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Europe's Frontier Countries: The EU's Geopolitical Test

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Europe's frontier regions are no longer a buffer but a real-time stress-test of the European Union's ability to translate geopolitical ambition into credible action.

Europe's European neighbours have become the arena in which the European Union's geopolitical credibility is being tested in real time. From Ukraine and Moldova to the Western Balkans, Belarus and the wider Black Sea region, developments along the EU's immediate periphery now shape Europe's own security environment more directly than at any point since the end of the Cold War. These frontier countries are no longer a buffer or a preparatory space for gradual integration; they are the place where power is contested, deterrence is measured, and Europe's ability to act under pressure is exposed.

This policy brief argues that the EU enters this geopolitical test with a widening gap between ambition and readiness. Over the past two years, Brussels has adopted an increasingly geopolitical vocabulary and launched a series of important initiatives from the White Paper on European Defence and the Readiness 2030 agenda to ReArm Europe, military mobility efforts, a new Black Sea strategy, and the European Political Community (EPC) initiative. Taken together, these steps acknowledge that Europe faces a harsher strategic environment. Yet they have not resolved the core problem: the EU still struggles to convert political declarations, financial resources and regulatory power into timely, coherent geopolitical action. Institutional fragmentation, slow decision-making and unresolved dependencies continue to limit Europe's ability to shape outcomes in its own neighbourhood.

The EU's European neighbours function in this paper not as case studies, but as stress-tests. They reveal how the EU performs when confronted with fast-moving crises, security risks and external competition. Military mobility offers the most tangible example: despite repeated reports and funding commitments, cross-border movement of forces and equipment remains constrained by legal, infrastructural and political obstacles that are incompatible with Europe's security rhetoric. Similarly, the Black Sea strategy signals growing awareness of regional importance, yet avoids hard choices about deterrence, escalation management and the division of labour between the EU and NATO.

These internal challenges are now compounded by an external shock. The United States' evolving strategic priorities underline that European assumptions about transatlantic leadership and alignment can no longer be taken for granted. This does not signal a US withdrawal from Europe, but it does expose how dependent the EU remains on external actors for security outcomes in regions it defines as vital to its own stability.

The central conclusion of this brief is deliberately uncomfortable: Europe's frontier countries are not testing the EU's intentions, but its capacity to act as a geopolitical actor. The question facing the Union is no longer whether it wants to be more strategic, but whether it is willing to address the political, institutional and practical constraints that prevent it from doing so. If the EU cannot adapt its posture in the regions closest to it, its broader ambitions from strategic autonomy to global influence will remain aspirational.

1. THE TURNING POINT: EUROPE'S NEIGHBOURHOOD AS A THEATRE OF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

The EU's European neighbours have become a theatre of sustained geopolitical competition, in which multiple powers seek to shape political outcomes, security arrangements and regional connectivity. Ukraine is the most visible and violent manifestation of this contest, but it is not the only one. Moldova, Belarus, Georgia and the South Caucasus, the wider Black Sea region and the Western Balkans are all arenas where influence is actively contested and where the EU's capacity to act strategically is increasingly tested.

Across this frontier belt, Russia remains the most disruptive actor. Beyond its war against Ukraine, Moscow deploys a broad toolkit of malign influence: hybrid pressure, disinformation, cyber operations, political interference, energy leverage, covert networks and the instrumentalisation of unresolved conflicts. In Moldova, these methods are used to undermine political stability and constrain strategic choice. In the Western Balkans, Russian influence exploits unresolved disputes and institutional fragility, particularly in Serbia–Kosovo relations and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the Black Sea and the South Caucasus, Russia seeks to preserve leverage by shaping security arrangements, limiting access, and preventing neighbouring states from consolidating alternative alignments. This is not episodic interference, but a sustained strategy aimed at restricting European authority in its own neighbourhood.

At the same time, the EU operates in a neighbourhood where the role of the United States is being reassessed and recalibrated rather than withdrawn. Washington remains Europe's indispensable security ally, but its engagement in the EU's immediate neighbourhood is increasingly shaped by strategic prioritisation and escalation management within a broader global context. This shift is visible in a more selective pattern of involvement, where the United States adjusts its posture in response to specific strategic risks and opportunities not only in and around Ukraine as the central theatre of European security, but also by revising its approach towards Belarus in order to manage escalation dynamics and by engaging actively in the South Caucasus as regional alignments shift and new transport and connectivity routes emerge. These moves do not amount to disengagement from Europe, but they do signal a redefinition of US involvement that is less anchored in comprehensive regional leadership and more focused on targeted strategic outcomes. For the EU, this recalibration carries a clear implication: reliance on US initiative can no longer substitute for the absence of a coherent European geopolitical agenda in its own neighbourhood.

China's presence follows a different, predominantly geo-economic logic, but with equally strategic consequences. Across the Western Balkans, the Black Sea region and parts of the South Caucasus, Beijing has expanded its footprint through infrastructure financing, logistics corridors, digital networks and political engagement. While China does not seek to act as a direct security provider, its growing influence shapes economic dependencies, affects domestic decision-making, and increasingly intersects with EU regulatory, security and foreign policy interests. Together, these dynamics underline a central reality: Europe's neighbourhood is not a vacuum, but a competitive strategic space in which external actors revise and pursue their roles with intent.

The EU's own response to this environment has been significant, but uneven. Granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia was a historic geopolitical signal, and opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova confirmed that enlargement has returned as a strategic instrument. Yet the limits of this turn are already visible. Relations with Georgia have entered an unprecedented crisis, leaving the EU without a credible strategy for a candidate country where political developments have triggered a breakdown in relations with Brussels. In the South Caucasus more broadly, rapid geopolitical shifts are reconfiguring alignments and connectivity routes, often faster than EU policy frameworks can adapt. In the Western Balkans, prolonged ambiguity continues to erode EU credibility and creates space for competing influence, including persistent Russian engagement.

What unites these cases is not their diversity, but the pattern they reveal. Europe's European neighbours are no longer a zone of gradual convergence; they are a contested strategic space in which power is exercised actively and often coercively. In this environment, the EU's traditional reliance on conditionality, process and incrementalism increasingly leaves it in a reactive position. Too often, Brussels responds to crises after they erupt, rather than shaping the agenda that determines how competition unfolds.

This dynamic now defines the strategic challenge confronting the European Union. The EU is not facing a single crisis, but a systemic contest for influence along its borders. Remaining primarily in response mode risks turning Europe's neighbourhood into a permanent source of strategic vulnerability. Developing a proactive geopolitical agenda, one that integrates enlargement, security, defence readiness, connectivity and external engagement, is no longer optional. It is the condition for the EU to act as a credible power in a region where others are already doing so with strategic intent.

2. FRONTIER REGIONS AS STRESS-TESTS, NOT CASE STUDIES

The EU's European neighbours are often treated as a collection of separate policy challenges, each with its own instruments, timelines and institutional formats. In practice, however, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region are not examined here as individual dossiers, but as a connected frontier space that functions as a series of stress-tests for the EU's geopolitical posture. Together, they reveal how the Union performs when confronted simultaneously with armed conflict, political instability, external competition and strategic uncertainty.

The first stress-test concerns coherence. Across the frontier belt, the EU deploys a wide range of tools: enlargement policy, neighbourhood frameworks, sanctions, civilian missions, security assistance, connectivity initiatives and diplomatic engagement. Yet these instruments often operate alongside one another rather than as parts of a single strategic design. Institutional silos, competing mandates and divergent member-state priorities limit the EU's ability to articulate clear priorities and trade-offs. In a competitive environment, this fragmentation weakens

deterrence and creates opportunities for external actors to exploit gaps between EU policies, even where overall engagement is substantial.

This coherence gap is also visible in sanctions policy. The EU has demonstrated its ability to agree on far-reaching restrictive measures under pressure, but translating political decisions into effective enforcement and circumvention control often proves far more uneven. The result is a recurring pattern in the frontier space: formal resolve at the political level that outpaces operational capacity on the ground.

The second stress-test is speed. The frontier regions expose a persistent mismatch between the pace of geopolitical events and the tempo of EU decision-making. Escalations, hybrid pressure, political crises and shifts in regional alignments unfold rapidly, while EU responses remain constrained by unanimity requirements, procedural sequencing and legal complexity. This delay is not a merely technical issue. In a contested strategic space, slow responses reduce credibility, weaken leverage and allow other actors to shape outcomes before the EU is able to intervene meaningfully. Speed, in this context, is not a question of efficiency but of geopolitical relevance.

Another and one of the most revealing stress-tests of the EU's geopolitical posture is its long-standing inability to eliminate or resolve conflicts on the European continent. Across the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the EU has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to calm escalation and manage instability, but far less capacity to address the underlying political and security drivers of conflict. Over time, this pattern has produced an illusion of stability - one that has repeatedly broken down under renewed pressure.

In the Western Balkans, unresolved disputes remain a persistent source of vulnerability. Relations between Serbia and Kosovo continue to generate periodic crises, while Bosnia and Herzegovina remains structurally fragile and exposed to external influence, including sustained Russian engagement (particularly in Republika Srpska). Despite decades of EU involvement, the region has not been anchored in a durable and irreversible security order. Instead, unresolved questions of sovereignty and governance continue to resurface, creating constant risks of destabilisation at the EU's doorstep.

Further east, a similar dynamic is evident. In Moldova, the Transnistria conflict has remained unresolved for more than three decades. While escalation has largely been contained, the conflict continues to constrain Moldova's strategic options and expose it to external pressure. In the South Caucasus, the EU proved unable to shape outcomes during the decisive phases of the Karabakh conflict, despite its proximity and declared interests. In Georgia, the long-standing presence of the European Union Monitoring Mission has contributed to stability but not to resolution. The occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia continues, while EU observers remain unable to cross the occupation lines or fully implement their mandate.

The same pattern was visible after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. EU engagement helped to manage escalation and mitigate consequences, but it did not prevent the entrenchment of a conflict that later escalated into

Russian full-scale aggression. In each of these cases, the EU demonstrated competence in crisis management, but an inability to deliver conflict resolution.

This record points to a deeper structural problem. Over time, the EU has become highly proficient at managing conflicts, but far less effective at resolving them. Stabilisation has too often substituted for strategy. Negotiations are prolonged, mandates renewed, and unresolved conflicts effectively parked. While this approach reduces immediate risks, it also allows underlying problems to harden. Frozen conflicts do not remain frozen; they accumulate strategic costs, invite external manipulation and resurface under less favourable conditions.

Underlying this pattern is the EU's growing reliance on bureaucratic process as a substitute for political and strategic choice. Procedures, rules and mandates originally designed to implement decisions now have increasingly come to define the limits of action themselves. Missions are deployed without credible political pathways to resolution; dialogues are sustained without clear end states; and institutional routines replace strategic judgement. In this sense, the EU has gradually become constrained by the very frameworks created to support its action.

The consequences are now visible. What once appeared as manageable instability has evolved into systemic insecurity. Conflicts that were postponed rather than resolved have become entry points for war, coercion and external power projection. The frontier regions therefore expose not only the limits of EU power, but the long-term costs of a strategy built on delay rather than resolution.

Taken together, these stress-tests reveal a consistent pattern. The EU's European neighbours are not merely policy challenges to be administered, but strategic environments that demand prioritisation, risk acceptance and political choice. The frontier functions as a mirror, reflecting both the Union's strengths and its constraints. Understanding these regions as stress-tests rather than case studies is essential to grasping what kind of geopolitical actor the EU can realistically become and what it must change if it is to move beyond a predominantly reactive posture.

3. THE READINESS GAP: AMBITION WITHOUT PREPAREDNESS

The EU's recent defence initiatives reflect a growing recognition that Europe faces a far harsher security environment than previously assumed. The White Paper on European Defence – Readiness 2030, the ReArm Europe agenda, and related simplification efforts represent an important shift in tone and intent. They acknowledge that deterrence, defence readiness and the ability to act under pressure are no longer abstract concerns, but immediate requirements. Yet these initiatives also expose a central contradiction: the EU is increasingly explicit about its ambitions, but far less prepared to deliver the level of readiness those ambitions imply.

At the heart of this gap lies a persistent disconnect between strategic diagnosis and operational follow-through. EU defence documents are increasingly candid in identifying threats, vulnerabilities and capability shortfalls. They recognise the return of high-intensity conflict, the

importance of rapid reinforcement, the need for resilient supply chains and the centrality of Europe's eastern and south-eastern frontier to EU security. However, translating this diagnosis into deployable capability, sustained readiness and credible deterrence remains slow, fragmented and politically constrained. Readiness is treated as a medium- to long-term project, while the strategic environment demands near-term results.

The European Political Community (EPC) illustrates how the EU has sought to compensate for this readiness gap through political engagement rather than operational capacity. The initiative acknowledges that Europe's security space extends beyond the EU's formal borders and provides a forum for sustained high-level engagement with frontier countries at a time of heightened geopolitical pressure. In this sense, the EPC reduces diplomatic isolation and reinforces political visibility in regions where disengagement would carry real costs.

At the same time, the EPC remains a deliberately non-binding format, detached from concrete security guarantees, operational commitments or mechanisms for deterrence and conflict resolution. It expands political engagement without altering the EU's level of preparedness or its ability to shape security outcomes. While some view the EPC as a strategic response to Europe's neighbourhood challenges, its design instead institutionalises ambiguity about responsibility, priorities and end states. Used as a complement to preparedness, the EPC can support engagement; treated as a substitute for it, it risks reinforcing the very gap between ambition and capacity that now defines the EU's geopolitical posture.

One reason for this mismatch is that these EU initiatives remain heavily shaped by process rather than prioritisation. Funding mechanisms, industrial incentives and regulatory adjustments are important, but they do not by themselves resolve the core political questions: what the EU must be ready to do, where, and under what conditions. Readiness is not only a matter of resources; it is a matter of political intent, risk acceptance and clarity about end states. Without this, investment risks reinforcing existing fragmentation rather than producing usable capability.

This gap becomes even more pronounced when readiness is assessed not only in military terms, but in relation to the assets and infrastructure on which the EU's strategic posture increasingly depends. Energy corridors, transport links, ports, data cables and digital networks in frontier countries are no longer peripheral assets; they are integral to Europe's security, economic resilience and geopolitical investments. Yet EU thinking about protection and resilience remains largely confined to its own territory, creating a growing mismatch between exposure and responsibility.

This mismatch reflects a strategic trade-off. Limiting responsibility to formal borders reduces political risk and preserves existing legal and institutional boundaries, but it leaves EU investments structurally exposed to sabotage, coercion and hybrid pressure. Infrastructure intended to anchor neighbouring states to Europe can therefore become a vulnerability rather than a stabilising asset, particularly in contested environments where disruption is deliberately used as a tool of influence. Readiness that stops at the EU's borders is insufficient in a neighbourhood where threats do not respect jurisdictional lines. Responsibility follows dependence. Recent patterns of disruption, from cyber operations targeting critical systems to sabotage risks affecting energy, transport and data

links, demonstrate that infrastructure is already a frontline in practice, not merely a theoretical vulnerability. This reinforces that resilience cannot be designed solely within formal jurisdictional borders.

This problem is particularly visible when readiness is assessed against the realities of the EU's frontier regions. The Union's inability to resolve or decisively shape conflicts in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus has already demonstrated the costs of insufficient preparedness. Deterrence gaps, slow responses and ambiguous commitments have repeatedly encouraged external actors to test limits. Readiness 2030 seeks to address these shortcomings, but it remains unclear whether the EU is prepared to align its defence posture with the likelihood of sustained pressure and escalation along its borders rather than treating such scenarios as contingencies.

The ReArm Europe initiative illustrates both the promise and the limits of the current approach. On the one hand, it signals political acknowledgement that Europe must invest more, faster and more coherently in defence. On the other hand, it operates within a governance framework that remains nationally fragmented and strategically cautious. Member states retain primary control over force generation, deployment decisions and risk exposure, while the EU's role remains largely facilitative. This division of responsibility limits the Union's ability to ensure that increased spending translates into collective readiness rather than parallel national efforts.

The challenge is not only how much Europe spends, but how effectively and how quickly spending can be translated into deliverable capability, including production capacity, procurement speed and sustainment. Without this conversion function, higher budgets risk producing political reassurance more than operational readiness.

Military mobility offers the clearest operational example of this readiness gap. Despite years of assessments, funding and political endorsement, the movement of forces and equipment across Europe remains constrained by legal, infrastructural and procedural barriers. These constraints are not technical accidents; they reflect unresolved political choices about sovereignty, prioritisation and risk. In a security environment where speed and reinforcement are decisive, limited mobility directly undermines deterrence. The persistence of these bottlenecks highlights the gap between acknowledging the problem and resolving it.

More broadly, the EU's defence readiness efforts continue to sit uneasily alongside its approach to conflict management in the neighbourhood. The Union seeks to stabilise its borders through diplomacy, missions and economic engagement, while postponing hard security decisions. This reinforces a pattern in which readiness is discussed as insurance against worst-case scenarios, rather than as a tool to shape outcomes proactively. As long as unresolved conflicts persist along the EU's frontier, readiness cannot be treated as an abstract future objective; it must be calibrated to real, ongoing strategic pressure.

The readiness gap therefore reflects more than capability shortfalls. It reveals a deeper tension between the EU's self-image as a security actor and its willingness to act as one. Readiness requires clarity about where the Union is prepared to assume responsibility, accept risk and

commit resources in a sustained manner. Without this clarity, defence initiatives risk becoming an accumulation of instruments without a unifying strategic purpose.

Ultimately, the credibility of the EU's defence agenda will be judged not by the ambition of its documents, but by its ability to close the gap between declared intent and operational reality. In a neighbourhood defined by competition, coercion and unresolved conflict, preparedness is not optional. If readiness remains aspirational rather than actionable, the EU's frontier regions will continue to expose the limits of its geopolitical posture – and external actors will continue to act accordingly.

4. MILITARY MOBILITY: WHERE EUROPE'S GEOPOLITICAL AMBITION MEETS PHYSICAL REALITY

If defence readiness is the EU's declared priority, military mobility is where that commitment is most visibly tested and most clearly found wanting. The ability to move forces, equipment and supplies rapidly across Europe is not a technical detail; it is the practical foundation of deterrence, reinforcement and crisis response. Yet despite years of political endorsement, funding allocations and repeated assessments, military mobility remains one of the EU's most persistent and revealing weaknesses.

The problem is not a lack of diagnosis. EU military mobility assessments have consistently identified the same obstacles: inadequate or unsuitable infrastructure, legal and regulatory barriers, fragmented and slow cross-border permissions, customs procedures unsuited to crisis conditions, and insufficient coordination between civilian and military authorities. These shortcomings are well known and extensively documented. What is striking is their persistence. Their durability suggests that military mobility has been treated as an enabling concept to be improved incrementally, rather than as a strategic condition that must be guaranteed.

This gap matters because Europe's frontier regions demand speed, not reassurance. In an environment shaped by war, hybrid pressure and the risk of escalation, the credibility of deterrence depends on the ability to reinforce rapidly and visibly. Delays signal hesitation; friction signals fragmentation. In practice, military mobility exposes a contradiction at the heart of the EU's defence posture: while strategic documents increasingly acknowledge the likelihood of high-intensity scenarios, peacetime procedures and national prerogatives continue to govern cross-border movement.

Infrastructure is only part of the challenge. Legal and political constraints are often more decisive. Cross-border movement of military assets still depends on national authorisations that vary widely in scope, timelines and political sensitivity. In a crisis, this translates into uncertainty about who can move, when, and under what conditions. These constraints reflect unresolved questions about sovereignty and control, but they also point to a reluctance to confront the implications of collective readiness. Military mobility requires not only investment, but trust and a willingness to pre-authorise decisions that carry political and strategic risk.

The limitations of military mobility are particularly striking given that the EU already possessed a partial framework capable of addressing them. For instance, the Three Seas Initiative sought to strengthen transport, energy and digital connectivity across Central and Eastern Europe, including by addressing long-standing imbalances between East–West and North–South infrastructure. These corridors now overlap directly with the routes identified as critical for reinforcement, deterrence and lateral movement along the EU's eastern flank. Had these investments been systematically framed, prioritised and funded as dual-use infrastructure from the outset, many of today's mobility bottlenecks would have been less severe. Instead, the initiative remained largely disconnected from EU defence planning, treated primarily as a cohesion and development project rather than as a strategic enabler of security. This disconnect illustrates a recurring feature of the EU's approach: relevant instruments are identified early, but their strategic potential is not fully recognised until pressure forces reassessment. Connectivity initiatives often treat security as a background condition rather than a variable to be actively managed. In contested frontier regions, this assumption can turn infrastructure from a stabilising asset into a vulnerability that external actors are well placed to exploit.

The strategic consequences of limited mobility are significant. Constraints on movement undermine deterrence along the EU's eastern and south-eastern frontier, complicate responses to sudden escalation in the Western Balkans, and weaken coordination in the Black Sea region. They also reduce the effectiveness of the EU's own civilian and military missions, which depend on predictable access and rapid deployment. In this sense, Europe's physical geography, shaped by policy choices, becomes a limiting factor on its strategic ambition.

What makes military mobility particularly revealing is that it lies at the intersection of civilian governance and defence responsibility – an area where the EU can and should possess a comparative advantage. Dual-use infrastructure, regulatory harmonisation and cross-border coordination are domains in which the Union has decades of experience. That these advantages have not translated into operational readiness underscores a deeper problem: military mobility has been approached as a coordination challenge to be managed, rather than as a strategic requirement to be enforced. Readiness, as a result, is treated as a future objective subject to gradual improvement, rather than as an immediate condition shaped by real-world risk.

If the EU is serious about closing the gap between ambition and preparedness, military mobility must be treated as a litmus test of geopolitical credibility. This requires political decisions that go beyond infrastructure spending: harmonising legal frameworks, pre-clearing movement corridors, prioritising military requirements in transport planning, and accepting that readiness entails trade-offs. Without such decisions, military mobility will continue to symbolise a broader problem – the Union that understands the nature of the threat, but hesitates to adapt its operating model accordingly.

5. THE BLACK SEA: A PRIMARY THEATRE OF EUROPE'S GEOPOLITICAL CONTEST

The Black Sea has emerged as one of the principal theatres of Europe's contemporary security challenges. Alongside the Western Balkans, it concentrates a disproportionate share of the EU's most acute geopolitical tensions and conflicts: Russia's large-scale military aggression against Ukraine, sustained Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova combined with an unresolved conflict, the ongoing Russian occupation of parts of Georgia alongside the rapidly deteriorating and unprecedented crisis in EU – Georgia relations, and the legacy of conflict in Karabakh. Together, these dynamics make the Black Sea region a space where Europe's security, enlargement policy and geopolitical ambition intersect most directly.

This concentration of risk is not accidental. The Black Sea lies at the intersection of competing strategic projects and power projections. It is where Russia seeks to assert military dominance and restrict access, where NATO's eastern flank meets unresolved conflicts, where Europe's connectivity ambitions towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia converge, and where hybrid pressure is applied continuously below the threshold of open conflict. As a result, the region has evolved into a testing ground for contemporary coercion, combining military force with cyber operations, disinformation, psychological pressure, economic leverage and political interference.

The EU's formal posture in the Black Sea region stands in sharp contrast to this reality. Officially, the Union has four candidate countries directly linked to this geopolitical space: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Türkiye. No other region combines enlargement policy and hard security risk so tightly. In practice, however, the EU's relationships with these countries are deeply uneven and increasingly disconnected from strategic realities. Accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova proceed under conditions of war and unresolved conflict. Relations with Georgia have entered an unprecedented crisis, marked by a rapid and sustained deterioration of political ties. The accession process with Türkiye has been effectively frozen for years, with no credible political horizon. The gap between formal status and political substance has become impossible to ignore.

This gap carries tangible strategic costs. In Ukraine, the Black Sea has become a key theatre of Russia's military campaign, with direct implications for energy security, global food supply and freedom of navigation. In Moldova, unresolved conflict combined with sustained Russian hybrid pressure continues to constrain state resilience and strategic choice. In Georgia, the erosion of relations with the EU coincides with expanding Russian leverage and diminishing European influence. Even where conflicts have formally ended (in Karabakh), the outcome has reshaped regional power balances without meaningful EU involvement. Across the region, the EU remains present diplomatically and economically, but rarely decisive in shaping security outcomes.

Russia's role in this environment is both overt and covert. Military force, naval presence and territorial control coexist with less visible instruments: cyber operations, information campaigns, psychological pressure, manipulation of energy and trade flows, and the exploitation of internal political divisions. The Black Sea region has effectively become a laboratory for Russian hybrid

warfare, where tools are tested, refined and combined. These activities do not stop at the EU's borders; they spill into member states, challenging resilience well beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

At the same time, the region has attracted growing attention from other external actors. China's involvement, while predominantly geo-economic, is expanding through infrastructure investment, logistics, port access and digital networks. These activities intersect with EU connectivity ambitions, but they also introduce new dependencies and political leverage into an already contested space. The cumulative effect is an environment in which strategic competition intensifies faster than the EU's capacity to define and enforce its own interests.

This acceleration of competition also exposes a more fundamental blind spot in how the EU conceptualises power and security in the region. The Black Sea highlights a deeper structural weakness in the EU's geopolitical posture: the persistence of a continental, land-power reflex in an increasingly maritime security environment. Despite extensive maritime access across several strategic sea basins and adjacent oceanic spaces, the EU continues to approach geopolitics primarily through territorial control, land-based infrastructure and border management. Seas are treated largely as boundaries or transit spaces, rather than as strategic domains where power, access and denial are actively contested.

This bias carries strategic consequences. Maritime access, port infrastructure, freedom of navigation and sea-based connectivity are central to deterrence, reinforcement and economic resilience in the Black Sea region. Yet EU engagement in these areas remains limited, fragmented and largely declaratory. Even initiatives with explicit geopolitical ambitions, such as the Three Seas Initiative, prioritise terrestrial corridors along the Adriatic–Baltic–Black Sea axis while leaving the maritime dimension largely unaddressed.

The trade-off is clear. By continuing to frame security primarily in land-based terms, the EU preserves institutional continuity and political comfort, but at the cost of strategic leverage in a theatre where competition is increasingly maritime. In a region where Russia actively employs naval power, access denial and hybrid pressure at sea, the absence of a coherent EU maritime strategy reinforces a reactive posture and narrows Europe's room for manoeuvre.

What the Black Sea ultimately reveals is a structural mismatch between the EU's declaratory policy and the geopolitical conditions it faces. The Union approaches the region through multiple frameworks: enlargement, neighbourhood policy, connectivity, sanctions and resilience, but without a unifying strategic logic capable of integrating security, power and political commitment. In a region where force, coercion and hybrid pressure are routinely employed, this fragmentation limits the EU's ability to act as a strategic actor rather than a secondary one.

The Black Sea therefore functions as a credibility test. It shows whether the EU can align its enlargement commitments, security interests and geopolitical ambition in a space where competition is direct, persistent and unforgiving. As long as the gap between formal status and strategic reality remains unresolved, the Black Sea will continue to operate less as a bridge to Europe's future and more as one of the fault lines shaping it.

6. BELARUS: RETHINKING EUROPE'S STRATEGIC APPROACH

Belarus's geographic position makes it a critical factor in both the war against Ukraine and the security of central and eastern Europe. Located at the heart of the EU's eastern flank and sharing borders with multiple EU and NATO member states, Belarus directly affects the security environment of the Baltic region, Poland and the wider European continent. Its role is defined less by formal alliances than by geography, military posture and escalation dynamics.

Over recent years, Belarus has become increasingly embedded in Russia's regional military architecture. This has included the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory and the presence of advanced Russian strike systems, including Oreshnik-type capabilities, alongside deeper operational integration and joint military planning. These developments materially alter the balance of risk along the EU's borders and elevate Belarus from a political concern to a central strategic variable in European defence and deterrence planning.

To date, the EU's policy towards Belarus has been driven primarily by sanctions, political distancing and crisis containment. While these instruments clearly communicate political positions, they have not been accompanied by a strategic assessment of Belarus as a security space, one that accounts for its geographic centrality, its role in regional military dynamics, and its long-term implications for EU and NATO security. As a result, the EU has limited capacity to shape developments that directly affect its own borders.

Recent developments underline the costs of this strategic gap. The United States has begun adjusting its approach towards Belarus through limited, conditional engagement and selective sanctions relief, aimed at managing escalation risks and preserving room for manoeuvre in an increasingly militarised environment. This recalibration reflects a security-driven calculation rather than political accommodation: an effort to influence outcomes at the margins and to prevent further consolidation of Russian military leverage. For the EU, the implication is clear. In the absence of a strategic framework, others shape the security environment along Europe's borders through targeted but purposeful action.

The challenge for the EU is therefore not one of principle, but of strategy. A policy centred exclusively on restriction and signalling leaves little space to manage risks, shape incentives or prepare for future contingencies. A credible EU geopolitical posture requires treating Belarus not only as a political issue, but as a permanent geographic and security factor in Europe, one that demands strategic planning, close coordination with allies, and a clearer understanding of how to limit further militarisation and escalation over time.

7. THE WESTERN BALKANS: MANAGED STABILITY AND THE COST OF POSTPONEMENT

The Western Balkans remain the EU's most persistent unresolved security challenge, not because of a lack of European engagement, but because that engagement has prioritised stability management over political resolution. More than two decades after the end of large-scale violence, several foundational issues remain unsettled, leaving the region exposed to periodic crises and long-term strategic vulnerability. This is not a question of regional failure alone; it is a reflection of the limits of the EU's approach when political complexity meets risk aversion.

The EU's engagement has succeeded in preventing a return to widespread conflict, but it has not delivered durable political settlements. Instead, unresolved questions have been managed, deferred, or compartmentalised. In relations between Serbia and Kosovo, sustained EU-facilitated dialogue has reduced immediate tensions at critical moments, yet the absence of a clearly defined and enforceable political end state continues to generate cycles of escalation and de-escalation. Agreements have been reached, but their implementation remains uneven, and political incentives to move towards a final settlement are weak.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the challenge is even more structural. The post-conflict constitutional framework has ensured peace, but it has also entrenched fragmentation and institutional paralysis. Persistent tensions between state-level institutions and the authorities of Republika Srpska periodically raise concerns about secessionist rhetoric, governance breakdown and long-term viability. The EU has played an important role in supporting stability and institutional continuity, yet it has been unable to catalyse a political process capable of overcoming entrenched divisions. As a result, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains formally at peace, but politically fragile.

What unites these cases is not a lack of European presence, but the absence of decisive political closure. Enlargement remains the EU's central strategic promise, yet its credibility is undermined when accession is decoupled from the resolution of core political disputes. Conditionality functions as a management tool, but not as a mechanism for breaking deadlock. Over time, this has produced a form of managed uncertainty: sufficient to avoid collapse, but insufficient to deliver consolidation.

External influence exploits precisely this space. Russian engagement in the Western Balkans does not seek to dominate the region or replace the EU as a partner of choice. Instead, it operates selectively, amplifying existing divisions, reinforcing scepticism towards Euro-Atlantic integration, and maintaining leverage through political ties, information operations and security cooperation. These activities are most effective where uncertainty persists, institutions are weak, and political horizons remain unclear. The objective is not escalation, but obstruction – ensuring that unresolved issues remain unresolved.

It is important to stress that this dynamic does not define the region as a whole. The Western Balkans are characterised by strong societal links to Europe, broad public support for EU integration, and significant progress in many areas of reform. The strategic vulnerability lies not in

the aspirations of the region, but in the gap between those aspirations and the political pathways available to realise them. When progress stalls, space opens for alternative narratives and external engagement.

The Western Balkans therefore illustrate a broader lesson relevant to the EU's entire frontier. Stability achieved through postponement is inherently fragile. By avoiding hard political decisions and relying on process-driven management, the EU has limited its own leverage and allowed unresolved disputes to persist as latent security risks. In a more competitive geopolitical environment, these risks are no longer contained.

If the EU continues to approach the Western Balkans primarily as a problem to be administered rather than a strategic space requiring political resolution, the region will remain vulnerable to renewed tension and external manipulation. More importantly, the EU will continue to demonstrate a pattern that others can observe and exploit: the ability to manage crises, but the reluctance to resolve them.

CONCLUSION: BRIDGING FRONTLINES

Europe cannot afford a security posture built around multiple, unconnected frontlines. Each unresolved conflict, frozen accession process or strategic vacuum along the EU's perimeter may appear manageable in isolation. Taken together, they create cumulative vulnerability. Pressure does not remain local; it shifts, multiplies and compounds. In a geopolitical environment defined by competition and coercion, fragmentation is itself a strategic weakness.

"Bridging Frontlines" is therefore not a metaphor, but a strategic necessity. It means recognising that Europe's eastern and south-eastern edges form a single security continuum, where developments in one area directly affect stability in others. War in one theatre reshapes risk calculations elsewhere; unresolved conflicts invite external leverage beyond their immediate geography; delayed decisions increase exposure over time. Strategy that treats these dynamics separately will always lag behind reality.

To bridge frontlines does not mean erasing differences between regions or partners. It means overcoming the habit of compartmentalisation that separates enlargement from security, defence from neighbourhood policy, crisis management from long-term strategy. The EU's instruments are not insufficient; they are insufficiently connected. Political ambition has expanded, but strategic integration has not kept pace. In a competitive geopolitical environment, instruments, rules and procedures can only fulfil their purpose if they remain subordinate to strategic intent. When systems designed to enable action become obstacles to it, they undermine the very objectives they were meant to serve.

Acting geopolitically in this environment requires more than reacting to escalation or issuing declarations of resolve. It requires the EU to prioritise where its exposure is greatest, to align political commitments with operational capacity, and to accept that stability cannot be indefinitely postponed without cost. Recent developments beyond Europe's immediate neighbourhood,

including the war involving Iran and the resulting instability across the Gulf, underline a broader reality: Europe does not choose the crises that affect its interests, but it does choose how prepared it is to respond. The absence of a clear European approach in such situations exposes the limits of a reactive posture and risks allowing external dynamics to define the conditions under which European security is shaped.

Geopolitical change does not wait for institutional adaptation or conceptual clarity. It unfolds continuously, often faster than the EU's response. In this context, effectiveness depends not only on responsiveness, but on creativity, dynamism and dexterity – the ability to combine existing capabilities, adjust practice and act under imperfect conditions rather than waiting for comprehensive solutions.

Europe does not begin from a blank page. Across EU mechanisms, national assets, allied arrangements and legacy or improvised formats, there exists a dispersed set of operational building blocks. These are uneven and incomplete, but they are not inert. In practice, coherence is often produced through use: through repeated decisions, operational cooperation and the accumulation of effects over time. Action, rather than design, frequently becomes the organising principle.

The choice facing the EU is not whether to engage along its strategic edge; that choice has already been made by events. The choice is whether Europe continues to manage each vulnerability separately, or whether it begins to act with the strategic clarity required to reduce them collectively. Bridging frontlines is how Europe moves from a posture of accumulating risk to one of deliberate security, and from reacting to geopolitical change to shaping it.