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What have we learned from the COVID-19 crisis in terms of Sino-Serbian relations?

China's influence in Serbia will grow as much as the EU allows it to

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian and international expert community has become alarmed by Serbia's overwhelming emphasis on China in its fight against the virus. Coupled with a statement proclaiming the end of European solidarity by the Serbian President as a result of the EU's untimely assistance, recent developments in Sino-Serbian relations warrant attention - especially from the perspective of Serbia's EU accession process. The concern is so great that some are worried that China might misuse the situation to continue expanding its political influence in Serbia, while weakening the EU's regional position. Others also warn that the boost of public support for China will diminish the already-fragile support of Serbian citizens for the EU. The basis for these fears can be found in the fact that Serbia indeed already stands out from the rest of the Western Balkan countries in terms of its level of political and economic cooperation with this Asian giant.

This policy brief argues that China is willing and able to step in and increase its foothold in Serbia, mainly due to the lack of genuine EU commitment of Serbian decision-makers, together with the EU's geopolitical unpreparedness. This paper points out that China's room to manoeuvre in Serbia strongly depends, therefore, on the level of the EU's active engagement with Serbia. For this reason, a set of recommendations is developed, mainly focused on EU institutions and member states, as the EU is an actor whose further actions towards Serbia may prove decisive for the country's future orientation.

State of Play

The Steady Rise of Sino-Serbian Political Relations

Serbia's political relations with China grew fast in the aftermath of Kosovo's¹ declaration of independence in 2008, facilitated by efforts to mitigate growing international recognition of Kosovo*. For China, Kosovo's* secessionist move was unacceptable according to the long-standing policies related to its own "One China" vision. In this respect, Serbia found in China, alongside Russia, a keen supporter of its cause at the UN and on the global level, which to this day remains Serbia's single most important advantage from cooperating with China. The fact that China was designated as one of the "four pillars" of Serbia's foreign policy – along with the EU, the US, and Russia – in 2009 by former President Boris Tadić, illustrates how valuable this relationship became to Belgrade.² In fact, this prioritisation of China represented an evolution of Serbia's perception of global powers, especially bearing in mind that former President Tadić had originally envisioned balanced relations with only the other three previously-mentioned powers – Brussels, Washington, and Moscow.³



A worker adjusts Chinese and Serbian flags for the upcoming visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, in Belgrade, Serbia, on June 16, 2016. Photo: REUTERS

Stronger ties between the two countries were cemented in 2009 when Serbia and China signed a joint statement on the establishment of a Strategic Partnership. This agreement represented a milestone, as it was the very first strategic partnership agreement Serbia has signed with any country in its modern history (while subsequent strategic partnerships were signed with Italy in 2009, France in 2011, and the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Azerbaijan in 2013). Ever since then, Serbia has remained the only Western Balkan country to have built such a partnership with China.⁴ Serbia has thereby affirmed its support of the “One China” policy, while China has not only reaffirmed its support of Serbia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, but has also acknowledged Serbia’s efforts to join the EU. In addition, the two sides agreed to enrich dialogue by increasing exchanges and cooperation between their governments, legislative bodies and political parties, continuing to strengthen cooperation in the UN and other international organizations, as well as communicating and consulting on international issues of common concern.⁵

Ever since the Strategic Partnership was signed, bilateral visits increased, while Serbia has refrained from aligning with any EU foreign policy declarations targeting China.⁶ In other words, Serbia has prioritised strong relations with China over gradual alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. In this regard, Serbia stands out from other Western Balkan countries that generally do adhere to the EU’s calls for alignment on China-related declarations.⁷ Cooperation between China and Serbia also took place in a multilateral format. Following the introduction of the 16+1 Framework (presently known as 17+1 Framework) - intended to allow China to build closer relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative - Serbia actively participated at the annual summits of this initiative. A notable example of multilateral cooperation took place in 2014, when Belgrade hosted the 16+1 Summit, which was even attended by China’s Prime Minister Li Keqiang.

Serbia has prioritised strong relations with China over gradual alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.

A historical peak in Sino-Serbian relations was reached with the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership – the highest level of partnership a country can have with China - in 2016 during the first and only visit of China’s President Xi Jinping to Serbia (and to the Western Balkans in general). Typically, China elevates its level of partnership with a specific country once it assesses that political trust and a positive record of cooperation have been achieved.⁸ As a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership represents the agreement with the most symbolic value to China, its aim is to make cooperation between the signatories “all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered”.⁹ In the case of Serbia and China, the document reiterated what was stated in the 2009 Strategic Partnership while encouraging further communication, cooperation and coordination in the political, economic and people-to-people aspects of bilateral relations. On this occasion, Serbia reaffirmed its position that China represents one of its key pillars of foreign policy, while



Chinese Ambassador in Serbia and their medical team. Source: Tanjug / Dragan Kujundžić

officially endorsing China’s Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰ Just a year later, the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China was established in Belgrade, headed by Serbia’s former President Tomislav Nikolić. All things considered, ever since 2008, every government and high official of Serbia, including incumbents, has demonstrated a strong willingness and desire to build a closer relationship with China. For now, there are no indications that this trend will change.

This positive development of relations has created fertile ground for cultural cooperation as well. What makes Serbia distinct from the rest of the region is the fact that it was usually the first Western Balkan country to make milestones with China in terms of people-to-people cooperation.¹¹ Namely, the first Confucius Institute – China’s main cultural promotion institution - was established in Serbia in 2006, and, in 2017, China and Serbia abolished visas for citizens. Also, a Chinese Cultural Centre, planned to be the largest in Europe, is currently under construction in Belgrade. Finally, it appears that Serbs generally see the existing relationship with China as very close and have positive expectations with regard to future cooperation.¹² These elements indicate that China’s soft power has potential for further development in Serbia.

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China's Economic Footprint in Serbia

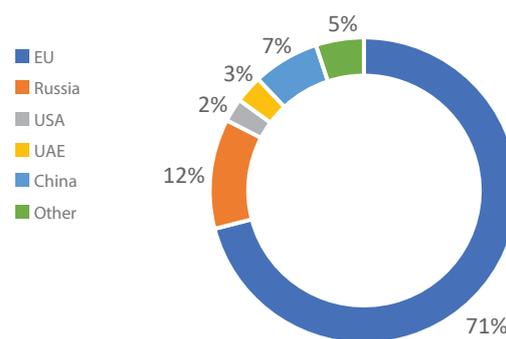
Similar to political ties between the countries, economic cooperation between Serbia and China is the most developed of all the countries of the Western Balkans.¹³ The intensification of economic relations between the two began with 2009's Strategic Partnership, after which came contracts for, among other projects, the construction of the Zemun-Borča bridge over the Danube and renovation of a major thermopower plant, Kostolac B. After these initial steps, further agreements on the construction of infrastructure projects were signed, including for three sections of highway E763 (Corridor XI), parts of the Belgrade Bypass, the modernisation of the Belgrade-Budapest railroad, and the construction of a new block of the Kostolac thermopower plant. What remains an issue is the fact that these projects have received a disproportionate amount of positive PR by Serbian decision-makers and media, often being misrepresented as investments while they are, in fact, loans.

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In fact, all of these projects have been financed by loans from the Export-Import Bank of China (usually accounting for 85% of all project-related costs) and built with the considerable involvement of workers and construction machinery from China.¹⁴ An exact calculation of the direct and indirect impact of these projects on the Serbian economy during the construction process and after the completion of work is difficult to make. However, what is known is the amount of Serbia's debt to China. According to the most recent data from the Serbian Ministry of Finance, the total amount of money borrowed from the Export-Import Bank through the end of 2019 was nearly \$3.7 billion. Meanwhile, Serbia's remaining debt to the Export-Import bank at the end of 2019 was approximately \$1.2 billion - representing 7.7% of total external debt stock and 4.5% of overall Serbian public debt stock.¹⁵ Therefore, Serbia's level of indebtedness to China is modest at the moment.

In the field of business cooperation, a rising trend in the complexity of mutual relations is notable. The relation evolved from the simplest form – the *acquisition* of the Smederevo steel mill (the largest in Serbia, employing nearly 5,000 workers), through *greenfield investment* in the Zrenjanin tire production plant all the way to a strategic partnership in the Bor copper mining and smelting complex (the largest of its kind in Serbia with 5,000 workers), as the most advanced form of cooperation.

Chart 1. Serbia cumulative net FDI 2010-2019

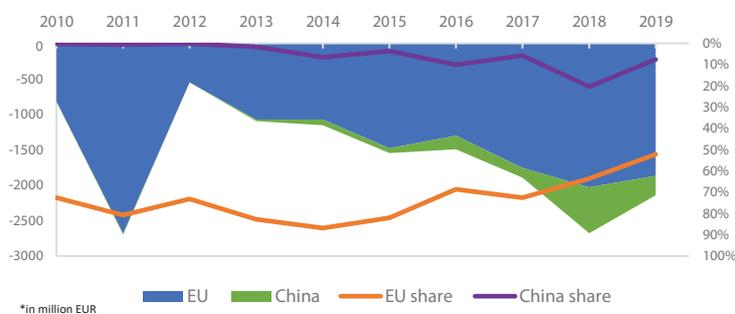


Source: authors' calculation and representation based on National Bank of Serbia, Balance of Payment

Similarly, trade between the two states has demonstrated an upward trend in the last 10 years. According to the latest data from the Serbian Statistical Office, the overall annual value of trade in goods between the two was nearly \$3 billion in 2019, with a significant advantage in favour of China – the value of imports from China was nearly \$2.6 billion.¹⁶ Accordingly, China accounted for 9.6% of Serbia's total imports and 1.8% of its total exports in 2019. Furthermore, the share of net foreign direct investments (FDI)¹⁷ coming from China in the last ten years was nearly €1.5 billion, which was approximately 7% of the total for that period (Chart 1).¹⁸

At the same time, a trend of increasing value of FDIs is noticeable, with China as the official country of the capital's origin – 2018 was especially fruitful for Serbia, with China accounting for 20% of total net FDIs that year (Chart 2).¹⁹ Even though these numbers seem large, when compared with the EU's contribution of 71% of total net FDIs (for the period from 2010 to 2019), along with 67% of Serbia's exports and 58% of imports, it is clear that China's economic presence in Serbia is on the rise but is still relatively low and limited.

Chart 2. Value and share of net FDI coming from the EU and China



Source: authors' calculation and representation based on National Bank of Serbia, Balance of Payment

A trend of increasing value of FDI is noticeable with China as the official country of the capital's origin - 2018 being especially fruitful for Serbia in this regard.

Relations in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, the rapid spread of COVID-19 caught the world unprepared. Before the virus became a global pandemic, the Serbian government expressed solidarity with China, the first country to face the crisis. Firstly, in early February 2020, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić told the Chinese ambassador that Serbia would send approximately €125,000 worth of medical and other supplies.²⁰ Soon after, the President of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China and former Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić personally collected €5,000 of donations intended to assist hospitals in Hubei Province.²¹ Finally, Serbia's Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić visited Beijing in late February 2020 to express support to China's efforts in the fight against virus. In his own words, he was the first foreign minister of any country of the world to do so.²²

Soon after, in early March 2020, the first case of the COVID-19 was reported in Serbia. As the number of cases began to rise, Serbia began to reach out for foreign assistance, especially in terms of medical supplies, recognising how severe the situation was in nearby Italy. Using the opportunity incited by the EU's lack of rapid response in this time of crisis, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić sent a strong message to the public during a televised emergency address to the nation, proclaiming "European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale."²³ Referring to the Chinese President as a true friend and to Chinese citizens as brothers, President Vučić added that in such a difficult situation China was the only country that Serbia could rely on. The president's statements appear to have had a profound impact on the public, as the press conference has continued to circulate on television and in social media to this day. This message was apparently so impactful that, a month later, China's President Xi even officially accepted President Vučić's invitation to visit Serbia.²⁴

Using the opportunity incited by the EU's lack of rapid response in this time of crisis, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić sent a strong message to the public during a televised emergency address to the nation, proclaiming "European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale."



A ceremony remembering the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, symbolically entitled 'Steel Friendship for Common Prosperity', held at Sava Centre on September 21, 2019. .Source: Ministry of defence of Serbia

At this point, several airplanes have arrived carrying medical equipment from China. Although Serbian decision-makers and media overwhelmingly praise such assistance, it is still unknown what share of it is donated and what is in fact paid from Serbia's state budget (and under what terms). This aid was also accompanied by six Chinese medical experts brought in to share their experience fighting COVID-19, to offer advice on measures that have produced the best results in China in preventing the spread of this virus, and to assist in monitoring the situation in Serbia.²⁵ Such efforts were not exclusive to Serbia, representing, rather, a part of a wider Chinese strategy to provide aid to various countries afflicted by the coronavirus.

China managed to gain further points with the wider public after the arrival of the first plane, when the Chinese ambassador to Serbia and medical experts took part in a national emergency press conference alongside the Serbian President. From then on, the Government of Serbia has actively considered suggestions provided by the Chinese medical experts when implementing measures to tackle the virus. Considering that the fight against the virus is ongoing, the exact impact of these activities on China's soft power in Serbia cannot yet fully be known, as it is still too early to gather hard data. Nevertheless, as public appreciation strongly depends on the level of media coverage and political promotion, it is expected that China's popularity will increase in the eyes of the domestic public.

When it comes to the other foreign aid provided to Serbia during the pandemic, Norway's donation of €5 million also caught the public's eye, with President Vučić meeting with the Norwegian ambassador to express his gratitude.²⁶ Even though the EU donated €7.5 million to Serbia soon after,²⁷ to date it has not received the same treatment from Serbia's government that China and, to an extent, Norway, have. The limited reaction by the government to the EU's donation has produced a proportionally limited media spotlight as well. Similarly limited responses are notable when the EU authorised Serbia to use approximately €94 million of unspent funds from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19,²⁸ when the Centre for Disease Control in Brussels offered Serbia its expertise in fighting the virus,²⁹ when the EU activated the Civil Protection Mechanism and enabled Serbia to seek assistance from EU members,³⁰ and when it assisted in the evacuation of five Serbs from Wuhan, where COVID-19 was first identified.³¹ In other words, the EU's assistance to Serbia has gone under the radar. It illustrates that without proper outreach strategy and timely response, the EU will remain in the backseat, while other countries, such as China, will drive processes and gain further influence. All things considered, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that cooperation with China has been used by the Serbian government at the expense of the EU's image, thus working against the spirit of the EU accession process.



Chinese anti-epidemic expert team to Serbia, March 21, 2020. / China News Agency

Prospects: Impact on Serbia's EU Perspective

For now, it appears that China has not shown an apparent will to undermine Serbia's accession process. In fact, it is likely that Serbia's objective of EU membership goes hand-in-hand with the goals of Belt and Road Initiative and China's economic interests. Not only would the EU accession of the region diminish administrative and customs barriers, but it would also boost regional connectivity, thus making it easier to transport Chinese goods across the region to the rest of Europe.³² It is therefore unsurprising that China has publicly supported Serbia's EU perspective.³³ Even if China had the latent intention of disrupting or slowing down Serbia's accession process, comparing China and the EU's current economic and political leverage in Serbia shows that China's ability to do so would be rather limited. Nevertheless, if Serbian decision-makers continue exalting their Chinese counterparts, it is probable that China will strengthen its position in Serbia in the future, potentially at the EU's expense.



Serbian capital city illuminated its bridges and key buildings in the color of the Chinese national flag as a sign of Serbia's gratitude to China. [Photo/Xinhua]

When it comes to Serbia's future membership in the EU, some, like the former Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn, have warned that Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkan countries are susceptible to becoming China's Trojan horses.³⁴ The basis behind such reasoning is the fear that Serbia's economic cooperation with China could result in a debt trap, which China could leverage for political purposes once Serbia becomes an EU member. However, the data on China's economic presence in Serbia presented above clearly shows that such fears are, at this point, blown out of proportion. Nevertheless, China's activities in Serbia should be carefully monitored by the EU, as it is visibly intensifying its economic presence.

What remains of particular concern is the fact that Serbian decision-makers' efforts to promote the country's EU perspective have weakened in the past years. The case of COVID-19 particularly illustrates how, in times of crisis,

Serbian officials will disregard the strategic priority of joining the Union, as well as other economic assistance Serbia has received from the EU in past years, including aid for flood relief in 2014.³⁵ In fact, such public condemnation of the EU and its lack of solidarity strike a heavy blow to the already-weakened public support for Serbia's EU accession process.³⁶ Also, the crisis has shown that EU sometimes acts slowly and unskillfully, which leaves room for China to step in and for Serbian officials to act against the spirit of the EU accession process. Such developments will make it even more difficult to keep the EU accession process on the agenda during the next election campaign in Serbia, originally scheduled for April 2020. Therefore, it is high time for the EU to step up its game, taking prompt and decisive action to strengthen its position and show that Serbia indeed holds a credible membership perspective in a reasonable timeframe if it complies with accession conditionalities. Such a timeframe would need to be short enough to retain relevance within the average electoral cycle of approximately four years.

Recommendations:

- Politically, the EU needs to make sure that Serbia's EU perspective is credible and tangible, especially as the current process is perceived to be never-ending. Allowing Serbia to take part in the Conference on the Future of Europe as a candidate country, as then-candidates participated in the Convention on the Future of the EU in 2002-2003, would be a token of political dedication that could help further to build good faith, solidarity and mutual trust. Another means of making the process more appealing and tangible could include the specification of a potential date for accession - representing a moving target based on annual monitoring reports. Then, implementing the revised enlargement methodology, first proposed in the French non-paper and then developed by the European Commission, would be another step in a positive direction, allowing Serbia to phase into individual EU policies and programmes, tying the country closer to the EU based on the achieved level of progress in negotiations. The application of these measures is of paramount importance, as without clear benefits, both in political terms and for citizens, Belgrade will not be incentivised to shift its foreign policy focus to Brussels over Beijing.
- Economically, the EU needs to significantly beef up its investments in Serbia, and to do so while China is still only filling niches not tackled by the EU. The fact that the European Commission has already pledged to put forward an Economic and Investment Development Plan for the Western Balkans (in the context of the revised enlargement methodology), is a good starting point. The EU should actively include Serbian state officials and civil society experts in the consultation process during the formulation of the Development Plan. The plan's measures need to have tangible benefits that fit to the current local needs and to be accompanied by a developed roadmap with a clear timetable for implementation. By narrowing the current development gap, Serbia will have less need to look for assistance from other foreign powers such as China.

• In order to better prepare Serbia to fully assume the rights and obligations associated with EU membership, gradual access to structural funds should be made available to Serbia – as originally proposed in the French non-paper. Alternatively, ensuring that the substantial increases in funding available under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) follow actual progress towards EU membership would play an important role in boosting the EU's influence in the country. Considering that negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period from 2021 to 2027 are well under way, EU member states should follow the Commission's suggestion to increase the IPA budget as compared to that of the previous programming periods. Acknowledging the difficulty of the MFF negotiations, the Council presidencies could play an important role in balancing the interests of different stakeholders, while reminding member states of the need not to overlook the EU's interests in Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkan region. Such steps would disincentivise Serbian decision-makers from welcoming Chinese projects and loans with open arms and without proper scrutiny. Also, the visibility of existing and subsequent EU projects and investments, as well as their overall positive externalities on Serbia's economy, need to be better promoted by the EU and recipient government, both in the traditional and digital medias.

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All things considered, evidence strongly suggests that the current lack of a credible commitment to EU membership is primarily driven by Serbian officials rather than by the meddling of external actors such as China. At the same time, recent events have confirmed that China stands ready to use every chance it is given to increase its presence in Serbia, as much as the EU allows it to. Hence, looking forward, the more economic and political capital the EU invests in Serbia, the less room will there be for China to extend its influence.



Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić welcomes Chinese health experts and a plane load of medical supplies to Belgrade on March 21. Source: Radio Free Europe (RFE).

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List of Endnotes:

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European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

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- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy;
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