

NEWS – ECIPE PRESS RELEASE – NEW POLICY BRIEF

From Periphery to Power: The Geoeconomic Case for Southeast Europe

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Brussels, 14 July 2026 - The EU is still in a position of power in its Southeast neighbourhood, but amid a rapidly changing world order, business as usual is no longer an option. A new [ECIPE Policy Brief](#) finds that while enlargement is once again a strategic objective of the EU and its member states, the effects of a stalled process and a transformed geopolitical landscape demand a revised and substantially upgraded EU strategy that aims at deeper integration and cooperation in key areas to safeguard the single market and EU cohesion against geoeconomic and geopolitical challengers.

China, Russia, Türkiye and the Gulf states expand their footprints across countries close to the EU's borders, often through infrastructure projects and business deals under terms that may differ from EU expectations and thus interact strategically with EU objectives. Close alignment remains the EU's strongest lever to deter adverse influence and generate mutual benefits. The study provides in-depth analyses of the EU's geoeconomic competition in the Western Balkans and a set of targeted recommendations to inform a broader discussion, drawing on data collected for the Geoeconomic Interconnectivity Index (GEOII) developed by wiiw, ECIPE and Bertelsmann Stiftung, as well as interviews with experts from the academic and business sector and EU officials.

“A credible political offer with firm backing by the member states needs to be put on the table, providing a clear roadmap to deeper integration and eventual membership, and committing all sides to assume responsibility for a shared economic and political space facing the unprecedented challenges of an unwinding international order”, says Philipp Lamprecht, author of the study.

Frauke Seebass, author of the study, adds: ***“This is an opportune moment: several ideas recently emerged from capitals to accelerate sectoral integration, notably into the Single Market. The European Commission must use***

this political momentum to propose a bold and comprehensive upgrade to the bilateral partnerships, rather than the current piecemeal approach to gradual integration, and clear messaging in preparation for the October Council Summit.”

The paper argues that such a new approach will ultimately strengthen the EU's geopolitical position, ensure more effective enlargement, counter adverse influence of strategic competitors, and support democratic governance and societal resilience in the neighbourhood, not least for increased autonomy of the bloc post-accession.

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