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THE WESTERN BALKANS PERSPECTIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF SINO-EUROPEAN RELATIONS¹

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ABSTRACT

The Western Balkans perspectives as an integral part of the EU is a many time declared commitment throughout the past decades. By emphasizing it as a joint vision, the EU tends to strengthen and maintain not only peace and stability among the six Western Balkans countries (WB6) but also economic and political prosperity transposing its norms and values. Nonetheless, this process is taking too long, leaving space for foreign influences at different times. The economic expansion of China came meanwhile, consisted mainly of infrastructure investment and development, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1 framework. As it is growing exponentially, it is clear that thesedirect investments are highly related to China’s geopolitical interests in the region. The biggest issue here is that China’s values (and its civilizational matrix – predominantly Confucian) are different from the EU’s to such an extent that the parallel presence of both in the Western Balkans could lead to

¹ review scientific paper

numerous controversial choices of the governments, which threaten to slow down, to sabotage and to complicate the long and arduous process of eurointegration. In the end, it can be concluded that the Western Balkans is too small for the presence of more great actors, and thus, the perspectives of the Western Balkans belong to European civilization.

Keywords: Western Balkans, integration, values, FDI, China, EU.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past two decades the place of Western Balkans countries as part of the EU is a many time declared commitment. However, giving the traumatic experience of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the economic, social and political wounds that left in the countries and the time needed for their healing, the present neighbor issues that EU by all means tends to avoid entering in its family, make this process a long lasting story that is open to different influences and turnings off the road.

By emphasizing the membership perspective as a joint vision, EU tends to strengthen and maintain not only peace and stability among the six WB countries, but also economic and political prosperity transposing its norms and values. In that manner, EU membership criteria known by the name of Copenhagen Criteria, consisted of the most important institutional, political and economic requirements for aspiring EU members, had been upgraded particularly for the Western Balkans with additional condition regarding regional cooperation and good neighborly relations in the process of stabilization and association².

The relation of EU and WB is a unique example of engagement that cannot be categorized as a typical foreign policy neither of the EU itself nor of any other state and non-state actor. The EU has developed a comprehensive approach, that includes not only foreign but a great deal of internal policies, in order to support more effectively the inclusion of the

² More on this: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en, [accessed June 2021]

region. It is therefore irresponsible to assume and predict the European Union allowing accession of a WB state that has not completed the processes of democratization and improvements to the principle of rule of law, having in mind the particular focus on these fundamentals, according to the 2020 revised enlargement methodology.

In parallel to this, the economic expansion of China came, rotating mainly around objectives of infrastructure investment and development, mainly as part of the Belt and road initiative. In that manner, China's main interest in the Western Balkans is not particularly to the countries themselves, but to the region as a connection and entrance to the market of the European Union. At the beginning this came as a no threat at all, having in mind that infrastructure development is also something supported and promoted by EU itself through its pre-accession funds. Based on the values it promotes, the EU believed that it may even benefit from increased Chinese investments in the WB, having in mind the need of external financing to impellent all the required adjustments in the process of association.

It was later on acknowledged that China is not doing anything just for the sake of doing it. Economic investments thus, are highly related and interdependent on China's geopolitical interests in the region, and its values towards this issues are different from the EU's to such an extent that parallel presence of both in the Western Balkans leads to numerous controversial choices of direction of the governments of the WB countries, which threaten to slow down and complicate the already long-lasting process.

THE DIFFERENT FRAMEWORKS AS DIVIDER OR A LINK?

As in almost every aspect of its functioning, EU has set a highly intensive and bureaucratic relations to WB countries that are effected on different levels. First, there are the instruments of Stabilization and association, the accession process, regional cooperation and the visa-free travel, all introduced to support and improve the development of the region and its

integration in the EU³. The number of treaties, regular high level summits, as well as active participation from the Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is the institutional level to which constant monitoring and support of the processes is given to the WB countries. Finally, there are the EU Delegations located nationally in respective countries for every aspect that cannot be followed and supported on central level. Also, particularly in the case of Western Balkans there is an institutionalized political engagement for boosting regional cooperation in parallel with the process of integration, that is the Berlin process initiative⁴.

On the other hand, China does not have such institutional framework particularly for the Western Balkans and its foreign relations with the respective countries are maintained at bilateral level. However, very important aspect of the overall multilateral policy of China with the broader region is the 17+1 mechanism, which is a form of cooperation of China with Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE). All of the Western Balkans countries except Kosovo are members of the 17+1 mechanism and these are the only non-EU members in the group, which is of no significance to China in regards to the cooperation within the mechanism.

Comparatively seeing these two forms of cooperation, we can observe very strong and firmly settled cooperation of EU with WB as a region in general, but also individually with the countries. This cooperation is founded on different levels and covers many aspects of development and democratization. The relations with China on the other side, are more loose in institutional manner, and only include WB as part of the CEE region and the bilateral relations with respective countries. No particular institutional framework for the WB is developed nor it is planned to be in the near future. However, in the case of EU-Western Balkans-China

³European Parliament, (2020), Fact Sheets on the European Union, The Western Balkans, available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans> [accessed June 2021]

⁴ More on this at: <https://berlinprocess.info/> [accessed, June 2021]

relations, it seems that the most institutionalized is not necessarily the strongest tie. In some WB countries political and economic ties with China, are growing exponentially. This does not necessarily indicate withdrawal from EU integration per se', but definitely an open door for different options.

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

China's Belt and Road Initiative is the main framework for China's foreign policy towards most parts of the world, including the Western Balkans.

China's relations with this region's countries are to a large degree shaped by this framework, which aims to increase international trade and the role of Chinese companies, in particular in transport, energy and communication infrastructure.

	EU		China	
	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Exports</i>	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Exports</i>
Albania	58% (1)	76% (1)	9% (3)	2% (4)
BiH	61% (1)	72% (1)	7% (3)	-
Kosovo	49% (1)	33% (1)	10% (3)	-
Montenegro	47% (1)	37% (1)	8% (3)	4% (5)
N. Macedonia	50% (1)	79% (1)	6% (4)	2% (4)
Serbia	59% (1)	68% (1)	9% (2)	2% (7)

Chart1: Western Balkans' trade in goods with the EU and China, as percentage of the total trade(Source: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/1-chinas-approach-to-the-western-balkans/#12-the-economic-domain> [2021])

China has risen to be the second or third most important import partner. In other words, while the EU is still by far the most important partner, China has managed to offset other traditional partners of the region like Russia or Turkey.

The algorithm for foreign direct investment (FDI) is similar to that for trade. Engagement is growing, but China is not the largest direct investor in any of the region's countries. In 2018 the top investors were France (for Serbia), Austria (for Bosnia and Herzegovina), the United Kingdom (for North Macedonia and Kosovo), Switzerland (for Albania) and Italy (for Montenegro).⁵

Bosnia and Herzegovina has no recent reliable data available for Chinese FDI.

For Albania and Montenegro, Chinese FDI is low, accounting for just 2.27 per cent and 0.36 per cent respectively in 2018.⁶

North Macedonia recorded a slightly higher figure, with Chinese FDI accounting for 3.75 per cent of the total investment in 2018.⁷

⁵Sources for foreign direct investment figures have been obtained from the WB6 central banks' datasets [accessed May 2021]. For Serbia, see https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/80/platni_bilans.html; for Bosnia and Herzegovina, see http://statistics.cbbh.ba/Panorama/novaview/SimpleLogin_en_html.aspx; for North Macedonia, see http://nbstat.nbrm.mk/pxweb/en/Eksterni%20statistiki/Eksterni%20statistiki_Direktni%20investicii_Direktni%20investicii%20-%20Dvizenja/4_DIRMPoZemjiGodisniEN.px/table/tableViewLayout1/; for Kosovo, see <https://meptinis.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/A1B0861D-D650-47D5-AF53-898FE80D414B.pdf>; for Albania, see <https://www.bankofalbania.org/?crd=0,8,1,8,0,18666&uni=20200212134102901452029929756148&ln=2&mode=alone>; and for Montenegro, see <http://www.mipa.co.me/en/sdi-statistika/>.

⁶Bank of Albania, 'Foreign Direct Investment Flow', https://www.bankofalbania.org/Statistics/External_sector_statistics/Foreign_Direct_Investments/Foreign_direct_investments_flow.html [accessed June 2021]; and Government of Montenegro, 'FDI Statistics', <https://www.mipa.co.me/en/sdi-statistika/> [accessed June 2021].

⁷National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia, 'Direct Investment in the Republic of North Macedonia: Transactions – by Country, by Years',

In 2016, Chinese FDI represented 7.32 per cent of the total FDI in Serbia, while the top investor – the Netherlands – had a 13.18 per cent share.⁸

In 2018, Chinese investments in Serbia had risen to a 14.82 per cent share, coming close to (then the main investor) France's 16.24 per cent.⁹ China's FDI is based mainly on acquisitions rather than Greenfield investments. In 2016, Hesteel Group, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, purchased the Zelezara Smederevo steel-manufacturing conglomerate for EUR 46 million. Also in Serbia, Zijin Mining Group, in which the Chinese government holds a controlling stake, bought a 63 per cent interest (for EUR 279 million) in the RTB Bor copper factory (which was then renamed Zijin Bor Copper) in 2018. Recently, in April 2020, Zijin Bor Copper announced a EUR 731 million investment to expand its capacity.¹⁰

In Albania, Chinese state-owned company China Everbright Group bought TIA, the operator of Albania's national airport, in 2016. Investments by Chinese entities in foreign airports are in line with the Belt and Road Initiative, as they potentially contribute to improved transport links between China and other regions, and/or to a great role for Chinese companies in international air transport. Another instance of Chinese FDI related to Albania occurred in 2016 when Geo-Jade

http://nbstat.nbrm.mk/pxweb/en/Eksterni%20statistiki/Eksterni%20statistiki_Direktni%20investicii_Direktni%20investicii%20-%20Dvizenja/4_DIRMPoZemjiGodisniEN.px/table/tableViewLayout1/ [accessed May 2021].

⁸National Bank of Serbia, 'Serbia's Balance of Payments', https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/80/platni_bilans.html [accessed June 2021].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Serbia Energy, 'Zijin Bor Copper in Serbia Plans to Invest \$800 Mln in Expansion of its Production Capacity', <https://serbia-energy.eu/zijin-bor-copper-in-serbia-plans-to-invest-800-mln-in-expansion-of-its-production-capacity/> [accessed June 2021].

Petroleum bought the Canadian firm Bankers Petroleum for EUR 385 million.¹¹

Bankers Petroleum's main asset is an exclusive concession to produce oil at the Patos-Marinza oil field in Albania, the biggest onshore oil field in Europe. It also has exclusive concessions in two further oil fields in Albania (which are known as Kucova and Block F). Bankers Petroleum, which derives all of its oil revenues from Albania, is the country's largest oil producer. The company produces 95 per cent of Albania's crude oil, and in 2018 'mineral fuels including oil' accounted for almost 11 per cent of the country's exports (with roughly 85 per cent of extracted crude oil being exported).¹² According to Bankers Petroleum's website, it is the largest foreign investor, largest taxpayer and one of the largest employers in Albania.¹³

The aspect of China's economic ties with the region that has drawn most international attention relates not to trade or direct investment, however, but to loans for infrastructure construction. While Chinese construction companies are among the world's largest and active in many parts of the world, their role in Europe is largely limited to the Western Balkans (including Croatia).¹⁴

China's infrastructure-related lending to the WB6 countries includes the following:

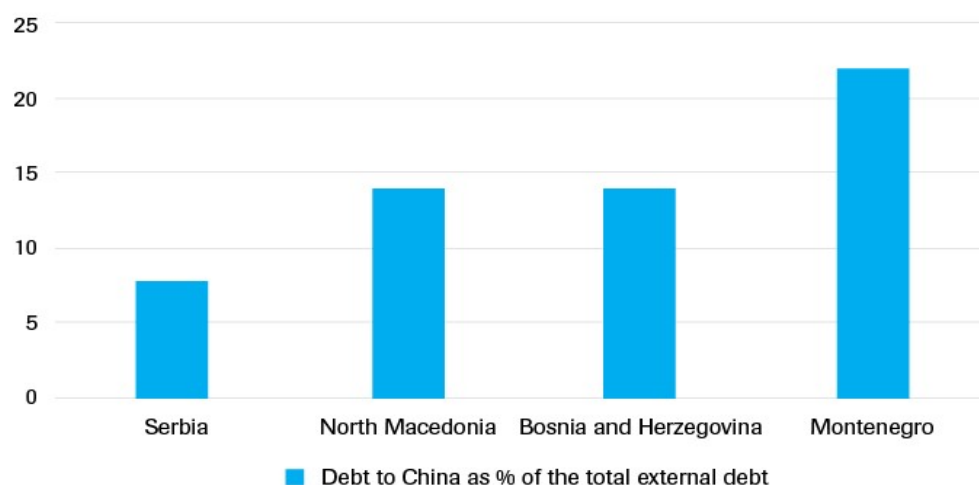
¹¹*Balkan Insight*, 'Chinese Investments Raise Eyebrows in Albania', <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/05/03/chinese-investments-raise-eyebrows-in-albania-05-02-2016/> [accessed June 2021].

¹²Reuters, 'China's Bankers Deny Abusing Dominant Oil Position in Albania', <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-albania-competition-crude-idUSKBN1X31UP> (accessed 27 June 2020); and World's Top Exports, 'Albania's Top 10 Exports', www.worldstopexports.com/albanias-top-10-exports/ [accessed June 2021].

¹³Bankers Petroleum, 'Profile', <https://bankerspetroleum.com/about/> [accessed June 2021].

¹⁴M. Petkova and F. van der Putten (2020), 'Building the "Belt and Road" in Europe?', *Clingendael Policy Brief*, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/building-belt-and-road-europe> [accessed June 2021].

- *Montenegro's* sovereign debt to China is the highest in the region. China's Export–Import (Exim) Bank has financed the construction of the Bar–Boljare highway. As of 2019, Montenegro owes EUR 671 million, which is 22 per cent of its total foreign debt of EUR 3.1 billion, with its total foreign debt standing at 63 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). China is the second biggest lender to Montenegro, and it is the single biggest bilateral lender.
- In 2013 *North Macedonia* borrowed EUR 714 million from China's Exim Bank for the construction of two highways: Miladinovtsi–Stip and Kicevo–Ohrid. This is approximately 14 per cent of the current 2020 level of government debt, which stands at EUR 5.2 billion.
- *Albania* has registered a decreasing level of indebtedness to China, owing Beijing EUR 13.7 million in 2010 and EUR 1.6 million in 2019.
- There is no data on *Kosovo*, which presumably has no debt with China as the countries do not have official relations.
- *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (BiH) has welcomed involvement by Chinese construction companies in the construction of the 12-kilometre-long Počitelj–Zvirovići section of a highway at a cost of EUR 66 million, which is being financed by the European Investment Bank (EIB). Bosnia and Herzegovina has received loans from China with regard to two energy projects, the Stanari coal plant and the Tuzla lignite power plant, which accumulated a total debt of EUR 1.1 billion. In May 2020, the government of the *Republika Srpska* (one of the two political entities that make up BiH) signed an agreement with China Gezhouba Group, part of the Chinese state-owned conglomerate China Energy Engineering Corporation (CEEC), to build a large-scale hydropower plant in the south of BiH.



- *Serbia* borrowed EUR 195 million from the Exim Bank for the Pupin Bridge and EUR 1.08 billion for the two sections of the Belgrade–Budapest railway. Additionally, EUR 538 million were borrowed for the construction of the Kostolac B3 coal power plant. This equals 7.91 per cent of Belgrade’s EUR 24.5 billion government debt.

This amount is approximately equal to what Belgrade owns to the EIB, or half of its debt to the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).¹⁵

Chart 2. Debt to China, accumulated by loans for infrastructure and energy projects, as a percentage of the total foreign government debt, 2019 levels (Source: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/1-chinas-approach-to-the-western-balkans/#12-the-economic-domain> [2021])

¹⁵ China and the EU in the Western Balkans | Clingendael Report, August 2020, pp. 14-15

In infrastructure financing China is an alternative provider to the EU, one that countries in need can turn to if the EU is not willing to help. In Montenegro, China's Exim Bank was the only available actor to finance a highway that Montenegro's government has deemed of national significance for decades.¹⁶

The only completed infrastructure construction project in the Western Balkans is the Pupin bridge in Serbia since 2016, with the other bigger and more complex projects still under construction or delayed. The Bar–Boljare highway in Montenegro, the Belgrade–Budapest railway, the two motorways in North Macedonia – Miladinovtsi–Shtip and Ohrid–Kicevo – and the Pochitel–Zvirovici section of motorway in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain under construction.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

China's official rhetoric stresses equity and mutually advantageous economic cooperation, thereby moving focus away from ideas and politics. While China is an economic rather than a political player in the Western Balkans, the political component still plays a role in bilateral relations..¹⁷

The Chinese government has generally referred to its relationship with the whole 17+1 group only in general terms as one of 'traditional friendship' and 'shared past'.¹⁸

While Chinese–Albanian diplomatic ties were very close during the 1960s, after the Cold War and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Serbia emerged as China's primary diplomatic partner in the region. While President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade for the first time, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić insisted that China would bring more jobs, improve

¹⁶Mladen Grgić (2016), 'Chinese Infrastructural Investments in the Balkans: Political Implications of the Highway Project in Montenegro', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 7, p. 55.

¹⁷ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Speech: Strengthen Traditional Friendship and Promote Common Development', [link](#) [accessed May 2021].

¹⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

living standards, and lift the country's economic growth. That same year, China's state-owned HBIS Group took over Smederevo's steel mill for 46 million euros, or \$55 million. The steel mill generates 5,200 jobs in Smederevo, a city of 100,000 that has depended on the mill for decades.¹⁹

During the 1998–1999 Kosovo War, China was supportive (and has remained so) of the Serbian position on Kosovo and objected to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) military intervention. Another serious event brought China and Serbia even closer together: On May 7, 1999, five U.S. Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) guided bombs, part of a NATO operation, hit China's embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese reporters and leading to outrage in Beijing. Although the U.S. administration stated that this strike was accidental, there have been ongoing doubts in China, with many feeling that it was an intentional act on the part of the United States.

Beijing has not recognised Kosovo as an independent state and abstained in the voting for UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which laid the basis for Kosovo's role internationally. This approach stems from concerns over political stability in autonomous regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as China's resolute rejection of an independent Taiwan. China eventually accepted Resolution 1244 as a legal basis for the settlement of the Pristina–Belgrade dispute.²⁰

In 2015, for example, China voted against Kosovo's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) membership bid.²¹ In 2017, Kosovo withdrew its Interpol application as the assembly was hosted in China, with the reason being lack of

¹⁹ ASIA FOCUS #93 – ASIA PROGRAM / November 2018, p. 38

²⁰ *Xinhuanet*, 'China Supports Settlement of Kosovo Issue through Dialogue: Envoy', http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/11/c_138132033.htm [accessed May 2021].

²¹ European Commission (DG TRADE), 'EU Trade in Goods with Kosovo', https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_kosovo_en.pdf [accessed May 2021].

international support but also the unfriendly environment.²² In 2018, Serbian media outlets reported that China had voted against Kosovo's Interpol application, but as the voting is by secret ballot this claim cannot be verified.²³

Also, as in many countries, China has been inviting numerous Serbian journalists, especially at BRI-related events. "Everything to do with China is treated and covered positively in government circles and in the Serbian media," said Jelena Milić of the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies in Belgrade.²⁴

There are active Chinese language schools, including at the two Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad University. A new massive eight-story Chinese cultural centre is under construction on the site of the bombed Chinese embassy. Despite the increased presence of Chinese nationals in Serbia, China is still seen as a remote country, with little cultural appeal to young Serbians, who are immigrating to Western countries in large numbers, driven away by the lack of job opportunities at home.²⁵

China took no active position on the 2018 Prespa Agreement, which settled the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, and which China probably welcomed as a step towards a more stable environment for the LSER.

²² P. Isufi (2017), 'Kosovo Abandons Bid to Join Interpol this Year', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/21/kosovo-abandons-bid-to-join-interpol-this-year-09-21-2017/> [accessed May 2021].

²³ B92, 'Kosovo's Bid to Join UNESCO Fails; Details of Voting Emerge', https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2015&mm=11&dd=09&nav_id=95984 [accessed May 2021]; and N1, 'Serbia Thanks China for Being Against Kosovo in Interpol', <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a437054/Serbia-grateful-for-China-s-opposition-to-Kosovo-s-Interpol-membership.html> [accessed May 2021].

²⁴ ASIA FOCUS #93 – ASIA PROGRAM / November 2018, p. 41

²⁵ Ibid.

China also continued the construction of the Croatian Peljesac bridge, in spite of Bosnian claims that the bridge obstructs access to Neum, Bosnia and Herzegovina's only seaport.²⁶

All countries in the Western Balkans region adhere to a *One China policy* by refraining from political interaction with Taiwan, the extent to which they support China on other issues, such as matters relating to Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the South China Sea, has remained limited.

In Serbia, Marko Djuric, in his capacity as vice-president of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, stated in an interview with China's press agency *Xinhua*: "I can tell you that the level of protection of minority rights in Xinjiang is something that many countries in my part of the world could envy".²⁷ Also, "Just as Serbia supports the one-China policy, China supports Serbia as its best and most stable friend in south-eastern Europe", Serbia's then deputy prime minister Božidar Đelić said in Beijing in 2009. Serbia would later receive Beijing's support against EU pressure to recognize Kosovo's independence.²⁸

Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has expressed support for China over the issue of Hong Kong.²⁹

Montenegro's foreign ministry issued a statement on the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on the dispute between

²⁶M. Lakic (2018), 'Bosnia to Protest to EU over Croatia Bridge Deal', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/24/bosnia-calls-eu-commission-over-peljesac-bridge-04-24-2018/> [accessed May 2021].

²⁷*Xinhua*, 'Interview: On Xinjiang and Terrorism, US Double Standards on Display', www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/18/c_138641055.htm [accessed June 2021].

²⁸ As China Moves In, Serbia Reaps Benefits, With Strings Attached, New York Times, September 9, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/09/world/europe/china-serbia-european-union.html> [accessed June 2021].

²⁹ Serbian Press Agency SRNA, 'Support to China in Efforts to Maintain Peace in Hong Kong', www.srna.rs/novosti/718507/support-to-china-in-efforts-to-maintain-peace-in-hong-kong.htm [accessed June 2021].

China and the Philippines in the South China Sea, classifying the Philippines' appeal as a unilateral measure and calling for dialogue instead.³⁰

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia have not issued any statements on these issues.

In 2019, a group of 22 states issued a joint letter to the UN Human Rights Council, condemning China's mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This was followed by a letter from a group of 55 states that backed the PRC's policies in the Xinjiang region. None of the Western Balkans countries joined either letter, but a second letter from October 2019 supporting China was co-signed by Serbia.³¹

VukVuksanovic, an astute observer of history, estimates that the Balkans is "an inroad into the heart of Europe". As he puts it, "the European Union should send a strong political message that these countries will join the Union eventually, to avoid fomenting insecurity that plays into China's hands."

THE SECURITY DIMENSION

Serbia is the country with the most extensive cooperation with China in the security area. These include police cooperation, military equipment purchases and certain telecommunications operations.

³⁰ Government of Montenegro, 'Announcement on the Verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague on the Dispute between China and the Philippines', <http://www.gov.me/naslovna/vijesti-iz-ministarstava/163193/Saopstenje-povodom-objavljivanja-presude-Stalnog-arbitraznog-suda-u-Hagu-o-sporu-izmedu-Kine-i-Filipina.html?alphabet=cyr%20>[accessed June 2021].

³¹ China and the EU in the Western Balkans | Clingendael Report, August 2020, p.20

A joint Sino–Serbian police exercise aimed at disabling terrorists and releasing hostages was held in late 2019 at a facility of the Zelezara Smederevo steel company.³²

From the Chinese side, the exercise involved 180 police officers, 20 vehicles and three helicopters. The rise of Chinese tourists in Serbia, which draws more Chinese tourists than the other Western Balkans countries, prompted the start of joint police patrols in the Serbia capital, Belgrade, in 2019.³³ Apart from Belgrade, Chinese police officers were also deployed to Novi Sad and Smederevo, according to the Serbian Minister of the Interior out of security considerations.³⁴ Chinese police officers in the three Serbian cities number only six in total, with no power to arrest or to use coercive means. In recent years, the Chinese government also deployed police officers to cities in some other European countries, including Italy and France.

Serbia is the only country in Europe that has bought unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from China. It bought nine Chengdu Pterodactyl-1 drones in late 2019, with a possible future order of an additional fifteen UAVs.³⁵ These drones can be employed for reconnaissance tasks or be fitted with a variety of weapons, such as laser-guided bombs, air-to-surface anti-tank missiles and guided rockets.³⁶

³² M. Zivanovic (2019), 'Serbia and China Hold Joint Police Exercise', <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/28/serbia-and-china-hold-joint-police-exercise/> [accessed May 2021].

³³ Radio Free Europe, 'Chinese Police Launch Joint Patrols in Serbia', <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-china-police/30174932.html> [accessed May 2021].

³⁴ N1, 'Joint Serbian–Chinese Police Patrols in Belgrade', <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a526839/Joint-Serbian-Chinese-police-patrols-in-Belgrade.html> [accessed June 2021].

³⁵ D. Stojanovic (2019), 'China to Boost Serb Military with Drones, Other Equipment', *Associated Press*, <https://apnews.com/c19a207d89b34dd7aa0f608933ef607b> [accessed May 2021].

³⁶ Airforce Technology, 'Wing Loong Unmanned Aerial Vehicle', <https://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/wing-loong-unmanned-aerial-vehicle-uav/> [accessed May 2021].

Beyond Serbia, the scope for security cooperation with China is limited, with Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia being NATO members and Kosovo having no diplomatic ties with China.

Cooperation with Chinese communications and technology company Huawei has so far remained limited to Serbia.

While the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a cooperation agreement with Huawei in 2018, no further cooperation followed.³⁷

WHAT IS SO ATTRACTIVE IN CHINESE SUPPORT FOR THE WB?

Generally speaking, EU is known as a strict rule-maker. Its fundamental values couldn't be promoted and supported throughout the years and so many phases of enlargement if it wasn't for its strict policies and conditions that all present and aspiring members have to fulfil and impellent. On the other hand, China seems very superficial in setting rules and conditions when providing support and aid, and those who choose to move along the line of least resistance, may easily be convinced to go that way.

For example, one of the most important conditions for the aspiring members, as for the WB countries, is the principles of rule of law and good governance, expressed through chapters 23 and 24 of the *acquis communautaire*. (judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom and security) as reflected by their inclusion in the 'fundamentals' cluster in the revised enlargement methodology. And this are conditions not only set for improving the stated areas per se, but as well as for accessing financial and other assistance from EU. When comes to economic investment from China, there is no such conditioning. In other words, China will invest in WB countries, no matter the lack of transparency and accountability, the risks of corruption and undemocratic

³⁷Sarajevo Times, 'Sarajevo Mayor Signed Agreement on Cooperation with Huawei', <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/sarajevo-mayor-signed-agreement-on-cooperation-with-huawei/> [accessed May 2021].

practices, or lack of mechanisms for protection of human rights and providing security for its citizens.

Moreover, human rights and freedom of expression are central to the functioning of democracy and are part of the EU's core values. In that manner, media freedom is a crucial part of freedom of expression and it is generally acknowledged that independent media plays an important role in exposing political bad behaviors, and therefore crucial part of a functioning democracy. While it is unclear whether and what media actors in the Western Balkans are directly or indirectly influenced by Chinese entities, it is well known that China enforces a media campaign of expanding its influence abroad, so there is no reason to believe that this tendency will not continue in the WB, if it hasn't already. One example of media enforcement of Chinese presence in the Western Balkans happened in May 2020, when billboards portraying Chinese president Xi Jinping with the text "Thank you, brother Xi!" ("Hvalabrate Si!") were published in Belgrade, which is a clear sign that pro-Chinese discourse is spreading throughout Serbia³⁸.

And here comes the most important issue towards this matter - Chinese standards on media freedom and human rights are very low comparing to the EU. China is ranked 177 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index³⁹. This may come handy for those political elites of the WB that show autocratic tendencies since it means an economic support without human rights and democratic values conditions, but that is completely opposite of EU's vision and its requirements of the aspiring member states.

We may be fooled to think it is a sign of respect to not interfere in this areas when providing economic support at the beginning, but this is the point where we should ask the question: what is the cost of this

³⁸ Chapple A., (2020), Public Displays Of Affection? Chinese Signage In Serbia Sparks EU Ire, Radio Free Europe, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-signage-in-serbia-sparks-eu-ire/30637889.html> [accessed June 2021]

³⁹ Reporters Without Borders (2021), World Press Freedom Index, Ranking 2021, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> [accessed June 2021]

investment that should improve our societies but at the same time allows us to go backwards in development and democratization?

And this list could go on and on, counting different areas and aspects to which Chinese influence directly or indirectly interferes with the process of integration of the WB countries. From energy and green policies, through security and data protection all the way to public procurement and macro-economic policies, there is an inversely proportional dependence of requirement of China and EU from the WB countries that brings them in a position of hardly possible balance, but rather of choice from two completely opposite directions.

CONCLUSIONS

The future of the Western Balkan countries is within the European Union at that is a statement that should be noted before concluding anything else regarding this matter. Different influences will come from different sides eventually, having in mind the integration of the WB is a lasting process and the membership of EU is not just a question of status but a question of shared principles, values and regulation that will bring our societies to a higher level of democratization.

When comes to China's objectives in the WB, they are not officially opposite to what EU is promoting in the region. Economic and infrastructure investment and development in the Western Balkans are the areas where China has a great influence and exponentially growing presence, but these are shared objectives by the three sides of this story. On the other hand, the EU and WB relations are very firmly settled, with multi-level institutionalization that by no means can be affected by the economic or even political engagement of China in the region.

However, the intentions of China of very serious engagement in the Western Balkans are a reality and we should make no mistake that these intentions are purely economic. The highly proactive and aggressive diplomacy, that adjusts its moves in real time as circumstances occur, is entering the WB in a big way, and it is welcomed with standing ovations from certain structures present in every of the 6 WB countries.

The European Commissioner Johannes Hahn was right warning on the putting of China's 'Trojan horses' in several positions in Europe including Western Balkans in 2018: "We should be aware about the strategic concept by China and react in an adequate manner. I think this will be one of the great challenges of Europe."⁴⁰. Every adventure comes at a price and engagement of the WB countries with China involves political choices that are incompatible with EU *acquis* and EU standards.

Furthermore, the EU enlargement toward Western Balkan countries seems to last longer that it should have. Different crises EU has been dealing with, along with the Covid-19 crisis, have led to serious misunderstandings and unequal decisions of member states, regarding several issues including enlargement. That led to EU sending mixed signals to WB countries thus leaving space for different interpretations and skepticism. In many different occasions it seems that the Member States increasingly prefer to put national priorities and interests in the first place, with national agendas dominating over the Union's long-term interests. In particular, using or more precisely misusing of the veto power by specific Member States, as in the case of Bulgarian veto for initiating opening negotiations with North Macedonia (solely by national interests regarding history and identity), has made enlargement more politicized and nationalized and lowered EU's credibility in Western Balkan countries. Delaying accession by using the veto especially when it is provoked only by national interest and agendas, neglecting broader interest of the EU as a whole, could seriously compromise not only the integration of Western Balkans, but also the EU's long-term approach and strategies.

In the meantime, China is presenting itself in the region bigger than ever, taking advantage of every crisis and issue that appears with the speed of light. What might have started as economic investment that will benefit all is rising into a firmly settled political presence in all aspects of the WB

⁴⁰Heath R. & Gray A. (2018), Beware Chinese Trojan horses in the Balkans, EU warns, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/>[accessed June 2021]

societies. What might come out of this is strengthening the positions of autocratic elites in the region, who will instead of EU turn to the Asian great power that puts no democratization and rule of law conditions on them. They will most certainly sell this to the public as a sign of respect for the national interests of the country, but the truth is that behind the curtain lies an agenda for development illiberal practices that will slow down or completely stop the process of stabilization and association of the region.

Western Balkans region is too small for the presence of more than one great actor. Mixed influences can cause more damage than use since they create separate ways of development of the fragile democracies that are not yet prepared to cope strongly with power streams. Therefore, it is an obligation that has to be taken into serious consideration from both WB6 as well as the EU to take serious steps forward in confirming the place of WB into the EU, thus preventing further influences that can drag these countries into opposite direction of what they have been working on for so long.

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