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RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY
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DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN
NEIGHBOURHOOD

REDEMOS Policy Paper D6.1

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14725196

The role of China in the political transition of the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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January 2025



Funded by
the European Union

The REDEMOS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101061738. The Associated Partner University of Surrey has received funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee under grant number 10040721. The Associated Partner University of St. Gallen has received funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, UKRI and SERI. Neither the European Union nor UKRI or SERI can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

In comparison to Russia, which has been trying to retain pre-eminence over the post-Soviet space and to prevent the EU's eastern neighbours from moving closer to the EU, China is a relatively new player in the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was primarily interested in military technology from Ukraine. Only with the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 did China discover the Eastern European and South Caucasus countries for their geographic location along the BRI that connects China with Western Europe.

This paper explores the role of China in the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries since the end of the Cold War and analyses how China has affected the political structures of these states. All EU eastern neighbourhood countries have actively sought China's political and economic engagement as a counterbalance to Russian influence and to mitigate EU conditionality or the feeling that integration into the EU would be out of reach. China, with its agenda of undermining democratic norms at the international level, which it is articulating increasingly assertively, creates a challenge to the EU's normative agenda of democracy promotion in the EU eastern neighbourhood.

However, China's direct impact on the countries' political structures is still limited and indirect. Politically, China has not been a reliable partner as far as the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries' territorial conflicts with Russia are concerned. Rather than pursuing a regime change agenda in these countries, China pursues narrow economic objectives, and even its economic presence is comparatively limited. Trade with China has increased, but except for Ukraine, this led to large trade imbalances for them. There is some evidence of mismanagement, elite capture and corruption in Chinese investment projects. At the same time, infrastructure construction with Chinese companies have often been financed by (international) lenders other than China. China is facilitating the normalisation and diffusion of digital dual-use surveillance technologies, even to contexts where the protection of individual rights is weak. Finally, China has increased its outreach to citizens through media and educational institutions in the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries with a China-friendly narrative that is critical of the West.



List of Terms and Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CI	Confucius Institute
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EN	Eastern neighbourhood
FDI	Foreign direct investment
CBIP	Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park
GCFA	Georgian-Chinese Friendship Association
GCI	Global Civilisation Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council

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1 Introduction

With its Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, the EU has been reaching out to six neighboring countries in Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). The EU has recently decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and to grant candidate status to Georgia (which has been suspended in the meantime), conditional on the fulfilment of several requirements. In comparison to Russia, which has been trying to retain pre-eminence over the post-Soviet space and to prevent the eastern neighborhood countries from moving closer to the EU, China is a relatively new player in the region. With the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has discovered the East European and South Caucasian countries for their geographic location along the BRI that connects China with Western Europe.

What role is China playing in the EU's eastern neighborhood countries (EN), and how has China affected the political structures of these states? This paper argues that China, with its agenda of undermining democratic norms at the international level, creates a challenge to the EU's normative agenda of democracy promotion in the six countries. However, China's direct impact on the countries' political structures is limited. Rather than pursuing a regime change agenda in these countries, China pursues narrow economic objectives, and even its economic presence is comparatively limited.

The paper relies on policy documents, speeches, newspaper articles, publicly available statistical data, as well as secondary literature and academic articles to identify China's interests in the region, to assess the countries' linkages with China, and to generate an assessment of its effects.

2 China's Overarching Objectives, its Vision of Global Order and Perspective on Democracy

China seeks to make the world safe for autocracy. This objective of China's foreign policy is strongly shaped by the Chinese Communist Party's domestic needs. Domestically, President Xi has identified constitutional democracy, the universal values of freedom, democracy and human rights, civil society, and press freedom as perils, a form of 'Westernisation' that the party has to prevent.¹ From the Chinese leadership's perspective, international democratic norms and Western democracy promotion are a threat to domestic political order and a force of destabilisation of other countries around the globe. Therefore, China opposes Western attempts to promote democracy and human rights and disseminates the narrative that there is no one-size-fits-all model that is suitable to the unique experience and history of individual countries. This standpoint finds direct translation into China's conception of global order, the so-called *Global Community of Shared Future*.

Under President Xi, China has articulated a proactive foreign policy agenda that identifies the need to transform the global governance system and foresees a leadership role for China in doing so. Broadly speaking, China supports the UN-led international order, its institutions and principles of international law, and especially those that emphasize state sovereignty. Though China's vision of the world remains somewhat nebulous, its *Global Community of Shared Future* has been elevated to "the overall goal of China's major-

¹ ChinaFile. 2013. "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation." November 8. <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

country diplomacy in the new era.”² References to this concept can be found in various bilateral and multilateral documents, including at the UN level.

As explicated in China’s 2023 white paper, “A Global Community of Shared Future,” the description of an interconnected world, in which all countries have to jointly overcome global problems, is detailed. In order to do so, states need to cooperate based on partnerships – as opposed to alliances – in an inclusive, multilateral, UN and law-based international arena on the principle of sovereign equality without excluding any country based on ideological reasons.

Central to this vision are the “*common values of humanity*,” referring to common aspirations of peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom. While China frames democracy as a universal aspiration, it rejects any specific definition of the term. Instead, it promotes a conceptualisation that is adaptive to individual, local, and cultural contexts and conditions by proposing that each country may have “different understandings of the nature of these values.”³ Rejecting a set definition of democracy and human rights, China attempts to dilute the substance of these concepts. By pushing back against well-defined international norms that would allow them to act on them, China seeks to undermine the mechanisms of and justification for international intervention.

China’s recent three initiatives, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) complement the concept. The GDI provides impetus for multilateral global development initiatives, the GSI emphasizes commitment to the UN-based international order and rejects the US system of treaty alliances in favor of a global network of partnerships, and the GCI reiterates normative relativism by couching it in the language of traditional culture. Together with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these are the main vehicles to advance China’s Global Community of a Shared Future.

In alignment with this narrative and with *the five principles of peaceful coexistence*, which stipulate sovereignty and mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs and remain a foundational principle to frame China’s bilateral relations, China does not seek to impose a specific governance model elsewhere.⁴ Rather, it markets itself as an inspiration for others to reject democracy as a developmental paradigm. President Xi seeks to actively offer Chinese “wisdom” to others, proposing in 2017 that China might be an interesting example for others “who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”⁵

As China does not want to be seen as intrusive and dominating, it relies mostly on soft channels to communicate and popularise the Chinese perspective through economic linkages and non-economic networks, media, and platforms for knowledge transfer. Reaching out to foreign political and economic elites through cooperation, consultation, and networking mechanisms, it aims to socialise others into this worldview and to promote a China-friendly perspective. During the past decade, China established various dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, such as regional cooperation, think tank networks, or dialogue platforms for political parties. Some of these efforts have been integrated into the BRI. China offers to share “experience in governance” and offers training programs to officials, political elites, media, or journalists. It is also expanding its media outreach around the globe in order to be able to influence public opinion

² Previously this was referred to as “community with a shared future for mankind” and “community of common destiny,” which is building on Hu Jintao’s “harmonious world.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs; State Council Information Office of the PRC. 2023. “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions.” September 26. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202309/t20230926_11150122.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Embassy of China. 2014. “The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence Stand Stronger.” June 29. http://ir.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dtxw/201407/t20140702_1894012.htm.

⁵ Jinping, Xi. 2017. “Full text of Xi Jinping’s report at 19th CPC National Congress.” November 3. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm.

elsewhere. Content-sharing agreements allow China to insert its perspective into local media to reach out to broader populations.

Through such measures of political cooperation, China pursues its agenda of normalising non-democratic ideas. In addition, there are risks related to economic cooperation. Corruption and the diffusion of surveillance technologies that are associated with China's economic engagement can directly damage or undermine democratic processes, institutions, and rights elsewhere and serve to prop-up authoritarian ruling elites. However, the risks depend largely on existing institutions and safeguards in place. Until recently, the Chinese government has left it to host country governments to hold Chinese companies accountable for their conduct abroad. In countries suffering from corruption, weak institutions and law enforcement, this has often allowed for corporate misconduct, acerbated corruption, and resulted in underperforming projects.

China's role as a forerunner in the development and application of digital (mass surveillance) technologies is also problematic because China is keen to export its technologies to the outside world. Safe or smart city systems are dual-use technologies with the potential to be misused against political opponents: China is actively marketing these technologies and makes them affordable through state-backed financing and export-promotion schemes. Chinese telecommunication companies have been found complicit in locating and surveilling political opposition in Latin America and Africa when asked by incumbent governments to do so.⁶

China also has a track record of using economic statecraft, censorship and intimidation to pressure activists and civil society, extending even to governments elsewhere to prevent them from criticising China. Such measures tend to be employed to protect China's core interests such as re-unification with Taiwan, its reputation against negative publicity regarding human rights violations at home and sometimes corporate misconduct abroad. Economic statecraft relies on asymmetric dependencies in trade, investment, or financial relationships which when instrumentalised lead to the loss of the recipient's decision-making autonomy.

3 China's Goals Towards the Eastern Neighborhood and its Shifting Views on the Role of the EU

China has no particular strategic interest in the countries in the EU's eastern neighborhood in and of themselves. The countries of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan) are geographically distant, have no strong historical connection to China, and they do not form a security concern for China, even though the South Caucasus countries are considered relevant in order to counter potential Islamic supporters of Uighur separatisms in China's Autonomous Xinjiang Region.⁷ The South Caucasus countries in particular have small populations, and China's interests in these countries are primarily of economic nature as China sees them as important transit countries along the BRI.

After gaining independence in 1991, all six countries established diplomatic relations with China in the course of 1992. However, with the exception of Belarusian and Ukrainian arms sales to China, relations remained low-key and only further developed during the 2000s. Ukraine and Belarus in particular became more

⁶ Parkinson, Joe, & Bariyo, Nichoals, & Chin, Josh. 2019. "Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spuy on Political Opponents." *The Wall Street Journal*. August 15. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helped-african-governments-spy-on-political-opponents-11565793017>; Mozur, Paul, & Kessel, Jonah M., & Chan, Melissa. 2019. "Made in China, Exported to the World: The Surveillance State." *The New York Times*. April 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/technology/ecuador-surveillance-cameras-police-government.html>.

⁷ German, Tracey. 2022. "Russia and the South Caucasus: The China Challenge." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74(9) (October 21): 1596–1615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2071843> ; Arutyunyan, Agavni. 2022. "China-South Caucasus: Cooperation in Transport and Logistics Nodes of the Belt and Road." *Modern Oriental Studies*, 4(4), 112–137.

important to China with the announcement of China's BRI in 2013 due to their location and existing railway connections to Central and Eastern Europe. As a consequence of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas region in 2014, China shifted focus somewhat away from Ukraine to Belarus while Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022 has boosted the importance of the alternative, the Middle Corridor or Trans-Caspian International Transit Route through Azerbaijan and Georgia that circumvents Russian territory.⁸ China considers the situation in the South Caucasus as conducive to the construction of the BRI, which converges with the strategic aspiration of these countries to exploit their geographic location as potential transit hubs as well as their desire to diversify their economies while seeking to balance external influence from both Russia and the EU.⁹

China's approach to the region is conditioned by the Sino-Russian relationship, with China pursuing economic interests in the region without challenging Russia's influence. Being considerate of Russia's interests, China's increasing economic engagement with the post-Soviet states has thus far not led to competition between China and Russia, and in 2022, both agreed to intensify practical cooperation between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union, of which Armenia and Belarus are members.¹⁰

Unlike Russia, which has exerted pressure on the countries aspiring to join the EU, China respected the choices of these countries. It is important to note that elites in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia have actively sought China's attention with the hope to attract investment and to increase their room for maneuver so as to balance Russian influence and counter Western conditionality. Even Belarus' president Lukashenko, the most prominent ally of Russia, has sought Chinese engagement to alleviate pressure from and dependence on Russia as well as economic sanctions by the EU.

Russia's attempts to maintain its influence in the post-Soviet space have not always been in China's interest to realise economic opportunities and free trade. Given China's own separatist movements and the Taiwan issue, it has been challenging for the Chinese leaders to position themselves towards the Russian strategy: to invade or instigate separatist wars, and later legitimise secession through referenda. In its official statements, China avoided taking sides in the Russia-fueled secession conflicts in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), Moldova (Transnistria), and Ukraine (Crimea and Donbass in 2014) while emphasising respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, de facto, China has supported Russia, for example by helping to connect Crimea to the Russian energy net.¹¹

Starting in the late 2010s, China began to see Western engagement more negatively as an intrusion into the Russian sphere of influence and as an attempt to meddle into these countries' domestic politics.¹² China shares Russia's narrative that protests, such as the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine and post-election protests in Belarus in 2020, were initiated by Western forces to weaken Russian influence. Regarding Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, China tried to minimise diplomatic damage by abstaining from votes targeting Russia in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) while, at the same time, sharing Russia's opposition against NATO expansion and its blaming of the

⁸ Deng, Hao, & Li, Zigu. 2007. "Evolution of the situation in the South Caucasus and the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt." China Institute of International Studies. https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/yjbg/202007/t20200716_4556.html.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ President of Russia. 2002. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development." February 4. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

¹¹ Safranchuk, Ivan, & Denisov, Igor. 2020. "China and Russia in the Black Sea: Between Global Convergence and Regional Divergence." In Gönül, Tol et al. (eds.), *A Sea Change?: China's Role in the Black Sea*: 18-26. November. <http://www.mei.edu/publications/sea-change-chinas-role-black-sea>.

¹² Ibid.

West for the war. In less visible multilateral settings, China sided more openly with Russia, objected to economic sanctions on Russia and Belarus and actively disseminated Russian disinformation about Ukraine.¹³

4 EU Eastern Neighbourhood Countries' Linkages with China

4.1 Political Relations

All EU eastern neighbourhood countries have actively sought China's political and economic engagement as a counterbalance to Russian influence, to mitigate EU conditionality or the feeling that integration into the EU would be out of reach. However, China considers only the relation to Ukraine, Belarus, and only from 2023, Georgia as strategic. Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have no special political or security-related importance for China and the relationship is defined in economic terms.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, one area of particular interest to China was space, military and technical cooperation.¹⁴ Due to cooperation in this area, the China-Ukraine relationship was considered strategic. Ukraine's arms factories, a remainder from Soviet times, have been an important source of military technology and materials for China, including for what was turned into China's first aircraft carrier Liaoning. From 2016 to 2020, Ukraine was China's third largest weapon supplier and more than 35% of Ukraine's weapons exports went to China.¹⁵ However, the attempt of a Chinese investor to obtain a controlling share of the Ukrainian Motor Sich, a Ukrainian aircraft and helicopter engine manufacturer in 2017, by offering an additional USD 100 million was blocked by a Ukrainian court amidst pressure from the US.

In late 2013, under pressure from Russia, **Ukraine** suspended the Association Agreement negotiations with the EU. Around the same time, it signed a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation with China, a Joint Declaration on Further Deepening of Strategic Partnership Relations, and a Program of Development of Strategic Partnership Relations. The friendship treaty contained mutual support for each other's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. However, China's ambiguous stance on Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea hampered the relationship from developing for a few years.¹⁶ While the Chinese government abstained from UNGA votes on the status of Crimea and provided material, technical and humanitarian military aid to Ukraine, Chinese companies started to re-negotiate investment plans for a port project in Yevpatori with the Crimea authorities.

In 2017, as the EU and IMF were pressuring Ukraine over corruption and political reforms, Ukraine made attempts to revive the relationship with China, joined the BRI, and several initiatives were proposed. However, it was only under President Zelensky that the bilateral relationship was truly revived.¹⁷ In the years before Russia's invasion, China was seen in Ukraine as an economic opportunity and potential counterbalance to Russia, but this is changing with China's unwillingness to condemn Russia's aggression.¹⁸

¹³ Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. 2022. "China's Response to War in Ukraine." *Asian Survey*, no. 5–6 (October 21): 751–81. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2022.1807273>.

¹⁴ Poita, Yurii, & Gerasymchuk, Sergiy. 2018. "Ukraine-China after 2014: A New Chapter in the Relationship." Friedrich Ebert Foundation, September. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/14703.pdf>.

¹⁵ Girard, Bonnie. 2022. "Ukraine was not one of China's largest partners, but they had important ties in a number of areas that will be difficult to replace." *The Diplomat*. March 30. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-cost-of-the-war-to-the-china-ukraine-relationship>.

¹⁶ Nizhnikau, Ryhor, and Marcin Kaczmarecki. 2020. "China's policy towards Belarus and Ukraine: A limited challenge to Sino-Russian relations." *FIIA Briefing Paper* 298, December 16. <https://www.fiaa.fi/julkaisu/chinas-policy-towards-belarus-and-ukraine>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kuo, Mercy A. 2023. "China-Ukraine Relations: Kyiv's Balancing Act." *The Diplomat*, February 13. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/china-ukraine-relations-kyivs-balancing-act>.

In 2006, China and **Georgia** signed a Joint Agreement on Further Developing Friendship and Cooperation and agreements on economic and technological cooperation. With an eye to balance Russian influence, Georgia actively sought engagement with the EU, NATO, and China which avoided taking a position in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and did not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Towards China, Georgia actively marketed itself as an investment-friendly and integral part of the BRI, even though transit routes were initially designed to run over land through Russia, rather than Georgia and the Black Sea. Nevertheless, Georgia was a founding member of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and an active supporter of the BRI; it lobbied for investment to transit routes through Georgia and founded the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum which has been held five times since 2015. The calculation was that establishing Georgia as a transit hub for trade between China and Europe would not only provide an economic stimulus, but also increase China's stakes in the stability of the country, and so help stabilize and guarantee Georgia's security.¹⁹ Georgian officials have stated the priority they attach to developing bilateral relations with China on various occasions.²⁰

In August 2023, as Georgia was awaiting the decision on its EU membership application, Georgia and China signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement. The statement emphasized the mutual intent to deepen bilateral relations, high-level policy consultations, to expand ties between central and local governments, political groups and parties, and legislative bodies to exchange experiences and strengthen interactions. Moreover, in the statement, Georgian state representatives expressed their belief that "Chinese modernization offers a new path and a new option for mankind to achieve modernization" and stated its support for China's GSI and GCI, thereby implicitly subscribing to China's rejection of NATO as an alliance-based security mechanism, and to China's stretchable definition of democracy.²¹ On his visit to China, then Prime Minister Garibashvili praised President Xi as an inspirational leader, "truly an exemplary leader, a visionary, a wise man, who did great things for this great nation" in Chinese media.²² In the context of increasing populism and democratic rollback under the ruling Georgian Dream party, the intensified alignment with China as an outside option serves the Georgian government as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis EU democratisation demands in the context of the ongoing accession procedure.

Just like Georgia, **Armenia** actively sought to deepen its ties with China, in particular after Russian pressure to move away from its Association Agreement with the EU in 2013. Both countries signed a Joint Statement on Further Developing and Deepening Friendly Cooperative Relations with China. Armenia joined the BRI in 2015. It has procured weapon systems from China since the late 1990s and more recently, trained its military personnel in China. In 2017, China pledged military assistance of about USD 1.5 million to Armenia.²³ **Moldova**, too, maintains a Cooperative Friendly Relationship with China, has also received military assistance in the form of scholarships, logistical and medical support, and has discussed the possibility of China-led trainings for Moldovan personnel recently.

Before **Azerbaijan** joined the BRI in late 2015, Azerbaijan's relations with China remained modest. While Azerbaijan attempted to conduct a multi-vector foreign policy that remains autonomous from both Russian and Western initiatives and also includes Turkey, closer cooperation with China as a third player was hampered by China's military support to Armenia in the context of the territorial conflict over Nagorno-

¹⁹ Topuria, Revaz. 2016. "Georgia: The Key to China's "Belt and Road." *The Diplomat*, April 28. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/georgia-the-key-to-chinas-belt-and-road>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Georgia. 2023. "Full text: Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and Georgia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership." August 7. http://ge.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202308/t20230807_11123383.htm.

²² "PM Garibashvili Touts China Ties in CGTN Interview." 2023. *Civil.ge*, August 12. <https://civil.ge/archives/555615>.

²³ German, Tracey. 2022. "Russia and the South Caucasus: The China Challenge." *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (October 21): 1596–1615. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966_8136.2022.2071843; Abrahamyan, Eduard. 2015. "The China-Armenia Declaration and Beijing's Prospects in the South Caucasus." *SSRN Central Asia-Caucasus*, April 20. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2596934>.

Karabakh.²⁴ While Azerbaijan as an oil-rich country managed to keep its autonomy, an economic crisis as a result of falling oil prices in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Crimea, pushed the regime to diversify its economic relations. In 2013, Azerbaijan received military aid and equipment donations of USD 0.5 million from China.²⁵ In 2019, an agreement on mutual military aid and further Chinese arms sales were signed. In several visits to China, Azerbaijan's Minister of Defense has shown interest in military sales and cooperation.

For **Belarus**, China has become an increasingly important outside player with which it hopes to balance its dependence on Moscow, to modernize its economy and to fend off pressure from the West on domestic issues relating to democracy and human rights. President Lukashenko has therefore actively sought and prioritized the partnership with China which manifests itself in numerous visits and bilateral agreements. In 2013, the two countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement and in 2015 a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. In that year, they also adopted a joint declaration on the further development and deepening of their comprehensive strategic partnership. With China's support, Belarus also gained observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2015 and completed the accession process to full member in July 2024.

Politically, the Sino-Belarusian relationship has become ever more important when Belarus' relationship to the EU further deteriorated after the 2020 post-election violence. In contrast, President Xi was the first to congratulate Lukashenko on his re-election. China supported Lukashenko by articulating its opposition against foreign interference into Belarus' internal affairs, criticising sanctions on Belarus and by voting against an UNHRC draft that expressed concerns about human rights violations around the elections. Likewise, Belarus defended China on human rights in the UNHRC in 2020 and 2021 by issuing statements (sometimes on behalf of a group) in support of China's measures in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, respectively.

In 2023, China and Belarus upgraded their relations to an "all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership." On this occasion, President Xi described the China-Belarus friendship as unbreakable and emphasised the importance of mutual support for "each other's choice of development path, support each other's effort in safeguarding their respective core interests, oppose external interference in internal affairs, and safeguard the sovereignty and political security".²⁶ President Lukashenko once again repeated his support in safeguarding China's core interests, the BRI, the GSI and the GDI. New economic projects were announced. According to President Lukashenko the ideas of China and Belarus on a prospective world order "absolutely coincide."²⁷

4.2 Economic Linkages and Corruption

Though China's economic presence in the EU's eastern neighbourhood space is increasing, with the exception of Belarus, China's economic engagement has not created overwhelming leverage. The degree to which Chinese companies are actively investing in the six countries varies (see Table 1). Yet, the countries have in common that Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) makes up only a small share of foreign investments, partly because infrastructure projects implemented by Chinese companies have in many cases been financed by international financial institutions, multilateral development, or non-Chinese commercial banks. Trade with China is increasing, but except for Ukraine, all countries suffer from large – if not huge – trade

²⁴ Geybulla, Arzu. 2018. "The Third Powers and Azerbaijan." in *Third Powers in Europe's East*. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), March, 101–110. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17442.15>.

²⁵ Rolland, Nadège. 2018. "China's Ambitions in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus." *Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI)*, December 17. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russienevisions/chinas-ambitions-eastern-europe-and-south-caucasus>.

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2023. "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko." March 1. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202303/t20230303_11034766.html.

²⁷ Eruygur, Burc. 2023. "Belarusian, Chinese ideas on prospective world order "absolutely coincide": Lukashenko." *Anadolu Agency*, August 17. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/belarusian-chinese-ideas-on-prospective-world-order-absolutely-coincide-lukashenko/2969405>.

imbalances, making them also less susceptible to economic pressure. However, as discussed below, for the most evidently documented case of Georgia, Chinese companies and investors have nurtured corruption and elite capture.

When Ukraine joined the BRI in 2017, several projects in the energy and transportation sector were signed, and USD 7 billion of investment projects were announced.²⁸ China proposed the creation of a free trade zone and a visa-free travel regime. However, not all proposals were implemented. Under President Zelensky, Chinese companies were awarded contracts exceeding USD 6.6 billion for construction work, including in road and railway infrastructure, metro lines, port terminals, agriculture, (wind) energy, and telecommunications. Port projects, including at Mariupol Sea Port, aimed at increasing the capacity to ship agricultural goods to China. In 2019, China became the biggest trade partner for Ukraine, the latter of which played an important role in Chinese food security and supplied other commodities such as iron ore. In 2021, Ukraine accounted for 20% of China’s grain and 30% of Chinese corn imports,²⁹ which explains China’s interest in investing in Ukraine’s ports of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Trade with China amounted to 11% of Ukraine’s total trade in 2022. On paper, China’s FDI in Ukraine of a little less than USD 300 million is negligible, hovering around 0.5% in 2021 and 2022.³⁰ However, as in other countries, these investment numbers may underestimate the foreign direct investment of Chinese companies as many Chinese companies operate with branches that are registered elsewhere.

Table 1: Economic linkages

	Chinese FDI stock in \$ million (2022)	Chinese FDI (% of total)	Public liabilities in \$ million (2000-2021)	Trade (% of total trade)
Ukraine	80.36	0.5% ³¹	2691.6	11% (1 st trade partner)
Belarus	747.59	3% (2019) ³²	8756.4	4.1% (2 nd trade partner)
Moldova	2.41		11.8	10% (4 th trade partner)
Georgia	853.61	2% ³³	296.6	12.7% (3 rd trade partner, biggest export market)
Azerbaijan	28.92	0.1% ³⁴	966.3	4.1% (4 th trade partner)
Armenia	30.96		24.7	9.5% (2 nd trade partner)

Note: Data on Chinese FDI stocks is taken from 2022 Statistical Bulletin of China’s Outward Foreign Direct Investment.³⁵ Data on Chinese FDI as share of total FDI relies, where available, on data from the host countries and may exclude investments from Chinese companies operating from branches that are registered outside China. Public liabilities are

²⁸ Brooke, James. 2018. “With Russia on the Sidelines, China Moves Aggressively into Ukraine.” *Atlantic Council*, January 5. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/with-russia-on-the-sidelines-china-moves-aggressively-into-ukraine>.

²⁹ Jiang, Yang. 2022. “The economic meaning of the Russia-Ukraine war for China.” *Danish Institute for International Studies*, December 14. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-economic-meaning-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-china>.

³⁰ National Bank of Ukraine. n.d. “External Sector Statistics.” National Bank of Ukraine. <https://bank.gov.ua/en/statistic/sector-external#5>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jakóbowski, Jakub, and Kłysiński, Kamil. 2021. “The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations.” *Centre for Eastern Studies* 81, January. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2021-01-25/non-strategic-partnership>.

³³ National Statistics Office of Georgia. 2023. “Foreign Direct Investments 2022.” August 15. <https://www.geostat.ge/media/55749/FDI-in-2022---%28Adjusted%29.pdf>.

³⁴ Central Bank of the Republic of Azerbaijan. “External Sector Statistics.” Consulted on January 31 2024. <https://www.cbar.az/page-43/external-sector-statistics?language=en>.

³⁵ Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, National Bureau of Statistics, State Administration of Foreign Exchange. 2023. “2022 Statistical Bulletin of China’s Outward Foreign Direct Investment,” 148f. <http://hzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/aa/202309/20230903443704.shtm>.

taken from AidData which aggregates (estimated) Chinese loans to state entities or state-guaranteed loans to non-state entities since 2000 and does not account for repayments.³⁶ Trade data is based on www.trademap.org

As of 2023, China's economic presence in the three South Caucasus states is strongest in **Georgia**. In 2018, shortly after the conclusion of the Georgia-EU Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), the China-Georgia Free Trade Agreement was completed. In the context of Russian sanctions, trade with China had been increasing. In theory, due to Georgia's bilateral agreements with Turkey, the CIS countries, EFTA and the EU, this offers access for Chinese exports far beyond Georgia. China has become Georgia's third biggest trading partner behind Russia and Turkey with USD 1.8 billion which corresponds to 12.7% of total trade. Receiving 18% of Georgia's exports, China was also Georgia's largest export market in 2022.³⁷ Despite hopes to increase wine exports to China, copper accounted for almost 80% of Georgia's exports to China in 2021.³⁸

Even in Georgia, China is still not a major investor. With USD 43.6 million in 2022, Chinese FDI amounted to a little more than 2% of Georgia's total FDI and with the exception of 2013/14 numbers have been similar during the past ten years. China's comparatively high FDI stock in Georgia is primarily driven by Hualing Group, the single largest Chinese investor in Georgia with a total investment capital of USD 600 million since 2007, in construction, real estate and the financial sector. The development and modernisation of infrastructure, which is crucial if Georgia is to realise the potential of the Middle Corridor, has often been financed by the Georgian state, international donors or multilateral financial institutions. This being said, in the near future, China's weight as an investor in Georgia's infrastructure may change if the construction of a deep seaport in the Black Sea harbour of Anaklia materializes with the participation of a Chinese-Singaporean consortium as announced in 2024.

The negative publicity that a number of Chinese contractors of such projects have received, points towards corruption and elite capture in the Georgian government and bureaucracy. Civil society organisations have criticized the lack of information on tendering processes, insufficient due diligence in awarding contracts, as well as lax law enforcement by the Georgian government. For example, despite being sanctioned by international donors for corporate malpractices, China's Sinohydro has been awarded projects worth a total of GEL 1 billion in the road construction sector in Georgia, where it subsequently violated environmental and labor law regulations. Another major project through the Rikoti Pass, a strategically important section in the country's East-West connection, which involves the construction of 96 bridges and 53 tunnels on a stretch of 52 kilometers and which was awarded to four Chinese companies have met unexpected delays and price increases and led to floods and landslides.

Chinese business interests have also involved elite capture, corruption, and the entanglement of business interests of Georgia's oligarchic political elites at the highest level. Georgia's elites have actively sought to address Chinese business networks through the Georgian-Chinese Friendship Association (GCFA), and there are striking parallels to the infamous case of CEFC China Energy Company Limited's inroads into the policy circles in the Czech Republic.³⁹ However, different from the case of the Czech Republic, and similar to the case of Sinohydro discussed above, CEFC has been embraced even after scandals of corporate misconduct became public and could have been known by Georgian decision-makers.

³⁶ AidData. 2023. "Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 3.0." <https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-3-0>.

³⁷ International Trade Centre. <https://www.trademap.org>.

³⁸ The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), "Country Profile; Georgia." <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/geo?yearSelector1=2021&flowSelector1=flow1&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0>.

³⁹ In the Czech Republic, CEFC's chairmen Ye Jianming was given an advisory role to former president Milos Zeman. CEFC which has been involved in high-level corruption in Chad, Uganda and the UN, invested in real estate in Prague, Czech Airlines, a brewery, the Slavia soccer club and the parent company of TV Barrandov, a media outlet that has helped Milo Zeman's election campaign. Zeman could promote private business interests in China, and adopted an outspokenly China-friendly foreign policy. However, in 2018, chairman Ye disappeared and was charged on corruption in China, the company was declared bankrupt.

In Georgia, several well-known political figures are entangled with Chinese businesses. These involve oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire former prime minister and the founder of the ruling Georgian Dream party who is considered the country's key decision-maker, former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and Ivane Chkhartishvili, a controversial former politician and businessman and millionaire. Switching between political and corporate positions, these figures launched and used the GCFA to draw in CEFC which later was sold a 75% share in the Poti Free Industrial Zone, a tax-free manufacturing base near the Poti port.⁴⁰ The firm that represented CEFC China Energy in Georgia, Euro-Asian Management Group was later found to be linked – through constructions involving companies in the British Virgin Islands – to Chkhartishvili and Ivanishvili.⁴¹ CEFC's promised investment in Poti never materialised due to the company's bankruptcy as a result of corruption charges in China.

In 2024, the Georgian government announced that China Communication Construction Company (which is also involved in the East-West Highway discussed above) won the tender for an alternative port project in Anaklia. A Georgian-American consortium had earlier been contracted to develop this port, but the contract was terminated in 2020 by the Georgian government over accusations of money laundering and the failure to meet contractual deadlines. The Georgian government will have a 51% stake in the revisited project with a total estimated investment cost of more than USD 2 billion. Under the envisioned Build-Own-Operate scheme, the project is to be financed by Chinese entities, but because contracts and profitability studies are not disclosed, some fear it will spur corruption and may involve state guarantees with uncontrollable risks in the case of default or unprofitability. Also, it seems that the inclusion of a Chinese contractor has made the project more acceptable to Russia, which earlier opposed Western involvement in Georgia's Black Sea port.⁴²

With a total trade volume of USD 957 million, China was **Moldova's** fourth biggest trading partner in 2022, behind Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. This accounted for roughly 7% of Moldova's total trade, however, the relation is very unbalanced, given Moldova's heavy trade deficit of about USD 937 million. Moldova has received very little Chinese FDI, but in 2010 received two loans of USD 11.8 million. These were co-financed by Huawei and were given to state-owned Moldtelecom to finance equipment and post-warranty maintenance. The 2015 launch of container shipping services in Giurgiulesti port at the Danube River by a Chinese state-owned company significantly improved the country's export opportunities and ameliorated the economic harm caused by Russia's embargo on Moldovan wine.⁴³ Other joint projects, such as a planned free trade agreement and major road constructions have not materialised yet.

Though China has become **Armenia's** second largest trade partner with minerals as Armenia's main export good, bilateral trade still only amounts to 9.5% of Armenia's total trade. Armenia remains still heavily dependent on trade with Russia (35% of total trade in 2022). Armenia has also not been a target of Chinese investments as the East-West BRI corridors do not run through Armenia, but the country has seen some investments focused on North-South connectivity.

⁴⁰ Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany. 2021. "Interview: Former Georgian minister on elite corruption and China." *Axios*, November 16. <https://www.axios.com/2021/11/16/interview-former-georgian-minister-on-elite-corruption-and-china>.

⁴¹ Standish, Reid, and Luka Pertaia. 2023. "The Controversial Company That Opened The Door For China's Growing Influence in Georgia." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, September 7. <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-growing-influence-georgia-garibashvili-cefc-energy/32582441.html>; Transparency International Georgia. 2021. "Developments around Georgian ports: what is new?" April 22. <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/developments-around-georgian-ports-what-new>.

⁴² Pastucha, Tymon, and [Wojciech Wojtasiewicz](#). 2024. "Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port Project May Open New Routes, but at What Cost?" *The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, September 16. <https://pism.pl/publications/georgias-anaklia-deep-sea-port-project-may-open-new-routes-but-at-what-cost>.

⁴³ Davi, Eugénie. 2020. "Moldova's Unexpected Opening to China." *China Observer*, September 22. <https://chinaobservers.eu/moldovas-unexpected-opening-to-china>.

Just like Georgia, **Azerbaijan** is aiming to form part of the BRI transportation corridor, and has invested in its domestic infrastructure, such as the Baku International Sea Trade Port or the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) Railroad, an important link in the over-land route. The government of Azerbaijan thereby sought to rely on international financial institutions and to circumvent Chinese private investors in order to ‘decrease scope for economic pressure’.⁴⁴ According to AidData, of Azerbaijan’s estimated USD 966,3 million public liabilities to China, only projects worth USD 141.4 million were provided exclusively by China without non-Chinese co-financiers.

Azerbaijan had received little FDI from China before it signed a major Memorandum of Understanding in 2019 in which deals worth USD 821 million were agreed upon.⁴⁵ In 2022, Chinese FDI amounted to USD 6.7 million which corresponds to 0,1% of total FDI (with similar shares in 2021 and 2020). With a total value of USD 2.1 billion, China was Azerbaijan’s 4th biggest trade partner, behind Italy, Turkey, and Russia in 2022, but Azerbaijan’s trade deficit with China amounted to more than USD 2 billion in that year.

Economically, **Belarus** is primarily significant for China as an important transit country to European markets in China’s BRI and a laboratory for new modes of economic cooperation. While some Chinese analysts have dubbed Belarus “our Pakistan in Europe,”⁴⁶ Belarus has been a second-choice partner for China which was initially more attracted to Ukraine as a more strategically located and economically more important interlocutor.

In 2014, the two countries set up a Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park Green Stone, the largest China-built industrial park in Europe with a considerable tax exemption scheme.⁴⁷ Another USD 300 million flagship project related to real estate development in Minsk, the joint Chinese-Belarusian car plant BelGee, and a production complex of the Belarusian National Biotechnology Corporation which was opened in 2022 and had been built by CITIC with a Chinese loan. A number of projects carried out by Chinese companies were plagued by issues relating to poor quality and delays, some of which got cancelled altogether.

China has offered credit lines to Belarus, mainly as export and development loans by China Exim Bank and China Development Bank. According to AidData, Belarus’ accumulated public liabilities, i.e. loans to state entities or state-guaranteed loans to non-state entities since 2000, amounts to more than USD 8.7 billion. Chinese FDI in Belarus is still low and amounted to 3% of total foreign investments in Belarus in 2019.⁴⁸ In 2019, President Lukashenko stopped granting government guarantees for Chinese loans in order to limit the public debt burden and incentivize Chinese investors to invest their own money. Lending from China amounted to 20% of Belarus’ foreign debt in 2019 when China issued a liquidity loan of USD 500 million which is assumed to have been used for debt repayments to China.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Baghirov, Orkhan. 2019. “Azerbaijan and China Sign \$800 Million Economic Package: The Geo-Economic Implications.” *Jamestown*, May 29. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-china-sign-800-million-economic-package-the-geo-economic-implications>.

⁴⁵ Shahbazov, Fuad. 2019. "Azerbaijan Eyes More Cooperation With China Within Belt and Road Initiative." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 16, Issue 62, April 30. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-eyes-more-cooperation-with-china-within-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁴⁶ Jakóbowski, Jakub, and Kłysiński, Kamil. 2021. “The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations.” *Centre for Eastern Studies* 81, January. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2021-01-25/non-strategic-partnership>.

⁴⁷ Šerić, Matija. 2023. "Responding To Western Sanctions: A Strong Belarusian-Chinese Relations – Analysis." *Eurasia Review*, December 20. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/20122023-responding-to-western-sanctions-a-strong-belarusian-chinese-relations-analysis>.

⁴⁸ Jakóbowski, Jakub, and Kłysiński, Kamil. 2021. “The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations.” *Centre for Eastern Studies* 81, January. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2021-01-25/non-strategic-partnership>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

In 2021, bilateral trade reached almost USD 3.5 billion. With Belarusian exports concentrating on potash fertilizers, meat and dairy products, Belarus' trade deficit has consistently exceeded USD 2 billion in recent years. Though China has become the second largest trade partner for Belarus, bilateral trade still accounts for only 4.1% of Belarus' total trade and remains far outmeasured by Belarus' trade with Russia— which accounted for roughly 32% of total trade.

In sum, Lukashenko's hopes that China may help rescue the economy have not materialised as expected, and Chinese academics admit that the large-scale economic cooperation projects are driven by political rather than economic incentives.⁵⁰ Due to diverging visions of the economy, the Chinese government has been reluctant to engage in modernization-related reforms in the way President Lukashenko had hoped for.⁵¹ For example, Chinese companies have refrained from acquiring stakes in a number of Belarusian state-owned enterprises which Lukashenko had offered.

The withdrawal of European companies from the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park (CBIP) in reaction to the 2020 sanctions and the decrease of freight traffic through Belarus after Russia's war in Ukraine have negatively affected China's economic interests in the country. Yet, with the 2023 "all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership" agreement, new economic projects of more than USD 3.5 billion were announced.⁵²

Initially, Belarus similarly sold Soviet equipment to China. In the 2000s, China helped Belarus with an (unsuccessful) satellite launch and in the 2010s provided lightly armed vehicles and enabled Belarus' Polonez Multiple Rocket Launch System.⁵³ In 2018, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and the Chinese aeronautics conglomerate AVIC created a joint drone manufacturer.⁵⁴ Both countries have also carried out joint military exercises. With the growing political importance of the bilateral relationship against Belarus' isolation in recent years, military cooperation has received a new impetus. Both countries announced to strengthen their military cooperation in 2021. Next to economic objectives, the advancement of military cooperation and military-technical cooperation, cooperation in the digital economy and information and communication technologies has been elevated to priority areas in the Sino-Belarus relations.⁵⁵

4.3 Internal Security and the Diffusion of Surveillance Technology

Chinese telecommunication companies are engaged in all EU eastern neighbourhood countries in network development, the provision of telecommunication equipment or smart city projects.

⁵⁰ Zhao, Huirong. 2023. "Belarus and Sino-Belarusian Economic Cooperation in the Context of Escalating Crisis in Ukraine." *欧亚经济(Journal of Eurasian Economy)* 5: 1–17.

⁵¹ Jakóbowski, Jakub, and Kłysiński, Kamil. 2021. "The Non-Strategic Partnership: Belarus-China Relations." *Centre for Eastern Studies* 81, January. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2021-01-25/non-strategic-partnership>; Nizhnikau, Ryhor, and Marcin Kaczmarek. 2020. "China's policy towards Belarus and Ukraine: A limited challenge to Sino-Russian relations." *FIIA Briefing Paper 298*, December 16. <https://www.fiaa.fi/julkaisu/chinas-policy-towards-belarus-and-ukraine>.

⁵² Zahid, Mashal. 2023. "Decoding China's Foreign Policy Approach Toward Belarus." *The Diplomat*, December 14. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/decoding-chinas-foreign-policy-approach-toward-belarus>.

⁵³ Kharchuk, Solomiya. 2021. "What Is Drawing Xi's China and Lukashenko's Belarus Closer?" *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 50, no. 3: 67–90.

⁵⁴ Rolland, Nadège. 2018. "China's Ambitions in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus." *Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI)*. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/chinas-ambitions-eastern-europe-and-south-caucasus>.

⁵⁵ The President of the Republic of Belarus. 2021. "Directive on advancing Belarus-China relations signed." December 3. <https://president.gov.by/en/events/podpisana-direktiva-o-razvitii-dvustoronnih-otnosheniy-s-kitayskoy-narodnoy-respublikoy-1638612358>.

Since the early 2000s, Chinese telecommunication companies have made inroads into **Ukraine**, where some operators rely up to 70% or more on Chinese suppliers.⁵⁶ In 2015, Ukrtelecom received a USD 50 million loan from China Development Bank to make Huawei upgrade its networks.⁵⁷ Huawei helped increase Ukraine's broadband penetration from 8 to 65% and was tasked with installing 4G networks in Kyiv's subway in 2019.⁵⁸ ZTE was involved in installing CDMA technology for United Telecom of **Georgia** (in 2007 and 2018 for about USD 50 million)⁵⁹ and has supplied the first DSL broadband network to **Armenia's** Armen Tel.⁶⁰ Both Huawei and ZTE have partnered with Beltelkom to roll-out the 5G network in **Belarus**.⁶¹ As late as 2020, the **Ukrainian** government tasked Huawei to help with cyber defense and cybersecurity, but the announcement attracted criticism and was later removed.⁶²

Even though **Georgia** signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the US on using Western technologies in the development of 5G infrastructure in 2021, then Prime Minister Garibashvili visited Huawei's demonstration center in Beijing during his 2023 visit.

Huawei also runs labs, research centers and educational cooperation programmes with universities in Ukraine and Belarus, with some of them focusing on cybersecurity. Various universities in Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are partners of Huawei's Seeds for the Future programme which funds students' trips to China to learn about language and culture and to visit Huawei's headquarters.⁶³

Several cities in the EU's eastern neighbourhood cooperate with Chinese tech firms in the implementation of safe or smart city projects. A traffic surveillance and monitoring system around Chişinău was discussed as early as 2014, financed by a RMB 30 million grant from China and contracted to Huawei. The following year Kyiv signed a Memorandum of cooperation to implement a Safe City project involving Huawei and Hikvision, and in 2019 Huawei signed a contract to implement a Smart City project in Kharkiv.⁶⁴ In 2017, Huawei also announced a project in Baku and signed a Smart City agreement with Yerevan, apparently without explicit

⁵⁶ Pollet, Mathieu. 2023. "Ukraine walks telecoms tightrope between China and the West." *Politico*, August 29. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-reconstruction-digital-infrastructure-contemplate-ban-china-suppliers-telecom>.

⁵⁷ SCM Limited. 2015. "Ukrtelecom launches strategic modernisation of its telecoms network. China Development Bank to provide financial support of \$50 million." December 21. <https://www.scm.com.cy/news/ukrtelecom-launches-strategic-modernisation-of-its-telecoms-network-china-development-bank-to-provide-financial-support-of-50-million>.

⁵⁸ Reuters. 2022. "China's business and economic interests in Ukraine." February 23. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/chinas-business-economic-interests-ukraine-2022-02-23/>;

Runde, Daniel F. 2023. "China and Russia are closer than ever. So why is Ukraine relying on Chinese tech firms?" *The Hill*, May 9. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3994402-china-and-russia-are-closer-than-ever-so-why-is-ukraine-relying-on-chinese-tech-firms>.

⁵⁹ Data collected from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, utilising their library on China's Tech Giants. <https://chinatechmap.aspi.org.au/#/data>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Beltelkom. 2021. "Beltelecom completes testing of fifth-generation network 5G." January 14. <https://beltelecom.by/news/main/beltelekom-zavershil-testirovanie-seti-pyatogo-pokoleniya-5g>; ZTE. 2021. "ZTE and A1 launch the first 5G SA test network in Belarus." May 25. <https://www.zte.com.cn/global/about/news/20200525e1.html>.

⁶² Reuters. 2022. "China's business and economic interests in Ukraine." February 23. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/chinas-business-economic-interests-ukraine-2022-02-23/>;

Runde, Daniel F. 2023. "China and Russia are closer than ever. So why is Ukraine relying on Chinese tech and firms?" *The Hill*, May 9. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3994402-china-and-russia-are-closer-than-ever-so-why-is-ukraine-relying-on-chinese-tech-fir>.

⁶³ Belarusian-Chinese Intergovernmental Committee on Cooperation. 2024. "Huawei opens two laboratories in Belarus." Sept 8. <https://archive.is/l7GCY#selection-697.67-697.104>; Australian Strategic Policy Institute. <https://chinatechmap.aspi.org.au/#/data/>; Huawei. "Seeds for the Future." <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/index.html>.

⁶⁴ Data collected from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, "Mapping China's Tech Giants." accessed April 2, 2024. <https://chinatechmap.aspi.org.au/#/data>.

negotiations about surveillance or privacy issues.⁶⁵ Video footage can be used to control citizens. Depending on legal frameworks in place and the strength of existing institutions to protect the individual, it therefore forms a potential threat to democratic rights.

It is clear, however, that China seeks to make security and safety services part of the BRI, and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security has instructed its digital surveillance firms to provide trainings to countries along the road. In this context, Belarusian and Armenian police forces received training courses from Meiya Pico, a Chinese frontrunner in digital forensics which has become known for its app which, when installed by police forces on the phones of citizens, provides access to images and audio files, location data, call logs, messages and the phone's calendar and contacts.⁶⁶ Against this background, cooperation with China is most worrisome in countries where the protection of individual rights are known to be weak or absent—as is the case in Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Digital transformation is a declared priority in Azerbaijan's industrial policy for the next decade. This implies both far-reaching domestic digitalisation and an ambitious Digital Hub program, which seeks to position Azerbaijan as a digital service provider and to construct a fiber-optic network connection from Europe to Asia. Relating to the former, Azerbaijan is reconstructing the systemic infrastructure of its recaptured territories in and around Nagorno Karabakh relying on "modern telecommunications, sensors, Big Data and other digital and artificial intelligence technologies, as well as innovation and knowledge". Huawei has implemented a smart village concept to provide the socio-technical infrastructure for the recaptured Zangilan's Aghali village.⁶⁷ Regarding the latter, next to engaging European telecommunication companies, Azerbaijan has signed an agreement with China on the establishment of an Asian-European telecommunication corridor.

In 2022, Belarusian president Lukashenko signed a directive to develop a national monitoring system under the lead of Beltelecom which has also helped implementing smart city systems with CCTV surveillance. It is to be expected that Chinese companies will be included in the implementation.

4.4 Networks of diffusion

China is attempting to create positive public perceptions through the engagement of citizens, elites and the media in the EN countries. All six countries host Confucius Institutes (CIs) and classrooms while the number of students studying in China has been increasing since 2010 and until the Covid-19 pandemic hit (see Table 2).

⁶⁵ Atanesian, Grigor. 2019. "Armenia mulls Chinese surveillance tech." *Eurasianet*, February 20. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-mulls-chinese-surveillance-tech>; InternationalNew.Az. 2017. "China's Huawei to build "Smart City" in Baku." March 21. <https://news.az/news/chinas-huawei-to-build-smart-city-in-baku>.

⁶⁶ Meiya Pico. "Training Center." accessed April 2, 2024. https://www.meiyapico.com/training-center_d18 ; Weber, Valentin. 2019. "The Worldwide Web of Chinese and Russian Information Controls. Centre for Technology and Global Affairs," *Working Paper Series* No. 11, September 17. <https://www.ctga.ox.ac.uk/article/worldwide-web-chinese-and-russian-information-controls>.

⁶⁷ Azernews. 2023. "New life begins in Zangilan's Aghali village [VIDEO]." November 26. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/218019.html>; Azertag. 2021. "Huawei to apply its most advanced technologies in Karabakh." April 28. https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Huawei_to_apply_its_most_advanced_technologies_in_Karabakh-1767419; Museyibov, Ayaz. 2022. "Azerbaijan's Latest Steps Toward Becoming a Regional Digital Hub." *The Jamestown Foundation. Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 19, Issue 93, June 23. <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbajians-latest-steps-toward-becoming-a-regional-digital-hub>.

Table 2: Partnering institutions of Chinese Confucius Institutes and classrooms and students studying in China

Country	Host institutions	Students in China
Ukraine	Kharkiv State University (2008); National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv (2009); South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University (2012); Kiev State Linguistic University (2013); Vinnytsia National Technical University (2019); Ternopil V. Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University (2021); Classrooms at Ukrainian National Tckaiovsky Academy of Music and Zaporizhzhia National University	16,585
Azerbaijan	Baku State University (2011); Azerbaijan University of Languages (2015)	2,256
Armenia	Brusov State University (2008)	1,612
Georgia	Free University of Tbilisi (2010); Alte University (formally known as CI Tbilisi Open Teaching University) (2019); Classroom at Kutaisi University	1,174
Moldova	Free International University of Moldova (2009)	1,130
Belarus	Belarusian State University (2006); Minsk State Linguistic University (2011); Belarusian National Technical University (2014); Belarusian State University of Physical Culture (2015); Francisk Skorina Gomel State University (2016); Brest State A.S. Pushkin University (2019); Classrooms at Baranovichi State University and Secondary School No. 44 Vitebsk	4,773

Note: Student numbers refer to the total number of tertiary level students studying in China between 2010 to 2021. Data is sourced from AidData.⁶⁸

China has established cooperation schemes with educational institutions, is offering scholarships for students from the EU eastern neighbourhood, and has sometimes established entire educational institutions in those countries. For example, following a bilateral framework agreement in 2016, China offered 20 full scholarships for **Georgian** students to study in China.⁶⁹ In 2019, another bilateral agreement was followed by more university scholarships and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of Georgia announced to introduce the Chinese language as a second foreign language in public schools.⁷⁰ In 2020, Tavartkiladze University was acquired and re-branded as Georgia International University by China International Education Group, a group headquartered in Hong Kong which runs other educational institutions around the world.⁷¹ In 2019, China International Education Group also established the China International Education Institute in Tbilisi, an institute seeking to offer Chinese language instruction, events to help people learn about China and its culture, and to promote ‘China-Georgia friendship’ and cultural exchange.⁷² The recently signed bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2023 explicitly mentions the aim to further strengthen cooperation in the education sector. Civil society organizations have criticised the active engagement of the

⁶⁸ AidData. 2022. “China’s Global Public Diplomacy Dashboard Dataset, Version 1.3.” <http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org>.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2016. “Chinese Government Scholarships.” January 14. [Ministry of Education, Science And Youth of Georgia \(mes.gov.ge\)](http://mes.gov.ge).

⁷⁰ Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia. 2019. “Chinese Scholarships for Georgian Citizens.” <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?t=srch&search=Chinese%20government%20scholarship&id=8889&lang=eng>; Interpress.ge. 2019. “Chinese Language Instruction to Begin in Schools from 5th Grade.” February 19, [ჩინური ენის სწავლება სკოლებში მე-5 კლასიდან დაიწყება | საინფორმაციო სააგენტო "ინტერპრესნიუსი" \(interpressnews.ge\)](http://interpressnews.ge).

⁷¹ Georgian International University. 2024. “History” October 2. <https://giu.edu.ge/en/history>.

⁷² Interpress.ge. 2020. “The official opening ceremony of the Chinese International Education Institute took place.” January 11. [ჩინეთის საერთაშორისო განათლების ინსტიტუტის ოფიციალური გახსნის ცერემონიალი გაიმართა | საინფორმაციო სააგენტო "ინტერპრესნიუსი" \(interpressnews.ge\)](http://interpressnews.ge).

Georgian education sector by Chinese authorities through official, diplomatic, university-level and private entities which receives a lot of media attention. They are worried that education is used to diffuse an overtly China-friendly narrative while a critical public discussion about potential risks for security and academic freedom is lacking.⁷³

The role of CIs as channels to spread a one-sided narrative about China, and as potential tools to prevent negative discussions from being held at host campuses, has received a lot of attention in Western countries. The Confucius Institute of Sinology at **Belarusian** State University is one of the biggest institutes around the world and being awarded the title “model institute”, it is supposed to function as an exemplar for other CIs in countries along the BRI. In addition to language and culture classes, the institute started to hold seminars and conferences in 2017, often on China’s political model and with the aim to popularize the Chinese developmental model in Belarus, which Chinese academics describe as ideologically similar and willing to actively learn and imitate.⁷⁴ However, while they praise the targeting of academics as an efficient way to spread China’s message and confirm that such “cultural exchanges” dovetail with political and economic exchange in the context of the BRI, they identify various (organisational) shortcomings that challenge the effectiveness of CIs.

5 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The rise of China creates a challenge to democracy around the globe and to the EU’s normative agenda of democracy promotion in its eastern neighbourhood space. This is because China is an illiberal major power that provides an example of economic prosperity without democratisation and actively seeks to normalize illiberal norms at the international level. With its promise of economic engagement without conditionalities and pressure for democratic reforms, it has changed the opportunity structures for illiberal governments who refuse to engage in democratic reforms or are dismantling existing democratic structures at home. Yet, despite China’s increasing economic presence in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood, China’s direct impact on the countries’ political structures and their alignment with the EU is mixed and overall remains limited.

While China’s interest in the region is primarily of an economic nature, for the six EU eastern neighbourhood countries, security considerations are an important motivation in their engagement with external actors. All of them have actively sought China’s political and economic engagement as a counterbalance to Russian influence, EU conditionality, and alternative when closer alignment with the West was not feasible. China’s response has primarily been economic. Yet, China’s promise to bring economic prosperity has not materialised, and China’s investments in the region remain comparatively small. Importantly, neither in Ukraine nor in Georgia has China been willing to temper Russia’s attempts to maintain influence and, therefore, has not improved the security environment of those countries in the way they had hoped for.

China’s ambivalent position on Russia’s war in Ukraine has, in parts, served to motivate closer ties between Ukraine and the EU. The opposite is true for Georgia, which is increasingly reorienting its foreign policy towards Russia and China. Yet, Georgia’s shift in foreign policy seems to follow significant domestic democratic rollback and polarisation according to the playbook of other illiberal populists such as Hungary’s

⁷³ Bakradz, Nino. 2021. “China’s footprint in Georgia causes anxiety.” *Eurasianet*. September 23. China’s footprint in Georgia causes anxiety | Eurasianet; Civic Idea. 2020. “Who is in charge of the post-cold war world?” Report on Georgian - Chinese Affair - Civic Idea.

⁷⁴ Liang, Yang, and Sui, Xinyue. 2020. "Study on the Current Situation of Cultural Communication and Development Strategy of Confucius Institutes in Countries Along the Belt and Road." *Literature and Art Criticism* 1 (June): 118–23. <https://doi.org/10.16566/j.cnki.1003-5672.2020.06.018>.

President Orbán or Turkey's President Erdogan rather than the other way around.⁷⁵ As such, corruption and elite capture involving Chinese companies in Georgia are a symptom rather than the cause of the stalling political transition in the country.

Surveillance technologies are a consequential tool for illiberal regimes to secure their power. Unfortunately, even authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan, with the intent to repress, have been able to purchase such technologies in the past, including from companies in Western democracies. Yet, China's active marketing of export subsidies for dual-use safety and surveillance technology is exacerbating existing problems by diffusing technologies to places where no demand for them existed initially, by making them affordable, and by normalising the use of intrusive applications. Once in place, they risk being misused for repressive purposes.

In the case of **Belarus**, China has most evidently protected President Lukashenko from international pressure and alleviated Western sanctions in response to domestic repression and its assistance to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. China's political patronage of Belarus has come with economic engagement, though both sides seem to be skeptical about the effectiveness of this engagement in terms of modernising and stabilising the Belarusian economy. Ultimately, it led to Belarus' indebtedness to China, which is further reducing Belarusian autonomy.

Policy Recommendations

The EU's geopolitical environment has dramatically changed with Russia's aggression against Ukraine, also leading to the revival of the EU's enlargement process. China's presence in the EU's eastern neighbourhood constitutes another challenge to the EU's democracy support agenda: The six countries are interested in economic and educational opportunities and investment from China, and China's ribbon diplomacy often receives local media attention without encountering a critical (European) counter-narrative. Across the board, China's presence in these countries confirms the importance of existing aims and priorities of the EU towards its eastern neighbourhood, but the EU should undertake the following steps to protect its interests in the region:

- The EU has emphasized anti-corruption, anti-oligarchisation, strengthening of the rule of law, independent judiciaries, accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights in these countries as crucial objectives before, and these objectives need to remain a priority. Problems of corruption, non-transparent decision-making or the misuse of surveillance technologies that are associated with China's presence can only be mitigated or prevented by strong institutions of accountability, legal protection of the rights of the individual, and independent judiciaries.
- Even if there are incentives to sacrifice democratic conditionality in the context of geopolitical tensions, the EU should fully exploit the enlargement process as a powerful tool to enforce political reforms in the six EU eastern neighbourhood countries. It should not give in to attempts of blackmailing with outside options, such as Georgia's strategic partnership with China. Negotiators should consider that China has not been willing to back the prospective EU member states at crucial moments, it has not followed suit on economic promises, and given the faltering economy at home, it will invest even less abroad in the coming years.
- Given that the six EU eastern neighbourhood countries will continue to seek investment from China, the EU should minimise potential risks thereof by finding and communicating a common position on the presence of Chinese companies in strategic (communication) infrastructure and other sensitive sectors.

⁷⁵ De Waal, Thomas. 2023. "The Orbanizing of Georgia." *Carnegie Europe*. August 31. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/90465>; Sabanadze, Natalie. 2023. "EU-Georgia Relations: A Local Show of the Global Theater." *Carnegie Europe*, November 16. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/11/16/eu-georgia-relations-local-show-of-global-theater-pub-90995>.

- Moreover, in order to prevent the emergence of dependencies on Chinese suppliers which could be weaponised and affect the decision-making autonomy of the EU post-enlargement, the EU should share information about risks, cooperate in risk assessment and screening mechanisms, assist with the implementation thereof, and incentivise eastern neighbours to reduce their procurement from and inclusion of China in strategic sectors. The first step will be to strengthen guidance, coordination and information sharing within the EU and its member states. For Ukraine specifically, this would also imply financial assistance to help reconstruct and replace Ukraine's telecommunication networks without critical components from China.
- The EU should do more to reach out to media, citizens, and elites to counter China's attempts to shape public discourses in the six EU eastern neighbourhood countries. Through public diplomacy or by increasing the EU's presence in domestic media in these countries – for example through op-eds or analytical articles – the EU needs to communicate better the facts of the educational, developmental and economic contributions that the EU and its members make in each country, particular in areas where they exceed China's. Such outreach also needs to contain a positive narrative about what the EU stands for and a vision of how it sees international relations and its relationship with these countries, in particular.
- Finally, the EU should facilitate a more critical analysis and public debate about China's role in the EU eastern neighbourhood through financial and professional support to independent media and journalists.

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