



Report



**GEOPOLITICS FIRST:
PERSPECTIVES OF CEE ON THE
EU'S GLOBAL CHALLENGES IN
THE NEXT POLITICAL CYCLE**

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About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



On December 11th, the Brussels Office organised Geopolitics First: Perspectives of CEE on the EU's Global Challenges in the Next Political Cycle. The aim of this expert discussion was to broaden the perspective of the Central European region on key geopolitical challenges, such as the foreign policy influence of Russia and China.

*The debate also aimed to present views and open the floor for **discussion on the major global challenges facing the European Union in the next political cycle**. The debate brought together experts at the level of national parliaments and key stakeholders based in Brussels, offering a unique platform to exchange views and formulate strategic recommendations.*

*The discussion focused on **hybrid threats, the foreign influence of Russia and China and their efforts to weaken the European Union through economic dependencies and disinformation campaigns, especially in the Western Balkans and the Indo-Pacific region.***

The first speaker focused on the results produced by the Center for Informed Society in cooperation with IRI, which dealt with hybrid threats and the evolution of strategic communication in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These analyses and presentations offered recommendations useful for policy makers in both countries.

The Czech Republic has been identified as a leader in the field of hybrid threat resilience, as a result of the existence of strategic documents, such as the Strategy for Countering Hybrid Threats, and the establishment of a wide network of institutions and working positions.

Despite these achievements, the Czech Republic faces significant challenges, including insufficient legislation as well as problems with the implementation of some EU legislation. Another obstacle is the lack of resources to put strategies into practice, which undermines the ability to respond effectively to hybrid threats.

The most effective states in this area are characterised not only by good inter-institutional coordination and effective information sharing between ministries, security authorities and the non-governmental sector. In the Czech Republic, however, many results depend on the initiative and expertise of individuals, who often overcome systemic barriers. After their departure, institutions suffer from low institutional memory, which makes long-term effectiveness and continuity of action difficult.

In Slovakia, the situation is similar. Slovak authorities have developed action plans to combat hybrid threats and disinformation, but their implementation is hampered by the lack of political support.

Drawing on his experience at the Ministry of the Interior, the speaker stressed that political will is crucial for strategic documents and action plans to gain the necessary weight and be successfully implemented. However, this approach, he said, cannot replace systematic state support. The absence of state funding in this area shows the low level of state commitment.

In the speaker's words, one of the most significant problems is the lack of will of the Slovak government during various political constellations to invest in the development of preventive and retaliatory measures against foreign hybrid threats, as well as in the building of units capable of identifying and eliminating these threats. Slovakia therefore urgently needs a public administration that will work systematically to increase resilience to hybrid threats, while at the same time mobilising sufficient financial resources to support these efforts.

In her opening remarks, another panellist stressed that the problems related to the implementation of strategic documents and the lack of financial resources are not only related to Europe, but also to the Indo-Pacific region and China. The European Union has strategic documents such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the China Strategy, and has also developed an ambitious Global Gateway Initiative. This strategy focuses on developing infrastructure, building new partnerships and links, as well as addressing technical challenges and security threats in different regions of the world.

However, the biggest challenge remains the implementation and financing of this strategy. At present, the implementation process is not sufficiently transparent and funding, whether at the level of the EU budget or the Member States, is still unclear. This undermines the strategy's potential to achieve its full ambition. In the context of the current unstable geopolitical situation - marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the future administration of Donald Trump in the US and tensions in the Middle East - the Global Gateway initiative represents an opportunity for the EU to forge new partnerships.

These partnerships could be forged in the Indo-Pacific region, Latin America or Africa, and would help the EU to meet the challenges in the areas of general security, economic security, economic diversification and securing stable supply chains.

One of the speakers stressed that misinformation and anti-American or anti-European narratives significantly influence the media environment in the Western Balkans, which is linguistically and culturally divided (e.g., Yugoslav and Albanian languages).

The speaker pointed out that local societies face a significant lack of financial resources, which prevents them from building autonomous and resilient structures capable of responding to disinformation. He suggested increased financial and personnel support from European Member States and institutions to strengthen local societies and state institutions. This support would enable a more effective response to external pressure and stabilise the region against external disinformation campaigns.

Another speaker focused on the current political situation in Romania, which escalated during the presidential elections. Călin Georgescu, a far-right and pro-Russian politician, won the first round and has significantly strengthened his public position through the social network TikTok. This situation revealed the need to significantly strengthen institutions and strategic communication structures capable of countering hybrid threats and foreign influence.

The political climate in Romania, marked by high levels of corruption, disillusionment with government institutions and distrust of the political elite, **creates favourable conditions for Russian interference.**

These differences are exploited by foreign policy actors such as Russia, China and the Gulf countries, which disseminate their narratives through local media channels.

The rising cost of living and the perceived lack of benefits of EU membership further deepen public discontent and increase the country's vulnerability to disinformation narratives.

The speaker also drew attention to the influence of domestic political interest groups, which have cultivated closer ties with Russia over the past decades. These groups have benefited from their relationship, which has been reflected in the presidential election. This cross-border and complex activity is not limited to Romania - similar activities can be observed in Moldova, Ukraine, Hungary, Serbia and even in the United States, where they are carried out through conservative Christian groups.

Another factor facilitating Russian influence operations is the rise of the far right, which is closely linked to social discontent and the rising cost of living.

This trend is evident across the European Union and represents a challenge that requires a coordinated response at EU level.

Another speaker highlighted several problematic aspects related to the low level of coordination and consistency of the European Union's policy towards China and the Indo-Pacific region. Although the EU has documents focusing on a common strategy towards China and an Indo-Pacific strategy, their content is not consistently coordinated. These strategies are often interpreted and applied differently by individual Member States, leading to a fragmented approach. The situation of smaller Member States such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, which have different foreign policy priorities and relations in the Indo-Pacific region, is a case in point. Lithuania, for example, has recently entered into a partnership with Taiwan, while Slovakia has focused on closer bilateral cooperation with China. A similar split can be observed in larger Member States such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, which have developed their own national strategies. **This fragmentation further highlights the lack of a unified EU approach.**

Following the discussion, another speaker pointed out the differences between Slovakia and Romania, especially regarding the political will to implement measures against hybrid threats. In Romania, although problems have been identified, political leaders often maintain ties with nationalist and far-right groups, which they tolerate in their own parties or institutions.

These networks are deliberately used for political purposes, undermining institutional efforts and undermining public confidence in the state's ability to effectively address hybrid threats.

This state of affairs, according to the speaker, shows that political compromises and the absence of reform steps hinder not only the resolution of hybrid threats, but also the stability of the democratic system.

The panelist highlighted **the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and the challenges associated with China**, pointing to two major stages in West-China relations. The first stage began during the global financial crisis (2007-2008) when China under Hu Jintao's leadership supported Western markets. The second, more problematic stage came during Xi Jinping's presidency, when China stepped up its use of economic crises to expand its influence. An example of China's strategy is the North-South Highway in Montenegro, where China's 'predatory financing' has placed a huge financial burden on the local treasury. China is similarly active in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, where it maintains unclear financial commitments and exploits weak regulatory mechanisms. When Montenegro asked the EU for help in repaying Chinese debts, the situation highlighted the risk for the Union.

The EU must respond by creating transparent rules and supporting reforms in the Western Balkans, thereby reducing the countries' dependence on China.

At the same time, it needs to strengthen its communication strategies to effectively demonstrate the advantages of cooperation with the EU over Chinese investment.

The EU needs to invest more in strategic communication that not only exposes the shortcomings of Chinese investment, but also effectively presents the benefits of European initiatives such as the Global Gateway. This strategy must be targeted and tailored to local realities and needs. In countries like Serbia, where surveys indicate a high perception of China as a major investment partner, the EU must actively demonstrate that its projects are transparent, sustainable and bring real benefits to local communities. Striking a balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches is critical. Building trust and strengthening initiatives that respond to the needs of the local population is key to long-term success. The EU has a unique opportunity to use its values, expertise and experience to create a sustainable model of cooperation. This model must be competitive with Chinese investment, while offering long-term stability and development, thus strengthening the EU's position as a reliable partner.