

Kurt Bassuener

Primed Receptors: Synergies between Western Balkan Political Elites and Chinese Economic Actors and State Media

Abstract

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This article assesses the methods of China's engagement in the Western Balkans, particularly in the media space – particularly the central position of the region's entrenched political elites. China's approach is similar to that of other illiberal geopolitical challengers, including the EU and wider West, which were effectively unchallenged until six years ago. This fact underscores the EU-led policy failure to date, amplified by the ongoing COVID 19 crisis, and suggests that Brussels' current policy of countermeasures and competitive bidding will not only fail, but be counterproductive. The EU's development of a civic constituency and institutionalized culture of accountability – implied with the *acquis communautaire*, but de-emphasized to date in favor of an elite-based and pacification-focused policy – would provide not only the greatest resilience to external authoritarian penetration, but also the highest likelihood of “clubbable” future member states.

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Chinese economic and high-level political engagement in the Western Balkans has ramped-up considerably in the past seven years, since the Belt and Road Initiative was unveiled. In the past few years, Western political, analytical, and academic attention has followed suit. This article builds and draws upon work the author undertook a year ago in “Pushing on an Open Door: Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans”, a working paper for the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Forum for Democratic Studies.¹ It also builds on the work of other scholars, several of whom presented at Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft’s Reality Check conference on China in the region in late November 2019 in Berlin.²

This article will look in particular at the role of Chinese state media in the region, as well as other efforts to engage in the public space. The principal point to be made is that unaccountable local political elites – a fact now belatedly acknowledged by the EU,³ though still not actively confronted through policy – and Chinese state-owned business interests rarely have difficulty finding a *modus vivendi*. Rarely is this transparent or subject to public scrutiny. This confluence of interests has streamlined Chinese entry into the region – by mainlining into an already existing political patronage-centric economic model. While there is learning on both sides and no grand strategy evident, there is no need to translate operating systems. Presumption of for-profit governance is the starting point.⁴

Grifters and Grafters

I term Chinese and Gulf state economic engagement in the region as *grifting* in my simple taxonomy of illiberal foreign actors in the Western Balkans, differentiating it from *grafting*, which is the Russian and Turkish approach. Russia and Turkey both have long histories of engagement in the region, with attendant entrée – and baggage. In the past two decades, both have drifted from their earlier postures as having been partners of the West (with variable degrees of commitment) in supporting democratization and liberalization in the Western Balkans. At present, both Russia and Turkey are autocracies in differing stages of consolidation, with policies in the region closely tracking the domestic personal needs of their rulers, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Furthermore, these leaders seem intent on building personal constituencies in the region – grafting themselves into the body politic from below.

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- 1 Kurt Bassuener, *Pushing on an Open Door: Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans*, Working Paper, National Endowment for Democracy / International Forum for Democratic Studies, Washington D.C., May 2019, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pushing-on-an-Open-Door-Foreign-Authoritarian-Influence-in-the-Western-Balkans-Kurt-Bassuener-May-2019.pdf>
 - 2 Reality Check Series – Sources, Tools, and Impact of External Non-EU Engagement in Southeastern Europe, Part III – China, Berlin, 28 / 29 November 2019. The conference was held under the Chatham House rule.
 - 3 The EU now openly recognizes that state capture is an issue in the region, though it has not – at least publicly – truly dissected the issue or confronted these EU-aspirant “partner” governments. See *European Commission*, Communication to the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee Of The Regions – 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 29 May 2019, p. 3, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf
 - 4 *Ngai-Ling Sum*, The Intertwined Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of Hopes/Fears: China’s Triple Economic Bubbles and the “One Belt One Road” Imaginary, in: *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 7, Issue 4, 2019, p. 531. See also *Tena Prelec’s* comments in *Non-Western Actors in the Balkans: Which Types of Cooperation are Obstacles on EU Path?*, *European Western Balkans*, 19 June 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/06/19/non-western-actors-in-the-balkans-which-types-of-cooperation-are-obstacles-on-eu-path/>

China and the Gulf states are relative newcomers to the region, without heavy baggage and needing to develop *entrée*. Only recently has their economic and political engagement come to be seen as a threat to liberal values and democratization. Their activities seem more nakedly transactional and commercial, presenting themselves as development partners for mutual benefit.

Yet all four of these illiberal actors share what Tena Prelec, a young academic at Oxford focused on the region, has called (in reference to the United Arab Emirates UAE) “a personalized power blurring between the public and the private, in which state resources are viewed as personal property of the ruler and his associates.” This makes mainlining into the contemporary Western Balkan elites straightforward.⁵

China's Contingent Engagement

While the footprint of Chinese economic engagement in the region has grown considerably in the past decade, it is important to note that there is no evident master plan or blueprint.⁶ This remains evident despite some major investments – the anchor being the long-term lease and development of the port of Piraeus, or “dragon’s head”, as President Xi Jinping has called it, of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Western Balkans.⁷ The origins of the BRI are deeply explored elsewhere, but the essential fact is that BRI follows a top-down directive to project China’s “expeditionary capital”⁸ and capacity abroad, but under this umbrella there is a profusion of Chinese companies seeking (and proposing) projects, sometimes in competition with one another, with competition among Western Balkan governments for the infusion of funds and deliverables in projects.⁹ This diffusion often escapes the now dominant narrative in the EU and US, which seem to be suffering from a case of the geopolitical vapors. The impression one might draw is that all Chinese projects are part of a Gosplan, devised strategically by a hive mind.

Yet in the 17+1 format (which one participant in the *Reality Check* conference said should be 1+17, to reflect the power relationship and dynamic), in which China seeks to “shape the environment”¹⁰ for its economic involvement in a wide belt through Europe, Beijing alone – not Brussels – is the universal connector. China’s media footprint, diplomatic activity, and quasi-diplomatic cultural and academic engagement in the region should also be seen in the same light, retroactively giving coherence. In addition, in a longer term frame than Moscow or Ankara’s leader-centric engagement, China aims to develop a constituency for – or at least quiescence to – its growing regional role. And in this it has a community of interest

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- 5 Tena Prelec, UAE in the Balkans: Meeting Point between “Sultanism” and Authoritarianism?, in: *Vocal Europe*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.balkanfund.org/op-ed-by-tena-prelec-uae-in-the-balkans-meeting-point-between-sultanism-and-authoritarianism/>
 - 6 Ngai-Ling Sum, (op. cit.) notes that the BRI managed to “spectacularize global connectivity”; Lee Jones / Jinghan Zeng underscore the fragmentation on the Chinese side of the equation, noting that it has taken some time for BRI to move “from slogan to plan”; Jens Bastian underscores that “China does not have a master plan for Southeast Europe”. See Lee Jones / Jinghan Zeng, *Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Beyond “Grand Strategy” to a State Transformation Analysis*, in: *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 40, Issue 8, pp. 1.416–1.420, Bastian cited *ibid.* at p. 4.
 - 7 Helena Smith, Xi Jinping Comes to Greeks Bearing Gifts, in: *The Guardian*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/12/xi-jinping-comes-to-greeks-bearings-gifts>
 - 8 The author’s PhD colleague at the University of St. Andrews, German scholar Tim Zajontz, developed this term in his research of China’s engagement in East Africa.
 - 9 Ngai-Ling Sum, op. cit. pp. 528–531; Jones / Zeng, op. cit., p. 1.419.
 - 10 Keith G. Tidball / Elon G. Weinstein, *Applying the Environment Shaping Methodology: Conceptual and Practical Challenges*, in: *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Volume 5, Issue 4, 2011, pp. 369–394, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17502977.2011.625787>

with the local leaders who need the financial infusions to maintain their ecosystems of power.

The economic engagement of China has focused heavily on infrastructure and power generation projects. These include the controversial Pelješac Bridge to allow Croatian road traffic to bypass Bosnia and Herzegovina's short coastline at Neum on the Adriatic, as well as the Blok 7 lignite-fired power station to be constructed in Tuzla, northeastern Bosnia.¹¹ Yet as has been the case elsewhere, many of these projects not only involve considerable public debt, breach of EU procurement rules, or contravention of the EU's Energy Community. Debt for equity provisions in many of these arrangements could involve considerable Chinese ownership of infrastructure and resources.¹² So the local governments who arrange these terms with Chinese firms have a common interest with these companies and China more broadly in presenting such engagement in the most positive terms. This is where Chinese state media – in collaboration with regime-controlled (and -affiliated) media – comes in.

In the Western Balkans, as with the other illiberal actors, Serbia is the clear hub for China's economic engagement. China Global Television Network (CGTN), which broadcasts in English and has hired local journalists, frequently reports from Serbia, and is widely available in cable packages there and regionwide. CGTN's coverage acts as a booster for local government and Chinese narratives on multipolar engagement, as well as to demonstrate China's regional role – including in the cultural sphere – to a global audience.¹³

Xinhua: Both a Megaphone and Two-way Radio between Regimes

China's official Xinhua news agency has been present in the region for decades, presently fielding Chinese and local journalists throughout the region, with bureaus in Belgrade, Sofia, and Athens.¹⁴ The agency conducts both interviews in English with local leaders and senior officials, as well as generating local language content. In addition, the agency's reportage and wire service is carried frequently in local media – disseminating China's line on events far and wide. Its correspondents also undertake outreach in the higher education sector, including promoting study of Mandarin.¹⁵ For example, Yuan Liang, Xinhua's correspondent in Sarajevo, told students at the Department of Sinology at the University of East Sarajevo (in Republika Srpska) that with Chinese language skills, the career opportunities on offer with Chinese investments were without limit.¹⁶

Xinhua is therefore central to propagating the case for BRI and its ostensible benefits to Western Balkan populations. In the words of one interlocutor in 2019: "They are slowly, but

11 *Jens Bastian*, Background Paper – Reality Check Series – Sources, Tools, and Impact of External Non-EU-Engagement in Southeastern Europe, Part III – China, distributed at the conference of the same name, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, November 2019, p. 20.

12 See *Center for Investigative Reporting*, Public Property for Chinese Loan, Sarajevo, 31 July 2014, <https://www.cin.ba/en/javno-dobro-za-kineski-kredit/>

13 See CGTN, Shooting of First Chinese-Serbian Coproduction Film Starts in Belgrade, 27 July 2018, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674d3363444d79457a6333566d54/index.html>

14 *Jingwei Dong*, A Comparative Study of Xinhua and CNN's Overseas News Bureaus, Master of Arts thesis, University of Florida, 2012, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0045138/00001>

15 *University of East Sarajevo*, Dopisnik kineske agencije Sinhua održao predavanje na Filozofskom fakultetu UIS-a (A correspondent of the Chinese agency Xinhua held a lecture at the UES Philosophy faculty), 24 March 2018, www.ues.rs.ba/la/2018/03/24/dopisnik-kineske-agencije-sinhuaodrzao-predavanje-na-filozofskom-fakultetu-uis-a-2/

16 Ibid.

surely, increasing their presence and financial interest in the Balkans and they need to smooth the public before money kicks in. All Chinese investments are for employment of Chinese companies and workers, but they do good due diligence in advance. [...] All investments are presented through governments as employment opportunities for locals."

Local political leaders avail themselves of the ready conduit provided by Xinhua to China's officials and general population to praise Chinese investment and ask for more. A story run in Serbia's government-aligned "Politika" entitled "Chinese Dragon Develops Serbia", illustrates this local elite-Chinese symbiosis well.¹⁷

In the past year, Xinhua has also acted as a relay node for Chinese official narratives regarding controversial policies, such as its ostensible efforts against "extremism" in Xinjiang. In 2019, Serbia's pointman for Kosovo, Vice Prime Minister Marko Đurić, expressed his admiration for the Chinese policy, actively defending it against critics and comparing Uighur minority rights favourably to those exercised in Europe.¹⁸ This was not only a win for Beijing, but also dovetailed with the long-standing Serbian policy of playing-up fears of Islamic fundamentalism extremism and potential terrorism from Balkan Muslim populations. The confluence of interest is *prima facie* evident. In the same interview, Đurić asserted that the U.S. government was "pouring oil over fire" following the U.S. Congress' passage of the Hong Kong Human rights and Democracy Act, further stating that the pro-democracy and -autonomy protests were "hijacked by certain foreign powers, who wish to interfere in China's internal affairs and who wish to use, manipulate and exploit this topic to weaken China's position."¹⁹ It should be noted that maintaining Beijing's support for Serbia's rejection of Kosovo independence is a central foreign policy goal across almost the entirety of the Serbian political spectrum. When dissident Liu Xiaobo was announced the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his "long and nonviolent struggle" in December 2010, then-Foreign Minister (now opposition leader) Vuk Jeremić stated that China would boycott the award ceremony, as Serbia's "proven friend" and "Serbian people know that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident has nothing to do with peace."²⁰ Serbia later did send its ombudsman as representative to the ceremony.²¹ But the reflex reaction was readily apparent.

Message Discipline – Congruent Messaging in Chinese and Local Media

Analysis of Chinese state media in the region demonstrates, unsurprisingly, that Chinese economic activity is invariably painted in a flattering light, with emphasis on "win-win" and "jobs, jobs, jobs."²² In Bosnia and Hercegovina, for example, the local-language website *Kina*

17 The story ran in the 23 December 2017 issue of Politika. See: Helsinki Bulletin, China: A New Global Player in the Balkans, Number 138, January 2018, www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/HB-No138.pdf

18 "The protection of minority rights in China's Xinjiang is the envy of many countries, says a Serbian official," in: China Xinhua News, 17 December 2019, video: <https://twitter.com/XHNews/status/1206888467046838272>

19 "Interview: U.S. 'pouring oil over fire' in Hong Kong to undermine China's reputation, says Serbian party leader," Xinhua, 17 December 2019; available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/17/c_138638352.htm

20 Xiaobo died in prison in 2017 after being denied appropriate medical treatment, see BBC News, Serbia defends China-led boycott of Nobel ceremony, 9 December 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11957094>

21 BBC News, Serbia makes U-turn over Nobel Prize ceremony, 10 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11968854>

22 Zhang Jianfeng, Amid High Expectation, Belt and Road Initiative Brings More Win-Win Results to Europe, in: Xinhua, 15 May 2018, <http://english.cctv.com/2018/05/15/ARTIF2b9t1fNjKIIZIOjix180515.shtml>

Danas (China Today) “China and BiH” section ran stories on the BRI’s fifth anniversary, the 16+1 forum, and related investments.²³

In addition, Xinhua engages in cooperative agreements with local news agencies, such as Bosnia and Hercegovina’s *Patria*, which is aligned with the dominant Bosniak ruling party, the Party for Democratic Action (SDA). This agreement allows both agencies to publish one another’s texts and photographs.²⁴ One local media professional opined that *Patria* is “known to be easy to buy, they are ready to align their reporting with [the] positive agenda of those with money. Overall, [*Patria* is] not very popular and take[s] a small share in the [...] media scene.” The news content *Patria* took from Xinhua included reports on the 2018 Communist Party Congress in China and its economic ramifications, Chinese president Xi Jinping’s meeting with Vladimir Putin on the Iran nuclear deal, and China’s assistance to Turkey in its economic difficulties (under the headline “China Supports Turkey in Its Dispute with the U.S.”).²⁵ The pay-to-play element was seen matter of factly by local media professionals, one of whom remarked, “*Patria* is a commercial entity and why not sign a deal with the Chinese [...] They have money and are ready to oil good press.”

But in addition to such partnerships, local journalists have been hired as Chinese brand ambassadors to their erstwhile colleagues in the media realm. Faruk Borić, former editor of Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina news agency FENA and editor of the weekly *Dani*, directs the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association, founded in 2014.²⁶ Soon after its founding, the association arranged for the Chinese ambassador to speak to a group of venerable Sarajevo intellectuals, Circle 99, regarding China’s intent to invest in “all sectors” of the Bosnia and Hercegovina economy. Later posts include Chinese donations to the Red Cross and Sarajevo’s Koševo Hospital (run by Bakir Izetbegović’s wife). The donation to the hospital is listed as a joint effort by the Chinese embassy and Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications company whose 5G offerings have come to be seen in a number of countries, most notably the U.S., as a major security risk.²⁷

Cultural exchanges are also part of the association’s repertoire, such as the 2017 refurbishment of a cinema which showed the 1972 Yugoslav film “Walter Defends Sarajevo”, with introductory remarks by the Chinese ambassador.²⁸ The film, about partisans fighting Nazi occupiers during World War II, was and remains hugely popular in China. More recent cul-

23 See www.kina-danas.com/ and www.kina-danas.com/category/vijesti/kina/

24 *Patria*, Kineska novinska agencija Xinhua i novinska agencija *Patria* ozvaničile saradnju (Chinese news agency Xinhua and *Patria* news agency have signed up for cooperation), 19 September 2017, <http://nap.ba/new/vijest.php?id=38892>

25 *Patria*, Odluke nacionalnog kongresa Komunističke partije Kine utjecat će na svijetsku ekonomsku scenu (The Decisions of the National Congress of the Communist Party of China Will Affect the World Economic Scene), 23 October 2018, www.nap.ba/new/vijest.php?id=39880; and *ibid.*, Samit Šangajske organizacije saradnju, Xi Jinping i Putin razgovarali o nuklearnom sporazumu (At the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Xi Jinping and Putin Discussed a Nuclear Deal), 10 June 2018, www.nap.ba/new/vijest.php?id=45894; and *ibid.*, Kina podržala Tursku u sporu sa SAD-om (China Supported Turkey in a Dispute with the United States), 17 August 2018, www.nap.ba/new/vijest.php?id=47596

26 See the *Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association*’s “About Us” tab at <http://www.boskin.ba/o-nama/>

27 *Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association*, Ambasada NR Kine u BiH, Huawei, I KCUS u službi vašeg zdravlja (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in BiH, Huawei, and KCUS in the Service of Your Health), 8 November 2016, www.boskin.ba/ambasada-nr-kine-u-bih-huawei-i-kcus-u-službi-vaseg-zdravlja/

28 *ibid.*, Otvorena kino-sala JU ‘Kinoteka BiH’, obnovljena uz finansijsku pomoć Ambasade NR Kine (Open Cinema Hall ‘Cinema BiH’, Reconstructed with Financial Assistance from the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China), www.boskin.ba/timeline/svecanost-povodom-otvorenja-renovirane-sale-ju-kinoteka-bih/

tural events posted include coverage of a Chinese new year concert at which Chinese Ambassador Ji Ping introduced “The Charming Silk Road and a Walk across Gansu.”²⁹

While the news section of the association has for some reason not been updated since 2016, there are up-to-date posts in a sidebar, including a translation of an article by Director Borić for “China Daily” on the Covid-19 outbreak entitled “Two or three words about my China”, in which he condemns media sensationalism about the “accident” and writes in a dotting tone. He closes with “I share the belief in the Chinese authorities’ ability and commitment of the Chinese people to solve this problem as well. And when all this is over, China will emerge stronger than ever.” The association also posts a letter of support on its own behalf sent to the China People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) regarding the coronavirus outbreak.³⁰ The CPAFFC is an outlet for China’s “people-to-people” exchanges, ultimately under party control.³¹

It must be underscored that these narratives and the activities undertaken by Xinhua and other Chinese state actors are highly congruent with those made by Bosnia and Hercegovina officials and political leaders. Local media convey similarly positive messages on Chinese investments in the energy sector, infrastructure, and steel, as well as providing a platform for China’s Ambassador, who extolled Bosnia and Hercegovina as a destination for Chinese tourism. Even Western international officials, such as High Representative Valentin Inzko, have been quoted praising Chinese investments as positive in providing jobs. In the public space, Chinese engagement in the region is presented in an overwhelmingly positive light as a result of this confluence of local political interest, dominance over the media space, a media environment which has in many ways deprofessionalized in the past two decades, plus Chinese direct efforts.

However, Chinese efforts to ensure positive coverage have rankled some journalists with their blunt approach. One journalist related that the Chinese Embassy had attempted to influence a colleague’s article about China’s internal affairs, for example. Another noted that the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association has been “very active in bringing the Chinese embassy’s point of view to local media ... but [the] experience I had [...] was very totalitarian-like and unpleasant. Russians are much more subtle than the Chinese.” Yet many other journalists are allegedly biddable. One media figure asserted that a meal would suffice to yield favorable coverage. Journalists and NGO personnel receive invitations to visit China, where their hosts “organize roundtables, they [encourage] local journalists and intellectuals to spread their message, [and] they stimulate NGOs to consider [the benefits of] Chinese investments.” Local intellectuals are also reportedly asked “to serve as commentators and are indirectly paid. [...] Another way is that they give scholarships to local students and upon their return they tell their stories about China.”

29 Ibid., Kineska nova godina: U Sarajevu proslavljeno koncertom “Šarmantni put svile i šetnja kroz Gansu” (Chinese New Year: Celebratory Concert in Sarajevo – “Charming Silk Road and a Walk Through Gansu”), 11 February 2020, <http://www.boskin.ba/kineska-nova-godina-u-sarajevu-proslavljeno-koncertom-sarmantni-put-svile-i-setnja-kroz-gansu/>

30 Faruk Borić, Two or three words about my China, in: China Daily, 13 February 2020, <https://www.china-daily.com.cn/a/202002/13/WS5e4508d9a3101282172775a8.html>; The translated article, published on 14 February 2020, is titled “The friendly voice of most of the BiH public on the accident that is affecting China,” see <http://www.boskin.ba/faruk-boric-za-china-daily-prijateljski-glas-vecinske-javnosti-u-bih-nesreci-koja-je-snasla-kinu/>; A letter of solidarity was posted by the *Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association* 7 February 2020, <http://www.boskin.ba/udruzenje-bosansko-kinesko-prijateljstvo-uputilo-pismo-podrske-cpaffc-u/>

31 Ellen Bork, Beijing’s Long Game – China is Using You, in: The American Interest, 13 February 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/13/pompeo-to-governors-china-is-using-you/>

Engagement in Balkan Academia: Developing Surveillance Infrastructure

China has deeply worked to enmesh itself in the Western Balkan academic ecosystem through Confucius Institutes at numerous universities, as well as academic twinnings between local and Chinese universities.³² As noted earlier, these efforts promote learning of Mandarin and the presentation of Chinese investment as a jobs-generator.

Chinese police began joint patrols with Serbian counterparts in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Smederevo in the summer of 2019 – as they did with Italian police in Rome – to serve the increasing number of Chinese tourists. Serving in a liaison capacity, the police did not have executive powers or jurisdiction.³³ Yet the fact that they were deployed in Smederevo, where China has major investments did not escape attention.³⁴

Finally, China is endeavouring to construct what it calls a “Digital Silk Road”, building relationships with countries in information and communications technology.³⁵ China has been increasingly active in the regional digital ecosystem. Chinese handsets from Huawei and ZTE are strong sellers in the regional market; China’s Huawei is a major player in introducing 4G – and plans for 5G – in the region.³⁶ Fear of backdoor mechanisms in Chinese hardware and software have become an increasing concern in Western countries.³⁷ Stewart M. Patrick and Ashley Feng warn that such presence globally “will allow it to shape the future of the global internet - and reinforce the Chinese Communist Party leadership at home for decades to come.”³⁸ Since the November 2019 gathering which spurred this volume, U.S.-China confrontation on this issue (among others), along with intra-European differences in threat assessment, have only highlighted this issue. The Western Balkans may well provide Huawei with “facts on the ground” in 5G networks, absent EU hitherto unseen unity on this issue.

In the Balkan context, this not only often translates into significant commercial gain and market share, but Chinese firms often become intimately involved with government agencies, including the security structures. Digital partnership with Serbia began in 2011 with a donation of technical equipment to the Serbian Parliament. Huawei signed a 2014 Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Interior to acquire unspecified systems, after which the company donated a telecommunications laboratory to the Electrotechnical Faculty of the University of Belgrade. Most recently, China has worked together with the Vučić government in Serbia to install 1,000 cameras with facial recognition capability at 800 “hotspots” in Belgrade. This came in a year in which Serbia saw sustained protest countrywide against the government. Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović refused to dis-

32 *Jens Bastian*, op. cit., p. 9.

33 Reuters, Chinese Police Officers Join Serbian Colleagues on the Beat in Belgrade, 23 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-china-patrols/chinese-police-officers-join-serbian-colleagues-on-the-beat-in-belgrade-idUSKBN1W81Bo>

34 RFE/RL, Chinese Police Launch Joint Patrols In Serbia, 20 September 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-china-police/30174932.html>

35 *Vuk Vuksanović*, On China’s Digital Silk Road, Serbia Has Special Place, in: *Balkan Insight*, 9 December 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/09/on-chinas-digital-silk-road-serbia-has-special-place/>

36 Sarajevo Times, BH Telecom Claims it is Technologically Ready to Launch 5G Network, 18 August 2019, <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/bh-telecom-claims-it-is-technologically-ready-to-launch-5g-network/>

37 AP, US House Speaker Pelosi Warns Allies against Using Huawei, 17 February 2020, <https://apnews.com/77089929bc3d3c8279562f5714e0dc18>

38 *Stewart M. Patrick / Ashley Feng*, Belt and Router: China Aims for Tighter Internet Controls with Digital Silk Road, Council on Foreign Relations, *The Internationalist* (blog), 2 July 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/belt-and-router-china-aims-tighter-internet-controls-digital-silk-road>

close the manufacturer, widely thought to be Huawei, as “confidential.”³⁹ This comes as international and transatlantic tensions grow over Huawei’s price competitive 5G technology is marketed worldwide, with the U.S. – in a rare display of bipartisanship – pushing hard against its adoption as a security risk.⁴⁰ China’s highly developed surveillance state is well-known (though it receives scant coverage in regional press). China regularly assists partner countries in developing their own surveillance, censorship, and propaganda systems.⁴¹ The confluence of interest between a Serbian government which has faced significant protest and China, which can help further fine-tune its capabilities outside China and in a “front-runner” for EU membership, is apparent.

Playing the Long Game in the Western Balkans – Gambling on Long-Term, Asymmetric Relationships

From small beginnings, China’s footprint in the region has grown exponentially in less than a decade, particularly in Serbia. While the geopolitical and values challenges posed by Russia and Turkey had been the dominant concerns in the EU, China has fast risen up the list of worries. These concerns come at the same time that the relationship with the United States has been thrown into doubt by President Donald Trump, who called the EU a “foe” prior to meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, to whom he has never applied the term. As with many issues, the EU has yet to arrive at a common assessment and strategic posture in this newly “Westless” environment.⁴² China’s business is sought throughout the EU; the Balkans are hardly alone in this realm.

However, being outside the club – and at deep variance with the Union’s professed fundamental values and standards in a host of fields, even according to the Commission’s indulgent reporting – has made these countries a potentially high-return investment for Beijing. Given the EU’s prioritization of reaching normalization between Belgrade and Prishtina through the presently halted dialogue,⁴³ the leadership in Serbia – the hub of Chinese and other illiberal powers’ engagement – has seen scant pointed criticism on its governance or foreign relationships. Its refusal to align with EU sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, as well as aligning with Moscow in the UN on a resolution which called Russia an “occupying power” in Crimea, is a case in point.⁴⁴ President Aleksandar Vučić has made great power arbitrage, a specialty, while Serbia remains a “frontrunner” for EU membership in the region. More broadly, the reality is that application of the EU’s vaunted “normative power” in the Western Balkans has been spotty, and China recognizes that it can benefit from creating facts on the ground. In fact, China’s engagement in the region, amplified

39 *Tin Hanane El Kadi*, *The Promise and Peril of the Digital Silk Road*, Chatham House, 6 June 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/promise-and-peril-digital-silk-road>; see also *Nyishka Chandran*, *Surveillance Fears Cloud China’s ‘Digital Silk Road’*, *CNBC*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/risks-of-chinas-digital-silk-road-surveillance-coercion.html>

40 *Amanda Macias*, *Pelosi Warns US Allies: “Don’t go near Huawei”*, *CNBC News*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/14/pelosi-warns-us-allies-dont-go-near-huawei.html>

41 *Louise Lucas / Emily Feng*, *Inside China’s Surveillance State*, in: *Financial Times*, 20 July 2018, www.ft.com/content/2182eebe-8a17-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543

42 The February 2020 Munich Security Conference used the term. See *Munich Security Conference*, *Event Summary Westlessness – The Munich Security Conference 2020*, 16 February 2020, <https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/westlessness-the-munich-security-conference-2020/>

43 *Aleksandar Ivković* (EWB Interview) with Viola von Cramon-Taubadel: *We Need Dialogue, but we Cannot Let Vučić and Thaçi Get Away with Everything Else*, *European Western Balkans*, 31 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/31/ewb-interview-von-cramon-taubadel-we-need-dialogue-but-we-cannot-let-vucic-and-thaci-get-away-with-everything-else/>

44 *Maja Živanović*, *Serbia Backs Russia Over UN Resolution on Crimea*, *Balkan Insight*, 10 December 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/10/serbia-backs-russia-over-un-resolution-on-crimea/>

markedly with the BRI, has proven yet another diagnostic tool on the quality of Western Balkan governance, rule of law, transparency, adherence to EU norms, and so on.

China's mode of operation at home and its ability to project power seems to account for much of its appeal, at least to Western Balkan ruling elites. As a local civic activist observed in 2019, "Trust in Russia and China has gone up in the past two years. Russia was there, China came from nowhere. Arms and a strong state. China feels very sudden, with this Belt and Road Initiative."⁴⁵ The fact that the precursors of BRI in China itself aimed to tie the western provinces of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Yunnan – with their ethnic minorities – tighter to the Han Chinese heartland and state control – surely holds appeal to Western Balkan regimes as well.

While Chinese engagement has made significant efforts in the public space to sell its investments as unalloyed positives, it might be better to think of this element as "forward defense" for relationships that are deeply elite-centric. As such, these efforts tend to be shallow, diversionary, and preemptive as opposed to mobilizing, pressing an already elite-driven view that "all money is good money." Rather than develop a deep popular constituency, their approach relies on governments and leading parties.⁴⁶ As a recent "Economist" special report observes, "[a]t home, the Communist Party monopolizes the political space, prevents debate, and enforces an information autarky. Abroad, its obsessive attempts to stifle critics suggest limits to the openness it is willing to tolerate."⁴⁷ However, engagement with Chinese characteristics like those enumerated above may well become a selling point for Western Balkan governments.

Political Acupuncture – China Learns the Pressure Points

A look backward, northward, or across the Atlantic might be instructive. For Beijing has demonstrated a penchant for retaliatory measures when it sees its interests challenged. Backward, China's veto on the extension of the UN Preventive Deployment (UNPREDEP) in Macedonia, in retaliation for Skopje's recognition of Taiwan, came a month before NATO's Operation Allied Force, undertaken to end Serbia's repressive campaign in the then-province of Kosovo.⁴⁸ While the two events were not directly linked, the departure of UNPREDEP certainly did not aid the country's already fragile stability; nor did the war in neighboring Kosovo. A long-feared interethnic conflict erupted there two years later. Northward, in Czechia (also a member of the 17+1), China had facilitated Chinese tourism, particularly in Prague, the capital – an erstwhile "sister city" of Beijing. But the new Lord Mayor, Zdeňek Hřib, refused to kick out a representative of Taiwan at a New Year's reception, infuriating the Chinese Ambassador. In a cascade of events, the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra's long-planned 14-city tour of China was cancelled and China threatened to limit Chinese tourism. So in the 17+1 area, China has already demonstrated that it can and will leverage elements

⁴⁵ Author interview with Dobrica Veselinović of Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd, Belgrade, 21 June 2019.

⁴⁶ See *Austin Doehler*, How China Challenges the EU in the Western Balkans – Will the EU Ultimately Cede the Western Balkans to Beijing's Influence?, in: *The Diplomat*, 25 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/how-china-challenges-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/>; see also *Center for Investigative Reporting*, Public Property for Chinese Loan, 31 July 2014, www.cin.ba/en/javno-dobro-za-kineski-kredit/

⁴⁷ *The Economist*, Special Report: China's Belt and Road – Wanted: New Maps, 8 February 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/02/06/china-wants-to-put-itself-back-at-the-centre-of-the-world>

⁴⁸ *Paul Lewis*, Continuation of U.N. Force in Macedonia Faces a Chinese Veto, in: *New York Times*, 25 February 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/25/world/continuation-of-un-force-in-macedonia-faces-a-chinese-veto.html>

not normally considered policy instruments, like tourism, to register political displeasure.⁴⁹ Finally, in the United States, China's retaliatory measures for the trade war initiated by President Trump targeted tariffs and countermeasures at an economically and electorally granular level, focusing on farm districts with tariffs on soybeans and hogs, for example.⁵⁰ The Chinese moves focused particularly on districts upon which Trump relied for his electoral college victory in the 2016 election.⁵¹ Such targeted political pressure might be called political acupuncture.

In addition, the *modus operandi* of Chinese economic engagement, built on trial and error, ties with officials and ruling parties making non-transparent deals, would seem to provide rich potential for what the Soviets called (and Russia still does) *kompromat* – compromising material – on numerous arrangements. Given practices elsewhere, there is no reason to believe Beijing would refrain from using this leverage should it determine there is an interest – if only “educational” – in doing so. In any case, with growing activity throughout the Western Balkans, long-term financial arrangements including likely ownership of facilities and resources, China seems set at cruising speed for the long haul toward having several friendly EU member states. Or rather, several *more* friendly member states, given avowedly “illiberal” Viktor Orbán's strongly positive disposition, among many others in the 17+1.

Who Left the Door Open?

“Pushing on an Open Door” was so titled because it is my contention that the West's mode of engagement in the Western Balkans, led by the EU for well over a decade, helped entrench the political dynamic which has become evidently retrograde across a host of independent comparative indicators.⁵² The problem is rooted in the presumption, inculcated in the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, that political elites are representative, accountable, and are truly committed to embracing and adopting EU standards. The evidence clearly points in a different direction throughout the Western Balkans, with occasional qualification. Furthermore, the EU has approached the region for some time – well before the current geopolitical whiplash brought on first by Russia's invasion of Crimea – in a transactional gear, extolling the material benefits of EU membership. Liberal democratic values and obligations of membership were rarely a talking point. When combined with a posture of only being openly critical of malgovernance when it could no longer be avoided, as was the case in what is now North Macedonia in 2015, the prevailing message to ruling elites has been one of indulgence.

49 See Marc Santora, The Broken Promise of a Panda: How Prague's Relations with Beijing Soured, in: New York Times, 23 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/23/world/europe/china-prague-taiwan.html>; see also Stefan Vladislavljev, Cautionary Tale for the Western Balkans: China and Czech Republic, European Western Balkans, 15 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/15/cautionary-tale-for-the-western-balkans-china-and-czech-republic/>

50 John Brinkley, Chinese Government Officials Give U.S. Counterparts Lessons In Strategy, Forbes, 6 May 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnbrinkley/2019/05/06/chinese-government-officials-give-u-s-counterparts-lessons-in-strategy/#3b5fa87f5010>

51 Ibid.

52 For example, on Gini coefficients, see Zsoka Kocsan, Being Poor, Feeling Poorer: Inequality, Poverty, and Poverty Perceptions in the Western Balkans, IMF Working Paper, February 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp1631.pdf>; see also Freedom House, Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy – Freedom in the World 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf Regarding corruption, the countries of the region ranked as follows in 2016: Slovenia (31), Croatia (55), Montenegro (64), Serbia (72), Bosnia and Herzegovina (83), Albania (83), Macedonia (90), and Kosovo (95).

There have been two notable exceptions to this model, in which the EU insisted on obligations being upheld. The first was regarding the proposed South Stream gas pipeline, which would have traversed the Black Sea, entering Bulgaria, with a northward line traversing Serbia, Hungary, and ending in Austria, and a southern one crossing into Greece and entering Italy.⁵³ The project hit a major obstacle when the European Commission demanded in December 2013 that inter-governmental agreements between Russia and Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia – also a member of the Energy Community – be renegotiated, as their terms violated the EU's third energy package.⁵⁴ Specifically, distribution and supply were conjoined under Gazprom, the pipelines were proprietary and the tariff rates were deemed unfair.⁵⁵ The project stalled there. While cancellation followed the next year, in many eyes due to the chill in relations following Russia's invasion of Ukraine,⁵⁶ the fact that the EC applied the brakes to candidate Serbia made an impression. The second was regarding the Belgrade to Budapest railway project, part of the corridor for Chinese goods travelling from Piraeus into Central Europe and beyond. This is covered in detail by Jens Bastian in this issue.⁵⁷

Given that China's engagement involves loans – which countries with dwindling populations ultimately need to repay (effectively a postponed tax), as well as equity stakes (many hidden as effective collateral) – the EU could very well present the upholding of its standards as looking out for the public interest in the Western Balkans. Given the breadth of the *acquis communautaire's* requirements, there are myriad opportunities to undertake such action. The only problem is that this would be seen as adversarial by “partner” governments, whose business model relies on opacity.

Mao wrote during the Chinese civil war how guerrillas (the fish) need to operate in symbiosis with the population (the water) when fighting in the enemy's rear. “Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemy's rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be likened to water the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element cannot live.” To paraphrase Mao, Chinese economic (and security-sensitive) projects swim as easily as a fish through such an ecosystem.⁵⁸ Their starting point is always to mainline into the existing power structure. Unfortunately for the EU, its enlargement methodology and political practice has done the same – with arguably less effective public outreach than relative newcomer China, which at least speaks the language of ruling elites.

53 *Gazprom*, South Stream is estimated to cost EUR 15.5 billion, Press Release, 30 November 2010, <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2010/november/article106074/>

54 *Dave Keating*, South Stream Must Be Renegotiated – Commission, in: *European Voice*, 5 December 2013, <https://www.politico.eu/article/south-stream-must-be-renegotiated-commission-3/>

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Stanley Reed / James Kanter*, Putin's Surprise Call to Scrap South Stream Gas Pipeline Leaves Europe Reeling, in: *New York Times*, 2 December 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/business/south-stream-pipeline-cancellation-fallout.html>

57 *Jens Bastian*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

58 See Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare, 6. The Political Problems of Guerrilla Warfare, 1937, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/1937/guerrilla-warfare/cho6.htm>

Locals Have Agency – Who is the EU’s Partnership with, Anyway?

Local actors have agency in deciding the nature of the relationship to the extent that they have agency within the political system. As protests throughout the region in 2018–2019 made evident,⁵⁹ there is a huge dignity deficit and sense of lack of faith in the prevailing political systems as vehicles for positive change.

China will not – cannot – be an agent of positive change in the governing systems of the Western Balkans, which need genuine transformational change. Instead, Beijing serves as a force multiplier for the existing powers that be. Its economic throw weight is aligned firmly with the political *status quo*.

In the existing power dynamic, there is no reason that Western Balkan governments could not – in light of increasingly choking air pollution⁶⁰ in several capital cities (Skopje, Sarajevo, and Belgrade in particular) – call for Chinese proposals or make tenders for renewable wind or solar energy projects, given China’s production of affordable renewable energy generation technology. Yet this has not occurred. This cannot be solely attributed to deposits of lignite, but also to lack of incentives to place public interests ahead of political and personal interests. These are deeply clientelist political systems.

In the early days of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, the liberal democratic values elements of what the EU was supposed to be about were far more prominent than they have been in the past 15 years in the Western Balkans. A charitable interpretation might be that the presumption that governments were indeed accountable and espoused these values made such a focus redundant. A more realist view might be that the EU was consumed with its own priorities internally and attempting to demonstrate continuity, in the hope that “momentum” would be restored. A more acerbic take would be that even as it became clear that the enlargement model was not achieving the norm transfer it was supposed to, those tasked with managing saw highlighting this fact and advising decision makers to adjust the policy would be an admission of failure and bad career move. Whatever the rationale, there can be no doubt that the policy has failed to achieve the transformation necessary to make Western Balkan countries saleable to member state parliaments.

The EU cannot compete with China in the Western Balkans on a field of transactionalism, precisely because it is a Union of rules and at least declared values, if not always enforced even within its membership. For Western Balkan citizens frustrated with persistent – and ever more shameless – malgovernance, the EU’s fundamental values, standards, rules, and transparency are its selling points. The EU has sold itself short by attempting to play transactionally and trumpet its investments and aid via public relations exercises.⁶¹ If the EU is a normative power, it needs to extend to regulation of the digital space, so as not to let China dictate terms.

59 Dušan Stojanović, Anti-government protests in Montenegro, Serbia and Albania inspire hopes of “Balkan Spring”, in: The Independent, 6 April 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/balkan-spring-protests-montenegro-serbia-albania-a8858046.html>

60 Majlinda Bregu, The air pollution is killing us, European Western Balkans, 16 January 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/16/the-air-pollution-is-killing-us/>

61 European Commission, EU-Western Balkans Economic Relations – Investing in People, Infrastructures and Reforms, May 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/economic-relations_en.pdf

Schooling with Mao

So instead of playing to China's strengths, the EU needs to take a page from Mao's book and see itself as a fish which must swim not with Western Balkan leaderships, but with – and *for* – the populations of these countries. This means a wholesale shift in philosophy and posture, without need for any radical change to the EU's toolbox, mandates, and structures. The EU's policies are formally and ostensibly aimed at preparing the Western Balkan states for membership. This needs to be approached on a far more granular level, helping citizens act like EU citizens now – to force their governments to respond like EU member state governments have been forced to react to civic demands and public pressure. Instead of treating leaders as its constituency in the Western Balkans, the EU must approach citizens as its constituency. This would act as a force multiplier for those acting on behalf of the EU's standards, but also those who will benefit from them.

A revised EU enlargement methodology had recently been announced by the Commission, following French President Emmanuel Macron's veto on launching membership talks with candidates North Macedonia and Albania. In an earlier French "non-paper", an even more blatantly transactional and economically oriented approach was espoused, essentially outlining a containment policy in collaboration with local elites.⁶² The words "corruption", "state capture" and "democracy" were absent. The Commission's February 5, 2020 proposal at least addresses these concerns by frontloading the fundamental rights elements of the *acquis* in the membership negotiation process.⁶³ However, the opportunity provided by the crisis initiated by Macron – to rethink and recalibrate the enlargement philosophy to enable it to be effective – was squandered, with the goal of being able to launch talks with North Macedonia and (perhaps) Albania in the near term.

The onset of Covid19 crisis left Western Balkan governments, as with many others worldwide, scrambling to secure personal protective equipment. While the EU initially required clearance for export of this equipment, China filled the void – and capitalized on this heavily in the public space in what was called "mask diplomacy."⁶⁴ The EU's initial missteps in assisting the region led the EU to react by green-lighting these stalled membership talks in late March 2020 – but in an abrupt way transparently designed to signal *to itself* that the EU remained the dominant geopolitical player in the Western Balkans.⁶⁵ It was reactive policy; damage control rather than strategy. This insecure posture was also readily apparent in the Council's summit with the Western Balkans in May 2020. The "Zagreb Declaration", reflecting the palpable geopolitical angst from China's "mask diplomacy" and the plaudits it won in the region, particularly in Belgrade, effectively begged for recognition from the region.⁶⁶ In short, the Corona pandemic amplified the EU's concerns about Chinese inroads to the region and Europe more broadly. But despite boilerplate commitments to EU foundational values,⁶⁷ policy as practice puts illiberal and authoritarianizing leaders like Vučić at a fulcrum in a geopolitical bidding war, with the EU a suitor and not a norm-setter. This

62 Kurt Bassuener / Toby Vogel, Macron's Balkan Cordon Sanitaire Will Backfire on EU, in: EU Observer, 26 November 2019, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/146679>

63 Toby Vogel / Kurt Bassuener, Enlargement: a Missed Opportunity, in: EU Observer, 7 February 2020, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/147384>

64 Stefan Vladislavljev, Serbia the Focal Point of Chinese 'Mask Diplomacy' in the Western Balkans, European Western Balkans, 30 April 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/30/serbia-the-focal-point-of-chinese-mask-diplomacy-in-the-western-balkans/>

65 Jacopo Barigazzi, North Macedonia, Albania Get Green Light for EU Membership Talks, Politico Europe, 24 March 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-macedonia-albania-eu-membership-talks/>

66 EU Council, Zagreb Declaration, 6 May 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>; cited at point #5

67 Ibid, cited at point #7.

paradoxically increases not only local political elites' leverage, but that of China (and other illiberal powers).

Unless this changes dramatically, the Chinese approach will remain far more effective with its chosen partners – and toward its ends – than the European for the foreseeable future. If so, reckoning with the durable results of Beijing's policies and Western Balkan leadership, opportunism and arbitrage will be postponed into the future for the EU. It is hard to believe that the EU then will be in a relatively stronger position to address the problems that follow than it is at present.



China's President Xi Jinping welcomes Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić at the Second Belt and Road Forum, Beijing, 27 April 2019. Photo: imago images / ITAR TASS



Aerial photo taken on 16 January 2019 shows Piraeus port, Greece. The development of Piraeus in recent years is the result of the cooperation between Greece and China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Photo: imago images / Xinhua