



REDEMOS

RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY
SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED
DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN
NEIGHBOURHOOD

Policy Brief 3

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

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Setting the Scene

China, while still a relatively new actor, has already positioned itself as an influential player in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, in contrast to Russia, which has the historical advantage of regional dominance. China's engagement reveals its economic ambitions and strategic pragmatism, anchored by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU's eastern neighbourhood countries have proactively looked to China, seeing it not only as a source of economic investment—alternative to the EU—but also as a geopolitical counterbalance to Russian influence. China's political clout in the region, however, remains indirect and limited, suggesting Beijing's unreliability as a partner, in particular regarding territorial conflicts.

Yet, China's economic engagement in the six countries poses a significant challenge to the EU's normative goals, leading to trade imbalances and elite capture, as well as exacerbating vulnerabilities in governance practices. Through media influence and partnerships with educational institutions, China promotes Beijing-friendly narratives and disseminates a discourse that undermines liberal democratic norms. China is also actively promoting its dual-use safety and surveillance technology, making them affordable, and normalizing the use of intrusive applications. Once in place, they risk being used for repressive purposes. By projecting and utilising its soft power, as well as offering economic opportunities without conditions such as stringent reforms, China is able to challenge the EU's efforts in the region, while reinforcing authoritarian norms and tendencies. In addition, China's stance with regard to Russia's aggression further undermines regional security—and thus the security of EU member states.

Key Findings

- The EU's eastern neighbourhood countries have actively sought China's political and economic engagement, both in the form of investments and as a counterbalance to Russian influence.
- China's economic engagement in the eastern neighbourhood countries is primarily driven by its strategic interest under the BRI. Thus far, this has resulted in limited Chinese investments and increasing trade imbalances, while elite capture has enabled corruption and exploited domestic governance vulnerabilities. China's weight in the region may, however, increase depending on whether or not Chinese companies will be included in the development of Georgia's Black Sea Port Anaklia.
- China's broader objective is to make the countries in the region subscribe to China's vision of international order as articulated in, for example, the *Global Community of Shared Future*, which undermines liberal democratic norms and values.
- China has not realised its potential in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, which is evidenced by its ambivalent stance on Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Whilst Ukraine has sought closer ties with the EU, Georgia under the Georgian Dream Party, on the contrary, has been increasingly aligning itself with the governments of Russia and China.
- China has facilitated and normalised the spread of dual-use surveillance technologies to the region. The possibility to use these technologies against political opponents or civil activists by national governments represents a serious risk to political and civil rights, as can be observed in Georgia after its 2024 elections.
- China has leveraged soft power in the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries by expanding its media presence and cooperation in education (offering scholarships and establishing Confucius Institutes), which allows Beijing to promote pro-China narratives and raises concerns about the diffusion of one-sided discourse as well as potential risks to academic freedom.

Policy Recommendations

- The EU must continue to prioritise anti-corruption efforts, help strengthen the rule of law and judicial independence, and uphold fundamental human rights, as well as continue to support strong accountability institutions to address the governance risks and legal protection for individual rights. This will enable these countries to safeguard themselves from and limit China's influence, which is facilitated by corruption, lack of transparency, and diffusion of surveillance technologies.
- The EU should fully utilise the tools already available via the enlargement process to drive reforms, especially against the backdrop of a decline in Chinese investment capacity and failed economic promises. It is particularly relevant in the case of democratic backsliding in Georgia and its government's active pursuit of ties to China. The EU must, however, acknowledge at the same time that China is seen as an alternative partner by many in the region.
- As the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries persistently seek Chinese economic investments, the EU should mitigate potential risks by developing and effectively communicating a unified strategy on Chinese involvement in national strategic infrastructure, as well as critical and sensitive sectors.
- To prevent and limit dependencies on Chinese suppliers, the EU should strengthen coordination in areas such as information sharing, support screening mechanisms, and incentivise the reduction of China's involvement in strategic sectors, such as telecommunication. In the case of Ukraine, it implies further financial assistance to rebuild its war-damaged infrastructure.
- The EU should engage the local media, civil society, citizenry, and elites to counter China's influence in the region by better communicating its own contributions to the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries' development. It should continue to advance democratic values through, for instance, public diplomacy, building and promoting positive narratives, including the EU's own vision for the future that, in turn, includes stronger and closer partnerships with the neighbourhood countries.
- Finally, the EU should foster critical analysis and public debate about China's role in the region by supporting independent media and journalism.



The full study – **REDEMOS Policy Paper: The role of China in the political transition of the EU's eastern neighbourhood** – can be found at <https://redemos.eu/resources/publications/policy-papers/>



**REDEMOS: REconfiguring EU DEMOcracy Support.
Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

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