

THE PLACE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS OF CHINA AFTER THE RENAMING PERIOD¹

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ABSTRACT

The political and economic situation in the Republic of North Macedonia and the declarative commitments of the EU for the European future of the country, are a serious geopolitical challenge for the EU and an opportunity for the penetration of China's interests in the region. In fact, China's strategy is present in all Western Balkan countries and we can perceive it primarily through the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) or known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 17+1 cooperation platform as a framework, for the implementation of Chinese projects. The above two serious projects contribute and have contributed to the change in the perception of China's foreign policy capacity.

The Covid pandemic has only further strengthened China's influence globally, in the context of the global struggle for dominance in the production of vaccines against Covid 19.

This paper aims to show how North Macedonia, as a small country, is positioned within the geostrategic interests of China expressed through the initiative known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 17+1 cooperation platform, but also in the context of the current Covid situation.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), 17+1, influence, China, Republic of North Macedonia

¹ review scientific paper

INTRODUCTION

The European Union, with its declarative efforts, has moved away from the region, creating a vacuum for economic and political power in the Western Balkans. It is an indisputable fact that these are small economically weak countries, which are often synonymous with conflict, corruption, poverty. The picture is complemented by the media, whose independence in information is debatable, and not infrequently subject to influences, through which public opinion is manipulated. The small political and economic importance of the Western Balkans, as well as their position between the United States, Russia, Turkey and affluent North Europe, is constantly debated, but no one pays attention to the quiet China that has become an important investor in Southeast Europe, not doing it secretly.² The countries of the Western Balkans, tired of waiting to join the EU, accepted China's loans with open arms. A win-win situation for the local authoritarian leaders, they have someone to borrow money from, and he does not ask for anything, and on the other hand it is presented as investments that have not been made for the last 30-40 years.³ North Macedonia is on the path of that Chinese ambition and is not bypassed. Although the Macedonian-Chinese relations experienced a diplomatic adventure in the 90s, with the recognition of Taiwan, which was a kind of scandal and caused a cooling of relations between the two countries, but that did not stop China from being present in North Macedonia and realizing its geostrategic goals. North Macedonia is part of the Chinese BRI and 17 + 1 initiatives, and was the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to use \$ 10 billion made available to CEE countries through Chinese state-owned infrastructure projects under the 17 + 1 cooperation.⁴ The paper aims to show how North Macedonia, as a small country, is positioned within the geostrategic interests of China expressed through the BRI and 17 + 1 initiatives, but also in the context of the current

²DW in Macedonian, Michael Martenes, China Becomes a Factor in the Balkans, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/2k1fh>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

³ DW in Macedonian, Ljupcho Popovski, The Chinese Network in the Balkans, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3RAvC>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

⁴Ana Blazheska, BRI – *POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, 2018, Center for Research and Policy Making.

Covid pandemic. Is China using these initiatives, as well as dealing with the Covid pandemic, ie with the production and distribution of its vaccines, trying to impose itself geostrategically in the region, in this case in North Macedonia? Are Chinese loans a real opportunity for the realization of serious capital infrastructure projects in North Macedonia or is it a "debt-trap" theory as in the case of Montenegro? How does this affect the political situation and prospects of North Macedonia? The first part will analyze the geostrategic interests of China in the Western Balkans, while in the second part as North Macedonia, as a small country is positioned within the geostrategic interests of China expressed through BRI and 17 + 1, but also in the context of the current situation with Covid-19 virus, from which conclusions can be drawn.

WHY CHINA NEEDS WESTERN BALKANS?

The BRI and 17 + 1 initiatives have undoubtedly secured China a place among the most important economic and even strategic factors around the world, ensuring its presence in many parts of the world, where it simultaneously invests in strategically important areas and promotes cooperation between those countries. The Western Balkans are on the road to the Chinese economic corridor leading to Central Europe.⁵ Outside the EU, but surrounded by EU member states, the Western Balkans is an open field in which a significant part of the 17 + 1 Initiative's investments have already been invested. China has announced the creation of favorable conditions for economic cooperation by solving the burning problems of the Western Balkan countries at once, such as infrastructure, logistics, trade facilitation, investment promotion, tourism, etc., guided by the principle of mutual benefit. In the absence of the EU in this region, this Chinese offer has raised expectations of the Western Balkan countries, which expected an increase in their exports to China, an increase in Chinese FDI and cheap loans to build infrastructure projects, especially in transport and energy, which are essential for the region.⁶ In fact, by building better infrastructure, it is primarily trying to reduce its own production and export costs. However, China's infrastructure projects obviously also have a

⁵China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape, OECD Business and Finance Outlook, 2018, p.12, https://doi.org/10.1787/bus_fin_out-2018-6-en

⁶Ana Blazheska, BRI – *POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, 2018, Center for Research and Policy Making.

more important goal of establishing connections from the Greek port of Piraeus with Budapest. China's intentions to connect with the prosperous regions of Europe are obvious.⁷ China has always publicly supported the aspirations of the Western Balkan countries for EU membership, in fact it knows in detail the capabilities of the WB countries, which do not pose any threat to China's foreign policy. Through 17 + 1 China and Chinese companies learn the different laws, standards and ways of doing business. By the very process of aligning with the EU standards of potential EU members from the Western Balkans, Chinese companies will already have good references when participating in much larger tenders within the EU market. But for Chinese companies, the membership of these countries in the EU will mean market stability and prosperity of these countries, but free access to a market of about half a billion inhabitants. In fact, it means untapped economic potential that would increase several times with the membership of these countries in the EU. But what is much more significant, and which has started to worry everyone in the West, is China's influence on the 17 + 1 countries, which is manifested directly in the Council of the EU, through its members who joined the China Cooperation Initiative.⁸ The examples of Hungary and Greece show what this can mean. Chinese investment in both countries is huge, which may be the reason why both have repeatedly vetoed EU resolutions critical of China in recent years. Critics who see Chinese investment in the Balkans as an increase in China's political influence in the region see China as doing so through three starting points: the credit crunch, low environmental standards and persistent corruption.⁹ The West's concern in the case of Montenegro, which is not only a candidate for EU membership but also a NATO member, is aimed at increasing Chinese influence over the Montenegrin government, which may be reflected in NATO structures themselves. and one day in the EU.¹⁰

In that direction, the West pays serious attention to the investments of China power plants, of which Tuzla is the largest so far, but also to the scandalous

⁷DW in Macedonian, Why is China investing in the Balkans? Available at:

<https://p.dw.com/p/2qVMo>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

⁸Ana Krstinovska, The Place of the Republic of North Macedonia in the Chinese Strategy for the Western Balkans, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in R.N. Macedonia, n.d., p.7

⁹DW in Macedonian, Ljupcho Popovski, China Network in the Balkans, Available at:

<https://p.dw.com/p/3RAvC>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

¹⁰Auto MEDIA MK, German "Zeit" with astonishing facts about Chinese highways in the Balkans, Available at: <https://automediamk.mk/objavi/crna-gora-kina-avtopat/>, Viewed on: 23.07.2021

investments in the construction of the highways Kicevo-Ohrid and Skopje-Stip in North Macedonia. The public witnessed the fierce reactions of former EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn to China's influence in the region, and no less provocative was the statement of former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel in September 2017: "If we [the European Union] fail "In developing a single strategy towards China, then China will be able to divide Europe." The question is whether China's ultimate ambition is to undermine the already fragmented EU? China, however, saw a chance to strengthen its influence in the Western Balkans. China is already positioning itself as a major player in the fight against the Corona virus globally, although this is not universally accepted with equal approval. Some experts comment on China's new strategy of so-called "diplomacy mask", which was later replaced by "vaccine diplomacy". As governments around the world face conflict, division and border closures for the export of masks, medical equipment and medicines, Chinese authorities are portraying themselves as saviors who have offered help to the world and the Western Balkans.¹¹ Whether the EU has not learned its lesson again and is facing the biggest geostrategic challenge from a breakthrough in the East in its backyard remains to be seen, but one thing is certain, and that is that EU inertia on these issues will be to the detriment of Western Balkans integration in the EU. While the West is worried about Chinese investment in the Western Balkans, Serbia is celebrating a new investment from China, namely the opening of a factory to produce Chinese vaccines.¹² It is the pinnacle of China's "vaccine diplomacy."¹³ Unlike other countries in the Western Balkans, Serbia plays an important role in China's interests and is considered a crossing point of the BRI initiative in the EU, especially as shown by the Belgrade-Budapest railway. An additional impetus for their cooperation was given by the former President of the

¹¹DW in Macedonian, Marijan Gjurovski, The Balkans - the first Chinese colony in Europe ?!

Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3qt1I>, Viewed on: 23.07.2021

¹²Radio Liberty, Serbia: Sinofarm vaccine factory built by the end of the year, Available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31354961.html>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

¹³Radio Liberty, Goce Atanasov, Chinese "vaccine diplomacy" succeeds in the Balkans, Available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B0%BB%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%82/31109353.html>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

Republic of Serbia, Mr. Boris Tadic, who in his public statements defined China as one of the "four pillars" of Serbia's foreign policy. China learns and corrects its mistakes very quickly and adapts its methods of influence, which are initially similar to those of the United States and the European Union. From the initial cooperation with government institutions, it is slowly expanding cooperation with other stakeholders, such as: universities, research institutes, think tanks, chambers of commerce, etc. As part of the 17 + 1 cooperation, China opens Confucius institutes across all countries, and creates its own organizations and networks, such as the BRI study network, the 17 + 1 think-tank network, etc. In addition, it has secured collaborations and invested in major media outlets in the region to increase its visibility, and their representatives in the BRI countries, especially in the Western Balkans, are increasingly active on social media. The country is characterized by a growing number of news and other programs in the region. For example, between 2016 and 2019, the number of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stories published in Albania jumped from 42 to 194.¹⁴ This new approach allows China to achieve several goals: from collecting analytical information on foreign policy; to promote its development model and itself as a "soft power" in the Western Balkans on a par with the EU and the US. China's presence in the Western Balkans is growing, and the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic has opened up new levels of cooperation.

The vaccines provided by China to the Western Balkans are just part of a series of steps it has taken to become a relevant and active player in the region. This not only provided her with a way of popularity among political leaders, but also with the general population, which allows her to further position herself and further establish her presence in the region. The West sees this as an opportunity for China to turn investment capital from tackling the pandemic into a political one, pursuing its own geostrategic interests in Southeast Europe.¹⁵¹⁶

¹⁴EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, Vladimir Shopov, Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans, Available:

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

¹⁵Radio Liberty, Goce Atanasov, Chinese "vaccine diplomacy" succeeds in the Balkans, Available at:<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%82/31109353.html>,

Viewed on: 25.07.2021

CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The Republic of North Macedonia is on the road leading from Athens to Budapest and is of great importance when it comes to the implementation of the BRI. China is present in North Macedonia mainly with projects in the public sector, including public contracts and development assistance, while the contracts are mostly concluded with Chinese state-owned companies and there is no cooperation with the private sector despite numerous attempts to establish such cooperation. In fact, after the economic fiasco with the Macedonian privatization, the newly elected government in 2006 considered that the best way to reduce unemployment and generate economic growth was to attract greenfield or brownfield investments, in order to open new factories or restart the old ones. After all the implemented reforms mainly aimed at improving the business environment, including fiscal policy reforms, as well as the creation of special zones for foreign investments with more favorable rules and regulations, as well as the creation of a state agency to attract FDI, North Macedonia is 11th. - the place in the world according to the report of the World Bank "Doing Business" in 2017. China's foreign economic expansion and large investments in various sectors, even during the global economic crisis, fueled Macedonia's expectations for bilateral cooperation. North Macedonia was among the first countries in the Western Balkans to accept the BRI and 17 + 1 cooperation, hoping to increase its visibility in China, especially among Chinese large companies, in order to create new opportunities for economic cooperation and accelerate its economic development. A Memorandum of Cooperation was signed within the BRI in March 2015, which contains a broad and general wording that the two parties are committed to developing their mutual cooperation within the BRI. In fact, at that time there was generally no (at least publicly) available document offering a clear definition of the scope, objectives and instruments of the BRI. This loose concept and institutional framework leave room for flexibility, allowing each country to participate in the BRI according to its own interests. On the other hand, inaccuracies raise concerns about transparency, intentions and results achieved. However, this did not change the mind of the previous government to even propose the opening of special free zones for Chinese companies, and the

¹⁶VOA in Macedonian, Miki Trajkovski, Intensification of Macedonian-Chinese Relations, Posted on: <https://mk.voanews.com/a/5896556.html>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

same project was presented several times at each 17 + 1 summit until 2017, but the Chinese side showed no interest and Chinese FDI in RS Macedonia remain insignificant. Going a step further, North Macedonia was the first country from the 17 + 1 platform to use the \$ 10 billion credit line made available to CEE countries through Chinese state-owned banks for infrastructure projects. In addition, the first complete construction project financed with Chinese funds following the model, ie the Chinese procedures already known in Asia and Africa, where all projects implemented with Chinese funds should be implemented by a Chinese, mostly state-owned company, and concerned the construction of a primary school. "Rajko Zinzifov" in Skopje. The first major Chinese project in the energy sector in NorthMacedonia was the Kozjak hydropower plant on the Treska River in 2004 funded by the China Development Bank in accordance with Chinese procedures, and Chinese development cooperation funds were also used to implement a project called e-education. , which aims to connect all educational institutions in the country. Chinese procedures provide for the contractor to be directly designated by the Chinese government, as was the case with the construction of the Kozjak and Huawei hydropower plants for the e-education project, or to be selected by Macedonian authorities but from pre-selected companies by Chinese institutions, such as was Sinohydro for the construction of the highways Kicevo-Ohrid and Miladinovci-Stip. It must be emphasized that in all three cases the procedures were not in accordance with the Macedonian public procurement legislation, ie transparency, fairness and efficiency were not ensured. Exceptions to this were the procurements conducted by the capital City of Skopje, which were covered by the funds provided by the Macedonian budget and a loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development for procurement of 202 buses intended for the Public Transport Company and electric trains and locomotives intended for the Macedonian national railway company, which in regular procedure were awarded to Chinese state-owned companies.¹⁷¹⁸

The increasing number of investments of this kind has provoked reactions not only from the public, but also in the West, especially after the announcement of the scandal with the wiretapped conversations or the so-called "Bombs" by the

¹⁷ Ana Blazheska, BRI – *POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, 2018, Center for Research and Policy Making.

¹⁸ Ana Krstinovska, The Place of the Republic of Northern Macedonia in the Chinese Strategy for the Western Balkans, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in R. N. Macedonia, n.d., p.4

then opposition SDSM which was the introduction to a severe political crisis in North Macedonia. Namely, SDSM claimed that the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski for the project from the Chinese company "Sinohydro" allegedly demanded a commission of 25 million euros. Later, with the establishment of the Special Public Prosecutor's Office for this tender, the "Trajectory" case was opened in which Gruevski and several senior government officials are suspected of illegally assigning the project to a Chinese construction company, which damaged the budget of the Republic of Macedonia by 155 million euros. The trial is still pending in a case called "Trajectory", but only for the former Minister of Transport Mile Janakieski, former Prime Minister Vlado Peshevski and the former director of the Public Enterprise for State Roads, Ljubco Georgievski, while for the first suspect, former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, the case is obsolete.¹⁹²⁰ The EU has paid particular attention to this case in its strategic documents regarding its relationship with China, and the agreements awarded to Sinohydro are treated as a scheme of corrupt behavior by China in the developing world. But the construction of this highway also caused a series of controversies, delays and additional borrowing from Chinese banks. According to the statements of Prime Minister Zaev, the government clumsily justified itself for the additional borrowings from the Chinese banks and the delay in the work, ie according to the statements of Prime Minister Zaev, to a poorly executed project, ie omissions in the project, but without failing in the route according to the current Minister of transport Bocharovski.²¹ The German newspaper Deutsche Welle in Macedonian devoted several articles and analyzes to this case, which included a series of statements by experts and stakeholders. In the statement of Nikola Velkovski, former president of the construction chamber at the Economic Chamber of the Republic of Macedonia for Deutsche Welle, he states that the projects were not wrong, but unfinished and that the entire investment was started without perceived expropriations, geological

¹⁹ DW in Macedonian language: Kostadin Delimitov, The Million "hole" on the highway Kicevo-Ohrid will be patched with special technology!, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/2f4Y7>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²⁰ 360 degrees, Hekuran Akifi, Chinese loans exceeded 1.2 billion dollars, and the Kicevo-Ohrid highway is far from ready, (video), Available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/video-kineskite-krediti-nadminaa-1-2-milijardi-dolari-a-avtopatot-kicevo-ohrid-e-daleku-od-gotov/>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²¹ LIDER, There is no failure in the route of the highway Kicevo-Ohrid, admits Bocharovski Available at: Available on: <https://lider.com.mk/ekonomija/nema-promashuvanje-vo-trasata-na-avtopatot-kicevo-ohrid-priznava-bocharovski/>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

surveys of the route and everything else. means input data that are essential for the entire technical documentation, which is agreed by Aleksandar Stojanov, former director of the Public Enterprise for State Roads and Darko Moslavac, former dean of the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Skopje.²² University professor Vulnet Paloshi, in his statements warned that the whole thing could end up in court and in that case the damage for us would be doubled, for example he took the lawsuits related to Croatia, Serbia, Hungary where concessionaires ended up in court and got the processes. But noting that the government pushed this project, because no one wanted to invest in this section which proved unprofitable in terms of the number of vehicles. Experts link the case to the Montenegrin highway or a model of a diplomatic debt trap, but also a glaring example of Chinese influence by bribing decision-makers (corruption), who are part of the upper echelons of government, without caring about which political party is in power, at least so far.

If we take into account the four aspects: first, that the agreements were made with direct agreement and with the full involvement of the local ambassador of China, secondly, if we take into account the statement of prof. Paloshi for the unprofitability of the highway solution, thirdly the constant increase of the debts for its construction or from the planned 840 mil. Euros for both highways, the amount reached 1.2 billion euros or the only borrowing of North Macedonia of this kind from a bank and the fourth still unfinished court case Trajectory for the alleged bribe of 20 million euros, then we can recognize the models of diplomatic debt trap and reviving corruption.²³ This highway and seven years since the start of construction is still the subject of party squabbles and public suspicions of possible crime, especially in the area of downtime, delays in the deadlines set by the Government to complete the construction, as well as the constant clumsy excuses. for re-designing and concluding new annexes, for which the opposition VMRO-DPMNE reacted recently and demanded faster completion of the project in order to reduce the costs for its construction, which

²² DW in Macedonian, Kostadin Delimitov, The Million "hole" on the highway Kicevo-Ohrid will be patched with special technology!, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/2f4Y7>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²³ DW in Macedonian, Kostadin Delimitov, Populism "judged" the expertise on the highway Kicevo-Ohrid, Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/2f95I>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

in the end are paid by the shooters.²⁴ According to the rhetoric of the then opposition SDSM, it seemed that with the coming to power it would completely distance itself from the East and dedicate itself to the West, and NATO accession further limited China's opportunities to cooperate with North Macedonia in areas such as strategic infrastructure, security and defense and digital communications.²⁵ But geopolitics is a complex matter and is constantly changing, according to the spheres of influence and the interests of the great powers. During the Covid 19 pandemic, China successfully adapted its hybrid strategy from the very beginning. China, as in other countries and in North Macedonia, practices the so-called "diplomacy mask" which was later changed to "vaccine diplomacy" through donations of medical equipment and masks in a very specific period of the coronary crisis in North Macedonia and the availability to vaccines in the desired quantities and for "cheap money". Poor management in dealing with the current government's pandemic has affected the number of patients, overcrowded hospitals and questionable measures, especially in the area of movement and grouping bans that part of the population did not comply with, which imposed draconian penalties, but it was not case of numerous violations by local political powers. North Macedonia also had difficulty obtaining supplies for respirators, masks and other medical equipment, and vaccination was not only delayed, but North Macedonia was the last country in the region to start mass immunization, which in the early stages was carried out exclusively with donations from other countries. The Western world, and especially the EU, did not show enough interest in the Western Balkans during the pandemic, so more and more supporters are receiving the statement of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who said that European solidarity is a fairy tale on paper. But the Macedonian authorities seem to have remained consistent to the end of the West, so in a statement by Prime Minister Zaev he said that

²⁴ MakFax news agency, (Video) Miteva: The highway Kicevo - Ohrid is at a standstill for 4 years, the government projects only new costs, Available at: <https://makfax.com.mk/ekonomija/%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%b0-%d0%b0%d0%b2%d1%82%d0%be%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%ba%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%be-%d0%be%d1%85%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%b4-%d0%b5/>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²⁵ EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, Vladimir Shopov, Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans, Available: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

Serbia has no aspirations for NATO and normally more open to the eastern world China and Russia and makes agreements with them, and that we as a new NATO member, we generally stick to the western world and the vaccines approved by the local health institutions.²⁶ After the Government changed the rhetoric and procured 200,000 Chinese vaccines with which the mass immunization in the country started, the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the Minister of Health Venko Filipce, together with the Ambassador of China, Zhang Zhuo, visited the vaccination point in the Jane Sandanski Polyclinic Skopje. Some of the media commented on the intensification of the cooperation between China and North Macedonia, which was obviously on standby after the coming to power of SDSM. This was especially noted through the meeting of Minister Filipce with the Ambassador of China, Zhang Zhuo, where the cooperation between the two countries and the solidarity of China in the period of the pandemic were emphasized, although donations from other countries were numerous.²⁷ While current political leaders and part of the public and media represented China as a savior who offered assistance to North Macedonia, some analysts of Chinese actions saw it as an attempt to absolve itself of responsibility for not preventing the spread of the Coronavirus in a timely manner.²⁸ An additional impetus to the perception of intensified cooperation was given by the meeting between Prime Minister Zaev and Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe, where it was concluded that the two countries are fulfilling their obligations under the Defense Cooperation Agreement, especially in the field of military education and training. Also, Prime Minister Zaev said that the abolition of visas is underway, which will intensify cooperation and help achieve the ambition of the two countries, for trade next year of 1 billion US dollars.²⁹ The

²⁶Radio Liberty, Pelagia Stojcheva, When there is no western vaccine, the Chinese one is also good. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0/31069765.html>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²⁷Filipce: Support from China and the Chinese people is of paramount importance to the healthcare system. Available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/25663>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

²⁸DW in Macedonian, Marijan Gjurovski, The Balkans - the first Chinese colony in Europe ?! Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3qt1I>, Viewed on: 23.07.2021

²⁹VOA in Macedonian, Miki Trajkovski, Intensification of Macedonian-Chinese Relations, Available at: <https://mk.voanews.com/a/5896556.html>, Viewed on: 21.07.2021

cooperation is intensified in the IT sector, where after the meeting of the Minister of Information Society and Administration and the Ambassador of China Zhang Zhuo, the possibility of deepening the cooperation between the two countries in the IT sector was discussed.³⁰ The intensification of the cooperation takes place at a time when North Macedonia expects the start of EU negotiations, which is difficult, but also at the time of the expected "new Cold War" between the United States and China, which will not be only in the field of customs and import-export. but it will be primarily a struggle over advanced technologies, based on 5G technology, where the United States does not reduce the pressure on its European allies in order to block Huawei's 5G technology.³¹ It remains to be seen how the intensification of the cooperation between China and North Macedonia will affect the perspectives of North Macedonia.

CONCLUSIONS

Although China does not seem to have a pre-defined strategy for the Western Balkans or the wider CEE region, and its actions are seen as a way of shaping policies aimed at seizing the opportunities that are currently opening up, it still has a behind-the-scenes approach. A serious plan for breakthrough in the prosperous regions of Europe and much more. Chinese investments in the region, however, are a field for a kind of hybrid influence, ie. Exercising diplomatic (political) influence through Chinese diplomatic phenomena, which for Balkan politicians who can never get out of that vicious circle of bribery and corruption, is a great offer for investment in projects that have not existed in the region for decades, and not to Democracy and standards are questioned and bribes are offered. Such influence on EU member states has already been directly reflected in its institutions, especially in the decision-making and decision-making processes concerning China. When it comes to North Macedonia, it, like most WB countries that want to be on the same table with China through BRI and 17 + 1, do not have a clear idea how to use the cooperation to their advantage. But obviously the problem is not only in the asymmetry in terms of resources and knowledge, but the biggest problem is that

³⁰Ministry of Information Society and Administration of R.N. Macedonia, We provide support for advancing the digitalization process, <https://mioa.gov.mk/?q=mk/node/3323>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

³¹Radio Liberty, Goce Atanasov, Corona crisis strengthens China's influence in Central Asia, Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/30752977.html>, Viewed on: 25.07.2021

local political leaders see this cooperation through the prism of personal profit through Chinese models of bribery (corruption). However, China can not be blamed for the biggest problem of the Western Balkan countries, and that is the lack of resistance to financial influence, ie corruption. Accession to the BRI and 17 + 1, as well as the conclusion of financial agreements with China for projects in the Western Balkans were on a voluntary basis, with agreement on the rights and obligations of both parties. Therefore, in particular, North Macedonia should start clearing its backyard by combating corruption, which is not only important for future possible cooperation with China through cooperation initiatives, but also for potential and long-awaited EU membership, but also for appropriate positioning in order to attract FDI. It should be borne in mind that China is rapidly learning and modeling its diplomacy in order to avoid criticism and regain the lost image of investment scandals in the Western Balkans as well as the irresponsible behavior of the Chinese leadership when it comes to the current pandemic. Thus, China has successfully adapted its strategy since the beginning of the pandemic, especially through "mask diplomacy", ie through donations of medical equipment and masks in a very specific period of the coronary crisis, which further modeled it in "vaccine diplomacy". , with the production and distribution of Chinese vaccines, for "cheap money", but with many open questions about their action. In the end, the issue of Chinese influence and the intensification of cooperation is still not a burden for North Macedonia, although China is obviously using hybrid methods that could stand in the way of the European integration of North Macedonia. How this will affect North Macedonia in the long run is yet to be seen, and the time to come will show whether it will be positive or malicious.

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