

*EU's and NATO's Public Diplomacy in Western Balkans after February 2022*

**Introduction**

Launched in February of 2022, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been reshaping Europe's strategic landscape and has brought the Western Balkan states back under scrutiny. For the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the said region no longer represents a mere neighbouring area waiting for its slow inclusion into the larger Union and in the Alliance, but also a space in which external influence – especially that exercised by Russia – can directly undermine the Euro-Atlantic security. Moscow's long-lasting and standing presence in the Western Balkans, manifested through cultural proximity, political ties, energy leverage, and disinformation networks, has made the region a vulnerable and easy target for strategic manipulation, at once with the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of reaction, and as a response to all of this, both the EU and NATO have accelerated and recalibrated their public diplomacy efforts. These particular initiatives have been a combination of messaging, political signalling, financial commitments, and targeted support, in an effort to strengthen the regional stability and combat the competing and opposing narratives. Within this context, for the EU, the enlargement process has been labelled and rethought of as a *geopolitical investment*<sup>2</sup>, being coupled with substantial financial tools<sup>3</sup> and an increased activity at the level of political contracts. Simultaneously, NATO has focused on deterrence, crisis and security management, as well as on strengthening its resilience in face of the hybrid threats, therefore seeking to project reassurance and security.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, the current article examines in a comparative manner the way in which EU's and NATO's public diplomacy approaches have developed subsequent to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The aim is to thus analyse the extent to which the efforts of the two organizations have managed to work as political, economic, and security guarantees for the Western Balkans states. As such, this article is based on a comparative analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> Russia and the Western Balkans, EPRS - European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> EU-Western Balkans Summit, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wvld5ka1/brussels-declaration-2024-en.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission – New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, [https://x.com/EU\\_Commission/status/1723702184204706278](https://x.com/EU_Commission/status/1723702184204706278)

<sup>4</sup> NATO on X - <https://x.com/NATO/status/1728051895191683451>

official public diplomacy outputs produced by the EU and NATO after 2022. The materials employed and assessed include policy documents, strategic communications, press releases, social-media messaging, as well as high-level statements. Within this context, the current research traces the processes through which each organisation framed its role in the Western Balkans and how their messaging evolved in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

By placing the post-2022 developments within the broader patterns of regional engagement, this article offers a structured understanding of how the two Euro-Atlantic institutions are trying to shape perceptions, strengthen resilience and unity, and maintain strategic dominance in a competing environment. Moreover, it advances the argument that in the period following the 2022 invasion, the European Union has increasingly acted as a political and economic stabilising anchor for the Western Balkan states, while NATO has assumed the role of the region's primary security provider. Considering the current assessment thus far, both NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept<sup>5</sup> and the EU's 2022 Enlargement Package<sup>6</sup> have been reflecting this shift in tone and positioning, with both documents emphasizing resilience, counter-hybrid threats, and a more politically driven enlargement agenda as strategic priorities for the Western Balkans.

### **Context and Background**

The Western Balkans, comprised by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, have remained a strategically sensitive region for the EU and NATO since the early 2000s. Although all of these states (with Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia already part of NATO; and all of them in talks or negotiations with the EU) maintain formal integration trajectories, the region continues to be characterized by political volatility<sup>7</sup>, stalled reforms<sup>8</sup>, unresolved disputes<sup>9</sup>, and persistent external influence<sup>10</sup>. This set of conditions created a favourable environment for strategic competition well in advance of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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<sup>5</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> EU 2022 Enlargement Package, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_6082](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6082)

<sup>7</sup> Kapidžić, D. & Komar, O. - Segmental Volatility in Ethnically Divided Societies: (Re)assessing Party System Stability in Southeast Europe. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.9>

<sup>8</sup> Hovic, N. - Pre-enlargement Reform Failures in the Western Balkans: Social and Economic Preconditions of the Rule of Law. *Hague J Rule Law* 16, 693–714. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-024-00235-2>

<sup>9</sup> Basheska, E. - The Western Balkans and the EU: Genuine and Sincere?: The Story of Bilateral Disputes and Pretence. *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 1–16. doi:10.1017/err.2025.10031

<sup>10</sup> ECFR – Mapping China's Rise in the Balkans, <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/>

The 2022 invasion substantially altered the geopolitical calculus. For the EU and NATO, the Western Balkan states have begun to be increasingly perceived as a potential pressure point through which Russia could spread its geopolitical influence and disruptive tendencies beyond Ukraine. The reports that were assessed and published after 2022 have showcased the risks associated with Moscow's capacity to exploit the issue of energy dependency, the political alignments, and the media environments in particular parts of the Western Balkan region.<sup>11</sup> Russia's influence has manifested in diverse ways; from cultural-religious narratives, elite-level political connections, and economic leverage, all the way to complex networks of disinformation channels amplified by local actors.<sup>12</sup> These employed methods have contributed to shaping the public perception in ways that overall do not align with the EU's and NATO's strategic objectives and positions for the region.

As the global geopolitical environment has suffered changes, the two Euro-Atlantic institutions have reshaped and recalibrated their approaches accordingly. Within this context, the EU, especially through its post-2022 communication and with a newly released enlargement framework, has emphasized the importance of the region's integration. Initiatives such as the EU's enhanced growth and reform agenda, as well as intensified efforts against disinformation, have illustrated this particular shift.<sup>13</sup> In parallel, NATO has also expanded both its diplomatic and communication tools, focusing particularly on resilience to hybrid threats, crisis management and reassurance measures – notably in the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where security dynamics remain fragile to this day.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, the post-2022 context transformed the issue of the Western Balkans from a peripheral, secondary matter, to a central segment of the European response to the instability generated by the war in Ukraine. In this regard, the EU's and NATO's public diplomacy shall therefore be understood within this intensified and conflictual geopolitical environment, in which maintaining credibility, countering competing narratives, and strengthening long-term commitments have become strategic imperatives.

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<sup>11</sup> Kico, Kapetanović, Šušnica - The Western Balkans and the war in Ukraine. Atlantic Initiative. <https://www.atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/THE-WESTERN-BALKANS-AND-THE-WAR-IN-UKRAINE.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Mahmutaj, N. - Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans. In: Mihr, A., Sorbello, P., Weiffen, B. (eds) Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8)

<sup>13</sup> Brethous & Kovalčíková - Next level partnership - Bolstering EU-NATO cooperation to counter hybrid threats in the Western Balkans. EUISS. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/next-level-partnership-bolstering-eu-nato-cooperation-counter-hybrid-threats>

<sup>14</sup> Security in the Western Balkans. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0089/>

## **Public Diplomacy Tools and Strategies**

As noted above, from 2022 onwards, both the EU and NATO intensified and developed their public diplomacy approaches in the Western Balkans, with the aim of shaping public perceptions, building resilience and countering Russian influence. Although their mandates differ, the two institutions make use of complementary strategies that, together, aim to portray a strengthened political alignment, and build societal trust and regional stability.

### **EU public diplomacy**

In the months following Russia's invasion, the EU's public diplomacy adopted a noticeably sharper geopolitical tone. Enlargement was no longer presented as a long, merit-based process centred almost exclusively on reforms, but increasingly as part of Europe's own security equation. This shift was visible in both official communication and the messaging coming from senior EU figures. Ursula von der Leyen captured this new framing openly when she described enlargement as a "geostrategic investment" for the Union – a formulation that signalled a clearer link between the Western Balkans' integration and the EU's broader strategic posture.<sup>15</sup> Making use of such language, Brussels thus began portraying the Western Balkans more as a region whose stability and alignment directly affect the EU's internal and external security, rather than as a secondary issue at stake.

This repositioning has also been reflected in policy documents released during 2022. In this context, the EU Enlargement Communication and the accompanying enlargement package showcased the advancement of Western Balkan states' membership processes not merely as recognition of reform progress, but actually as a strategic response to the instability triggered by the war in Ukraine. Moves such as granting Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status and opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were framed as steps that would strengthen the EU's geopolitical weight in a contested environment. These documents have emphasized resilience, rule-of-law consolidation, and countering malign external influence, signalling an operational pivot towards more coordinated regional outreach and a more assertive communication strategy.<sup>16</sup> Their combined message was clear: enlargement had become a tool for both stabilisation and strategic positioning.

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<sup>15</sup> Ursula von der Leyen on X. <https://x.com/vonderleyen/status/1580205627200212992>

<sup>16</sup> European Commission - 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2022-communication-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2022-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en)

The particular approaches implemented by the EU in this regard have been visible across several fronts. High-level political signalling – through repeated official visits, summit-level diplomacy, and coordinated messaging that stressed the importance of partnership and common European identity – has been a central element.<sup>17</sup>

A clear example of this framing appears in the European Commission’s communication emphasising the EU and the Western Balkans’ “shared values” and “common future”, signalling that the region is viewed not only as a group of aspirant states but as part of the EU’s broader political community.<sup>18</sup> Under this light, it is understood that the EU’s public diplomacy actions and tools have been designed and developed to strengthen the EU’s presence and credibility in the region.

### **NATO’s Public Diplomacy**

While, on the one hand, the EU’s public diplomacy has increasingly placed emphasis on geopolitical stabilisation and on a more politically driven enlargement agenda, NATO’s approach, however, evolved along a different yet complementary axis. Thus, whereas the EU sought to reinforce political and economic alignment, NATO’s communication strategy shifted more explicitly toward security reassurance and deterrence. Official NATO statements began stressing that the Alliance’s presence in the Western Balkans is not symbolic but an actual deterrent with real commitments behind it — including rapid reinforcement if the regional balance were to shift. This reframing pushes the region away from being seen as a set of peripheral partners and places it more firmly inside the Euro-Atlantic security perimeter. Put simply, NATO’s role has expanded: instead of mainly shepherding reforms, it increasingly positions itself as the actor responsible for holding stability together in a much more contested strategic environment.

As such, the 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted in Madrid, brought resilience to the forefront of NATO’s language — not only in military terms but also across information, cyber, and society. Since then, the Alliance’s communication has underlined that the Western Balkans face a mix of challenges that go beyond troop deployments: disinformation networks, pressure over energy, and various malign external influences are now portrayed as direct risks to Euro-Atlantic security. In practice, this shifted the tone. Countering hybrid threats is no longer

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<sup>17</sup> EU-Western Balkans Summit. EU Council. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wvld5ka1/brussels-declaration-2024-en.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> EU Commission on X - [https://x.com/EU\\_Commission/status/1600033423489470466](https://x.com/EU_Commission/status/1600033423489470466)

framed as an auxiliary task; it has become part of how NATO explains its broader purpose in the region.<sup>19</sup>

NATO has also increased its diplomatic presence through a steady flow of high-level visits and targeted communication. These signals' aim has been to reassure governments and publics that the Alliance remains engaged, especially amid growing geopolitical pressure. Within this context, during his four-day tour of the Western Balkans in November 2023, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, repeatedly underlined that “*the security of the Western Balkans is vital to NATO*,” thanking countries such as North Macedonia for their support to Kosovo Force (KFOR) and to Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

Former NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg also made a point of flagging the impact of Russia's activities in the region. In the same vein, Mark Rutte, the current Secretary General of the Alliance, continued this line of messaging during meetings in Montenegro in December 2024, which focused largely on stability and the growing relevance of hybrid challenges.<sup>21</sup> Even Serbia, whose positions are less aligned with those of the EU and NATO, was included in this outreach, with Stoltenberg meeting President Vučić to discuss the security situation and regional tensions.<sup>22</sup>

By leveraging such instruments, NATO's aim has been to strengthen its image as the main guarantor of security in the region and reduce the impact of destabilizing narratives, usually portraying the institution as a source of tension.

### **Impact and Effectiveness**

The analysis of the effectiveness of EU's and NATO's public diplomacy after 2022 involves looking into both the strategic changes adopted by the Euro-Atlantic institutions and the extent to which these initiatives have succeeded in generating resonance in the political and social environments of the Western Balkans. Considering the above assessment, three interconnected dimensions are particularly relevant in this context: the credibility and coherence of these institutions' engagements, their resilience in face of the diverse competing narratives, and the eventual observable changes in public perceptions and political alignment.

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<sup>19</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> NATO Secretary General on X. <https://x.com/NATO/status/1727028854697713674>

<sup>21</sup> NATO Secretary General on X. <https://x.com/NATO/status/1864349076801900708>

<sup>22</sup> NATO Secretary on X. <https://x.com/NATO/status/1726964681904951625>

### *EU's Impact*

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU's public diplomacy has become visibly more geopolitical. In this regard, the EU's visibility has been amplified by the reconsideration and the partial reframing of the enlargement process as a strategic necessity. Along with strengthening the reform and growth agenda, it did send a signal of long-term commitment to the region. Brussels has increasingly and consistently communicated that the Western Balkan states represent an integral part of the European security architecture, and are not just mere accession candidates.

This shift has been met with mixed results. On the one hand, high-level visits, targeted financial tools and clearer messaging have improved the EU's credibility among the more reform-oriented political actors. On the other hand, public opinion in some areas, particularly in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, remains vulnerable to alternative narratives amplified by media ecosystems close to Russia.<sup>23</sup>

### *NATO's Impact*

In the period following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO's public diplomacy has centred mainly on providing reassurance and strengthening the region's ability to cope with hybrid threats. Communications from NATO StratCom (2023) highlight this shift, showing greater attention to countering disinformation, handling crises and maintaining a predictable deterrence posture.

These measures have helped consolidate the perception that NATO continues to act as the principal security provider in the Western Balkans, especially among member states and those aspiring to join the Alliance. However, as observed throughout this analysis, NATO's messaging has been encountering notable limitations in places where pro-Russian narratives retain strong societal and identity roots – most visibly in Serbia. As such, the persistence of historically shaped scepticism continues to undermine NATO's ability to build broader public trust, regardless of its operational presence or political signalling.

### *Overall Effectiveness*

Taking the broader picture into account, the public diplomacy of both the EU and NATO after 2022 has become more coherent and strategically aligned, but remains affected by structural

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<sup>23</sup> Mahmutaj, 2023.

constraints within the region. Even though both institutions have succeeded in putting the Western Balkans more firmly on the Euro-Atlantic agenda and in curbing some of the disruptive influence of competing external narratives, Russian-aligned messaging still resonates with parts of the population.<sup>24</sup>

Within this context, internal political actors, along with the local media outlets are known to hold and play a decisive role in shaping how public diplomacy is received in the Western Balkans. As it has been reported, pro-Russian narratives are “deliberately amplified by local actors and pro-Russian media,” including influential politicians and editors who have been reinforcing anti-Western sentiments and public distrust in Euro-Atlantic institutions.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, even well-structured EU and NATO public diplomacy efforts are often met with limited responses, especially where domestic elites frame Western engagement as external interference or a challenge to national identity.

#### *Complementarity of EU and NATO strategies*

While their approaches differ, the EU’s and the NATO’s public diplomacy have showcased increased alignment after 2022. The EU’s emphasis on political and economic stability has complemented NATO’s focus on security and resilience. Together, the two (geo)political institutions have projected a more coherent Euro-Atlantic message at a time when Russian influence, supported and leveraged by political ties, cultural-religious narratives, and disinformation networks – has remained active.<sup>26</sup>

Compared to the pre-2022 period, both institutions adopted a more explicit geopolitical language, with the EU shifting from a mainly normative enlargement narrative toward one centred on resilience and strategic alignment, while NATO moved from partnership-focused messaging to clearer security assurances.

#### **Conclusion**

Russia’s 2022 war against Ukraine pushed the Western Balkans back into focus for both the EU and NATO, after years in which the region had often appeared politically stalled. Thus, as a result of Russia’s actions, the EU’s and NATO’s public diplomacy approaches have become

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<sup>24</sup> Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS\\_ATA\(2022\)733523\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATA(2022)733523_EN.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Asllani, M. Domestic Actors Fuel Russian Disinformation in the Western Balkans. BISI. <https://bisi.org.uk/reports/domestic-actors-fuel-russian-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans>

<sup>26</sup> NATO on X. <https://x.com/NATOpres/status/1984354453995360437>

more visible, not as a single strategy, but as a set of overlapping efforts aimed at reassurance, signalling presence, and limiting external influence at a time of renewed geopolitical competition.

As observed earlier, in the context of the ongoing security crisis, the EU has repositioned itself vis-à-vis and has responded to the Western Balkan states by presenting enlargement in more openly political terms, supported by increased funding and more direct communication on governance, resilience, and rule-of-law standards. In parallel, NATO has followed a different but complementary path, therefore placing emphasis on deterrence, preparedness, and continuity. High-level visits and regular messaging from Brussels have been used to underline predictability rather than urgency. Yet, these efforts have not produced uniform results across the region. In several Western Balkan states, domestic political incentives, established media environments, and long-standing identity debates continue to filter and reshape the external messaging. In practice, this means that official expressions of commitment do not always translate into public confidence or sustained alignment.

Considering these aspects, it is thus concluded that improving the effectiveness of public diplomacy will depend less on expanding messaging and more on adapting it. Greater attention to local conditions, longer-term and more active engagement with civil society, and more consistent responses to disinformation are likely to matter more than visibility alone. These challenges will unfold in a changing geopolitical setting, shaped by Russia's continued involvement in the region, uncertainty surrounding the EU's enlargement trajectory, and shifts in the broader European security environment. Under these conditions, credibility over time, rather than volume or repetition, will remain central to achieving stability and closer cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community.

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