

THE BEIJING AND THE BRUSSELS EFFECTS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS COMPARED – NORMATIVE DILEMMAS, POLITICAL CONUNDRUMS

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Abstract

Conditionality is an ambiguous instrument of the toolbox in the asymmetrical relations between both the European Union or China, and Western Balkan candidate states, respectively. However, the conceptual interpretations and the practical implications of conditionality of either the EU or China are nowhere near similar; this study even proposes the hypothesis that they are contrasting to each other. The Brussels effect is exercised through legal institutions and standards and stems from the soft power of the European Union, which is described as normative, as well as transformative. The Beijing effect displays the influence of sharp power which undermines democratic governance and the rule of law using attractive economic incentives, the technological edge and resource dependency. This research offers a comparative analysis of the two conditionality approaches to the Western Balkan countries (WB 6) by probing into different ethical issues and specific practical problems. Probable scenarios are eventually discussed, and enlargement strategies outlined so that the geostrategic positioning of the European Union should keep its footing in the region.

Keywords: conditionality, soft power, sharp power, Brussels effect, Beijing effect

Against conventional wisdom

The diplomatic toolbox has been undergoing a continuous upgrade for the last two decades due to the rapid innovations both in terms of technological learner's autonomy and the sophistication of human-based techniques in global communications. International actors such as nation-states and supranational entities adapt to these turbulent changes, but yet, their social learning happens at a different pace – the European Union (EU) has, for the last decade or so, slowed down the tempo due to public and elitist backlashes to economic

stagnation, migration pressure and partisan polarization, whereas People's Republic of China seems to have been steady at speeding or at least maintaining the tempo.

Both the EU and China apply the instrument of conditionality in their interactions with asymmetrically weaker partners, such as the set of six former Eastern bloc countries (North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo), labelled as the Western Balkans, specifically in the Bulgarian neighbourhood discourse. However, the asymmetry in the two vectors of the EU-China-Western Balkans triangle is explained by different variables – the adjacent relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans is based on membership criteria, the opposite one between China and the Western Balkans is grounded on economic dependence and political contiguity, whereas the longest side of the triangular partnership (the 'hypotenuse') can be subsumed under the disparities in the diplomatic approach as regards soft and respectively sharp power.

This study elaborates on a conceptual and empirical analysis of EU conditionality through the prism of its normative and institutional power in the relations with Western Balkan candidate countries and then compares it with China's impact on the same group of strategic partners in two consecutive arguments. The first argument reestablishes the transformative advantage of the Brussels effect in its long-standing principled nature of setting the standards, despite the practical shortcomings of a highly volatile geopolitical context in the region. The second argument tries to substantiate the dubious Beijing effect through some findings about the negative repercussions of the Chinese infrastructural, technological and industrial input as well as dysfunctional political influence. The inferences are oriented towards the policy outcomes that can affect the European Union as a whole and Bulgaria in particular.

A paper tiger

The European Union is not the same monolithic entity with ultimate rationality as states are, according to the realist thinking in international relations theory. Therefore, the materialist reasoning through military dominance or economic pre-eminence is not a defining feature of the EU. Being an integrative community with a complex regulatory and institutional framework of both intergovernmental and supranational method of governance, the EU is characterized by change and continuity alike, and is focused on a specific goal, namely, the setting of standards. These standards include the respect for universal human rights norms, as well as founding principles of the Union, such as liberty, democracy, justice, equality, solidarity and rule of law. The Brussels effect, therefore, is denoted as a **normative power/pouvoir normative**, likely to '*shape conceptions of the normal*' as part of European identity construction, a term coined by *Manners*¹ in the academic debate

¹ Diez, T., Manners, I. (2007), *Reflecting on normative power Europe*. - In: Berenskroetter, F., Williams, M. J., eds. *Power in World Politics*, Routledge, London & NY, p. 176

with Diez.² Although *Manners* distinguishes the prescriptive concept of normative power from Nye's seminal notion of soft power,³ as being only empirical and thus descriptive, such a differentiation is too theoretical and tends to alienate normative power from its implementation and the evaluation of its ethical considerations and practical effectiveness in specific contexts, where the asymmetry in relative power is inevitable. That is why this study prefers to emphasize the effect through Bradford's narrower term, **'the Brussels effect' – the regulatory power of the EU**. The Brussels effect, as Bradford asserts, is *'significant, unique, and highly penetrating power to unilaterally transform global markets, be it through its ability to set the standards'*.⁴ The Brussels effect in the broader sense of this research relies not only on the stringent standardization in market terms, but also on the governance through principles in global and regional politics.

The wielding of normative power appears to be radically different from the vertical coercion of military expedients (hard power) or the horizontal reciprocity of economic means (sticky power, after *W. R. Mead*). Normative power of the EU originates from two basic practices of diffusion – the first one is the more spontaneous practice of contagion and the second one is the purposeful practice of transference.⁵ The unintentional spread of ideas such as leading by 'virtuous example' (Coombes, 1998, cit. in: *Manners*, 2002) of non-binding norms (soft law) and the institutionalization of procedures can be tracked down to the enlargement negotiations with accession countries and is referred to as **the transformative power of Europeanization**. Transference concerns normative power *per se* and consists in the intentional adoption of binding norms as part of the *acquis communautaire*. Since transposition norms are more utilitarian in nature, they are aimed at deliberately changing the respondent's behaviour and are closely related to imposing the interests of individual member states. We can pinpoint two paradoxes to the implementation of the Brussels effect that complicates the conventional understanding of normative power.

The first paradox is that the promotion of particular norms, as *Sjursen* underscores, may necessitate even threat of the use of force⁶ or sanctions. A **case in point** is the imposition of restrictive measures against certain natural

² Diez, T. (2005), *Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering 'Normative Power Europe'*, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, no. 33, pp. 613-636

³ Manners, I. (2006), *The European Union as a Normative Power: A Response to Thomas Diez*, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, no. 35, pp. 167-180

⁴ Manners, I. (2006), *European Union, Normative Power, and Ethical Foreign Policy*. - In: Chandler, D., Heins, V., eds., *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy*, Routledge, London, pp. 116-136

⁵ Bradford, A. (2020), *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union Rules the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. xiv

⁶ A reinterpretation of Manners' six-factor concept of diffusion:

Manners, I. (2002), *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?* - *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 244-245

⁶ Sjursen, H., (2007), *The EU as a 'normative' power: how can this be?* - Sjursen, H., ed. (2007), *Civilian or Military Power? European Foreign Policy in Perspective*, Routledge, London & NY, pp. 100-101

and legal persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina whose activities undermine the sovereignty, territorial integrity, constitutional order and international personality of the country, seriously threaten the security situation there or undermine the Dayton/Paris General Framework Agreement for Peace and the Annexes thereto.⁷ Normative power may become punitive (proximate to hard power), thus causing indiscriminate harm to third persons, such as the whole civil society in a partly free, non-consolidated democracy.

The second paradox is that the more the EU pushes for the implementation of the transference mechanism by candidate countries, the more individual EU member states are suspected to use it to justify their egoistical national interests; on the contrary, the laxer the Union is in applying the contagion mechanism, the more inconsistent it appears to be. A *case in point* is the overall enlargement impasse and the ‘hostage situation’ for Albania⁸ caused by Bulgaria’s veto on North Macedonia accession talks in 2022 because of Skopje’s failure to recognize the Bulgarian minority in the constitution. On the one hand, the positional bargaining in accession negotiations doesn’t appear to have tackled the sore issue of the subversive influence from the Kremlin regime among a persistently hostile anti-Bulgarian narrative. On the other hand, the more concessive approach of the so-called French proposal doesn’t seem to have solved the intransigence on behalf of the hardliner nationalists of VMRO-DPMNE, having regained power in May 2024.

Two prerequisites are to be highlighted in view of the contagion mechanism that describes the transformative power of the EU. The transformative power of the EU leads to a specific socialization or social learning through persuasion, acceptance and best practices, labelled as Europeanization.⁹ The transformative effect needs, first, high probability in terms of approximate deadlines and tight scheduling, that is, explicit promise for enlargement; second, willing partners since the EU’s transformative power is based on good faith. The authentication of the will applies both to elites and society. Both are to espouse EU values and believe in the reforms they undertake in response to the EU accession requirements, so that they continue with the policies based on rule of law and good governance, even after the material incentives have gone¹⁰ (usually in the form of post-accession funds). This means that EU conditionality is based on the

⁷ *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Council extends framework for restrictive measures until March 2026*, Council of the EU, Press release, 25 March 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/03/25/bosnia-and-herzegovina-council-extends-framework-for-restrictive-measures-until-march-2026/>

⁸ Nikolov, K. *Bulgaria will stick to conditions for North Macedonia’s EU membership talks*, Euractiv.bg, Apr 9, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgaria-will-stick-to-conditions-for-north-macedonias-eu-membership-talks/>

⁹ Grabbe, H. (2006), *The EU’s Transformative Power. Europeanization Through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, pp. 44-52

¹⁰ Noucheva, G. (2012), *European Foreign Policy and the Challenges of Balkan Accession*, Routledge, London & NY, p. 47

internal feeling of appropriateness and legitimization, not on the external pressure of compliance.

More specifically, the Europeanization impact on the Western Balkans changes over time. The first major transition happened in the late 1990s – while starting at the minimum threshold of the Copenhagen criteria in the 1990s, the crises in Bosnia and in Kosovo added enhanced conditionality in the form of the Stabilisation and Association Process (full cooperation with the ICTY, respect for human and minority rights, the creation of real opportunities for refugees and internally displaced persons to return, and a visible commitment to regional cooperation). Therefore, the EU transformed its identity into a ‘*a civ-mil power*’¹¹, which is involved in complex crisis management. A *case in point* is the extended authorization of the peacekeeping mandate of the EUFOR-Althea¹² which accounts for increased security risks from separatist tendencies and recurrent regional instability. The problematic imbalance here is in the privileging of the build-up of military capabilities over civilian ones, which is yet unavoidable in the context of hybrid warfare. Still, the EU tries to cope with the imbalance by structuring its diplomacy¹³ with the missions of the special representatives (BiH, Kosovo, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues), as well as the EULEX Mission in Kosovo, aimed at reforming the institutional framework by strengthening the rule of law.

The second turning point is the visible shift towards a more instrumental understanding of the EU’s (**external democratization**) normativism¹⁴ after the Arab spring and the migration influx (the dwindling of the Mediterranean dimension), the Caucasus war in Georgia followed by the Crimea annexation (the suspension of the Eastern Neighbourhood dimension), and the austerity measures in the wake of the Eurozone crisis (enlargement fatigue due to the populist sway). From Brussels’ point of view, prioritizing external crises (financial, pandemic, war of aggression) have sidetracked the focus on horizontal integration. From Western Balkans’ perspective, internal processes of resilient populism and deficient democracy (‘*stabilitocracy*’¹⁵), in line with similar

¹¹ Juncos, A. E. (2011), *Power Discourses and Power Practices: The EU’s Role as a Normative Power in Bosnia*. - In: Whitman, R. G., ed., (2011), *Normative Power Europe. Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, p. 87

¹² United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, SC/15479, 2 November 2023, *Security Council Extends Authorization of Multinational Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina Mandate, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2706 (2023)*, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15479.doc.htm>

¹³ Keukeleire, S., Thiers, R., Justaert, A. (2009), *Reappraising Diplomacy: Structural Diplomacy and the Case of the European Union*, The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, no. 4, p. 154 et seq.

¹⁴ Holzhaber, R., Neuman, M. (2019), *Framing the Debate: The Evolution of the European Union as an External Democratization Actor*. - In: Neuman, M., ed. (2019), *Democracy Promotion and the Normative Power Europe Framework. The European Union in South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, Springer, p. 22

¹⁵ Kmezić, M. (2019), *EU Rule of Law Conditionality: Democracy or ‘Stabilitocracy’ Promotion in the Western Balkans?* - In: Džankić, J., Keil, S., Kmezić, M., eds. (2019), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 87-109

tendencies in member states, have been confronting the Europeanization dynamics with the national identity politics which filter the compliance with EU norms. A *case in point* is the independence of Kosovo as ‘the red line’ in public perception of Serbia’s relationship with the EU¹⁶ and a brake to accession progress – a dichotomy of national myth of heroism and historical trauma of humiliation. Besides, ‘decoupling between formal institutional changes and prevailing informal institutions and behavioural practices’,¹⁷ such as clientelistic schemes in the elections process, corruption in public administration, and flawed judicial reforms, also contribute to the faltering Brussels effect. Another *case in point* is Serbia’s and Kosovo’s reciprocal refusal to comply with EU-brokered Ohrid agreement as part of the conditionality for normalization of bilateral relations.

A tiger in the tank

The European Union is not the only strategic player in the Western Balkans, despite being the only authentically principled agent. People’s Republic of China is among the few global powers that try to maintain viable relations with all countries in the region except for Kosovo. Before the pandemic crisis, China deployed a large-scale project in which it identified 16 former Soviet bloc countries in the broader region of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) as potential partners with shared interests, specifically WB 5 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). Therefore, it assumed the role of a ‘*game maker*’, through cooperation ventures that do not openly confront the current global order, but rather aim to fill gaps and address the shortcomings of existing platforms and processes.¹⁸ The Belt and Road Initiative is emblematic in this regard because it demonstrates not only the economic interdependence model based on benefits, but also the connectivity model, built on infrastructure, transportation and high technologies. In short, the Western Balkans serve a dual function – a transmission zone and a production area – in the Chinese grand strategy.

Apart from the material dimension of the cooperation, China promotes „people-to-people“ linkages from the public diplomacy toolbox, such as cultural, scientific and educational exchange, as well as a visa-free travel regime. The mutual visa exemption regime for Serbia and for Bosnia and Herzegovina has

¹⁶ See more on stereotyping in Serbian society:

Jović, D. (2018), *Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans*, Croatian International Relations Review (CIRR), XIV (83), pp. 6-32

¹⁷ Börzel, T. (2013), *When Europeanization hits limited statehood: the Western Balkans as a test case for the transformative power of Europe*. - In: Elbasani, A., ed. (2013), *European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans. Europeanization or business as usual?*, Routledge, London & NY, p. 173

¹⁸ Vangeli, A. (2020), *China: A new geo-economic approach to the Balkans*. - In: Bieber, F., Tzifakis, N., eds. (2020), *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, Routledge, London & NY, p. 207 et seq.

mixed output because the liberalization of the tourist flow runs only in the direction from and not towards China; the same controversial trend can be registered as far as exclusively migrant workers are hired in the grandiose infrastructure projects. Media policy targets increasing coverage of China-related news and the production of China-friendly content by funding think-tanks or collaboration with local columnists. However, as the *case in point* of Albania suggests, articles about Chinese suppression of Uyghur Muslims, a sensitive issue for a Muslim-majority country like Albania, are replaced by articles praising the economic model.¹⁹ Albania is not an indicative example, nonetheless, for unlike the other four countries in the region, it tries to avoid any kind of political penetration that could lead to overreliance on Beijing.

China is both a **competitive and collaborative stakeholder** in the region that follows a peculiar rationality in its strategic behaviour, which is called **the Beijing effect**. The following paragraphs will hypothesize on the diverging trajectories of the two types of influence (the Brussels vs. the Beijing effect) while approbating them in the Western Balkans. What can be presumed is that the macro-perspectives ignore the fact that Chinese diplomacy is contingent on the local context and is not a direct aftermath of isolated actions following a predetermined economic script. What also has to be taken into consideration are recent unfavourable trends. Being the main engine of global economy and a major net investor for nearly two decades, China's economic performance for 2023, however, has been marked by volatility, ongoing deflationary pressures, still weak consumer confidence and slowed growth due to structural constraints.²⁰

First, the Beijing effect doesn't possess any normative essence which means that it doesn't count on conditionality. Nor are bilateral ties in any way institutionalized since they are very much dependent on the current political conjuncture. Chinese investment plans boast having no strings attached, but this claim shouldn't be taken at face value. China upholds the ideal of national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, therefore human rights and rule of law are no prerequisites for economic compatibility. However, Beijing exports a specific economic model of the so-called **Beijing consensus** (as an antipode of the Washington consensus) which means that it is a proponent of an ideological model (state capitalism and peaceful development). Under the one-party totalitarian regime this economic model of the 'visible hand' is undeniably penetrated by Marxist clichés (historical materialism, for example) that challenge the European model of an open market economy based on liberties. Moreover, despite contending to be a purely pragmatic economic model, the Beijing effect causes several after-effects that

¹⁹ Feta, B. (2022), *Chinese Influence in Albania*, Center for European Policy Analysis, August 23, 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-albania/>

²⁰ World Bank: China Economic Update - December 2023 'Which Way Forward? Navigating China's Post-Pandemic Growth Path', <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/cf2c1298e77c50bf1f1e7954ff560bc6-0070012023/original/China-Economic-Update-Dec23-EN.pdf> (last accessed 25/05/2024)

resemble **post-conditionality**. The trade relations reveal a structural asymmetry because Western Balkan countries' major exports are in raw materials and only a negligible amount are products with added value. Another form of dependence arises from the long-term nature of the infrastructure loans of the Belt and Road Initiative which can take decades to pay off. A *case in point* is the request as of the end of 2023 for a revision of the project to build the key Kicevo-Ohrid motorway in North Macedonia, launched in 2014, with possibility of cancelling the deal with China's state company Sinohydro altogether and seeking alternative contractors to finish it.²¹ Lack of due diligence, transparency, accountability and adequate meritocratic planning not only make such projects unbearably expensive, but they also erode the credibility of fair procurement procedures and the basic principle of equality in bargaining.

Secondly, the Beijing effect does exert **some transformative potential with an ambiguous impact** on the recipients. One conundrum is that notwithstanding its claims at being positively pragmatic, Chinese economic enterprises create heavy burdens for the debtors on the premise that such endeavours 'borrow from the future'. Therefore, large-scale (in a Chinese mode) capital projects can actually be quite hazardous in contrast with the neoliberal logic of conditionality (devised by the World Banking Group) which scrutinizes and calculates probable gains against losses and engages in a complex impact assessment. A *case in point* is the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro – a huge project financed by a Chinese bank which, apart from drastically increasing the country's sovereign debt, has no guarantees whatsoever in favour of Montenegrin national interests, as the contract stipulates any arbitration procedure to be carried out in Beijing. The infrastructural venture was supposed to represent a transformative connection between the Adriatic Sea and Belgrade, but in fact construction and pollution took a heavy toll on the nearby Tara River.²² Environmental infliction as well as lack of social responsibility (poor labour standards) prove that the Beijing effect is a one-way street which, figuratively speaking, can leave the other contracting party in debris.

Another controversy is included in the **sharp power** that China exercises in the region. Sharp power signifies the malign influence exerted by authoritarian regimes to foreign audiences that take advantage of the tolerance and self-criticism of democratic societies,²³ although in this specific case it may be argued that nondemocratic states are not interchangeable²⁴ and no

²¹ Marusic, S. J. *North Macedonia Hints at Scrapping Stalled Motorway Project*, Balkan Insight, Skopje, BIRN, November 3, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/03/north-macedonia-hints-at-scrapping-stalled-motorway-project/>

²² Muller, N. (2024) *Montenegro's Scandal-ridden Chinese Road*, The Diplomat, January 13, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/montenegro-s-scandal-ridden-chinese-road/>

²³ Walker, C. (2018), *What is 'sharp power'?* - Journal of Democracy, 29(3), pp. 9-23

²⁴ See more about the criticism on the Beijing effect in digital authoritarianism:

Erie, M. S., Streinz, T. (2021), *The Beijing effect: China's digital silk road as transnational data governance*, New York University Journal of International Law and Politics, 54(1), pp. 1-92

universal model of sharp power exists. China has cultivated its economic leverage in order to ‘perforate’ and manipulate the public discourse in Western Balkan societies. For example, the normalization of the ‘strong arm’ approach has substituted the rule of law paradigm of the EU for the narrative of the rigid state control that securitizes human rights. As *Walker et al.* elaborate on the digital transformation, by ‘exporting authoritarianism, autocrats do not simply hand over a blueprint for **digital authoritarianism** to a small club of eager dictators’,²⁵ but also infiltrate conductive open societies freely. This is the *case in point* with post-Communist societies, where consumer materialism conveniently marries corrupted elites who readily take advantage of censorship. Even more troubling is the post-Yugoslavian Third way, visible in the trade agreement, signed between Presidents Aleksandar Vučić and Xi Jinping in early May 2024, a part of a comprehensive Serbia-China partnership called ‘Shared Future’.²⁶ While the latter slogan may not denote a specific initiative, the deal itself has an underlying significance as yet another term for an alliance that puts the Europeanization prospects under trial.

Thirdly, the Beijing effect is also about changing perceptions, or on a more constructive note, even **straightening out misperceptions**. Western Balkan countries are exposed to and socialized into China’s worldview which may be interpreted through the prism of peaceful growth and ‘*commitment to a win-win cooperation model*’ that induce re-evaluation of their own preferences.²⁷ However, domestic adoption costs of Europeanization, as already discussed, are very much tentative on identity politics. Semi-authoritarian rulers, such as Vučić, get instrumental of the Chinese **bargaining chip** to gain leverage in accession negotiations, especially as regards the linkage between Kosovo and Taiwan; besides, they solidify their constituent approval by reaping expedient and immediate economic returns of infrastructure and industrial projects. The possibility to choose the policy of alternatives (win-lose), instead of opportunities (win-win)²⁸ is a persistent geostrategic, not only geoeconomic risk for the Europeanization path of such opportunistic regimes. China’s symbolic power is also at play – as *Bechev* notes, it accords a higher status to the countries in the region,²⁹ turning them into major geopolitical hubs of land-sea inter-

²⁵ Walker, C., Kalathil, S., Ludwig, J. (2020), *The cutting edge of sharp power*, Journal of Democracy, 31(1), p. 29

²⁶ Dell’Anna, A. (2024) *China implements trade agreement with Serbia as it expands influence in Europe*, Euronews, 08/05/2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/05/08/china-signs-free-trade-agreement-with-serbia-as-it-expands-influence-in-europe>

²⁷ Pavlićević, D. (2019), *Structural power and the China-EU-Western Balkans triangular relations*, Asia Europe Journal, Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, p. 3

²⁸ Đorđević, V., Turcsányi, R., Vucković, V. (2021), *Beyond the EU as the ‘Only Game in Town’: the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans and the role of China*, Eastern Journal of European Studies, 2, pp. 21-45

²⁹ Bechev, D. (2020), *Making Inroads: Competing Powers in the Balkans*. - In: Fruscione, G., ed. (2020), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities. A European Region Looking for its Place in the World*, LediPublishing, Milano, p. 64

section grand scheme, not peripheral units of the integrative community. The global picture, though, at a closer look, displays more of a hub-and-spoke relations as an integral component of Beijing's multipolar alignment strategy rather than a solidary comradeship.

Final words to the wise

Overall, the Beijing effect doesn't strive to undermine the Brussels effect in a strictly calculated way, but the Brussels effect is completely capable of counterbalancing the Beijing effect by the smart use of conditionality. Whereas the Brussels effect is inherently constitutive in its impact and normative in its essence, the Beijing effect is more instrumental, therefore immediately effective, but still not ultimately sustainable. The problems identified in this study refer to the authenticity of the message and the long-standing commitment of the influence of both geopolitical players in the Western Balkans.

Policy recommendations for the European Union vis a vis WB 6 candidate countries should follow five mutually reinforcing vectors:

First, **rule-based engagement** is crucial in the neighbouring Black sea regional context (including Bulgaria) since rule-based world order as a whole is shattered by the war of aggression in Ukraine and violations of international rule of law.

Second, **more sustainable energy and infrastructure projects** will be feasible to compete with Chinese ones, namely because of the predictable regulatory and institutional framework of the EU.

Third, **an open and empowered civil society** can take the ownership of the political processes and the media narrative, contaminated by hybrid warfare, so that the Europeanization discourse is not discharged as yet another hard edge of soft power.

Fourth, **policy continuity with coherent joint positions** on global issues will speak for the inclusivity of the EU approach to the region itself.

Finally, **reimagining the misperceptions of the Balkans** as being conflictual, dependent and tribalist will definitely yield yet another credibility to the EU conditionality, because it will take preconditions in attitudes out of the policy equation.

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