



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

OKTOBER 2025

Geopolitically mapping Eastern Europe

Ideology, pragmatism
and (re)alignment

Abstract

The relationships on the European continent and beyond have shifted dramatically following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This policy brief uses Clingendael's geopolitical mapping methodology to provide an overview of not only the changes that have occurred among the three Eastern European countries considered at the core of this analysis – Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova – but also their relationships with the wider region and global powers, and the consequences of those shifts for regional dynamics. It visualises how February 2022 crystallised these countries' positions vis-à-vis each other and other regional and global actors and discusses the ramifications of the geopolitical dynamics in Eastern Europe for the EU approach, providing several recommendations.



Introduction

Europe was shaken to its core in February 2022, as Russian tanks rolled over Ukraine's borders. Although at the time Russia's war against Ukraine was entering its ninth year, since the annexation of Crimea occurred and hostilities in the Donbas began in 2014, it was the moment of this full-scale invasion that marked a turning point for many (Western) European countries, and became a catalyst for a political (re)orientation already underway in others. Some countries reacted early and decisively by condemning the Russian aggression, others did not, or made their choices more apprehensively and with delay, and others attempted to avoid the dichotomy altogether and continue a balancing act driven by pragmatism, to varying degrees of success.

These choices and their implications have had far-reaching consequences for the relations among European countries and the larger regional dynamic. To understand these changes and shifts, this brief presents an interactive geopolitical map of the region (see figure 1). At its core are three non-EU Eastern European countries that have been at the centre of recent developments – Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova – and their relationships among each other, with key regional actors, and with major global powers.¹ In mapping these relationships the brief builds on three main questions:

1. What is the state of relations between Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova?
2. How do these countries relate to regional and great powers?
3. What ramifications do the geopolitical dynamics in Eastern Europe have for the EU approach towards the region?

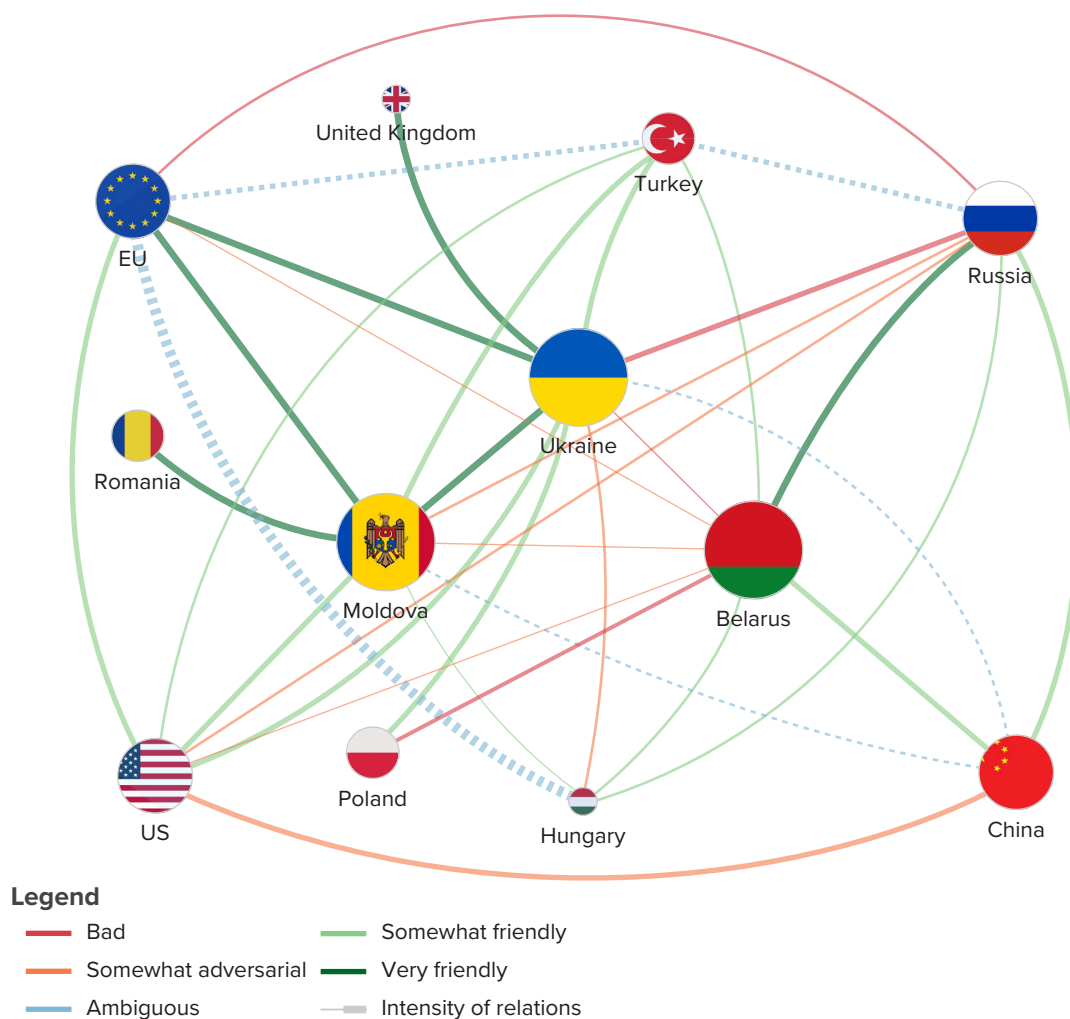
1 These three countries will be referred to as “core countries” throughout this paper based on the fact that they were chosen to be at the centre of this specific mapping effort. This is not to imply that there is a political, geographical or philosophical reason to consider them as the core countries of Eastern Europe.

The mapping reveals several dynamics that are worth a closer look, and are discussed in the present brief. It should be noted that the brief does not consider all of the bilateral relationships or clusters in-depth, but readers are invited to explore them on their own by using the interactive mapping in the online tool *Kumu*. The brief concludes with recommendations for the EU and European policymakers for navigating geopolitical complexities in Eastern Europe.²

The present policy brief is part of a series that has also featured geopolitical mappings of the Western Balkans, South Caucasus and Central Asia, all using the Clingendael Institute methodology.^{3,4}

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- 2 The authors would like to thank Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost and Kaspar Pucek for their feedback throughout the mapping and writing process. We would also like to thank all those who contributed to this study by filling out the expert survey (see the annex for an overview of the contributors who explicitly consented to have their name listed).
 - 3 Clingendael has developed a geopolitical mapping methodology to capture and measure changing relations between countries, focussing on a core region and including relevant regional and global actors. As part of this methodology, we sent out a survey to 96 experts on Eastern Europe, asking them to score bilateral relations between the core countries and regional and global powers. Per relationship, two variables were scored: the quality of political relations between governments and the intensity of the economic, security and societal interaction between countries. This yielded 39 responses which were used to create the interactive geopolitical mapping in *Kumu* discussed in the paper. The mapping reflects the geopolitical situation at the time of the data acquisition, which took place on 28 April – 14 May 2025. In some cases, the research team added relationships that had not been part of the survey, based on a combination of their expertise and literature research. Specifically, this was done with the relationships among non-core countries. The only exception to this was Hungary, which upon further consideration was found to bear more relevance than initially anticipated. The research team, therefore, expanded Hungary's position within the interactive map with more relationships than initially envisaged.
 - 4 Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers & Camille Linder, [The EU in the South Caucasus](#), Clingendael, March 2023; Niels Drost and Giulia Cretti, [Central Asia emerging from the shadows](#), Clingendael January 2025; Wouter Zweers, [Geopolitically mapping the Western Balkans](#), Clingendael, August 2025.

Figure 1 Interactive mapping of Eastern Europe



The core countries

Despite a shared history, over the past 20-30 years the paths of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova have diverged dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union. **Belarus**, under Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s authoritarian leadership, aligned with Russia, jointly creating their Union State in 1999 and engaging in far-reaching cooperation in various spheres. Belarus remained closely aligned with Russia based on similarities in their personalistic, authoritarian ruling systems, and Belarus’ dependence on Russia for energy, export and financial support. At the same time, Minsk’s relationship with the EU and its member-states remained an important instrument to counterbalance these

dependencies on Russia and create economic development perspectives. The result has been Lukashenka’s attempted balancing act, occasionally playing East and West against each other. Following the January 2020 uprising in Belarus, however, Russia’s support in ensuring Lukashenka’s continued rule, combined with Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation, narrowed Minsk’s space for manoeuvring and tied it in with Moscow more securely.⁵ Russia’s use of Belarus territory in launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 locked Lukashenka

5 Kaspar Pucek and Bob Deen, [Belarus on Thin Ice: Future Scenarios and Policy Dilemmas](#), Clingendael, January 2025

in further. Some experts in our survey noted increased risks for the loss of the already limited Belarus – and the Lukashenka regime’s – sovereignty.⁶ This may have led to Lukashenka’s recent attempt at re-engagement with the West (see below).⁷

Ukraine has undergone several revolutions driven by internal demands – a fight against corruption, calls for democratic reforms – and a geopolitical choice favouring the EU.⁸ Several experts in our survey noted the historic nature of the Russia-Ukraine tensions, rooted in Russia’s attempts to keep Ukraine within what it considers its sphere of influence.⁹ While segments of the Ukrainian society have already long viewed Russia as an existential threat, the full-scale invasion has erased any remaining pro-Russian sympathies in the Ukrainian public debate, at least in the non-occupied part of the country. Ukraine has tied its fate and future to the West and its supranational structures, like NATO and the EU. The strength of that alignment is largely dictated by the Russian threat, but may also be prone to fluctuation in the longer term, depending, for instance, on the success and speed of Ukraine’s integration into the EU, the state of play at the end of the war, Ukraine’s security and the extent to which Western powers play a role in it.

Historically, **Moldova** has experienced alternating pro-Russian and pro-European governments, all plagued by the problem of corruption and oligarchic influences. With the rise to power of the current president, Maia Sandu, and her PAS party, the cycle seemed to break in 2019, with a president that not only built her platform around the fight against corruption, but also uniquely boasted a “squeaky clean”

reputation. Since then, the Sandu government has been plagued by crises – including the global COVID19 pandemic and several energy crises – peaking with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While Sandu had already set Moldova on a pro-European course, the invasion served as a catalyst, crystallising Chisinau’s position squarely behind Ukraine, in clear condemnation of Russia’s aggression. This stance has caused difficulties in the form of a more hostile Russia, exacerbating the existing complexities of Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria effectively being under Russian protection. Experts in our survey also noted major Russian interference in Moldovan politics, attempts at destabilisation and more. But these developments also accelerated Moldova’s efforts to cut dependencies on Russia, which Chisinau had already been working on, especially in economy and energy.¹⁰ The changes were not without pain, as the cost of the transition added to the economic burden of one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Figure 2 The core countries

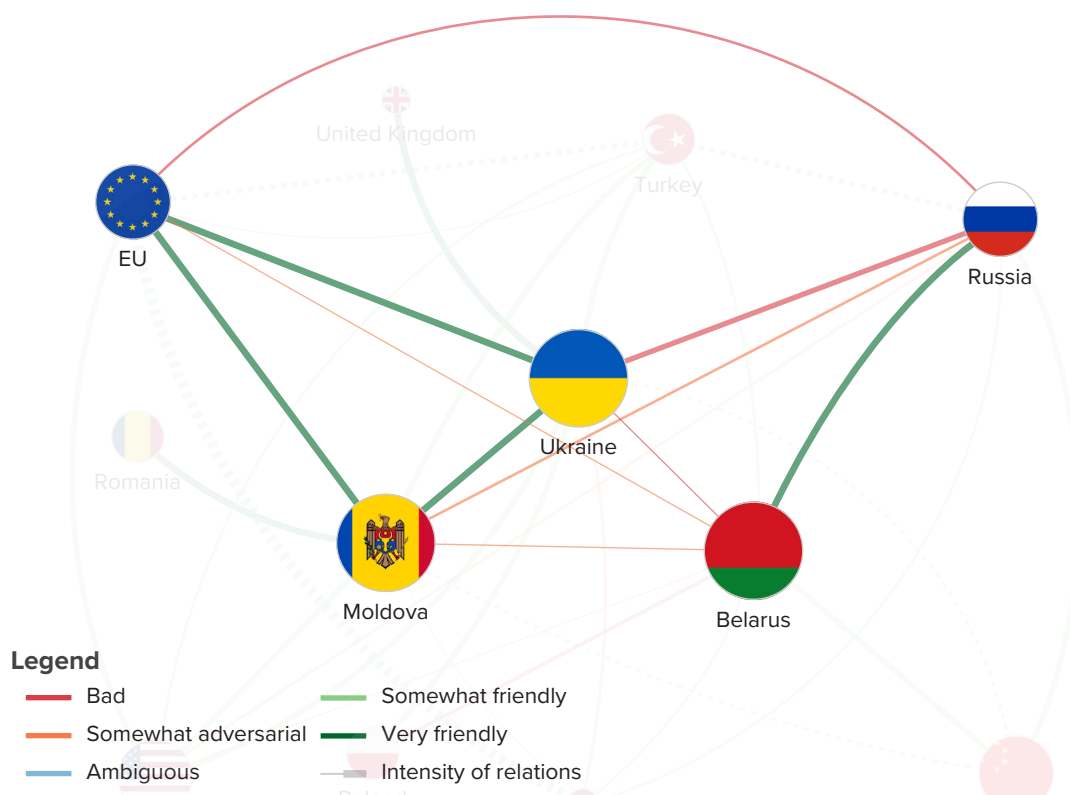


The choices made by the three countries, and especially their roles and attitudes following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have played a decisive role in shaping their

6 Clingendael expert survey
 7 Kaspar Pucek, [The Crisis of Belarusian Sovereignty](#), Clingendael, September 2025; Balázs Jarábik, [Is There a Chance for Re-Engagement Between Belarus and the EU?](#) Carnegie Politika, June 18, 2025
 8 Although the trigger for the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity was the choice of then President Yanukovich to back out of signing an Association Agreement with the EU, the protest gained a truly massive following after the authorities cracked down severely on the initial, relatively small numbers of protesters.
 9 Clingendael expert survey

10 Clingendael expert survey

Figure 3 The EU-Russia rift



mutual relations. With Moldova and Ukraine forming a strong bond over their shared experience with Russian interference and hostility, Belarus finds itself on the other side of this divide.

While there have always been differences between them, the stark division is a relatively new development: relations between these countries previously largely lacked a strong normative vector. The countries had their common interests as well as irritants, but largely stayed out of each other’s way in their foreign relations, which is perhaps why the region largely lacks an overall cohesion that can be found in other regional contexts, like the Western Balkans.¹¹ The Eastern European countries’ trajectories had been relatively autonomous and largely unencumbered by their relationships with each other, until the war crystallised their positions.

The Russia-Ukraine war and its effects on regional geopolitics

Zooming out from the core countries it becomes clear that the war in Ukraine has had a similar effect – of crystallising positions and pushing certain geopolitical choices – on the larger dynamics and relationships in Europe. This section will discuss several interesting developments illustrating this.

The EU-Russia rift

The clearest example of the war’s consequences can be seen in the positioning of the EU and Russia vis-à-vis each other and the core countries (see figure 3). The EU’s relationship with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, is an inversion of that of Russia. The Russia-Belarus alliance stands squarely opposite Ukraine and Moldova, both EU candidate-countries and backed by the bloc politically, diplomatically, financially and in terms of security.

¹¹ Wouter Zweers and Ivan Kelecevic, [Geopolitically mapping the Western Balkans](#), Clingendael, August 2025

Figure 4 Russian gas 2020

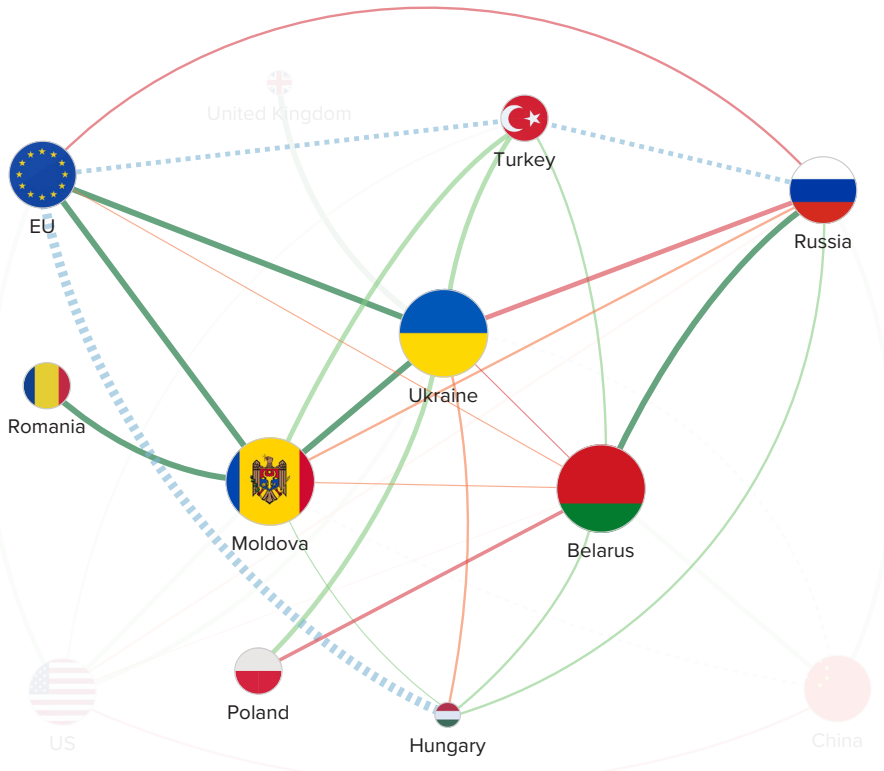
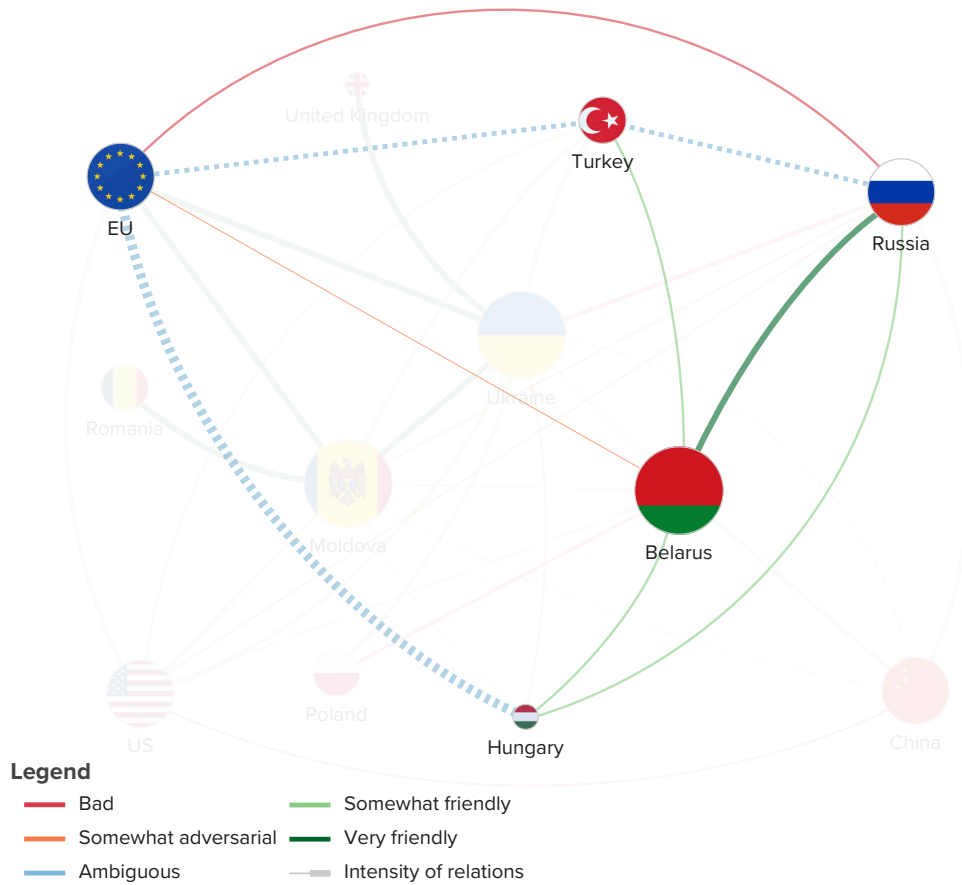


Figure 5 Russian gas 2025



The relationship between Russia and the EU has always had its complexities. Russia increasingly viewed the bloc as a political rival – though not necessarily a threat – as the 00’s and 10’s progressed, while the EU remained passively divided on its stance vis-à-vis Russia: the countries on its eastern flanks periodically warned of a potential Russian threat, while Western Europe largely preferred to continue engaging with Moscow. Following the February 2022 invasion, however, perceptions in EU’s Western member states shifted to align more with the pre-existing perceptions in the Baltics, Poland and other Eastern and Central European member-states: Russia came to be seen as a dangerous adversary, the threat of which warranted a rearmament push across the EU.

Russian gas

Another way this shift can be demonstrated relates to the transit and consumption of Russian gas (fig. 4 and 5). In 2020, Ukraine was an important transit country for Russian pipeline-gas on to its consumers in the EU, even though it had stopped consuming the gas itself by 2015. The share of Russian gas in EU’s gas imports has since dropped from 45% to roughly 19%, with Hungary and Slovakia still importing Russian gas via pipelines, and Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and France being the biggest importers of Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG).^{12,13} In June 2025, the European Commission proposed a plan to ban EU imports of Russian gas completely by 2028.¹⁴ In September 2025, following apparent pressure from the Trump administration, the Commission decided to speed things up, bringing the ban on Russian LNG forward to 2027.¹⁵ Slovakia,

Hungary and Austria have opposed it, with France and Belgium resisting the LNG ban.^{16,17}

Black Sea dynamics

Despite the new realities in Europe, there are still instances where cooperation, or at least communication, across the wartime divide is difficult to avoid. One such example is the Black Sea (see figure 6), which constituted a key theatre, especially during the early stages of the Russo-Ukrainian war after the full-scale invasion of 2022. Questions of dominance in the Black Sea basin hung in the balance, in terms of military superiority as part of the war effort, but also control over transit routes for trade vessels, especially when it comes to Ukraine’s grain exports and the related issue of global food security.¹⁸ Mainly using unmanned drones, Ukraine managed to push back Russia’s Black Sea Fleet after a number of successful attacks in 2023-2024, ushering in a somewhat calmer period. Nevertheless, the changed dynamic of relationships and general tension around the Black Sea still holds.^{19,20}

12 Katja Yafimava, Agnieszka Ason and Mike Fulwood, [The EU Proposal to Ban Russian Gas Imports: roadblock more than roadmap](#), The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, July 2025

13 European Commission, [Roadmap to fully end EU dependency on Russian energy](#), European Commission, May 6, 2025

14 European Commission, [Commission proposes gradual phase-out of Russian gas and oil imports into the EU](#), European Commission, June 17, 2025

15 Jacopo Barigazzi, Camille Gijs and Victor Jack, [EU wants to bring forward date for ending Russian gas imports](#), Politico, September 23, 2025

16 Jennifer Rankin, [Europe will never return to Russian gas, European Commission insists](#), The Guardian, June 17, 2025; Victor Jack and Louise Guillot, [EU’s top Russian LNG buyers wary of Brussels’ gas ban](#), Politico, June 3, 2025

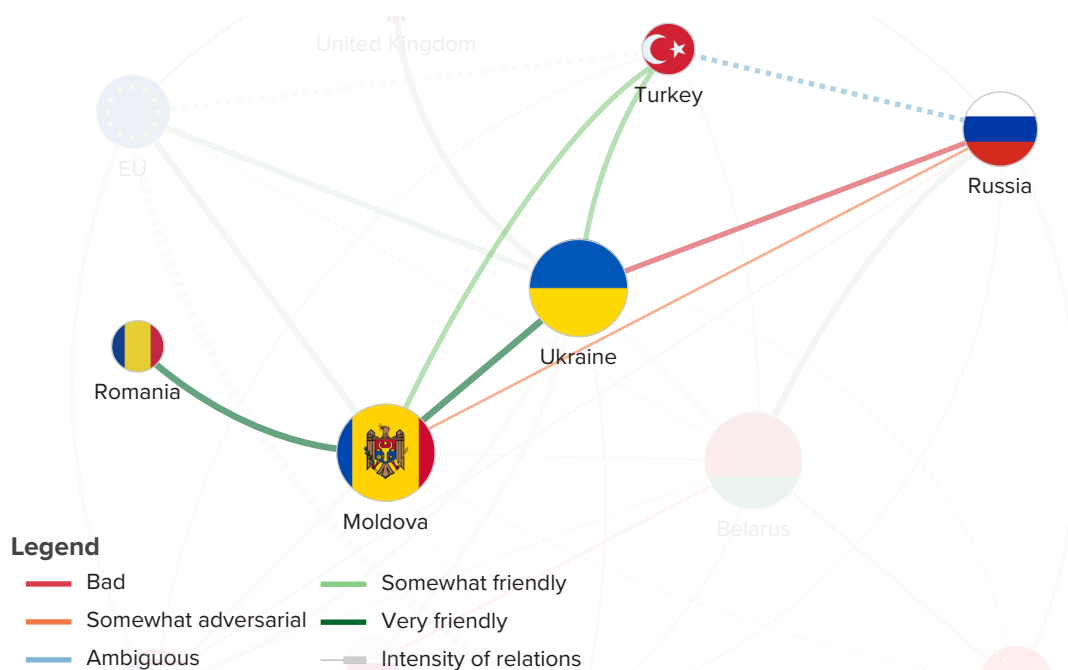
17 Some of the main importers of Russian pipeline gas or LNG are not included, but are represented by the EU icon.

18 Ukraine is a major exporter of agricultural food products, accounting for some 30% of the world’s wheat and maize supply and around half of the world’s sunflower seed oil supply. European Commission, [Food Security and Affordability Explainer](#), European Commission, April 4, 2025

19 One country not included in this mapping but highly relevant to the Black Sea region is Georgia. Tbilisi’s relationships with the other actors involved are complex. As Georgia is undergoing a geopolitical reorientation away from the EU and towards Russia, its relations with Ukraine and the countries supporting Ukraine have suffered. However, the Georgian-Turkish relationship stays relatively strong, further supporting the premise of Türkiye’s skilful balancing act. Commonsplace.eu, [Georgian and Turkish Foreign Ministers meet in Ankara to discuss “strategic partnership”](#), Commonsplace.eu, February 26, 2025

20 For more on the Black Sea dynamics, see Julia Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Ben Bekkering, Emma Caals, Giulio Damiani, “Black Sea Security as the White Knight for peace? Navigating risks and prospects for talks”, Clingendael Institute, October 2025

Figure 6 Black Sea dynamics



The divisions and rifts resulting from the war in Ukraine have provided an opportunity for Türkiye to obtain a strategic diplomatic position, as an actor that is able to balance its relationships with all others involved. While Ankara’s balancing skills will be discussed in more detail later, suffice to say that considering its position as the only major Black Sea country that has managed to retain a working relationship with every other Black Sea power, its ability to take on the role of facilitator of negotiations, especially during the more acute stages of the maritime conflict, are unsurprising.

Hungary’s attempt at balancing

Another actor that attempts a balancing act is Hungary (see figure 7). As a member of the EU, the country is tied into the bloc’s rules and procedures, but at the same time continues to entertain a relatively positive relationship with Russia despite the adversarial nature of the current EU–Russia dynamic.²¹ Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has regularly blocked support for Ukraine and its EU candidacy bid, and his willingness to visit and meet with

president Putin undercuts the EU’s policy of isolating the Russian president on the world stage.²²

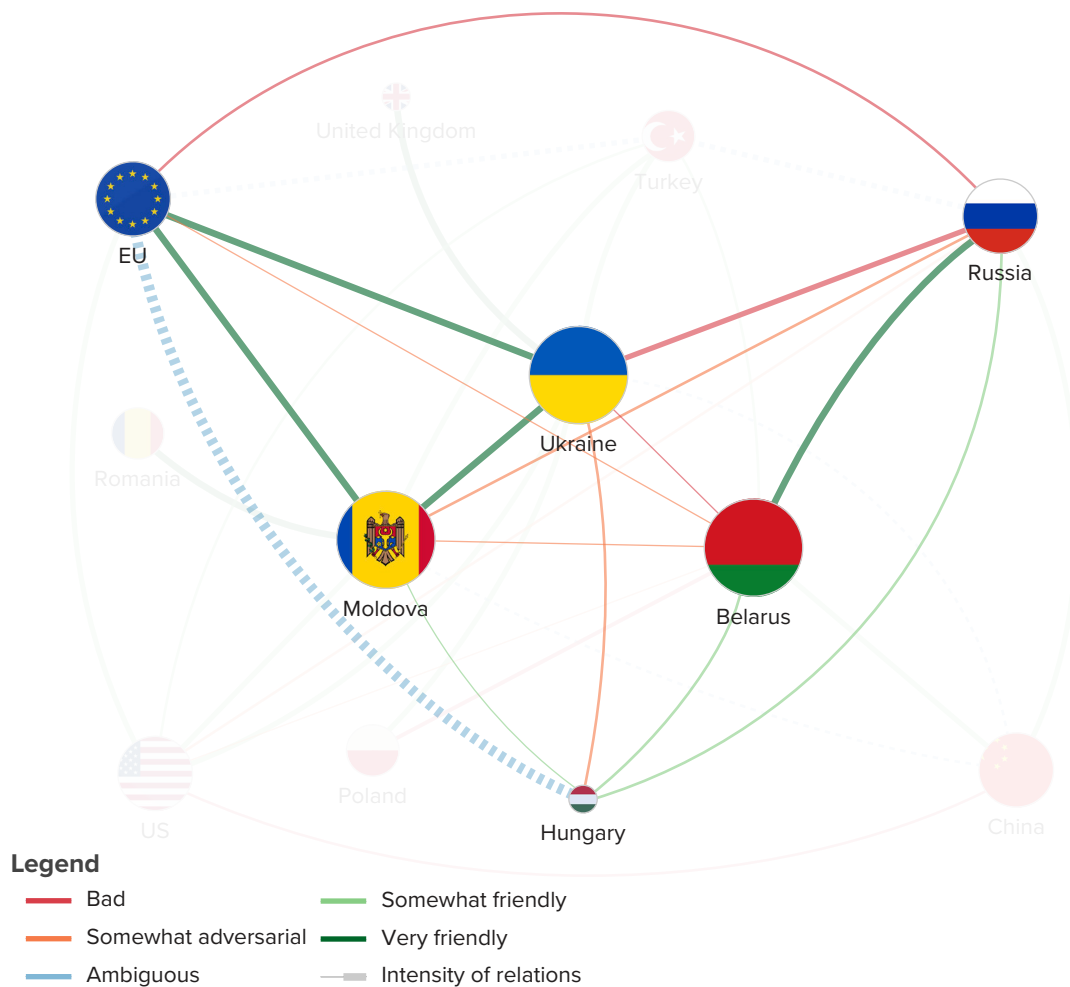
At the same time, while this may provide Orbán with some leverage in his dealings with the EU, the success of this balancing act is questionable. While its relationship with Russia provides Hungary with certain perks and benefits – notably in cheap energy – it is less significant than Hungary’s EU membership, and it has cost the country much goodwill with leading EU member states and institutions. This questionable trade-off is illustrated in our mapping with Hungary’s ambiguous relationship with the EU, which is quite striking – and arguably problematic – considering the country’s membership in the bloc.²³

22 Alexander Baunov, [Russia Sees Signs of Diplomatic Rehabilitation in Orbán Visit](#), Carnegie, July 10, 2024

23 It should be noted that Hungary’s balancing act is surely driven by more than just the practical benefits of a relatively positive relationship with Russia. The intricacies of prime minister Orbán’s foreign policy choices fall outside of the scope of this study, but probably include considerations of external and internal political factors, as well as ideological differences with what can be considered mainstream (Western) European, liberal democratic, thinking.

21 Zoltán Kiszelly, [Hungary’s realpolitik on Russia](#), GIS, May 5, 2025

Figure 7 Hungary's attempt at balancing



Great power competition

Having looked at the regional shifts, it is time to turn to the global dynamics and the role of great powers like the US and China, as well as the international blocs they lead.

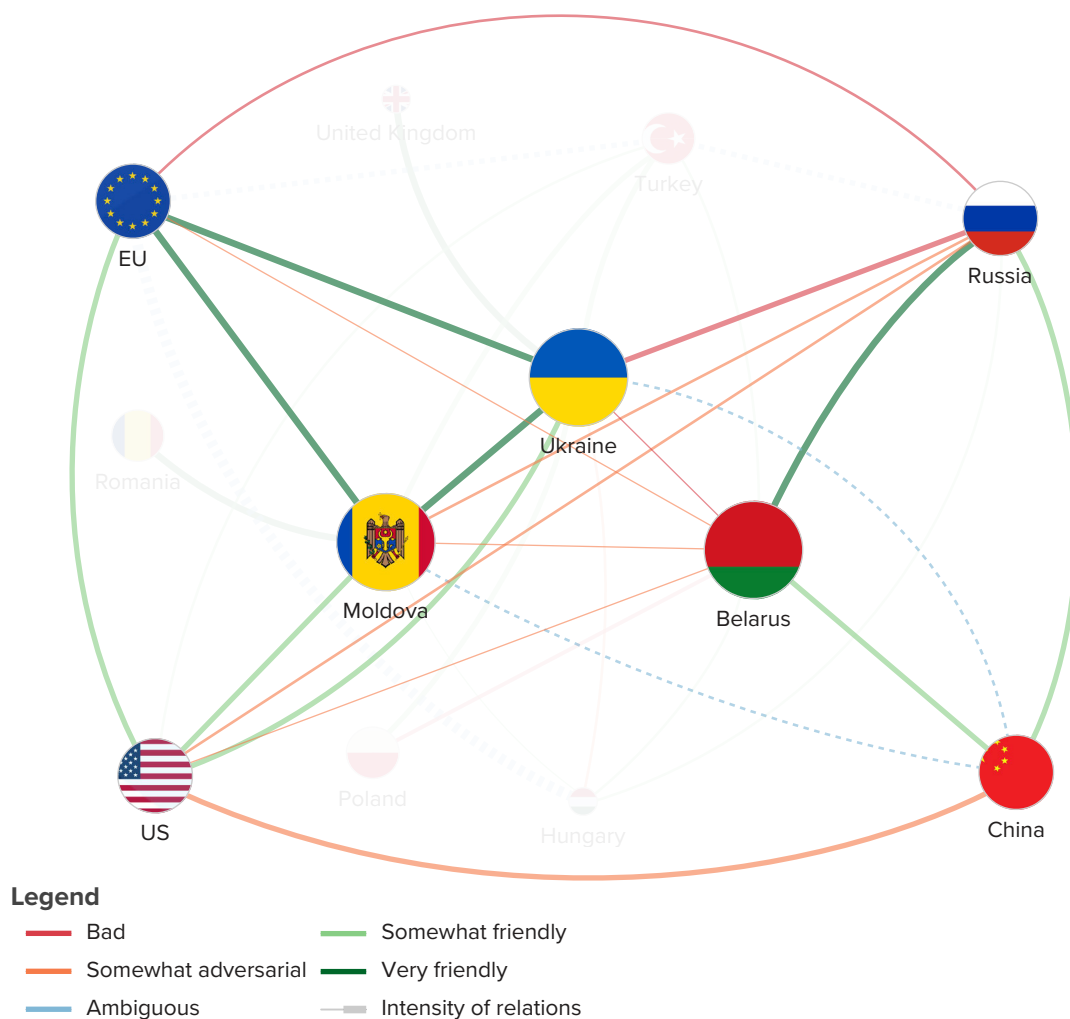
East vs. West

From the perspective of Eastern Europe and the core countries in our analysis, the war in Ukraine plays an important, but not always decisive role within the global geopolitical dynamic (see figure 8). As the US and China are added to the equation of great power competition, another factor appears: the shifting US position on the global political scene. Under the Trump administration, US foreign policy has been changing in two important directions:

from normative to transactional, and from globalist to protectionist. In combination with the unpredictability and volatility emanating from the White House, this has brought uncertainty to the foundations of longtime alliances and blocs. The trans-Atlantic relationship has suffered from this uncertainty, with European leaders engaging in a visible effort to retain the alignment with the US on issues varying from security and defence to the economy and broader diplomacy, especially when it comes to containing or deterring Russia.²⁴

²⁴ Andrey Gray and Lili Bayer, [Europe keeps trying with Trump on Ukraine and security despite Zelenskiy clash](#), Reuters, March 3, 2025

Figure 8 Great power competition



The Trump administration seemed to seek a quick end to the war in Ukraine for an increased focus on China.²⁵ However, with the former proving more difficult than anticipated, and the tariffs introduced in 2025 against almost the entire world driving many (potential) allies into China’s arms, the US seemed to weaken its alliances in Europe and squander (potential) alliances elsewhere.²⁶ This is reflected in our mapping, with the deteriorating US-China relations, somewhat adversarial US-Russia relations, and only somewhat friendly US-EU

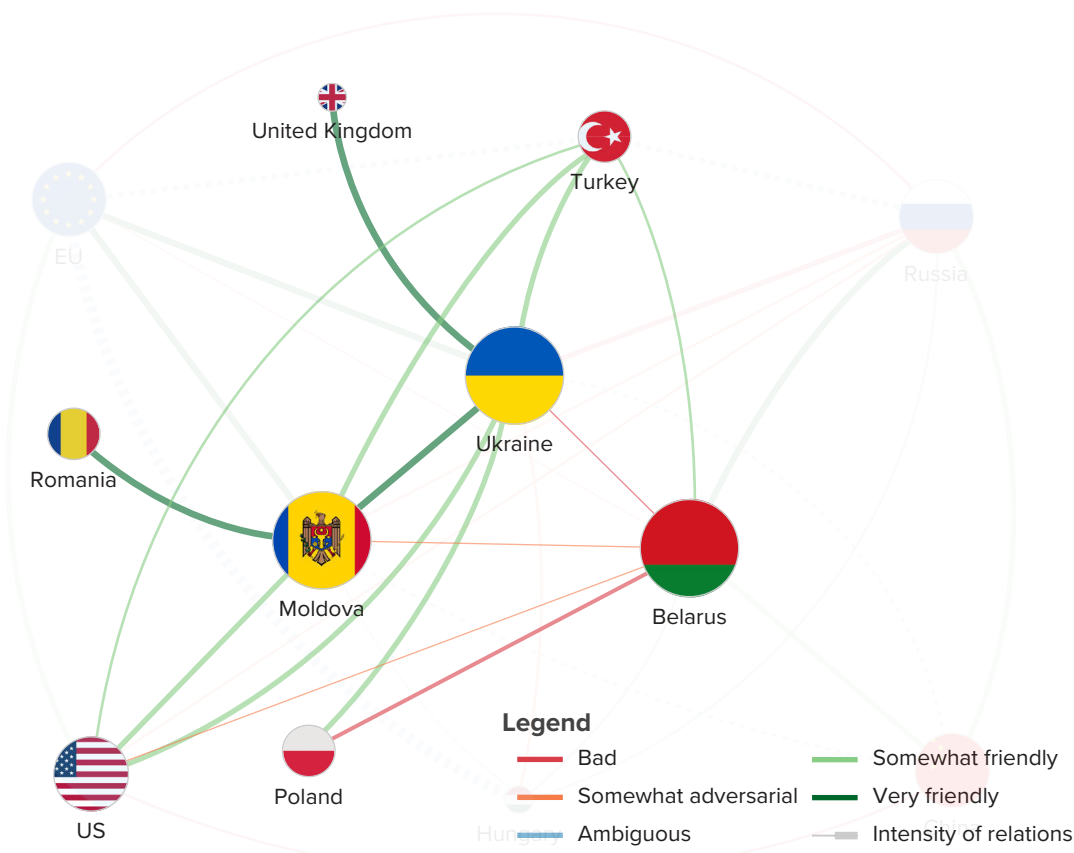
relations. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the relations between the Western-oriented core countries Ukraine and Moldova are stronger with the EU than with the US. In addition to the physical proximity and naturally more intensive neighbourly relations, Trump’s volatility, especially vis-à-vis Ukraine and its president Zelensky, has undoubtedly played a role.

In this regard, Belarus presents an interesting case. After we conducted the survey underlying the mapping, and as of the time of this writing, the US-Belarus relationship seems to be undergoing a thaw. Just before the August 15 Alaska summit with Putin, Trump called Lukashenka – an unprecedented event – afterwards referring to him as “highly respected president” and “a powerful leader.” The call followed the June release of prominent

25 Martijn van Ette and Andrew Gawthorpe, [The US pivot to Asia depends on peace in Ukraine](#), *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2025

26 Phillips Payson O’Brien, [Trump’s trade war handed China a strategic advantage](#), *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2025

Figure 9 NATO members' relationship with the region



Belarus opposition leader Syarhei Tsikhanouski after US envoy Keith Kellogg visited Minsk. In September 2025, Belarus released a further 52 political prisoners, including foreign nationals, in return for easing US sanctions on Belavia, the Belarusian national airline.²⁷ The positive trajectory of the US-Belarus relations bears benefits for both sides, with Lukashenka gaining unprecedented legitimisation by a previously antagonistic world power, and the Trump administration perhaps seeking quick wins and a positive momentum for negotiations with Putin.²⁸ If this tendency continues, the US-Belarus relationship could enter a more positive era. Here as well, however, the volatility of the Trump administration causes a great degree of unpredictability.

27 Pjotr Sauer, [Belarus frees 52 political prisoners, including foreigners, after visit by US delegation](#), The Guardian, September 11, 2025

28 Artyom Shraibman, [Can Belarus capitalize on historic Trump-Lukashenka phone call?](#) Carnegie Politika, August 21, 2025

The Blocs

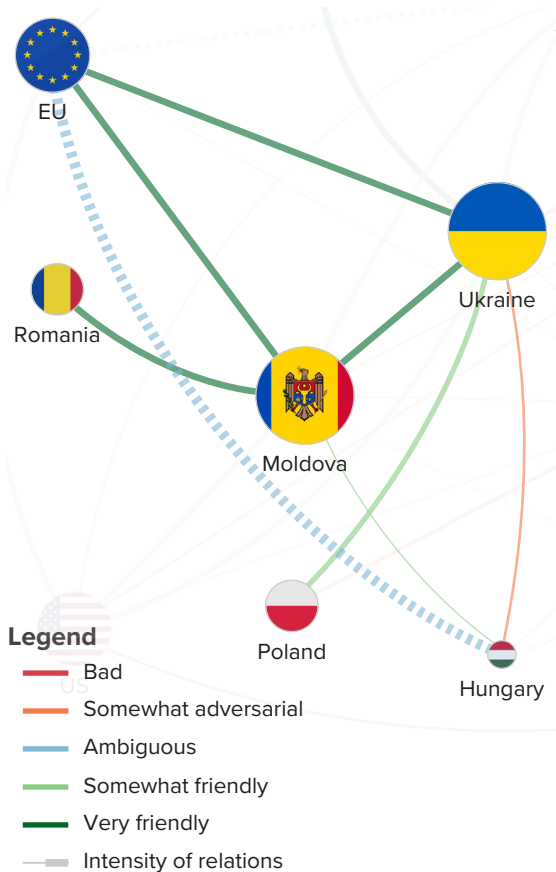
To explore the great power dynamic a bit deeper, it helps to consider the region, and specifically the core countries of this study, from the perspective of the various relevant international blocs.

On the Western side of the equation, the most relevant and prominent international organisations are the EU and NATO. In general, the NATO members' relationship with the core countries reflects the bigger Russia-US/EU rift over the war in Ukraine. An interesting aspect concerns the relations between neighbouring Belarus and Poland, featuring the only border between NATO and a Russian ally represented in this mapping. The geopolitical alignment undoubtedly plays a role in the strongly adversarial and quite intense relationship between Belarus and Poland, along with their more concrete friction related to the migrant crisis of 2021,²⁹ the September 2025 incidents

29 In August 2021 hundreds of migrants, mainly from the Middle East, were flown into Minsk and given free

involving Russian drones flying into Polish airspace from Belarus territory³⁰ and the Polish military buildup in a tense climate surrounding the Zapad 2025 Russian-Belarus military exercises.

Figure 10 EU integration



When it comes to EU integration, the relations of the EU and its members with Moldova and Ukraine generally reflect the alignment of the latter two with the West and against Russia that largely precedes 2022 but was intensified by the Russian

full-scale invasion of Ukraine. An interesting context is the Ukraine-Moldova-Hungary triangle. The Ukrainian-Hungarian relationship has long been prone to friction and irritations, mostly related to the issue of the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, regularly brought up by Hungary’s Orbán, and the latter’s obstructing of EU support for Ukraine, Kyiv’s EU membership bid and EU sanctions against Russia.³¹ Interestingly, however, this does not seem to affect the Moldovan-Hungarian relationship, despite Moldova’s far-reaching alignment with Ukraine on issues of security and EU integration. In fact, in contrast to his stance vis-à-vis Ukraine, Orbán has been a vocal supporter of Moldova’s EU-bid. In general, many experts in our survey noted the enormous positive momentum in Moldova’s relationship with the EU, strongly connected to the war in Ukraine, with some pointing to the possibility that this momentum could pass.³²

Turning to the Eastern side of the equation, Russia seems to be in search of alternative supranational formats that could counter the influence of the Western-led ones. Regionally, this effort has resulted in the development of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which Belarus is the only other member represented in our mapping. Globally, this search for alternatives occurs in the context of Russia’s efforts at deepening relations with non-Western actors of some weight in the international arena, China being the most important one. As some of those actors are considered to be spoilers of the Western-led international rules-based order, the term “axis of upheaval” has been used to describe their cooperation, mainly referring to Russia, China, Iran and North-Korea.³³

passage to the Polish border by the Belarus authorities. As the Polish authorities refused to let them in, many were stranded in a no-man’s land in the border area. For more, see for instance Andrew Roth, [Poland-Belarus border crisis: what is going on and who is to blame?](#) The Guardian, November 9, 2021

30 Including possibly the most tense episode, occurring in September 2025, with over 20 drones taken down by NATO fighter planes over Poland. Belarus had reportedly warned Polish authorities of the imminent arrival of the drones. For more on this, see Bart van den Berg & Erik Stijnman, [What the Russian drone incursion into Poland means for NATO](#), Clingendael, September 23, 2025

31 Clara Marchaud, [Language rights of Hungarian minority in Ukraine at the heart of Kyiv-Budapest spat](#), EurActiv, last updated October 1, 2024

32 Clingendael expert survey

33 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, [The Axis of Upheaval: how America’s adversaries are uniting to overthrow the global order](#), Foreign Affairs, May/June 2024

Figure 11 The “Axis of upheaval” and Eastern Europe

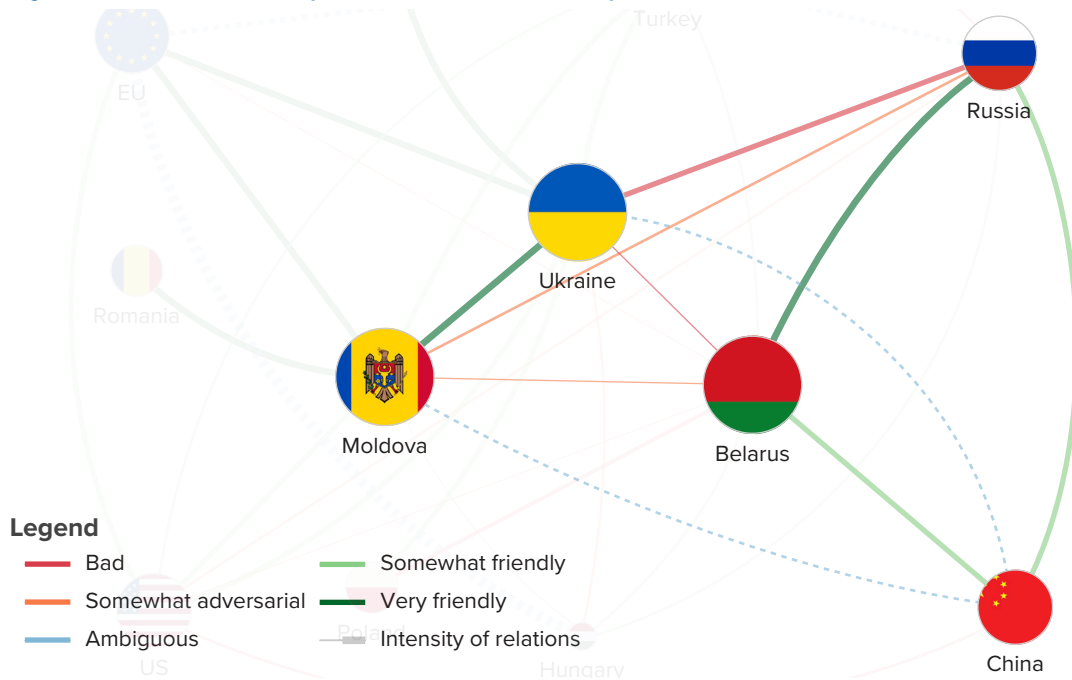
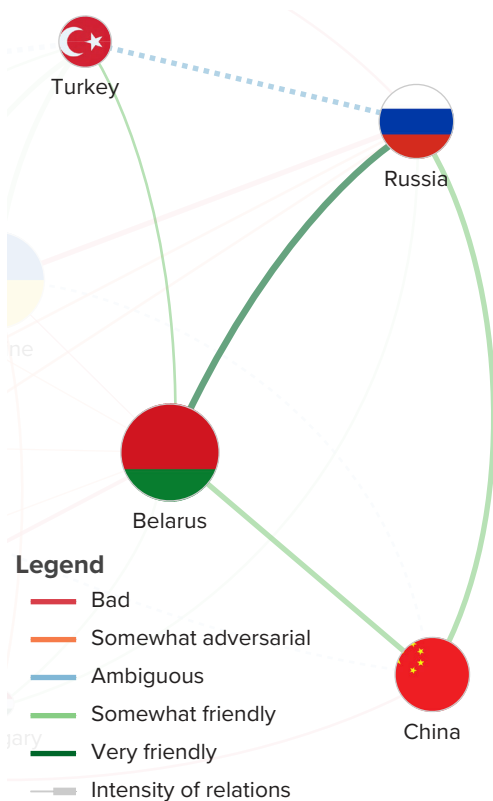


Figure 12 The relevance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

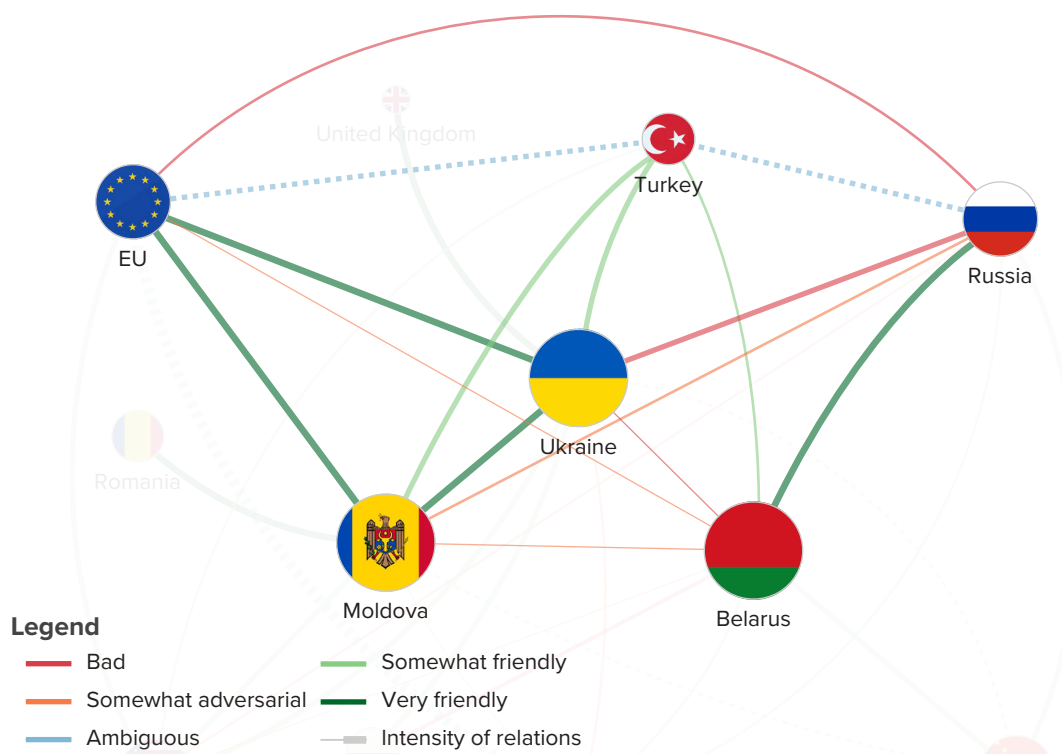


While there is certainly a varying degree of cooperation among the four countries, at least bilaterally, the term perhaps implies more coherence than can really be observed. Our mapping demonstrates this to some extent, when looking specifically at the Russian and Chinese relationships with Eastern Europe (see figure 11). Despite the outward signalling of a warm Sino-Russian friendship, it does not entirely translate into corresponding attitudes towards Eastern Europe and our core countries. China’s relationship with Eastern Europe will be discussed in more detail below, but the difference is undoubtedly at least partly due to the actual physical and political distance involved.

A more tangible supranational format pushed by both Russia and China, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO, see figure 12). According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies, institutions like the SCO present a useful platform for Moscow and Beijing “to strengthen their strategic coordination and build a new narrative to reshape global order.”³⁴ Since its

34 Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) comment, [China and Russia are using the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to push alternative global order](#), MERICS, July 31, 2025

Figure 13 Türkiye's balancing



establishment in 2001, the SCO has broadened its membership base and external engagement. With Türkiye as an observer member and the addition of Belarus as a full member in 2024, the organisation’s reach now extends into Europe and its neighbourhood. At the same time, some observers question the platform’s effectiveness and relevance.³⁵

The benefits of a pragmatic approach: China and Türkiye

A final interesting dynamic worth a deeper look is that of the powers that avoid making either/or-choices and manage to balance their approach across the geopolitical divides with some success.³⁶ Türkiye and China present

a case in point in our mapping (figures 13 and 14 respectively).

Türkiye’s strategic balancing

Türkiye occupies a unique position in the mapping overview, as the only country that has managed to retain generally good, or at least ambiguous – rather than adversarial – relations with all regional actors involved. Turkish foreign policy has gone through some iterations in the past decade(s). The “zero problems with neighbours” policy, as articulated by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in the early 2000s, eventually coalesced into quite the opposite: an assertiveness that increasingly used military means to secure Türkiye’s strategic interests in the Middle East and South-Caucasus.³⁷ However, this also caused friction with other (major) powers, increasingly risking deteriorating relationships.

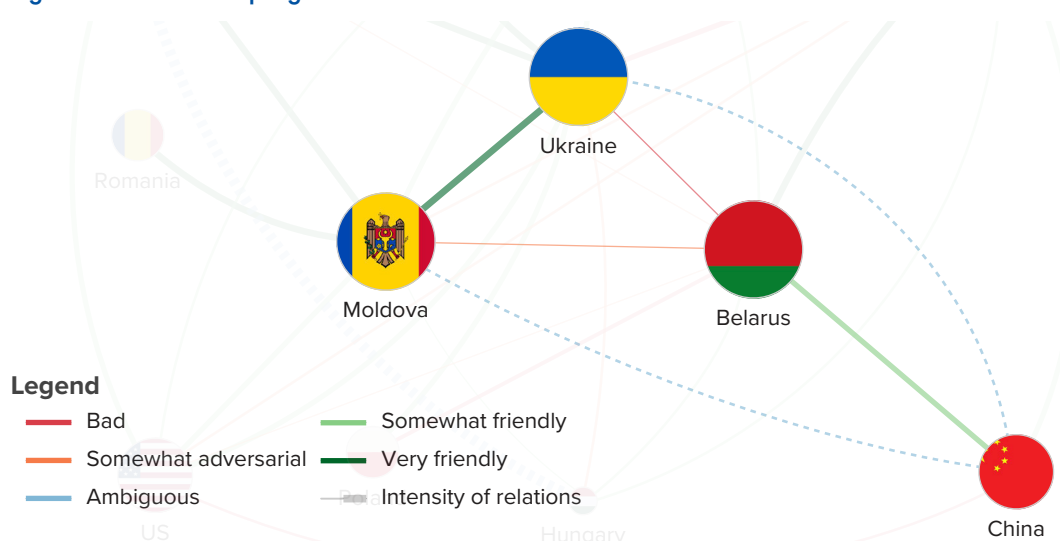
35 Temur Umarov, [The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is ineffective and irrelevant](#), Carnegie, July 5, 2024

36 Hungary has already been discussed as a country attempting a balancing act of its own, but with lesser success. While it also shares an ambiguous relationship with the EU, its status as an EU-member makes such a relationship much more striking – and arguably undesirable – than would be the case with a non-EU member state. This section focusses on countries that

have proven more successful at their balancing.

37 Nienke Heukelingen & Bob Deen, [Beyond Turkey’s ‘zero problems’ policy Motives, means and impact of the interventions in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus](#), Clingendael, January 2022

Figure 14 China's pragmatism



In the 2020s, Ankara began to moderate its official rhetoric and seek rapprochement with traditional rivals in the Middle East, and repair relationships in the mediterranean and the South Caucasus.³⁸ The importance of a working strategic relationship with Russia, despite their differences, had already become clear following the failed coup of 2016, when Moscow offered its support at a crucial moment in modern Turkish history and for President Erdogan personally.³⁹

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye's efforts at balancing its relationships with all actors involved fit well within its described general foreign policy course. With some countries, specific circumstances allowed for a closer engagement, like the historic and cultural ties with the Gagauz minority in Moldova or the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine.⁴⁰ The approach has also put Ankara in a position to play a central role at certain important junctures, like its mediation efforts that brought about the 2023 Black Sea Grain Initiative.⁴¹ Türkiye's geopolitical

balancing and its position as the only significant power in the region with a working relationship with all actors involved puts the country in a position to play a mediating role in the future as well.

China's pragmatism

China's relations with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus have largely been dominated by economic considerations. China became Ukraine's largest trading partner in 2019, overtaking Russia.⁴² For Moldova, it is a wine importer and exporter of various goods, and Belarus was starting to play an important role as a transit country towards (Western) Europe in China's Belt and Road initiative before 2022. However, as some observers argue, China's intrinsic interest in the region should not be exaggerated, and it is that (physical and political) distance that allows Beijing to apply a highly pragmatic approach.⁴³

Although Russia's turn towards the East and its special interest in China can be dated back years before the war in Ukraine, the Russian invasions in

38 Felipe Sánchez Tapia, [The balancing act of Turkish foreign policy and the war in Ukraine](#), Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), May 2022

39 The Moscow Times, [Russia Warned Turkish Government About Imminent Coup - Reports](#), The Moscow Times, July 21, 2016

40 Clingendael expert survey

41 Anna Nagurney, [What does the future of food security look like after the collapse of the Black Sea grain deal?](#) World Economic Forum, July 21, 2023

42 Overtaken by the EU in 2024. Mykyta Simonov, [China-Ukraine relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and future prospects](#), Research in Globalization, Volume 11, December 2025

43 Maxim Samorukov & Temur Umarov, [China's relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova: less than meets the eye](#), Carnegie Moscow Center, no date

2014 and 2022 accelerated this tendency out of sheer necessity, with Moscow facing increasing isolation from the West after 2022.⁴⁴ With Russia's limited options post-February 2022, the Sino-Russian relationship became increasingly asymmetric, pushing Moscow into the position of junior partner. Beijing, in turn, while seemingly surprised by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as Russia's subsequent failure to ensure a quick victory, has refused to abandon Moscow, instead adopting what some observers refer to as a "pro-Russia neutrality."⁴⁵ This is probably driven by a set of contradictory Chinese interests. On the one hand, Russia constitutes a strategic partner in pushing back US influence in the world. On the other, China's trade relations with the US and EU are of a crucial strategic value as well. The result is a Chinese balancing act, where Beijing does not want to see Russia lose its war, but is also intent on retaining its economic ties with the US and EU as much as possible. In practice, this translates in Beijing's continued declared support for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity (including not recognising Russia's annexations of Ukrainian territories), but also an abstention from condemning Russia's aggression and deliveries of dual-use goods for the Russian war effort. It also includes calls for a peaceful resolution to the conflict (including a 12-point peace plan in 2023), and an attempt to separate China's relations with the EU from the Russia-Ukraine conflict as well as from the US-China dealings.⁴⁶

Conclusions and recommendations

Visualising the various relationships between countries in Eastern Europe, as well as their ties with regional and global powers, creates an interesting overview of their interrelation and allows for several conclusions.

It immediately becomes clear that the war in Ukraine and Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 form a pivotal point for the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the region but especially for the core countries of our analysis. Before it, their trajectories had been relatively autonomous; it was the post-2022 war that truly crystallised their positions. Understandably, the effects are strongest closer to the epicentre – the Russia-Ukraine war. The consequences of the war and the divide it has caused in Europe are present on a regional and even the global level, sometimes constituting the defining characteristic of certain countries' attitudes towards not only Russia and Ukraine, but also their perceived allies.

The geopolitical divide has also had its consequences within regional and global political formations. Cooperation across the EU-Russia enmity has become difficult, or even impossible, within forums and organisations – or within regions or themes – that include both, like the Black Sea region discussed in this brief. A result of the rift between Russia and its allies (mainly Belarus) on the one hand, and Ukraine and its supporters on the other has also been an attempted isolation of Russia on the world stage, which in turn led to Moscow's search for other, alternative, non-Western-led formats. In this regard, Russia found a natural partner in China, which has long been suspicious of Western formats and initiatives and has promoted alternative platforms.

Nevertheless, there are regional and global powers that reject the dichotomy of the Russia-West divide and opt instead for a balancing act between the two, to varying degrees of success. One example within the EU is Hungary. Prime minister Orbán has carved out a space for himself to, at times, remain outside of EU policies regarding Russia and Ukraine, and use this obstructive stance in his own dealings and negotiations with the bloc. Our mapping shows, however, that the benefits of this approach have been somewhat limited. While Hungary's relations with Russia can be seen as relatively positive and bring some benefits, Budapest's dealings with Brussels and other European capitals – arguably much more significant for an EU-member state – have suffered.

44 Pierre Andrieu, [China-Russia relations since the start of the war in Ukraine](#), Asia Society, August 20, 2025

45 Yun Sun, [Ukraine: did China have a clue?](#) Simson, February 28, 2022; John Feng, [China surprised by Russia's military failures in Ukraine: CIA Director](#), Newsweek, May 10, 2022

46 Vitaly Kozыrev, [China's pro-Russian neutrality position in the Ukraine crisis as part of its "hybrid" confrontation with the West](#), East Asian Policy, volume 15, issue 2, April & June 2023, p.7-138

Two other – external – actors engaging in a similar approach have fared better. Türkiye managed to retain a working relationship with both Russia and Ukraine and thus finds itself in a strategic position that allows for a key role in (past but also potential future) negotiations and mediation. Whether or not such a role materialises depends on more factors than Türkiye’s positioning alone, but that position remains a rare one, as our mapping demonstrates. China, in turn, has also retained some extent of a working relationship with all parties, despite seemingly deepening ties with Russia. It is perhaps China’s physical and political distance to Eastern Europe that allows for this balancing.

Based on this analysis we can offer the following recommendations to EU policymakers:

- **Continue support for Ukraine and Moldova.** Considering EU’s current policy choices, this may seem quite obvious, but it bears repeating: as the clearest and staunchest allies of the EU in the region – as our mapping illustrates – that face the brunt of Russian hybrid and, in Ukraine’s case, military aggression, it is important to secure Ukraine’s and Moldova’s partnership and continued development in terms of democracy and security, for the longer term. Especially considering the potentially shifting US interest in the region, EU’s support becomes crucial. The loss of either country to the Russian influence would potentially be cause for significant concern for the EU in terms of security and reputational damage.
- **Be aware of the EU’s span of control and influence, and adjust goals, expectations and approaches accordingly.** While the EU’s strategy of supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression should be a constant, its tactics in doing so – including the use of various relationships – should be agile and dynamic, differentiating between different actors. The EU has plenty of leverage on a member-state like Hungary, and can and

should use it to get an obstructionist member in line. The leverage or influence on some other regional or global actors like Türkiye and China is either much more limited or even non-existent. There should therefore be a differentiated approach and tailormade goals per actor. It is important to acknowledge the unlikelihood of convincing every single capital to join a certain camp. Many “in-between” powers can nevertheless play a positive role in future developments and scenarios.

- **Point out the risks of a (less successful) balancing act.** As discussed in this policy brief, some actors are more successful than others in balancing their different relationships. With those that are less successful – like, for instance, the US and Hungary – the EU is advised to point out the risks of such an approach to steer the actor in question more towards an EU-friendly choice. The way in – and force with – which this is done depends on the actor in question and may require diplomatic skill and finesse.
- **Consider what constructive role the more successful “balancers” can play in any given scenario and approach them as such.** EU policymakers should consider the optimal roles for the actors that do succeed in balancing – like Türkiye and China – including roles like mediator, intermediary and others. Actors that cannot be expected to be greatly influenced by the EU, or forced to choose sides, can still play a constructive role in any number of scenarios and occasions, depending on their strengths and specific relationships to the key powers, and the EU should be aware of this at all times. Agility and flexibility in identifying such opportunities is key. At the same time, it is important to keep track of the extent to which the actor in question is still, in fact, balancing, and not leaning towards Russia. Naturally, such strategies should also include other relevant considerations, like a value-based assessment of any given cooperation format.

- **Continuously recalibrate EU's approach to a key Russian ally like Belarus.** The country finds itself in a complex position, with contradictory interests: its ever-closer alliance with Russia presents a challenge in terms of securing the country's autonomy and a modicum of independence. Depending on developments in the region, the EU's strategic interest towards Belarus can fluctuate between having the country completely isolated, to engaging in some level of rapprochement to peel it away from Russia. The analysis of the EU's best strategic interest at any given time should not be static, but rather dynamic, depending on factors like the progress of the war in Ukraine, Russia's strength and stability, US-EU relations, but also internal political developments in Belarus. It is important to keep the entire spectre of instruments at the ready – from complete isolation to rapprochement – and not be afraid to use them instantly if the situation calls for it.
- **Explore ways in which one country's positive relationships can play a role in improving others.** For instance, Moldova's positive relationships with practically all EU actors, including Hungary is striking and quite unique, especially when contrasted with Ukraine's more complex relationships with for example Hungary. Considering Moldova's complete alignment with Ukraine, it may be worth exploring whether Chisinau can play any sort of mediational or intermediary role in improving Kyiv's relations with some of the more difficult EU-members. While it is far from given that Chisinau would be accepted in such a role by the actors involved, depending on further developments in terms of Moldova's security, stability and democracy, as well as its progress on the EU integration path, some space for this may emerge in the future.

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