

LATVIA, ESTONIA EXIT CHINA-BACKED EAST EUROPE COOPERATION FORUM

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Latvia and Estonia have left a Chinese-backed forum aimed at boosting relations with Eastern European countries, according to officials, in what appears to be a new setback for China's increasingly assertive diplomacy.

The move follows China's boosting of its relations with Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine is seen as a possible first step in a series of moves against countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. China has refused to criticise Russia and has condemned punishing economic sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West.

Weeks before the invasion, President and Communist Party leader Xi Jinping hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing and declared their bilateral ties had "no limits".

"In view of the current priorities of Latvian foreign and trade policy, Latvia has decided to cease its participation in the cooperation framework of Central and Eastern European Countries and China," Latvia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Estonia issued a similar statement. China set up the forum to strengthen ties with EU members as well as Serbia and others, partly to further Mr. Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative to build infrastructure across the Eurasian continent.

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