolitical weight. Illustrating this turn, Đukanović – a pro-EU politician restored to power through a questionable coup d'état – is welcomed back as Montenegro's leader into the European Union.

2031-2033

Political power in European capitals and Brussels further consolidates around nationalist leadership. Alice Weidel becomes German Chancellor, and Marine Le Pen secures reelection in France in 2032. Together, they steer the Union toward a pragmatic but illiberal agenda, prioritizing sovereignty and borders over democratic standards. In the Western Balkans, North Macedonia passes a constitutional amendment recognizing Bulgarians as a national minority, unlocking its path to accession. Serbia elects a former student leader as president, struggling to build a fragile balance between a pragmatist pro-EU approach and Serbia's looming history of nationalism. While such mixed developments would have previously complicated EU accession, they are now welcomed as evidence that accession can move forward regardless of democratic or governance quality.

Western Balkans 2035

“Hybrid Boom”

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans – stuck midway between democracy and autocracy – experience strong economic growth. NATO’s cohesion and influence have declined. The US has pulled its last troops out of Europe, North Macedonia has left the Alliance, and Türkiye now runs former KFOR bases in Kosovo. Russia is back on the scene with intensified cultural diplomacy. China has expanded its role, moving from infrastructure and energy to directly investing in small businesses. Chinese A.I.-powered wind farms in Albania help compensate for the decline in hydropower due to climate change.

Although EU enlargement is temporarily off the table, the EU maintains an economic presence by officially including the Western Balkans in its Global Gateway program. Investors from Gulf countries have completed a luxury resort and highway project in Bosnia, solidifying their influence. Niche successes, such as Bosnia’s truffle exports to Chinese Michelin restaurants and Serbia’s booming crypto-casino sector, illustrate a thriving but fractured economy. The region is prospering by balancing multiple external supporters, even as democracy stagnates and inequality and hybrid regimes take hold.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- By the mid-2030s, the Western Balkans’ stability and growth are sustained by overlapping layers of external influence.
- Russia’s return is driven by intensified cultural diplomacy, symbolized by Orthodox initiatives such as the Moscow Patriarchate’s church in Montenegro and youth programs like the “Pioneers for a True Europe” camps.
- China expands its reach beyond infrastructure and energy into small business investment and A.I.-driven renewable projects, notably wind farms in Albania.
- The Gulf states consolidate their economic and social footprint through large-scale resort and highway projects in Bosnia and religious education programs in Albania, Bosnia, and North Macedonia.
- Türkiye emerges as a key security actor by taking control of former KFOR bases in Kosovo after NATO’s withdrawal.
- Meanwhile, the EU maintains a limited, transactional role through its Global Gateway program.
- Together, these actors transform the region into a mosaic of competing external influences, where prosperity depends on balancing foreign partnerships rather than pursuing democratic reform or Western integration.

Timeline of Key Developments

2025-2027

In the winter 2025/26, Russia launches a significant offensive in Ukraine, resulting in annexations of territory over the next two years. Governments in the Western Balkans stop supporting EU sanctions against Russia and are rewarded by Moscow with free trade agreement negotiations. Within the EU, enlargement efforts are diminished as DG NEAR merges with DG INTPA, indicating a shift from accession to external partnerships. France holds a consultative referendum on enlargement, with the majority voting against enlargement. Divisive right-wing media narratives about these results further rupture the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans, further reducing the credibility of any enlargement prospects. Tensions rise in Serbia, with clashes between Orthodox zealots and LGBTQI+ Pride participants.

2028-2029

Russia strengthens its cultural influence. The “Pioneers for a True Europe” summer camps appear, and the Moscow Patriarchate receives approval to build a new church in Montenegro. Meanwhile, China promotes a plan for a special economic zone in the Western Balkans, while investors from Gulf countries prepare luxury resort and infrastructure projects in Bosnia. Local economies diversify: Bosnian truffle exports reach Chinese luxury markets, and Serbia’s crypto-casino industry experiences significant growth.

2030-2032

The rift in transatlantic security widens. In 2029, newly elected U.S.-President J.D. Vance revokes Trump’s previous mild stance on NATO. As such, the U.S. officially leaves NATO in 2030. In response, the Kosovar government extends an official invitation to its ever-closer ally, Türkiye, to take control of KFOR bases, as it fears NATO’s disintegration and its own security deteriorating. Meanwhile, Montenegro adopts anti-LGBTQI+ laws, showing increased conservatism. Albania’s leader hosts a Belt and Road forum with China, while investment from the United Arab Emirates flows into infrastructure and vacation resorts in Bosnia. Gulf states grow their religious presence in Albania, Bosnia, and North Macedonia through schools and exchange programs.

2035

The U.S. completes its withdrawal from Europe, ending its role as security guarantor in the region. Türkiye formally starts managing military bases in Montenegro. North Macedonia exits NATO, reflecting growing discontent with the Alliance and a desire to diversify its relationships with external state actors. China launches a substantial small business investment program across the Western Balkans. The Emir of Qatar opens Bosnia’s highway and luxury resort project. Serbia’s crypto sector reports record profits, while Bosnia’s truffle industry thrives in Asian markets. Albania’s A.I.-powered wind farms generate economic benefits, representing the region’s ability to adjust despite climate challenges. By the mid-2030s, prosperity relies on hybrid regimes that balance, not reform, under strong external influence.

2033-2035

Russia’s cultural outreach peaks with the opening of the Moscow Patriarchate church in Montenegro. Gulf countries’ foundations step up Islamic education initiatives, boosting conservative trends. In Albania, climate change impacts hydropower production, but Chinese-funded AI wind farms stabilize the energy grid. The European Commission announces the Western Balkan states’ inclusion in the Global Gateway framework, showing Brussels’ shift to transactional partnerships.

2032

Serbia’s government adopts the Trump coin as its national currency, to flatter the U.S. and signal Serbia’s willingness to cooperate with autocratic states. Serbia’s gestures do not go unnoticed among the EU’s adversaries: in the same year, Serbia is granted observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union. The region’s economic realignment is also demonstrated by China, which presents a BRICS+ proposal inviting Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro to join – which they do.

Western Balkans 2035

“Authoritarian Crisis”

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, the Western Balkan governments are all consolidated autocracies. The European Commission has formally declared enlargement efforts dead in 2034. NATO remains intact at 32 members and the EU has shifted from offering integration to managing instability and accepting authoritarianism in its neighborhood. The promise of reform-driven accession has collapsed, leaving the region open to transactional deals with Russia, Türkiye, China, and Gulf countries.

Visa-free travel for Balkan citizens to the EU has been revoked, and public anger in the Western Balkans peaks, while inflation surpasses 1990s levels, triggering mass emigration and unrest. Disinformation campaigns continue to reinforce ethnic tensions, while civil society leaders flee into exile. As EU investments dry up, Russia offers energy deals, Türkiye becomes a key funder and partner in infrastructure development and weapons production, and China gains a technological foothold. These partnerships ensure local elites' survival and reinforce authoritarian power and governance.

Europe's political landscape has at the same time also shifted toward illiberal leadership. In conjunction with the Western Balkans' consolidation into autocracies, this leaves the EU to engage pragmatically with a neighborhood whose former democratic ambitions it has effectively abandoned.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- By 2035, foreign influence is the anchor of the Western Balkans' authoritarian consolidation.
- Russia sustains leverage through long-term energy deals, deepened ties with Serbia, and disinformation campaigns exploiting ethnic divisions.
- Türkiye fills Europe's void with arms sales, infrastructure investment, and aid, becoming indispensable to regional elites.
- China entrenches its position through major digital and AI projects in Kosovo and Albania.
- Gulf countries participate in transactional partnerships that sustain ruling networks.
- These external ties provide short-term stability but entrench dependency, inequality, and autocratic rule as the EU shifts from integration to containment.

Timeline of Key Developments

2025-2026

Russia, facing sluggish growth, seeks long-term energy deals with Western Balkan states, aiming to secure leverage at low cost. Türkiye expands its footprint through arms sales to Serbia. In parallel, far-right parties in the EU campaign for limiting Western Balkan migrant workers' rights, eroding the credibility of integration as a socio-economic pathway. U.S. illiberal factions reinforce these currents rhetorically, giving regional elites a sense that the Balkan countries' Western partners increasingly tolerate authoritarianism.

2028-2029

Severe heatwaves and droughts reduce agricultural output across the Western Balkans. These shocks intensify economic fragility and create conditions for external state actors to manipulate grievances. Disinformation campaigns, including deepfakes of mostly unknown origins, exploit grievances around inequality and discrimination in society, fueling ethnic polarization across the region. Civil society organizations, under sustained pressure, relocate their operations to Greece and Türkiye, weakening independent oversight in the Western Balkans. Putin's high-profile visit to Belgrade underscores deepening Russian-Serbian ties. Bilateral agreements expand Moscow's political influence in the region, competing with the EU for influence. A Eurozone financial crisis sharply reduces European investments and EU financial support for the Western Balkans, deepening perceptions of abandonment, while enlargement prospects become less credible.

2030-2031

Türkiye capitalizes on the EU's retreat, funding major infrastructure projects and offering aid packages. Ankara's rising economic power makes it an indispensable partner for Balkan governments, while simultaneously eroding EU conditionality. The U.S. brokers an interim peace agreement, leaving Ukraine divided, paired with a mid-term prospect of EU membership in 2033. In the Western Balkans, this prioritization of Ukraine accession over the Western Balkans accelerates disillusionment, fueling eurosceptic and nationalist tendencies in the Western Balkans.

2032-2033

After an authoritarian drift, the now militarized EU border agency Frontex deploys 10,000 troops to the Croatia-Bosnia frontier, securing the EU border in an unprecedentedly hostile fashion. The deployment demonstrates the EU's exclusionary stance and strengthens local narratives of containment rather than integration. In response, Kosovo and Albania establish a "Union Council," formally presented as an economic initiative. China seizes the opportunity to make significant digital and AI investments in both countries. This development entrenches Beijing's strategic presence in the region, while offering Balkan elites a new external patron unconstrained by democratic governance standards.

2035

The Western Balkans complete their drift into authoritarian rule. Climate shocks contribute to an economic crisis and disinformation campaigns further weaken democratic resilience in society. Inflation reaches historically high levels, causing protests. Governments violently crack down on any dissent and shut down the last democratic civic spaces, with Bosnia and Herzegovina adopting a foreign agents' law. Serbia exploits its control of the Danube trade routes to further Russian interests. Meanwhile, Türkiye and China strengthen their influence through infrastructure, aid, and digitization investment projects. These external connections benefit elites and worsen inequality, while also trapping the region in elite-driven, transactional foreign relations that contribute to its descent into authoritarianism.

2034

The new European Commission president announces that EU enlargement is off the table. Public backlash is immediate: EU leaders are openly booed by crowds in Sarajevo, as some of them visited for damage control after the accession announcement. While this shows that some people are disappointed in the EU's withdrawal, there is also relief among local populations that the process has come to a clear, official end.

BOSNIA
SERBIA
KOSOVO
MONTENEGRO
ALBANIA
NORTH MACEDONIA

“Nuclear Umbrella”

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, the Eastern Neighborhood depends on a fragile balance based on nuclear deterrence instead of integration. Ukraine, armed with nuclear weapons from European allies, has become the main security guarantor in the region. Effectively, this dependence on nuclear protection replaces the long-held ambition of EU and NATO membership. Rather than uniting the region, Europe has turned to deterrence for security, leaving Moldova and Georgia trapped in a strengthened buffer-zone logic.

The halt in EU enlargement and NATO expansion leaves space for third actors. Russia, China, and Gulf actors exploit this gap by making transactional deals with local elites and positioning themselves as key supporters. At the same time, democratic freedoms in the EN3 decline, independent media is suppressed, and protests are quelled.

The outcome is a fragile status quo: a nuclear Ukraine in a protective role and Moldova and Georgia effectively relegated to buffer states. The hope for Western integration fades, and foreign influence becomes deeply rooted in local governance structures.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- With EU and NATO expansion effectively halted, a strategic vacuum emerges that external powers seek to exploit.
- Russia reasserts itself through covert networks, disinformation, and political manipulation by promoting reintegration narratives in Transnistria and Abkhazia while backing authoritarian elites who trade sovereignty for stability.
- China leverages major infrastructure and energy investments to create debt dependency and policy influence, quietly aligning regional development with its own economic and strategic priorities.
- Gulf countries embed themselves through high-level financial partnerships and elite capture, reinforcing oligarchic governance across Moldova and Georgia
- By the mid-2030s, these overlapping layers of foreign influence define a new order in which sovereignty is transactional and deterrence, not integration, is the organizing principle of regional stability.

Timeline of Key Developments

2025-2026

Moldova undergoes a dramatic shift when pro-Russian forces win the parliamentary election and take political control of the country. At the same time, Russia's rationale on the economically weakened Transnistria changes. After decades of being a pro-Russian breakaway region, Moscow now sees Transnistria's reintegration with Moldova as a powerful opportunity to increase its overall control of the country. This comes as Russian soft power spreads in both Moldova and Georgia by pushing pro-Russian narratives. Meanwhile, China and the UAE start major infrastructure and investment projects. These investments spur short-term economic growth and create new economic dependencies in the region.

2027

Russia tries to capitalize on its narrative power in Georgia by strengthening discourse on an annexation of Abkhazia and by increasing support for its proxies. While domestic resistance prevents a complete takeover, Moscow shows it is willing to challenge Georgian borders more aggressively. Internally, Georgia's political system drifts further into authoritarianism in a desperate attempt by elites to cling to power amidst increasing civilian unrest.

2028

Opposition parties in Georgia are merely controlled front organizations - a result of vehement governmental crackdown. Ukraine, stuck in a deadlock with Russia, makes a tough choice: It holds a referendum on the recognition of occupied Crimea as Russian land in exchange for its eastern territories. Open hostilities come to an end, but the political agreement creates lasting wounds that leave Kyiv searching for new ways to prevent a renewed Russian invasion.

2029-2030

The region enters a phase of authoritarian consolidation. In Georgia, politics are tightly controlled, free media and civil society disappear. Moldova's elites turn to external support, relying on Chinese and Emirati investment to keep stability. Across the region, governments prioritize stability over democratic freedoms, while Western engagement remains unreliable. The lack of credible EU integration prospects begin to change regional expectations. Stability is now sought not through reform but through deals with foreign powers and deterrence.

2033-2035

By the mid-2030s, Ukraine is a nuclear power. This new strategy stabilizes borders but also traps the region in a system based on weapons instead of cooperation. EU enlargement and NATO expansion remain stalled, which reinforces the idea of a buffer zone, leaving Moldova and Georgia isolated. External forces take advantage of this situation. Russia applies pressure through propaganda and various disinformation tactics. China strengthens its position as the region's economic foundation. By 2035, its infrastructure projects lead in transport and energy routes. Debt trap dynamics give Beijing leverage in policy discussions. Gulf countries, on the other hand, serve as a financial support system for the wealthy, investing in real estate, energy, and logistics centres that reinforce oligarchic networks. Together, these players create a political economy that relies on outside influence, where local governments maintain power by exchanging sovereignty for investment and security.

2031-2032

The Ukrainian president unveils a plan for nuclear protection of Moldova and Georgia, aiming to turn Kyiv from a vulnerable frontline state into a guarantor of deterrence. The Ukrainian offer divides both societies, drawing attention to the intra-regional political cleavages that only deepened in light of the pro-Russian turn of the past few years. In 2032, Ukraine holds its first post-war election and European allies transfer nuclear weapons to Ukraine as a deterrent against future Russian aggression. Ukraine is granted limited autonomy over its nuclear capabilities, while its European allies are allowed ultimate oversight. With Ukraine possessing a nuclear deterrent, European leaders step back from their previously integrative rhetoric. EU enlargement stops, NATO expansion is blocked, and Ukraine's nuclear status replaces the security guarantees once linked to the promise membership.

“Emerging from Chaos”

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, the Eastern Neighborhood has changed significantly but remains unstable. Georgia and Moldova are now part of the European Union, the Eurozone and Schengen. Ukraine, while also in the EU, is struggling with growing concerns over democratic decline as autocratic parties take control of its parliament. Moldova and Ukraine complete a territorial swap. Southwestern Russian oblasts, torn apart by years of chaos, seek to join Ukraine and Georgia.

Russia is still in disorder, divided by domestic unrest following Putin's death. NATO and the United States keep a strong presence, forcing Moscow to pay reparations for its nuclear strike in Ukraine. China, once an ally of Russia in the war, has shifted to support the West, standing with the United States as a partner to Ukraine. The region emerges from a decade of turmoil, becoming more integrated with Europe. But its future stability is threatened by democratic decline in Ukraine and the uncertain effects of Russia's collapse after Putin's death.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- Foreign influence in the Eastern Neighborhood after 2025 has evolved from overt Russian manipulation to a more complex, multi-actor contest.
- Russia, with its early infiltration of Moldovan and Georgian institutions, set out to obstruct reforms and maintain leverage but collapsed after Putin's death and Moscow's ensuing chaos.
- China filled part of the vacuum, first as a weapons supplier to Russia's war effort in Ukraine, later repositioning itself as a postwar investor and partner to Ukraine. By 2035, Beijing's economic and technological engagement has become a key external force shaping Ukraine's increasingly non-democratic governance and dependencies.

Timeline of Key Developments

2025-2026

In June 2025, independent media reveal large-scale Russian infiltration of Moldovan and Georgian intelligence services. This exposure sparks political crises. External state actors respond by supporting groups aimed at weakening anti-corruption reforms and judicial independence, focusing mainly on Moldova but also targeting Ukraine. By spring 2026, China strengthens Russia's defense industry by supplying advanced weapons systems that extend Moscow's military efforts. While this temporarily boosts the Russian war effort, it is also a sign of the growing fragility of Russia's own war economy.

2027

Because its war-time economy is crumbling, Russia becomes desperate to end the war in Ukraine. To force Ukrainian capitulation in March 2027, Russia escalates the conflict with a limited nuclear strike near Kharkiv, destroying a military-industrial computer hub. This attack shocks the world and further isolates Moscow, including from China. It also fundamentally fails to achieve its goal: Ukraine does not capitulate. In September, Putin dies in a plane crash while traveling to Donetsk, forcing interim leaders to cancel celebrations for territorial incorporation. In October, these authorities announce the end of the “special military operation” in Ukraine. By November, Georgian president and oligarch Ivanishvili flees to Brazil, representing the collapse of Russian-aligned networks in the region.

2028

In February 2028, a new Georgian government releases political prisoners, marking a clear pro-European shift. In June, Ukraine prepares for its first postwar elections, where pro-European parties are expected to win. The power vacuum left by Putin exposes a deeply fragile and fragmented political landscape where no other actor can concentrate enough power to demonstrate de facto leadership. By the end of the year, Russia is in chaos, filled with riots after a failed paramilitary coup.

2029-2030

In spring 2029, Georgia and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia begin meaningful negotiations without Russia. That autumn, Moldova's parliamentary elections produce a strong pro-European coalition. In September 2030, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine join the European Union. Shortly after, Moldova and Ukraine start negotiations over territorial swaps.

2032

Ukraine's democratic progress stalls as autocratic parties gain dominance in parliament. Meanwhile, after years of unrest, three Russian oblasts hold referendums to join Georgia or Ukraine, further reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape.

2035

At the Prague EU summit, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova celebrate five years of EU membership by joining the Eurozone and Schengen. Moldova and Ukraine complete their territorial swap agreement. Concerns grow as Georgia and Moldova lead a campaign warning against Ukraine's democratic backsliding. Meanwhile, southwestern Russian oblasts continue to push for integration with Georgia and Ukraine. NATO and the United States demand reparations from Moscow for its nuclear strike. China aligns with Washington as an ally of Kyiv, supporting Ukraine's sovereignty. While Beijing's support is welcome, it also increasingly raises questions about the outlook of encroaching Chinese influence in a democratically fragile Ukraine.

Eastern Neighborhood 2035

"Dream Team"

Scenario Summary:

By 2035, the Eastern Neighborhood is fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic order. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are members of both the EU and NATO, with Moldova also part of Schengen and the Eurozone. Following its democratic transition, Belarus has applied for EU membership, while Armenia has been granted candidate status. NATO maintains a large navy base in Sevastopol, symbolizing NATO's power in the Black Sea region.

Russia is weakened, facing internal demands for independence and gradual democratization under ongoing UN oversight of its nuclear arsenal. The ICC has found senior Russian officers guilty of war crimes, further reducing Moscow's international standing. After some internal turmoil, the United States again plays a constructive role in NATO, while the EU has become the primary driver of expansion and rebuilding in the region. Authoritarian nostalgia remains only in small, isolated areas and cannot meaningfully challenge the broader move toward democracy.

Summary of Foreign Influence Mechanisms (2026-2035):

- Even as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova integrate into the EU and NATO, external state actors attempt to shape outcomes according to distinct strategies.
- Russia, weakened and internally fragmented, uses media and cultural nostalgia to maintain limited influence. Energy leverage is deployed selectively, but its capacity to project power is constrained by democratic reforms and international oversight.
- China provides targeted technologies, such as spyware, to influence internal governance, exploiting transitional vulnerabilities while balancing its broader alignment with the West.
- With Türkiye's turn towards the West, Erdoğan's voice from exile fails to assert much influence over candidate countries' trajectories.

Timeline of Key Developments

2026-2027

China supplies spyware to the Georgian government, which uses it to crack down on pro-democracy protesters and reporters. Despite this threat, an independent media source manages to publish an exposé on previously suspected, but underestimated, Russian infiltration of Georgia's intelligence services, leading to civic mobilization. As a result of wide-spread political mobilization, in 2027, the reigning Georgian Dream party loses elections in a pro-European political shift. At the same time, the EU starts a treaty reform convention to get ready for enlargement.

2028-2029

Putin's illness weakens his regime's stability, as fights about his succession start to expose deep internal fractures in leadership circles. In the United States, Trump exploits a constitutional loophole for a third successful presidential campaign. The cementation of Trump's isolationism pushes the EU to strengthen internal unity and increase military support for Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia's festering internal fragmentation over succession and the fatigue over the drawn-out war in Ukraine led to a neglect of supplying its proxies in Transnistria, allowing Moldova to use this momentum to peacefully reintegrate the breakaway region. In the Western Balkans, Montenegro joins the EU, and reforms agreed upon at the Podgorica summit prepare the Union for further enlargement.

2030-2031

In early 2030, the Kremlin announces a week of mourning as Putin dies of illness. Ukraine makes use of this moment of chaos and secures victory in 2030, thanks to EU military backing, a divided Russian leadership, and an army plagued by low morale. This leads to the liberation of Crimea, the capture of Russian generals, and their subsequent trial by the ICC. A peace agreement is then signed between Ukraine and Russia. Due to the weakened Russian negotiating position, the Ukrainian delegation succeeds in pushing for conditions that ensure a long-term and expansive peace: Russia renounces its claims for the long-contested Georgian territories and agrees to host a UN nuclear monitoring mission overseeing its nuclear facilities.

At the same time, Russian troops withdraw from Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the condition that the EU remains relatively absent in monitoring and reconstruction efforts. Therefore, the UN establishes a monitoring and transitional assistance mandate in Georgia to confirm territorial integrity. The EU launches a reconstruction plan for Ukraine, but Russia seeks to retain its influence in Europe through energy blackmail by cutting gas supplies.

2031

Trump is impeached after being revealed as a Russian asset. As the larger Russian geopolitical network starts to crumble, Lukashenka is overthrown in Belarus, starting the country's long-awaited transition. Georgia adopts a confederal model to reintegrate its territories, Ukraine holds its first post-war elections without Zelensky, and Moldova joins both the EU and NATO.

2034-2035

Ukraine and Georgia finish their EU accession negotiations in 2034. In 2035, Moldova celebrates Unification Day, and EU leaders at a summit in Chisinau sign accession treaties for Ukraine and Georgia. Moldova joins Schengen and the Eurozone, Belarus applies for EU membership, and Armenia becomes a candidate. NATO opens its largest navy base in Sevastopol. The ICC convicts several high-ranking Russian officers for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In the US, the Republican Party releases a report on abuses during the Trump years. From his forced exile in Doha, Erdoğan criticizes Türkiye's pro-EU policies. In Moscow, 5,000 loyalists commemorate the fifth anniversary of Putin's death. At the same time, Russia starts constitutional reform to address secessionist demands, and the UN nuclear monitoring mission is extended until 2037.

2032-2033

Ukraine and Georgia join NATO, strengthening the Alliance's presence in the Black Sea. Armenia applies for EU membership. Russia tries to evoke Soviet nostalgia in the Eastern Neighborhood through art and popular culture, but the impact is minimal. Meanwhile, Chechnya and Dagestan seek secession, and Russia holds its first competitive democratic elections.

