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ATLANTIC INITIATIVE

CHINESE-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN THE BALKANS



EDITORIAL



Written by:
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The Post-Trump America

For all that they may seem successful, policies never permanently achieve their goal. All the victories are nothing but a temporarily stabilized balance of power, and every order lasts only for so long as it manages to resist the incessant threats from the alternatives it had pushed to the margins.

This is precisely what thinkers like Francis Fukuyama lost sight of when, standing on the ruins of communisms in the last decade of the Twentieth century, they announced the expansion of liberal democracy as the final act of human ideological evolution. In the meantime, the return of authoritarianism in Russia; the strong economic advance of China under their one-party system; growth of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East; and the strengthening of right-wing populism in Europe and America have shown that liberalism is not a supra-political idea and an inherent human aspiration.

VIOLENCE AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Democratic systems, like all other political orders, have their natural enemies, and their achievements are lost unless actively and continuously defended.

This has never been more obvious than when witnessing the violent and deadly raid by followers of President Donald Trump at the US Congress building on January 6th this year. Angered by their leader's unfounded claims - whose words they trusted over the painstaking work of electoral commissions, consistent court rulings and numerous acts by other government institutions - the protesters attempted to stop the functioning of long-established American democracy through physical violence.

Thus the cult of one person, constructed on prejudice, xenophobia and fictitious conspiracies,

culminated in a physical attack on the institutions of a country whose political identity had been built for over two centuries around the idea of individual rights, the rule of law and being a global beacon of democracy.

Three decades have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union boosted expectations of the global march of liberal democracy, but that beacon now seems duller than ever.

Still, perception is never the same as reality. Dramatic scenes of broken windows, costumed rioters in the chairs of the House of Representatives, and the exchange of fire in the halls of Congress may easily mislead an observer to conclude that America is now among the countries where politics mostly happens in the streets.

However to do so would be to ignore the fact that law enforcement agencies regained control of the building within hours, that many rioters were quickly arrested and are facing long sentences, and that Congress continued their session the very same evening in the very same building, and confirmed the outcome of the November elections.

In the meantime, that confirmation has received additional support from a number of Republican congressmen, who blamed Donald Trump for the violence and denied him their loyalty. The attempt to move politics away from institutions and onto the street has left Trump alone in Washington, while calls for his impeachment - even his criminal accountability - can be heard from among Republican ranks as well.

American democracy works, and this was proven once again on 20th January when Joe Biden was officially inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States, and Kamala Harris as the first woman vice president in the history of the United States of America.

DEEP POLARIZATION

On the other hand, democratic ideas cannot be reduced simply to the institutional arena where political confrontations take place. Social reality is also

formed through informal relations among groups with different visions, sentiments and interests. As such, Donald Trump leaving Washington will not end the deep polarization and animosities that exist among Americans.

If they want to bring the divided segments of society closer together, Joe Biden's administration will have to get to grips with the causes of dissatisfaction that have given room for right-wing populism to grow and made tens of millions of Americans give their votes to someone different, even at the cost of breaking away from democratic traditions.

Why would an ordinary person feel so alienated from those leading their country, even when they come from the political party they themselves subscribe to? Have the elites been deaf to the cries of average American workers while conducting the neo-liberal economic policy of moving jobs to China and India?

Should the promotion of liberal values have taken a more cautious pace and approach, which would have proven to more conservative Americans that their traditional communities were not at risk? These are some of the questions the new administration will have to answer if they want to protect American democracy from a new Trump.

The events that have taken place in the United States of America will inevitably reflect on its international role. In the attempt to renew the ideological mission, President Biden will be faced with a dent in the image of his country as the "leader of the free world".

One of the first priorities of the new administration is strengthening the trans-Atlantic alliance, which has been weakened over the past four years under Trump's unilateralism. In spite of its internal turbulence, the USA is still the greatest economy in the world and the leading military power, and as such retains the most prominent place among liberal economies.

That America's return is welcome is shown by numerous congratulatory messages sent by European leaders to Joe Biden immediately after the votes

were counted, and again after the official inauguration. While at the same time little attention was paid to Trump's claims that the elections had been stolen, or to the fact that he joined the very few American leaders who have failed to carry out a dignified transition of power in accordance with the good and well-established democratic traditions of that country.

When it comes to regimes that are not ideologically akin, the situation is more complex. Processes that have taken place over the past several months, culminating with the violence on the 6th of January, have significantly eroded the moral capital America has made use of over past decades to confront *strongmen* and autocrats. How can a country where almost half of its citizens do not believe in the legitimacy of elections talk about freedom of elections elsewhere?

What authority can the government of a country, whose highest institutions were occupied by an angry mob, have to teach others about the rule of law? Can the world leader in the fight for human rights be so divided on racial grounds? The voice of America that criticizes Vladimir Putin about the repression of opposition in Russia, or Xi Jinping about Internet censorship in China is now muffled, and it can regain its old resonance only when the USA once again becomes the undeniable exemplar of what they wish others to follow.

Without doubt the path to mending its undermined image lies through the renewal of American leadership in international organizations. In the past four years, Trump's 'America First' unilateralism resulted in the significant weakening of American presence in United Nations organizations. As with any vacuum this too was filled very quickly, so we saw the sudden strengthening of Chinese influence in our largest international organization.

A whole range of UN organizations are now led by Chinese officials; moreover, since October China is a member of the UN's Human Rights Council. Plus China has created a number of new multilateral institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, and the 17+1 initiative for economic cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

STILL, BOSNIA...

While Trump was confronting his trans-Atlantic allies, China and Russia came closer together through the Eurasian Economic Union. The new administration in Washington clearly recognizes that China has been trying to turn multilateral organizations into platforms for expanding its global influence, and Joe Biden himself summarized the significance of these processes by saying "either China's going to write the rules of the road for the 21st century on trade, or we are".

In addition to the internal divisions and erosion of global leadership Joe Biden will have to deal with the pandemic, to which the departed administration responded disastrously and which has already taken hundreds of thousands of lives in the USA. Moreover, President Biden announced that one of his top priorities would be to seek an appropriate response to climate change.

When we look at the enormous problems Donald Trump has left behind, there are reasons to believe that the situation in the Balkans will remain a background topic.

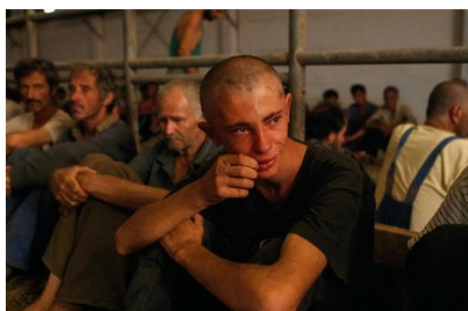
Still, the US State Department is large and specialized, and the new President has a personal connection to the region, so there will be energy and will to significantly boost USA engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As his mandate proceeds, we can expect stronger pressure to alter the Dayton Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina - which would not threaten the division of the country into its entities, but would remove institutional blockades that have been obstructing the functioning of the state. Though they may not be among his top priorities, Joe Biden still sees the integrity and functionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina as integral aspects of American national interest. ■

Edina Bećirević writes for the Atlantic Initiative about the genocide of the Uyghurs, and the deafening silence of the world in the face of widespread systematic persecution

China and the Western Balkans: On Economic Growth, Double Standards and Genocide

Despite Bosnian economists' claims that China is motivated solely by economics, it seems the "irresistible charm of authoritarian growth" may seduce many countries to succumb to Chinese political pressure, and even embrace grave violations of human rights



**CAMPS IN BOSNIA
IN 1992, AND IN THE
CHINESE REGION
OF XINJIANG IN
2017: IMAGES OF
PERSECUTION ON THE
CONSCIENCE OF THE
MODERN WORLD**

Written by: Edina Bećirević

“The irresistible charm of authoritarian growth”¹ is a sentence that aptly sums up China’s current position in the Western Balkans. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic China was openly favoured by Serbia over countries in the West as a source of

aid and information, a stance also taken by some politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet even prior to the pandemic a network of political and academic actors in the Western Balkans were engaged in a campaign to celebrate China as the world’s new leading global power, overlooking the fact that China is a communist, authoritarian regime that is



UYGHURS: VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE BEFORE THE EYES OF A SILENT WORLD

committing genocide against Uyghurs. The aim of this campaign was not only to favor China as the country to look up to, but also to undermine significant economic investments by the EU and the US, as well as their initiatives to strengthen the rule of law and promote democracy in the Western Balkan countries. Intentionally or not even liberal-oriented regional media have followed this lead, promoting China but also Russia and some other authoritarian regimes as alternatives to the Euro-Atlantic model.

IS CHINA ONLY INTERESTED IN ECONOMICS?

When assessing the influence of China in the Western Balkans even experts and politicians with a more liberal orientation have taken little issue with the negative effects of Chinese investments in the region, and most have ignored the intensified activity of the MSS (China's foreign intelligence service). Few have raised concerns about cultural and educational exchange programs that have the potential to promote illiberal values in Western Balkan societies, where the fractures of war may make them particularly susceptible to this messaging. The dominant narrative is that China, unlike Russia, not only "doesn't have an alternative political vision" for the Western Balkans, but that it supports a European outlook for the region. As such, the political

interests of China are viewed as limited mostly to whether sufficient stability exists to support its economic investments. As one Bosnian economist told me, "capital goes where it can grow, and that is the primary motivation of the Chinese government."

But nothing has more clearly proven the naivety of the idea that China's economic projects can exist in isolation from its politics than Serbia's willingness to officially support Chinese genocide against Uyghurs at the UN last summer. Given that Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU are underway, and according to some estimates should be completed by the end of 2024, Belgrade could be expected to follow the EU on foreign policy. Instead, after 22 states – largely from the EU – issued a letter to the United Nations Human Right Council condemning China's treatment of the Uyghurs, Serbia chose to sign on to an opposing letter which credited China for "protecting and promoting human rights through development." In doing so Serbia joined 49 authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes including Russia, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia and, notably, 23 Muslim-majority states. Some of these signatories supported China because of their own economic interests, and others because of their own vulnerabilities on the issue of human rights.²



CHINA'S XINJIANG REGION: "THE GEOPOLITICS OF EMOTION" CONCEALS A TERRIBLE TRUTH

THE BOSNIAN EXPERIENCE

It should not be surprising to European diplomats that Serbia has readily supported China on this issue. Taken Serbia's past involvement in the Bosnian genocide and its present narratives of genocide denial, this was actually one of the more sincere reflections of Serbian policy at the UN. Yet Serbia is not the only country in the region supportive of China in this matter. In other Western Balkan countries mainstream media, academics and politicians have also been curiously silent about the genocide of the Uyghurs. Perhaps saddest is the silence of Bosniaks, who were so recently the victims of genocide. They were held in very similar camps to the Uyghurs, run by the Bosnian-Serb leadership under the auspices of the Serbian state. In Bosnia and Herzegovina some have called them "detention camps"; in China they are called "re-education camps". Make no mistake, as was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina so in China now these terms serve as euphemisms for concentration camps.

In 1992 images from camps in Omarska, Trnopolje, and Manjača in northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina provoked global consternation about the war. Brave

journalists such as Roy Gutman, Ed Vulliamy, Peter Maass, and a British TV crew from Independent Television News (ITN) were so persistent in demanding access to these sites that they managed to enter and interview some of the "human skeletons" they had photographed behind the barbed wire. But in China, the suffering of Uyghurs cannot be filmed and photographed. Chinese authorities have closed the Xinjiang region, leaving the world to rely on satellite images, locations secretly filmed by drone cameras, and the testimonies of witnesses who have either served a sentence in "detention" handed down in a sham trial, or have managed to escape. The torture described by former prisoners includes rape, beatings, forced sterilization, and various psychological abuse. Some prisoners have also been sentenced to death, but there is no reliable data on how many Uyghurs have been killed by China.

China's growing economic power in the world means that we may never learn the scope of the Uyghur genocide. Unlike Serbian and Bosnian-Serb leadership, China has the capacity to ensure that its mass graves are never unearthed. Still, even before mass graves were discovered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the genocide against Bosnian Muslims provoked the

outrage of the West as well as of majority Muslim countries, even uniting enemies such as Saudi Arabia and Iran to lobby for their “Muslim brethren” in international spaces. Uyghur Muslims have not been afforded this support, exposing the hypocrisy of many Muslim countries.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF EMOTION

There was much talk last year about how Turkish President Erdogan has returned dignity to the Muslim world by ordering the reclassification of Istanbul’s historic Hagia Sophia as a mosque after the annulment by the Council of State of a 1934 presidential decree establishing it as a museum. The Turkish president is well versed in projecting himself as a protector of Muslims around the world. The “geopolitics of emotion” is his trademark. And while Turkey did not sign the letter to the United Nation Human Rights Council in support of China, and has condemned the treatment of Uyghurs in the past, when Erdogan met last summer with President Xi he reportedly emphasized that “residents of various ethnicities [are] living happily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region thanks to China’s prosperity,” calling this “a hard fact” and noting that “Turkey will not allow anyone to drive a wedge in its relations with China.”³ In light of this statement, the extradition treaty between China and Turkey which the Turkish Parliament is getting ready to ratify will further endanger the position of Uyghurs.

This appears to be the default position of autocrats these days, and one that poses a challenge to the United Nations - especially considering that these like-minded authoritarian states gathered in more than double the numbers of those willing to condemn China at the Human Rights Council. As autocratic and authoritarian regimes work to dismantle international human rights standards and norms from within the United Nations, experts in the Western Balkans and elsewhere must recognize that Chinese economic investment is indeed intertwined with politics. For despite the assertion of Bosnian economists that China is motivated solely by economics, it seems the “irresistible charm of authoritarian growth” may seduce many countries to succumb to Chinese political pressure, and even embrace grave violations of human rights. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sentence borrowed from the book *Why Nations Fail*, Acemoglu & Robinson (2013).
- 2 <https://jamestown.org/program/the-22-vs-50-diplomatic-split-between-the-west-and-china-over-xinjiang-and-human-rights/>
- 3 (Al-Araby, July 3) <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2019/07/03/Erdogan-says-people-live-happily-in-Xinjiang-Chinese-state-media->

Well-known Bosnian journalist analyzes Turkish-Chinese agreements and the position of Uyghurs in Turkey for Atlantic Initiative

What price will Turkey's Uyghurs pay for the benefits of the Chinese vaccine?

Concerns are growing over the persecution of Uyghurs in China, which experts are calling genocide



EXPERTS CALL THE PERSECUTION OF UYGHURS GENOCIDE

(PHOTO: SAVEUIGHUR.COM)

Written by: Mirnes Kovač

Twelve years ago, on 29 January 2009, the famous “One Minute” scandal took place at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

At one of the Forum's sessions Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then Turkey's Prime Minister, angrily interrupted the moderator to reply to Israeli President Shimon Peres, who was passionately defending Israel's three-week offensive against Hamas in Gaza.

"When it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill!" Erdogan said to Peres, adding "I find it very sad that people applaud what you said. You killed people. And I think that it is very wrong."

Erdogan subsequently walked out of the Forum, and since this speech his increasingly loud advocacy and defense of endangered Muslim minority communities around the world has become a trademark.¹



**"ONE MINUTE" SCANDAL 29 JANUARY 2009:
SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF VULNERABLE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

SILENCE ON CRIMES AGAINST TURKIC KIN

Until recently Turkey gave similar support to the Uyghurs, the threatened Turkic ethnic community in the Xinyang region of China. In recent years Uyghurs have been subjected to systematic persecution and oppression by the Chinese authorities, with the United States recently officially describing their treatment as genocide.²

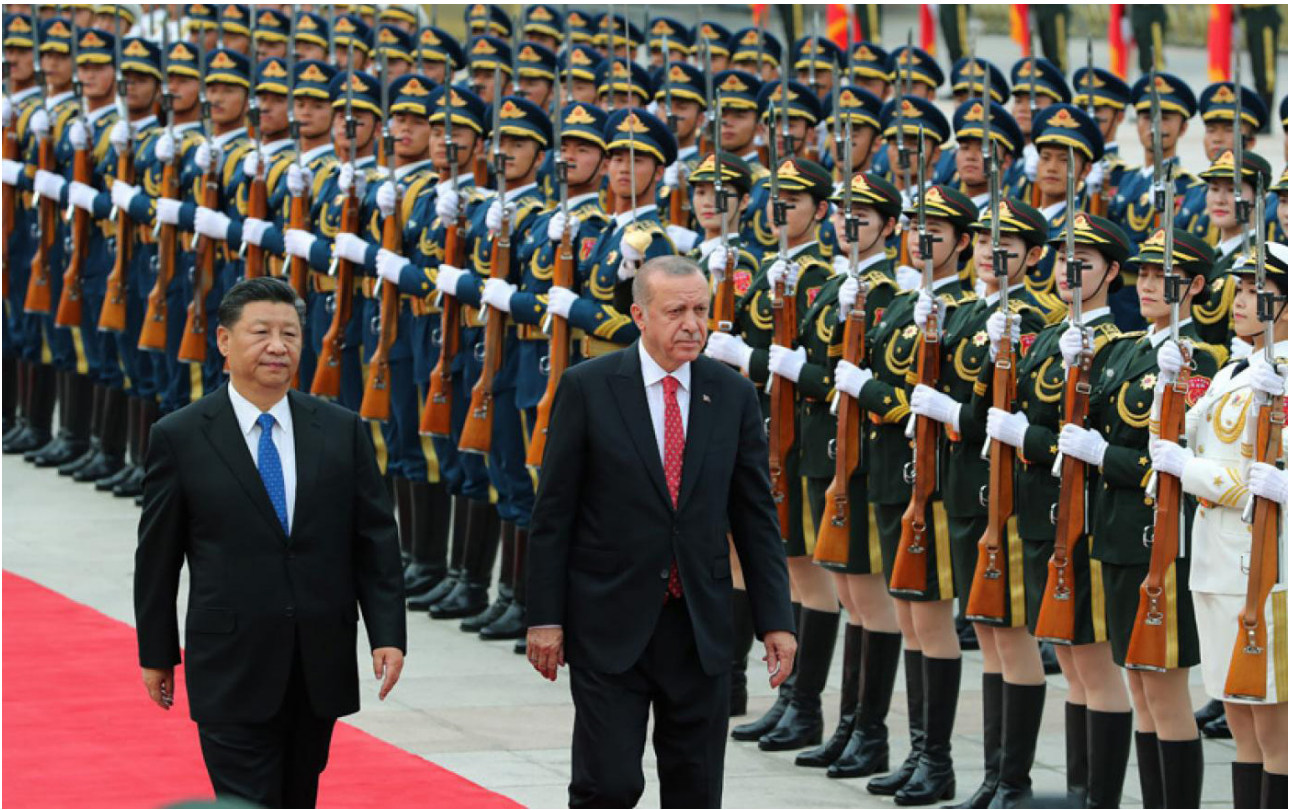
The US position has put Turkey, whose officials have been rather quiet lately on the Uyghur issue, in a very awkward place. The "thunderous" silence of Erdogan, who has stood out on the world stage for years as a global protector of vulnerable Muslims, is particularly striking. Not long ago he called out Western leaders and accused them of Islamophobia for their ignorance of Muslim suffering around the world. Right now, however, Turkey is just a step away from ratifying an extradition treaty with China which will further endanger those Uyghurs fleeing genocide in China, as well as those who have already found refuge in Turkey.

The treaty was ratified by China on 26 December 2020 at the National People's Congress, with Chinese media also pointing out that it would be of use in the fight against terrorism. According to Dilxat Raxit, a spokesman for the World Uyghur Congress (an exile organization based in Germany): "This extradition treaty will cause concern among Uyghurs who have fled China and do not yet have Turkish citizenship."³

Turkey, on the other hand, has not yet ratified the agreement, and Turkish opposition politicians - along with Uyghur activists in Turkey and human rights groups - are pressuring the authorities to reject the agreement and prevent it "becoming an instrument of persecution" of the estimated 50,000 Uyghurs in Turkey.

The Turkish parliament was expected to ratify the agreement on 26 January of this year, but it did not happen.

A day later Meral Aksener, president of the opposition Good-Iyi Partisi, said approval from the Turkish Grand Assembly was still pending.



CHINESE PRESIDENT XI AND ERDOGAN: SELF-INTEREST FIRST AND FOREMOST
(WEBSITE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY)

"I wonder if he will dare to put this on the agenda of the Committee on Foreign Affairs," Aksener told her parliamentary group.⁴ Whoever submits this pact to parliament will put their signature under "crimes against our (Uyghur) kin and will wear it as a sign of shame for life," she added. Similar criticism came from some Turkish politicians from the CHP party.

CHINA'S SUDDEN ECONOMIC PRESENCE IN TURKEY

The main reason for this concern is the escalation of Uyghur persecution in China, whose methods and implementation have been branded by experts as genocide.

According to data released by international human rights organizations, more than a million ethnic Uyghurs are believed to be detained in special 're-education' camps. There is growing evidence of restrictions on religious beliefs and cultural practices, forced labour schemes, mass surveillance, and even forced abortion and sterilization of women.

The most serious systematic persecution of Uyghurs was illustrated when Twitter moved to 'lock' the

official profile of the Chinese Embassy in Washington DC after a tweet on 7 January 2020 in which Uyghur women were presented in dehumanizing language as being "baby-making machines" prior to the Chinese government's interventions.

Such methods of oppression point, in fact, to how China is killing off the Uyghur population.

"It is strange that the Chinese embassy in Washington recently tweeted that they reduced the Uyghur population growth rate down from 12 to six percent per thousand people. So, they halved the population growth in one year. And how can you do that without forced abortions, which is exactly what Uyghur exiles and refugees have been trying to point out to the world's public," Cato Institute analysts Eric Gomez and Mustafa Akyol alerted in a recent podcast.⁵

In Turkey the change of policy towards the Uyghurs is officially denied because it is unpopular among the conservative electorate that supports the ruling regime. However, cooperation between China and Turkey is currently riding high.

China is working hard to make Turkey an important link in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Last summer the National Bank of China halted the fall of the Turkish lira at a time when the Turkish government could not find provision for this kind of arrangement anywhere else.

The biggest Chinese investment in Turkey is the construction of a thermal power plant in Adana and, after the recent withdrawal of Volkswagen from Manisa, Xiaomi is opening production facilities in Avcilar.⁶ These are just a few signs of the increasingly intensive economic ties between China and Turkey.

UYGHURS AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Russian-Turkish relations significantly improved after the attempted military coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016 because Russia provided open assistance to the ruling regime.

Turkey is now turning more towards Beijing because of the efficiency that China has demonstrated in delivering vaccines against COVID 19. After an initial three million doses arrived from China at the end of December, Turkey officially started its vaccination program on 14 January.

Addressing reporters after Friday prayers on 22 January in Istanbul, Erdogan announced that Turkey would soon receive a further 10 million doses of the Sinovac Biotech vaccine. Indeed by 25 January a shipment of six and a half million doses had arrived from China, and on 29 January the remaining three and a half million doses were received.⁷

This is very important for Turkey - especially for tourism, the main generator of the Turkish economy. The global race for sufficient vaccines against COVID 19 seems to show that, in Turkey, strong trade relations will take precedence over human rights and the protection of vulnerable Muslims.

Deteriorating relations with Western powers has apparently made Turkey a tempting target for China, an alternative superpower in the post-COVID world. The Uyghurs could be the most obvious collateral damage in this new constellation, regardless of the fact that their present oppression and

persecution are no different from the suffering of other Muslims that caused Erdogan to explode at Davos 12 years ago, or from the many other occasions on which he has played the profitable card of pan-Islamic populism. ■

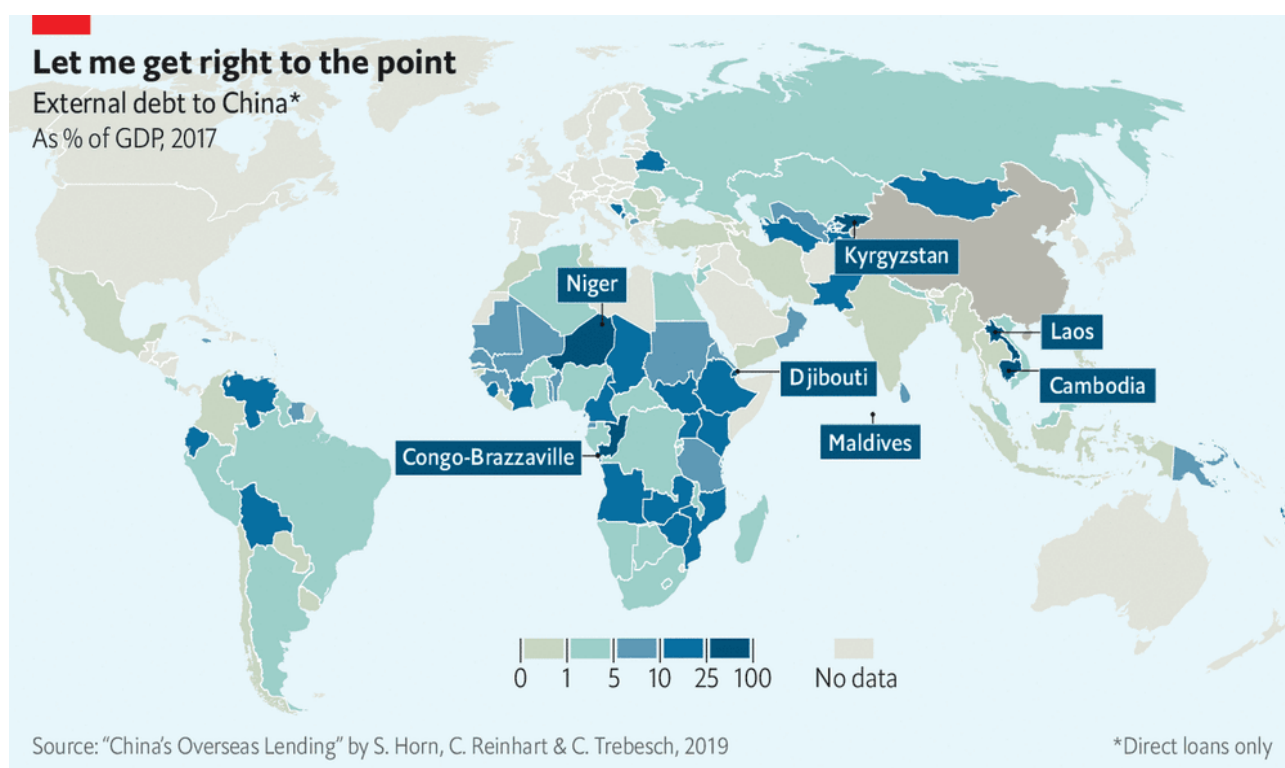
ENDNOTES

- 1 Associated Press, "Recep Erdogan storms out of Davos after clash with Israeli president over Gaza", The Guardian, 30. January 2009. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/30/turkish-prime-minister-gaza-davos>
- 2 In one of his last political appearances, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called China's actions in its western province of Xingyang genocide. The new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during his confirmation hearing that he supports the position of his predecessor. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_kHoQME1OM
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Emin Avundukluoglu, "Turkish opposition party against China extradition pact", Anadolu Agency, 27 January 2021. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-opposition-party-against-china-extradition-pact/2124685>
- 5 "A Declaration of Genocide in China", Cato Daily podcast, 25. January 2021. See: <https://www.cato.org/multimedia/cato-daily-podcast/declaration-genocide-china?queryID=91bc71e-8c9169ac7602018a9f74aea0a>
- 6 Nevşin Mengü, "How China's influence flipped Turkey's position on Uighurs", Duvar English, 27. January 2021. See: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/how-chinas-influence-flipped-turkeys-position-on-uighurs-article-56020>
- 7 "Turkey receives 3.5 million more doses of virus vaccine", Hürriyet Daily News, 29 January 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-receives-second-shipment-from-second-batch-of-sinovac-vaccines-162001>

What is the background to Chinese investments and loans in the region?

China's influence in Montenegro: Incentives to economic development or a road to dependency?

It is evident that China is gradually increasing its economic and social influence and building infrastructure in Montenegro now, in order to exert its influence on the country's internal and foreign politics in the future



RISE IN CHINESE LOANS TO THE POOR COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD

Author: Milica Kovačević

In their recent report "Nations in Transit", Freedom House writes that China exploits financially and infrastructurally weak countries to expand its influence abroad, including the debt-trap diplomacy strategy whereby economically stronger countries grant loans to developing countries, creating a debt burden along with political dependency.

According to some research, China has become the world's biggest creditor in developing countries.

In the Western Balkans China stands ahead of the European Union (EU), which has more stringent conditions for loans and repayment of financial support. The outcome is that foreign debt in the Western Balkans region is more and more in the hands of China. According to the data provided by Freedom House, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia respectively owe 39 and 20 percent of the state's debt to China.

CHINA'S DEBT-TRAP DIPLOMACY

Besides loans, investments from China are increasingly marked by the term "corrosive capital". The phrase comes from the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), with the explanation that it refers to either private or state capital that lacks transparency, accountability and a market orientation, and which comes from authoritarian regimes to countries in transition.

The "corrosive capital" exploits and exacerbates existing weaknesses in governance to influence economic and political developments in the recipient countries.

Numerous studies have shown that China adjusts its investment strategy for each country, focusing on their weakest institution.

The non-transparent and non-market-oriented nature of these investments stimulates corruption and degrades transparency and the rule of law in recipient economies.

Since regaining independence in 2006, the inflow of foreign direct investments (FDIs) has served as an important generator of economic growth for Montenegro. In 2018, the gross inflow of FDIs to Montenegro amounted to 9% of GDP, which is high compared to other countries of the region.

Tourism, banking, energy and real estate are the sectors which receive most foreign investment. During this period Russia was the biggest direct investor in Montenegro, with \$1,27 billion of cumulative investment.

Despite deteriorated bilateral relations, Russia is still among five leading investors in the country.

Significant investments have come from Western countries, as well as from the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Azerbaijan and China, which is the focus of this article.

According to data published by the Central Bank of Montenegro in October 2020, China was the biggest investor in Montenegro in 2020, with 70 million Euros of direct foreign investment.

With the rise in public debt during the economic crisis that occurred after Montenegro regained independence, the country needed money for development and it had to look for it in the East. Western sources of financing had stringent crediting conditions which Montenegro found difficult to meet.

A MOTORWAY THAT LEADS TO A DEBT TRAP

Despite numerous warnings and the fiscal unsustainability of the project, in 2014 the Government of Montenegro took a loan from the Chinese EXIM Bank for the construction of the Bar – Boljare Motorway. The road had been included for years in the country's national plans for the integration of its transport network with those of neighboring countries and beyond, into European road corridors.

The 809 million Euro loan for the construction of the first section of the motorway led to a dramatic rise in Montenegro's public debt.

From the very beginning the project was marked by a significant lack of transparency. Many documents relating to the planning and construction of the motorway were protected as secret, and even several years later the public did not get a complete picture of the project. Given the bilateral agreement between the two countries, and the credit arrangement being based on that agreement, any national regulations that would have increased control and transparency - including those related to public procurement - were bypassed.

After two extensions of the deadline it is expected that the first section of the motorway will be finished next year, when the first installment of the loan will have to be repaid.

Although the IMF has already warned that "the hasty completion of the motorway would probably jeopardize the fiscal sustainability of Montenegro", the construction of the remaining three sections has entered a stage of uncertainty due to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seriously affected the Montenegrin economy.

In June 2020, the Montenegrin Government requested financial support from the IMF via the Rapid



INCREASED ECONOMIC PRESENCE BRINGS ABOUT INCREASED POLITICAL PRESENCE

Financing Instrument (RFI). It stated it would not undertake any further stages of construction of the Bar – Boljare Motorway, or any other capital expenditures that could jeopardize the sustainability of the debt, until the prospects for the public finances have significantly improved.

The first stage of the motorway, which is close to completion, is an impressive construction through the Montenegrin mountains - but it ends up in the middle of nowhere, and will not be able to create conditions for a return of the investment in the near future because it has not been connected to the regional network yet.

Meanwhile, meager resources that could be spent in more profitable ways are being wasted.

The main "corrosive effect" of the Chinese loan is that it blocks the autonomy of present and future Montenegrin governments because, financially, it ties the country's hands for years to come.

Under the burden of high public debt, Montenegro has more and more difficulties finding money on the financial markets, and it has already taken on loans under unfavorable rates of interest from neighboring countries.

Montenegro's public debt discourages prospective investors because a potential increase in taxes to finance the debt would be seen as an unnecessary business cost. The lack of inflow of investments and other revenues will make it more difficult for Montenegro to continue financing its reform projects. The combination of fiscal risks and management risks due to the growing dependency on China could also jeopardize Montenegro's geo-strategic orientation and related democratic development.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL COOPERATION

With a greater economic presence in Montenegro, China's political presence has increased as well. Bilateral relations between the two countries are developing. Many agreements on cooperation in different areas have been signed, while the liberalization of visa policy is underway.

Exchange programs between Montenegro and China are well developed and include frequent visits by large groups, such as public administration and local government representatives, business associations, media, academic communities, teachers and students. The cooperation between the two countries in the field of education is continuously developing. All three universities in Montenegro have established partnerships with Chinese universities.

Every year, the best Montenegrin students receive scholarships to study in China. The Confucius Institute organizes classes of Chinese language across the country.

Analyses conducted by the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) show that Montenegrin media report mostly positively on China.

Media reports mainly emphasize the importance of the Bar –Boljare Motorway project, Chinese donations to Montenegro, and the promotion of cooperation between China and Montenegro.

Many articles describe Chinese successes in science, arts, infrastructure and technology.

On the other hand, one rarely finds articles about the Chinese political system, the quality of life of its citizens, or social inequalities. The Chinese Embassy in Montenegro often organizes visits of Montenegrin journalists to China.

These often involve visits to Chinese companies, important project locations, historic and cultural monuments, and the media. Reports on such tours are usually one-sided and mostly positive because visitors are only offered the good sides of China.

The rise in Chinese economic and political presence in Montenegro (and the media reporting about it) influence the views of citizens, and in recent years polls have shown that the popularity of China competes increasingly with that of the European Union (and Russia), while other Western countries are greatly behind them.

LESSONS (NOT) LEARNED

When assessing Chinese influence in Montenegro we must bear in mind the long-term political, economic and even civilizational decisions that Montenegrin society will have to take.

A fragile democracy in a constant process of transition cannot strengthen the bodies of democratic self-regulation if it is under the economic and political influence of a society that is totalitarian and undemocratic in its essence.

It is evident that China has been gradually increasing its economic and social influence, and building infrastructure in Montenegro, to one day use it to exert its influence on the country's internal and foreign politics.

All foreign investors in Montenegro have been treated as nationals, and there are no restrictions on the right to private ownership or the establishment of companies in Montenegro.

Furthermore, Montenegro currently does not have any mechanisms to control incoming foreign investments. Registration of an actual end proprietor has not been introduced yet, which leaves room for capital inflows that originate from hidden owners or illegal activities.

By signing international agreements, it is possible to bypass national legislation relating to public procurement, including its transparency. Investments into projects of strategic importance for the Montenegrin economy may thus evade necessary public scrutiny.

As a small country, Montenegro will always have exceptionally asymmetric economic relations with powerful economies. However, excessive dependency on the capital of any foreign state and concentrated primarily in key industries must be avoided.

Montenegro must be cautious when it evaluates its resources, particularly when it comes to investments in electric energy production – coal, hydro, wind and solar power plants. Despite the obviously great need for major development projects, the Government of Montenegro should not enable major countries like China to have cheap and aggressive access to its limited resources. Enabling their entrance into such key industries must be assessed from a perspective of national security and economic development.

NOTE:

This article is based on the results of research on Chinese economic influence in Montenegro conducted by the Podgorica-based Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), with the support of the Washington-based Center for International Private Entrepreneurship (CIPE). ■

ANALYSIS A renowned political scientist and political analyst from Croatia writes for Atlantic Initiative

China's asymmetric economic pressure and stability in the Balkans

We see again how the European framework still provides a certain degree of protection, writes Gjenero



THE CHINESE ON THE PELJEŠAC PENINSULA: EUROPEAN MILLIONS ARE GOING TO CHINA
(PHOTO: TPORTAL.HR)

Author: Davor Gjenero

Preoccupied with threats coming from Putin's Russia, the European Union (EU) has long ignored relations with China and has thus failed to notice the establishment of China as a global power. China took advantage of Donald Trump's isolationism policy in the USA to establish its domination in the Pacific Basin, using the instrument developed by the Obama administration to create the American-Pacific Alliance.

It has also gone somewhat unnoticed that China has been gradually establishing an ever greater influence on the edge of the European continent, and that with the "16+1" format for cooperation – or

more precisely, "17+1" now that Greece has joined – it has seriously imposed its economic and political influence on the European continent.

It was only in March 2019, at the very end of the European Commission mandate led by Jean-Claude Juncker, that the first serious European document – passed by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission – was created: **EU-China – A strategic outlook**.

This document was in preparation for EU member countries to take a common position ahead of the EU – China Summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, held in April that year in Brussels, and

where the Union had clearly defined its fundamental positions.

CHINESE TACTICS

In the EU they realized that, up to that point, China had used Putin's tactics: in evading negotiations, or only formally negotiating with the EU multilaterally, Putin tried to behave as if the Union did not exist at all, and seek instead to reach an agreement on all policies - energy policy in particular - separately and bilaterally with each member country, offering different concessions to individual countries in order to break and weaken the single European position at the Summit.

The fundamental premise of the EU document is that the Union should not tolerate asymmetry in trading relations with China, and that future economic cooperation needs to be based on respect for the fundamental values that the Union has set for its members and partner states. Primarily, environmental protection and the prevention of climate change; respect for freedom and democratic rights; the prohibition and punishment of slave labor; and last but not least, respect and protection of intellectual property rights.

Demands by the EU that its manufacturing companies introduce environmental protection measures - strategic reduction in the use of fossil fuels to cut carbon-dioxide pollution - mean an increase in the cost of production in EU territory. An asymmetry then occurs when commodities manufactured in China enter the EU's free market because China does not respect these rules, and consequently it de facto violates its fundamental principles.

The same goes with the protection of intellectual property, the use of slave labor or inadequate wages for forced labor. Furthermore, in the EU all public procurement is subject to established principles, its market being open to those who meet certain conditions. China, however, evades the application of these principles; instead EU states negotiate deals with state-owned domestic consortia, often owned by oligarchs with strong links to the Communist Party.



GJENERO: SERBIA PLAYS THE CHINESE GAME MORE THAN MOST

TRUMP'S POLICY OF ISOLATIONISM

Trump's policy of isolationism sought the answer to this situation in a simple solution: shutting down the market for Chinese products to protect domestic production from competition, meaning it de facto lagged behind, and was left out of the development cycle. Meanwhile bilateral or multilateral regulation arrangements were replaced by a trade war and the imposition of customs - measures that are equally detrimental to both parties in the dispute.

Almost immediately after the Summit with Jinping in Brussels there followed the Dubrovnik Initiative "16+1" Summit, at which Greece joined the group; at this meeting Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang attempted to play outside of the recently-adopted European rules, looking for soft bellies on the border with the EU, but also in EU member countries.

The European model of imposing principles and establishing trade symmetry has already resulted, on one hand, with clearer criteria for the participation of Chinese companies in European tenders and, on the other, political messaging that resulted in a shift of position by Chinese state leadership toward the EU. By the end of last year, at a video link meeting of European and Chinese leaders on 30 December, a framework for future comprehensive agreement on investment was reached.



**PRIME MINISTERS
PLENKOVIĆ AND LI:
WHAT IS IT THE CHINESE
WANT IN CROATIA?**

The Union succeeded in resolving the crisis according to this model – through regulation and the definition of principles. Now we have entered into a more challenging phase of the agreement’s implementation, needing to secure conditions so that member countries are not led by their own short-term interests to ”jump off” the agreement .

CROATIA AND CHINA

Currently Croatia has an administration that strictly follows European common policies, and it will adjust its policy of economic relations with China to that framework. Of all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Croatia was initially most interesting to China due to its advantageous geo-political position – having two potentially interesting seaports, one in Rijeka, and one in Zadar that has not reached its potential yet.

China showed interest in a concession on the Port of Rijeka, which is already connected by road with Central and Eastern Europe, though somewhat less with Western Europe (the connection from Rupa to Slovenian motorway system is lacking), while the railroad network still needs to be developed.

Potentially, the Port of Zadar is exceptionally interesting because it is better positioned strategically , and with the reconstruction and electrification of railroad logistics it could be the port of entry into Central and Eastern Europe. Although Chinese companies, especially those owned by the state,

rarely make bids in public procurement tenders (or rather they bid only when they are sure that they are going to win), in Croatia they for the first time won a major construction deal for the bridge connecting its mainland with the Pelješac Peninsula, which is financed from European structural funds.

This was not at all “a Chinese investment” - as the construction of infrastructure by Chinese companies in Serbia or Montenegro is called - where Chinese companies build roads or railroads while the Chinese state-owned banks secure credits, with the price of capital significantly higher than market prices.

The construction works on the Mainland-Pelješac bridge are conducted under full European financial control, and the Union has accepted the decision of the Croatian Public Procurement Commission to award the tender to the state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), because it was at that point in line with European rules.

Meanwhile those rules have changed and, had the tender been put out today, the European consortium that competed with the Chinese state-owned company would have been given preference. Although there were suspicions that the Chinese company entered into the deal under dumping conditions, the prevailing view was that the lower price of steel (the most important material for the construction of the bridge) was what secured the price advantage to the Chinese company.

Despite the fact that they have achieved in Croatia what they could not achieve anywhere in the EU, it is also the fact that, while China is involved in a major construction project that is and regularly and duly paid for, Chinese companies have not expressed any interest in investing in Croatia.

The truth is that a consortium of Chinese companies (including the CBRC) made a bid for a concession on the deep-sea terminal in the Port of Rijeka, and their offer was twice as favorable as that made by a holding comprising a domestic Croatian company, and one owned by the world's biggest shipbuilding company, Danish A.P. Moller-Maersk. The decision was postponed for a long time and, finally, on the same day that the framework for European Chinese Comprehensive Investment Agreement was adopted, the Rijeka Port Authority formally (but in reality the Croatian Government) annulled the public tender.

It is clear that overall the revitalization of the Rijeka Port depends on European funds, and that the EU no longer wants to tolerate profit from such deals being gained by third countries, where the term "third countries" primarily relates to China.

The fact that, in the case of the deep-sea terminal concession, Croatia acted in line with EU expectations immediately resulted in an unpleasant response from China.

Namely, a tender was published for the reconstruction of an existing line plus the construction of second track on the Hrvatski Leskovac – Karlovac section of the railroad from Rijeka to the Hungarian border. The very same CRBC that is building the Mainland-Pelješac bridge blocked the tender with a very "far-fetched" objection that the equality of competitors was not guaranteed, i.e. that it was not able to submit documentation because their experts from China did not get permission to enter Croatia due to the COVID-19 pandemics, an action which slowed down the bid selection procedure and, consequently, the beginning of works.

It is certain that this will be neither the last nor the only such example of Chinese pressure on Croatia; however Croatia, as an EU member, benefits from the protective umbrella provided by the principles

agreed within the common European policy and defined in the EU China Strategic Outlook.

Other Balkan countries do not have such protection, and nor does their status as potential members or candidates for membership provide them with the protection afforded by EU membership.

SWEET GLAZING AND BITTER CAKE

Serbia is playing China's political and economic game more than most; it accepted the asymmetric relations that suit China. It accepted "investments" in the Smederevo Steelworks and the Bor Mining and Smelting Company: two failed heavy industries that no longer complied with European rules, and which after the collapse of Yugoslavia had lost their privileged status on the protected closed market.

While semi-manufactured products from China cannot enter the European market because they do not meet European environmental or workers' rights standards, Serbia has opened up the possibility of a "back entrance" for Chinese investors into the European market and, as long as this entrance is open or half-open, this "investment" will continue.

Purely commercial deals financed by overly costly loans - such as the construction of sections of motorway and railroads contracted without public procurement procedures and without the control of the completed works - are presented in Serbia as Chinese investments.

Understandably, most of the construction works are done along the route of the Chinese mega- project widely known as the Belt and Road Initiative. But they are not constructed as Chinese investment or concession deals; instead the contracting party - in this case the Republic of Serbia - will sooner or later have to find finances to pay for Chinese works or they will remain without any type of strategic partnership. All the rest - all the tales of Brother Xi, of great friendship between the two peoples - are nothing but the sweet glazing on a bitter cake.

Right now in the Western Balkans the cake is most bitter in Montenegro, whose budget threatens to collapse because the construction of the motorway

from Bar to the border with Serbia is still unfinished; this motorway still leads to nowhere.

In addition to China, Serbia is also under Russian and US pressure. It seems that, for Serbia, the exit to the sea via the Port of Bar and Montenegro is no longer a priority, the focus being now on connecting the “investors” from China via Kosovo and Albania to the Port of Durrës. Here of course, an important role is played by the Lavrov-Vučić “Mini Schengen” project, for which only Albania, besides Serbia, has shown great interest.

European integration is not a panacea against the expansion of Chinese influence in the Balkans and the asymmetric Chinese approach to the economy. However, we do see once again how the European framework still provides a certain degree of protection - and how countries such as Serbia, which has entered into a risky game, or Montenegro, which has found itself in Chinese financial pliers - are indeed in an unenviable position, left without any anchor of security. ■

Chinese-Russian Propaganda in the Balkans

According to most analyses, the current momentum of Chinese penetration into the Balkans will continue in the future



CHINESE "SOFT POWER" IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: EXPANDING INFLUENCE "UNDER THE RADAR"
(PHOTO: EMBASSY OF PR CHINA IN SARAJEVO)

By: Atlantic Initiative

The challenges of birthing the multipolar world are reflected in Southeastern Europe too, as in earlier phases of world history.

Some 15 years ago already, Russia and China declared their “common wish to create a multipolar world, a world that would not be dominated by the United States”¹, and made a promise that they would continue to strengthen their mutual, but also global networks in the regions that are within their zones of interest.

Judging by processes that we have witnessed in recent years, Southeastern Europe is one of such zones,

despite numerous studies conducted over years or even decades demonstrating a clear Euro-Atlantic orientation in this part of the world.

"SOFT POWER" IN THE BALKANS

In these “incursions” into the region of the Western Balkans, the media plays a major role, with interested powers often using it as an expression of their “soft power”. This is a term coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye who defines power as “power to attract a state based on its political values, culture and foreign policy activities”.²



**PRESIDENT OF SERBIA MEETS EPIDEMIOLOGIST FROM CHINA, MARCH 2020:
THE PANDEMIC AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROMOTE CHINA**

This use of the media can be viewed from two perspectives, and both can be found in the recent experiences of the Western Balkans. One is the creation of independent media projects within countries, thus spreading influence into domestic media with the aim of instrumentalizing them. Such media initiatives by Russia, for example, have been known about for a while.

Krešimir Macan, a public relations expert from Croatia, observed that Russia had been “developing its own networks all over the Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia”.³ One of their trial runs is the Russian agency Sputnik, seated in Belgrade and publishing in Serbian. The agency was opened on 3 February 2015 and maintains close links with high officials of Serbia. In 2016, representatives of Sputnik confirmed to the journalists of the *Zagreb Globus* that they were paid directly by the Russian state, and that “their salaries come from Moscow”.⁴ Already in 2017, Macan warned that this agency’s sole “interest is to place semi-information and lies”.⁵

How far this (ab)use of media can go is clearly illustrated by how Sputnik reports on the strategic interests of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), objecting openly to the country joining NATO or to any relations

between BiH and the European Union (EU) and the West. A revision of several months of articles published by the Sputnik agency illustrates this:

“To the NATO Alliance: Bosnia and Herzegovina shall not join NATO – Srpska would not let it” (22. 11. 2019.)⁶; “Message from the West to the Balkans: Forget the EU – Forward March to NATO!” (14. 10. 2019.)⁷; “BiH in NATO — What would that mean for the region?” (03.10.2019)⁸; “Bosnia is being pressured into NATO against the will of the Serbs” (17. 08. 2019.)⁹; “Komsic is killing BiH because of his vanity or because of NATO ?” (09. 08. 2019.)¹⁰; “And now NATO wants to “defend” Serbia against its closest ally” (18. 04. 2019.)¹¹; “The first penalty for Sarajevo because of the NATO game against Serbs – what will be the outcome?” (08. 04. 2019.)¹²; “*In Lazanski's Crosshairs: NATO is obviously in a hurry to get to the Balkans*” (11.02.2019.)¹³; “*They are not giving up: NATO sets a new bait for the Serbs from BiH*” (10. 01. 2019.)¹⁴; “*NATO's blackmail presented to Srpska and it blew up in the face of – Sarajevo*”¹⁵; “*Ivancov: BiH joining NATO would cause new separation lines in Europe*” (28 December 2018)¹⁶...

Such contents enter BiH public discourse via the news portals. Particularly dangerous from the point

of view of BiH security is the fact that all these contents can be linked to inciting inter-ethnic tensions and impairing the statehood of BiH, which can then be used to forward Russia's strategic interests in this region.

Besides Russia, officials in Ankara also want to influence public opinion in the Balkans. They do this through the state Anatoly Agency (AA), which has been working in Sarajevo since 2012, while the expansion of Turkish Radio Television (TRT) is expected in the future.

THE CHINESE DRAGON ON THE SILK ROAD

Contrary to the Russian and Turkish presence, Chinese media influence in the Balkans is little known about. German daily paper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) noticed recently that Beijing had been trying to expand their influence in Southeastern European countries by "undermining" the local media.¹⁷

The People's Republic of China entered the 21st century with the confidence of an economic superpower, but also with a feeling that they had a duty to regain international glory after the so-called "century of national humiliation".¹⁸

Over the past ten years or so, China has increased its presence in the Western Balkans region. So far they have been using economic tools, but also the methods of "soft power" to expand this influence.

"China is very much aware of soft-power and knows how to use it to create an image of themselves in the world"¹⁹

For quite a long time people have been writing about Chinese interests in the "courtyard" of the European Union. According to most analyses, the current momentum of the Chinese incursion into the Balkans will continue in the coming years. Which is why it is not a surprise that the region's media more and more frequently feature headlines like "China is conquering the Balkans".²⁰



MESSAGE FROM BELGRADE TO THE PRESIDENT OF CHINA: THANK YOU, BROTHER XI
(PHOTO: TWITTER)

According to available information, Chinese investments in the Western Balkans amount to 5.5 billion EUR. “Chinese companies won contracts directly from governments, not in tenders that require competition among several companies.” This way of doing business “encourages corruption in the Balkans”. What is more, it has been observed that Chinese “investments” bring with them the arrival of the Chinese Intelligence Service (MSS) to the region,²¹ and little is known about it.

There comes the need to protect all these interests, including through the media .

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (close to the CDU party) recently commissioned a study of Chinese influence in the media scene in the Balkans.²² According to this study there is “comprehensive information sharing” with the Chinese happening in Serbia, which includes the maintenance of a “Chinese-Serbian media dialogue.”

Thus it is not surprising that the “quantity of content in Serbian media related to China has significantly increased as a result of intensified bilateral cooperation and the readiness of the Serbian government to present such activities in a positive light”.²³

Reports on China in Serbian media are almost always positive. They talk about scientific successes, business achievements, stability and prosperity. Chinese credit is presented as “investments”, since, as the FAZ observes, that sounds much better than the harsh reality.

"This is something only the Chinese can do"; "Orban is turning to China – Brussels is too slow"; "China is helping poor countries" - these are only some of the headlines dominating the Serbian press.

THANK YOU, BROTHER XI

An interesting example is the pro-regime *Informer*. After the Covid-19 pandemic started in Spring 2020, this tabloid rented a billboard “to honor President of China, Xi Jinping” with the message: “Thank you, brother Xi”!

In early 2021, agencies in Serbia reported with great delight the delivery of a million doses of the Chinese

Sinopharm vaccine. Serbia’s President, Aleksandar Vucic, welcomed the airplane bringing the vaccines when it landed at the airport in Belgrade on 16th January.

Since 2019, an agreement has existed with Albania on cooperation between the national radio-television broadcasters on sharing content - such as Chinese documentaries about the governance system in that country, which includes “education of the associates”.

Not many media organizations from the Balkans have correspondents in China and that, according to the German paper, “offers an opportunity to a dictatorship to advertise in the Balkans, by supplying them with produced content for free use in the region.” Of course, the consequence is the “unreflexive adoption of Beijing’s views”, or “not reporting on the democratic movement in Hong Kong, or persecutions against the Uyghur”.²⁴

CHINESE MEDIA PROJECTS IN BIH

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, China has also been working in several directions at the media/propaganda level. Besides the office of the national Xinhua News Agency, which has been developing partnerships with local media, Beijing recently started developing its own media network.

The Center for Promotion and Development of the Road and Belt Initiative has recently started the first Chinese media project in this region, a magazine called “Glas Kine” (*The Voice of China*). This is the first specialized media outlet that is “all about China, events in China and from China, in south-Slavic languages”.²⁵ In Sarajevo the “Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association” also uses their webpages to place information on China.

To mark 25 years of bilateral relations between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina, supported by China’s Embassy in Sarajevo, a Compendium of Papers²⁶ by several authors was published about relations between the two countries. This featured, among others, articles by the current President of the Presidency of BiH, Sefik Dzaferovic, and the former Serbian member of the Presidency of BiH, Mladen Ivanic.

China has also been active in the cultural sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are two Confucius Institutes in BiH, one in Sarajevo, and one in Banja Luka. Plamen Tonchev, in his report for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, calls these centers the “tools of Chinese soft power” in the region of Southeastern Europe.²⁷

In BiH media, most of the articles referencing China were about the coronavirus, but also the major project to build Unit 7 of the thermal power plant in Tuzla (for which BiH has been threatened with sanctions), and the relationship of the leading telecoms operator (BH Telecom) with the Chinese giant “Huawei”, accused by Washington of “using American technology and undermining its national security and foreign policy”.²⁸

“Chinese companies came here in spite of geographic distance, and they stayed here during the pandemic. Chinese companies appreciate the kind and friendly people of BiH, as well as the open and honest business environment in the country”, wrote the new Chinese ambassador to BiH, Ji Ping.²⁹

Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina have touched upon the issue of the Uyghur only sporadically, and even that was met with criticism by the Embassy of China in Sarajevo.

Croatia too has found itself “in the midst of a great geopolitical face-off”³⁰. In terms of China, Croatian media mostly report on the expensive projects implemented by Chinese contractors in the EU’s 28th member country.

Works on construction of the Peljesac bridge, worth 420 million EUR (85 percent of which are EU subsidies) and which, by recent accounts, should be finished by 2022, are being carried out by the consortium China Road and Bridge Corporation. However, judging by certain aspirations towards Croatian ports, the Chinese want to stay in the country even after they have completed the bridge.

DANGEROUS DENOUEMENT

Although “they took the motorway to the debt trap of China”³¹, the media in Montenegro remain rather restrained when it comes to China, and their

articles quite often feature critical contents, but this will not necessarily remain the case if Beijing increases its influence.

On the other hand, the passivity of the EU influences the views of the media and government in North Macedonia. The Prime Minister there, Zoran Zaev, announced that his country would continue working with China in “the field of infrastructure”. Praising relations between the two countries, Zaev said that North Macedonia had benefited from cooperation with China.³²

Such a view is a direct consequence of North Macedonia’s disappointment with the EU because of Brussels’ refusal, under the influence of France and President Macron, to begin accession negotiations with this former Yugoslav country as well as with Albania.

Given their economic strategies, as well as Beijing’s ‘soft power’ methods in the Western Balkans, unless the USA and EU decide to take a more active approach, the influences of Beijing and Moscow will undoubtedly continue to grow in the region’s economic, media, cultural and ultimately political spheres. ■

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