WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
EDITED VOLUME

Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence

Edited Volume

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Content

About the Project

"Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence" is a follow-up project that aims to build upon a knowledge base established in the preceding project "Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities," which mapped, analyzed and publicized Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States' influence activities in the region. The innovative project focuses on in-depth socially rooted research and investigative journalism. Its design reflects the aim to go beyond the existing research and conventional analytical frameworks while combining a variety of methodological approaches.

Project outputs consist of fourteen analytical studies investigating selected areas and facets of external actors' engagement in the region and of journalistic articles drawing on their findings. All the studies are also part of this final edited volume, further including two reflection papers. A short version of the volume is translated to Albanian, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and Macedonian.

Project duration: 10/2019 – 04/2021
Project coordinators: Barbora Chrzová, Petr Čermák and Anja Grabovac
Scientific advisor: Ioannis Armakolas

About the Prague Security Studies Institute

The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI's mission is to build an ever-growing group of informed and security minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

Contributors

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Maja Bjeloš is a public policy analyst and advocate in the area of security sector reform, including women, peace and security. She has ten years of professional experience working for the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. She has researched largely on various security issues, gender equality and the women, peace and security, with her research being published in domestic and international publications. She was a part-time visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences at Belgrade University and a coordinator of the Civil Society Network 'Women, Peace and

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Petr Čermák joined PSSI's Western Balkans at the Crossroads project team as a coordinator in April 2020. He is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno and junior researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. His research is focused on the role of ethnic politics and power-sharing mechanisms in post-conflict areas of the Western Balkans, with a special emphasis on its local level dimensions. He has conducted extensive field research in different regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The findings of his research were published in several peer-reviewed journals and presented at international conferences. He graduated in International Relations at Masaryk University in Brno. He also had an opportunity to study and conduct his research at universities in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Graz and Tirana.

Barbora Chrzová is a Program Manager at the Prague Security Studies Institute and has been leading both phases of the Western Balkans at the Crossroad project. She has managed the team, edited several PSSI's publications, articles and briefing papers, organized conferences and other events, and also contributed with her analytical work and writing. She is a PhD candidate at the Institute of International Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague where her research revolves around the politics of memory and identity and historical narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She holds two Master's degrees in Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies from the Faculty of Social Sciences, and in Political Theory and Contemporary History from the Faculty of Arts, both at Charles University.

Ognjan Denkovski is a lecturer in methods, statistics and computational social science at the University of Amsterdam, where he obtained his MSc in Communication Science. He is also a Research Associate at the Global Disinformation Index. His primary work is based on computational social science, with emphasis on the use of text-as-data methods, online data and machine learning for analyzing political rhetoric and fringe narratives. In his thesis research, awarded with a grant from the UvA DigiCom Lab and published in the International Journal of Communication, he proposed a method for detecting Russian disinformation content in political news in Serbia. Currently, he is a co-author in a Routledge edited volume examining the role of conspiracy

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Srećko Latal covered Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans during the wars in the 1990s as Associated Press correspondent, and later editor and Sarajevo bureau chief. He also served as an overseas correspondent from other places such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since 2000 he worked as a communications expert and political advisor for the EU and the World Bank, while from 2008 to 2013 he joined the International Crisis Group as its Balkan Analyst. Afterward, he established a new regional think-tank, Social Overview Service (SOS), and worked as its director and senior analyst. Over the past two decades, he cooperated closely with the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, and is currently working as their regional editor. Throughout this period, he also covered the Balkans for numerous international media and analytical organizations, such as Oxford Analytica, Janes Defence (currently IHS Janes), World Politics Review and Economist Intelligence Unit. Gentiola Madhi, Researcher and Political Analyst.

Gentiola Madhi is a researcher and political analyst whose research focuses on civil society, media and Western Balkans' European integration process. Since 2018, she has been working as a consultant researcher for plethora of non-governmental organizations. She regularly contributes to Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso – Transeuropa on Albania's political, societal and cultural

landscape. She holds several research fellowships from Kosovo Open Society Foundation, Think Visegrad Fellowship, Open Society Foundation for Albania, Institute of European Democrats, etc. Previously, she worked as a project manager at the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as national programme officer at Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, Tirana office. She graduated from the College of Europe (Bruges), University of Florence and European College of Parma.

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Tena Prelec is a Research Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations (DPIR), University of Oxford. Her work at DPIR centres on anti-corruption, money-laundering and reputation laundering, with a focus on Western countries' role in the global dynamics of corruption. She is also an established analyst on the Western Balkans, including as a Research Associate at LSEE-Research on South Eastern Europe (London School of Economics and Political Science), a Region Head at Oxford Analytica, and a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG). Other research interests include diaspora studies, transnational authoritarianism, academic freedom, and the intersection between governance and geopolitics. She holds a PhD from School of Law, Politics and Sociology at Sussex University.

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Introduction

Barbora Chrzová and Petr Čermák

The shifts of the global power balance and growing antagonism between the West and all key external players in South-East Europe – Russia, China and Turkey – have recently brought attention to the influences of these actors in the region. The focus, shared also by this volume, has been particularly placed on the six Western Balkan countries – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo – which despite their geographic location within the geopolitical space of the EU remain isolated and exposed to competing external actors' interests. With still distant or uncertain EU membership prospects and teetering US engagement, the Western Balkan countries' commitment to the Euro-Atlantic path, which seemed like a given a decade ago, is no longer uncontested.

The region has traditionally been a zone of great power rivalry. Indefinitely-pending integration into Euro-Atlantic structures thus creates room for Russia, China or Turkey to strengthen their own footholds using various tools, including traditionally well-established religious, cultural, and political bonds, as well as economic expansion. For Russia and Turkey, the Balkans has been a region of traditional interest. Russia has been recently exploiting its dominance in the energy sector and popularity among Orthodox Christian Slavic population, Serbs in particular, and subversive potential stemming from it. Turkey has been carrying out an ambitious foreign policy, relying on developing close personal ties between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Balkan leaders and support provided to local Muslim communities. In contrast, China is a relative newcomer to the Balkans but its economic and political engagement has been steadily growing and has been lately raising significant concerns among Western policy makers.

Most of the Western Balkan countries are still challenged by internal and mutual bilateral tensions, prolonged political crises, democratic backsliding or economic difficulties, all of which make the stability of the region fragile. Since regional and global tensions feed into each other and non-Western actors are able to skillfully exploit local vulnerabilities, many of Russian, Chinese or Turkish activities raise concern over their potential to jeopardize the stability and prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. The debate among Western and locally-based journalists, social scientists, and policymakers about Russia's, China's or Turkey's engagement is consequently dominated by narratives presenting their influence as inherently malign and considering its competition with the West a zero-sum game.

The project "Western Balkans at the Crossroads" aims to overcome this oversimplifying view and go beyond the existing research on non-Western actors' meddling in the region. While the project's first phase mapped and assessed foreign influence in individual Western Balkan countries in a series of briefing papers and the final publication, the second phase, whose results are presented in this volume, develops the already-established knowledge base in a way that leads towards a deep-cutting analysis of non-Western presences in the region. Instead of evaluating overall foreign leverage in individual countries or domains, it consists of case studies investigating specific mechanisms of influence or various aspects related to external presences.

The studies do not converge around a single point as they are very different in their methodology, topics, scope and style. While each of the case studies deals with a specific and clearly defined topic, all of them are also communicating with the general debate and the existing state of the art in the research on external influences in the Western Balkans, and they each introduce innovative insights and novel arguments about various aspects of Russian, Chinese or Turkish influence in the region. Together, the findings presented in this volume thus provide an original multidisciplinary contribution to the ongoing policy and scholarly debate whose relevance goes far beyond the region itself.

The volume contains fourteen (already separately published) analytical studies written within the Western Balkans at the Crossroads project framework by nine junior and senior researchers from within the region with multidisciplinary scholarly backgrounds and work experience, encompassing journalists, academics and think-tankers. The project was managed by Prague Security Studies Institute's Barbora Chrzová, Petr Čermák and Anja Grabovac, who worked closely with the researchers throughout the whole process of the studies' creation.

The quality of the papers was then scrutinized by Ioannis Armakolas, who acted as scientific advisor to the project.

The volume also encompasses a written reflection on the studies by a senior scholar, Senada Šelo Šabic, who engages with key questions related to the topic – the domestic/reception side of external actors' presence and the role of the EU, and presents recommendations for European policy makers. The concluding chapter written by Ioannis Armakolas, who provided the team with his insightful comments and consultations throughout the project's duration, offers insights into how the studies of the volume advance the understanding of impacts of external actors' presences in the region. It puts forward a classification of the studies into three thematic categories - 'Openings', 'Closures' and 'Inside-out' dimensions - which assist in conceptualizing external influence from a novel perspective and pinpoints main conclusions from the studies in the volume.

The publication is structured in four sections along broader topics identified as important but under-researched parts of the overall picture, and most of them bring attention to the already-mentioned domestic dimension of external presences. Each of the studies presented in the section contributes to the given topic and elaborates on it, albeit with very diverse methodological approaches and focuses. However, pairing the studies with these four broader topics has not been an easy task, as there are significant overlaps, and several studies speak to more than one of them.

The first section looks into domestic narratives on external presences. More specifically, all three papers address the way in which local elites or media portray and talk about Chinese engagement. The studies by Tena Prelec and Stefan Vladisavljev examine positive narratives about China and the promotion of mutual cooperation promoted by the Serbian ruling elite. Prelec's paper shows how Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS party use the narrative of economic salvation by foreign friends, currently represented by China, to consolidate their power. Vladisavljev maps individual political figures responsible for sharing these narratives in order to gain political points and shows that there is a striking consensus among political elites on the positive stance towards China. The paper by Anastas Vangeli has a region-wide focus and explores the ideational impact of China in the Western Balkans. It argues that China has been less successful in promoting its positive image and ensuring its objectives than tends to

be assumed because Western dominance in the discourse setting remains prevalent.

The second section addresses the question of external actors' roles in relation to domestic cleavages. While the paper by Srećko Latal looks into positions and aspirations of foreign actors in the debate about expected electoral reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other studies show that the external actors often play a passive rather than active role. Stefan Jojić's analysis of Turkish presence based on almost a hundred interviews with elites and ordinary citizens in Sandžak manifests how local elites use references to Turkey and its President Erdogan in order to strengthen their own positions in power struggles. Papers by Martin Naunov and Ognjan Denkovski deal with the North Macedonian case and manifest how internal political competition is closely related to the debate on the geopolitical orientation of the country, despite the fact that all major parties officially support Euro-Atlantic integration. Naunov's paper shows that partisanship is an important factor in popular support for external actors, and asserts that the divide between the pro-Western and pro-Eastern orientation of supporters of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE (respectively) is attributable to party cueing. The two studies by Denkovski deal with the same party competition and analyze the occurrence of computational propaganda methods on North Macedonian Twitter in the period preceding the 2020 parliamentary elections. His analysis of an original dataset consisting of thousands of tweets, users and interactions shows that computational disinformation methods were used to shape public discussions in the pre-election period and identifies a network of users created in the run-up to the election that was sharing content opposing to North Macedonia's NATO and EU integration.

The third section also puts the domestic dimension in its focus and scrutinizes the responsibility of domestic political elites for the malign impacts of foreign engagements. Using case studies, each of the three authors focuses on specific socio-political issues where the domestic elite is exploiting the external actors' involvement for achieving its own political goals. Tena Prelec, in a study based on her fieldwork among local environmental NGOs, investigates the responsibility of Serbian authorities and Chinese investors for the environmental damage visible in areas where Chinese companies invested in heavy industry. Maja Bjeloš deals with the issue of Chinese surveillance technologies that are being introduced in Serbia. Both of them argue that the Serbian ruling political elite must be held accountable for the malign effects of Chinese

engagement, as it is using Chinese technology and capital for achieving its own goals, regardless of its negative consequences on the environment or democracy and freedoms. Gentiola Madhi also discusses the active role of local elites in forging the partnership with non-Western actors in her paper focused on the publicly promoted 'personal friendship' between the political leaders of Albania and Kosovo and the Turkish president Erdogan. Her analysis of specific manifestations of these personal links shows that the image of friendship lacks a structural basis and has been rather led by pragmatic considerations.

The fourth section differs in its focus, as it comprises three studies about the consequences of the COVID crisis for external actors' presences. The topicality of the COVID related shifts on the global geopolitical scene and their translation in the Western Balkan space have led us to highlight these papers. In his two papers, Srećko Latal investigates the dynamic changes in the broader geopolitics of the region during the period that has been domestically, regionally and globally dominated by the COVID crisis. His first paper maps how the pandemic situation interfered with other long-term geopolitical developments and how this interplay affected the positions of major external powers in the region. In his second study, Latal deals specifically with the impact of the COVID crisis on European policy towards the Western Balkans and argues that the escalation of the geopolitical struggle over influence over the region once again confirmed the importance of the EU's engagement in stabilizing its neighborhood. Anastas Vangeli follows on Latal's overview in his analysis of the political impact of the COVID crisis on the discourses on China in the region. He provides a

comprehensive categorization of the changing responses of regional elites to the role of China, which were varying in time as well as across single states. Overall, both authors clearly show that the pandemic situation not only accelerated but also significantly altered the ongoing geopolitical struggles in the Western Balkans.

This brief overview of the studies and broader topics they address makes it apparent that even though the main focus of this project has been placed on non-Western external actors' influence, the debate about it cannot ensue without an appreciation of the domestic aspects of foreign presences and of the role of Western actors. Research on non-Western actors' influence in this region, which aspires to join the Euro-Atlantic structures, can never be complete without a critical assessment of the role and responsibilities of the US, NATO and the EU and its member states. The Western Balkans is once again becoming an important geopolitical hotspot where external influences from East and West meet deep internal cleavages. The underlying findings of this volume show that the role of external actors cannot be investigated and understood in isolation from the domestic demand for their influence. The local reception/demand side is shown to be a crucial piece of the puzzle in understanding the risks associated with Russian, Turkish or Chinese activities. As most of the studies presented in this volume illustrate, it is in fact often the domestic elites that are making room for or even contributing to the malign impacts of external engagements. Thus the greatest contribution of this volume lies in shedding more light on the mechanisms of these processes and the motivations of the individual actors involved.

Part I
Domestic Narratives on External Actors' Presences

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
'OUR BROTHERS', 'OUR SAVIOURS': THE IMPORTANCE OF CHINESE INVESTMENT
FOR THE SERBIAN GOVERNMENT'S NARRATIVE OF ECONOMIC REBOUND

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1. 'Our Brothers', 'Our Saviours': The Importance of Chinese Investment for the Serbian Government's Narrative of Economic Rebound

Tena Prelec

Executive Summary

The study analyses how the ruling party in Serbia has used the country's increasing economic cooperation with non-Western powers to promote a 'winning' narrative. The author brings new insights into how the Serbian leadership has used the topic of economic renaissance in relation to a narrative depicting economic salvation by foreign friends coming to the rescue to further its political power. It is shown that this role, initially played by the United Arab Emirates, has been assumed by China since the mid-2010s.

How has Serbia's increasing economic cooperation with non-Western actors been used to further a 'winning' narrative by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) during their consolidation of power (2012-2020)? And how has this played out in the case of the actor that has increased its economic ties with Serbia most strongly in the late 2010s, China? These are the two main questions addressed in this study. While the importance of the economic narrative for Aleksandar Vučić's political parties is established in the literature, an appreciation of how it has changed over time is lacking. Furthermore, there has so far been no meaningful attempt to put this topic of 'economic renaissance' in conversation with Serbia's relations with external actors; this is a significant gap in the literature, considering that the benefits of economic help from abroad have been repeatedly emphasized by the Serbian leadership.

This study therefore traces the way the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has used the topic of economic assistance from abroad to build and consolidate its dominance on the Serbian political scene from 2012 to 2020. It is argued that, under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian state has pursued a strategy of 'sitting on several stools'. While the 'two-stools' strategy ascribed to Vučić is usually conceived of as a binary choice between the West and the East, it is here maintained that Serbia's ruling party (SNS) has been pursuing a narrative that goes beyond this dualism, choosing, instead, to have a wide spectrum of allies to rely on. The ability to draw funds from several countries, the possibility of presenting this as a success with domestic and international audiences, as well as the implicit threat to the EU ('if you do not court us enough, we have other partners to rely on'), have been key features of Vučić's rule.

Through the analysis of domestic and international media coverage, it is argued that the construction of a narrative of economic renaissance has gone hand-in-hand with a narrative depicting economic salvation in the form of foreign friends coming to the rescue. It is shown that this role, initially played by the United Arab Emirates, was later assumed by China. It is argued that the conduit of this 'foreign' assistance activity is, in fact, the Serbian political leadership itself (in the person of current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić), which seeks to present itself as able to offer stability and reassurance to the population, thus preserving the 'ontological security' of the Serbian nation. The findings of the study provide insights into why Serbian foreign policy has been, seemingly, so erratic in recent years: narrative-wise, the Serbian leadership has picked the actor that was most useful in highlighting their own nation-saving activity at any given moment.

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Introduction

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The discussion is structured in five sections. The paper first outlines the theoretical framework within which the analysis operates, building on the ontological security theory as developed in the South East European context by Subotić (2015; 2016) and Ejdus (2020b; 2020a; Ejdus and Subotić 2014). It then establishes the great importance that the narrative of economic rebound had for the ascent of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, on the Serbian political scene. In the sections three and four, through the analysis of official statements in domestic and international media coverage relating to narratives about non-Western actors and the economy, it is shown that the role played by the UAE at the beginning of SNS' rule (i.e. as 'saviours' of the Serbian economy) came to be increasingly occupied by China over time. The theme of cooperation with Russia was present throughout, although it is interesting that the first signs of negative coverage on Russia, by Serbian government-friendly tabloids, appear in 2020 – coinciding with a closer alignment with China. Finally, in the fifth section, the paper goes on to provide a more detailed outline of the cooperation between China and Serbia over the course of the past decade (2009-2020), reflecting on the form into which this cooperation has morphed in 2020.

Theoretical Framing: State Ontological Security

The analysis presented in this paper deals with the way political actors strategically deploy shared narrative frames for their own political ends, by putting this dynamic in conversation with the presence of non-Western actors in the Balkans. In this sense, it speaks to a strand of theoretical literature that addresses cognitive frames being manipulated for political purposes (Payne 2001), within the well-established approach of 'strategic social construction' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). In the South-East European context, this approach has been developed to good ends by Jelena Subotić (2015) and Filip Ejdus (2020a; 2020b), within a framework of *ontological security*.

The concept of ontological security (which could be freely translated as 'the security of the self', from the Greek ὄντος (ontos), i.e. 'being') was initially coined by psychiatrist Ronald David Laing (Laing 1960), and later developed in sociology (Giddens 1990; 1991) and international relations (Wendt 1994; Huysmans 1998; Steele 2007). In substance, ontological security is "a basic need of actors for predictability of social order, stable relationships with others, and ability to maintain the narrative of the self" (Ejdus 2020a, 1). Scholars of international relations have postulated that in times of crisis, political leaders bridge what is presented as a security challenge through the preservation of state ontological security, by providing a sense of routine and familiarity, while attributing this

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success to themselves. It follows that the study of political narratives is able to shine a light on the inner workings of this attempt at preserving state ontological security and on the intention to claim this success. As Subotić writes, "The fact that narratives are manipulated for political purposes does not make them any less important. In fact, it makes them critical to our understanding of what motivates political action in the first place" (Subotić 2015, 611).

This framing is adopted in this article, while being applied to a novel angle. The lens of analysis is expanded from the insecurities originating from a challenge to territorial integrity (both Subotić and Ejdus look at how Serbian politicians responded in relation to the case of Kosovo) to the insecurities that are a product of a – real or perceived – economic crisis. As the empirical sections will analyse, in the topic of the overcoming of economic adversity through foreign investments, this projection of security is enacted through the 'salvific' help of foreign partners. This is another novel dimension this paper explores, pushing the theoretical boundaries of the concept of ontological security. While autocratic leaders usually present themselves as saviours in opposition to a foreign threat – examples abound, but Viktor Orban's positioning of himself as a safe haven *vis-à-vis* threats presented by migrants is a case in point (Toomey 2018) – the narrative employed by the SNS and by Aleksandar Vučić in particular shows that, in specific circumstances, this salvific narrative can also be applied to foreign actors. As will be examined in the analysis that follows, this salvific property is subsumed by Vučić himself. While the other actors are all disposable, he – through whom this salvific action is enacted – is not. In this sense, the ontological security framework is helpful in giving insights relevant to another burning question in IR analysis on contemporary Serbia: explaining the motives behind Serbia's seemingly erratic foreign policy behaviour.

The Ascent of Aleksandar Vučić's Progressives: The Economy As a Central Theme

To understand the importance of the partnership with China for the current Serbian government, it is important to first consider the way the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS, or Progressives) and of their leader, Aleksandar Vučić, were established on the Serbian political scene. SNS was set up in 2008 as a splinter party from the far-right Serbian Radical Party. The two figureheads of the SNS – Aleksandar Vučić and Tomislav Nikolić – set their new political home on a much more ideologically moderate course than the party they hailed from. They professed a far more favourable view of the European Union (whereas the Radicals abhorred it), a more ambivalent relationship with Russia (instead of unabashed support), and signalled an opening to dialogue with Kosovo (which the Radicals considered, and still do, an inalienable part of Serbia) (Buckley 2012; Samardzija and Robertson 2012; Lazea 2015; Ejdus 2020b, 127–59). This positioning was crucial in securing the support of key Western figures for this new political option (Eror 2018).

But a determining factor that drove SNS' popularity was, in fact, the *unpopularity* of the previous government. Ever since the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime in October 2000, and throughout the 2000s, Serbia was led by a broad coalition including the Democratic Party (DS) that experienced various changes during the decade, but was nevertheless anchored in its general pro-Western stance. Weakened by its inability to find a solid position on the Kosovo issue and rocked by several corruption scandals, this political trend was eventually brought down – as a final nail in the coffin – by the global economic crisis that started in 2008/9 and that hit Serbia particularly badly; Serbian citizens "generally blame[d] the DS for the country's economic and social plight" (Deutsche Welle 2012). This is recognised in the area studies literature on the subject, which has shown that economic vulnerabilities were key in the rise in support for the Serbian far-right (to which Vučić and Nikolić belonged, at the time) in the 2000s (Stefanovic 2008). Astutely exploiting the moment, while at the same time building a more acceptable *façade* for external purposes, the SNS won both parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012, and Aleksandar Vučić progressively solidified his dominance throughout the decade, from Vice Prime Minister (2012), to Prime Minister (2014), and to President (from 2017 to date).

Not discounting the relevance of topics such as Vučić's (later amply questioned) initial anti-corruption drive (Stojanović 2017) and the projection of security and stability (Bieber 2018), the economy was thus a key element by which the SNS distinguished itself from the previous old-guard. Scholarly works have shown that economic considerations have been front and centre in the way in which the SNS, and Aleksandar Vučić in particular, presented their narrative even in relation to more ideologically-charged issues such

as Kosovo (Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015; Dragojlov 2020). Indeed, Vučić kept using the language of economic development, stating in his speeches that Serbia wants to "win in the economy" and that his aim is to have "an economically stronger Serb in Kosovo" (Vučić in HRT 2018).

What is, however, still missing is an appreciation of how this topic has changed over time, and even more, how Serbia's increasing economic cooperation with non-Western actors has been used as a way to further this narrative. This question is relevant in light of the fact that, while the European Union has been by far the most important trading partner for Serbia and the Western Balkans for decades, in the 2010s several non-Western countries have emerged as important trading partners, investors and providers of financial assistance – including China, the United Arab Emirates and Russia (Bonomi and Uvalić 2020).

Serbia has been very agile in attracting foreign investments over the past decade. In the first two decades of the post-Yugoslav era, Serbia had difficulties with finding partners interested in the privatisation of large state-owned enterprises, whose poor financial results were putting pressure on state coffers. Since 2006, the Serbian government started giving out major subsidies and other incentive packages to foreign investors, which were further expanded in the 2010s. This model became particularly significant after 2012, when a new ruling majority led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) took power (Pavlović 2020; EBRD 2019). The foreign investment and economy narrative is a clear focus of the Serbian Progressive Party's political communication.

A closer look at SNS politicians' statements in media coverage shows how important this theme has been throughout the eight-year period (2012-2020) the SNS have been in power. As the consolidation of the Serbian Progressive Party's power continued in 2020 with a landslide victory in the June elections, it is relevant to take stock of this narrative to assess future prospects. In the section that follows, this evolution is documented through the analysis of a set of articles from Serbian and international press.

Campaigning on Economic Prosperity – the UAE As Serbia's New 'Salvific' Ally

At the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, the SNS presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolić won against incumbent Boris Tadić (DS) and the SNS became, for the first time, the largest party in the Serbian parliament. The key driver of the election was economic adversity and the promise of sounder economic leadership under the SNS. The two main figureheads of the SNS at the time – Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksander Vučić – often sounded stern warnings about the Serbian economy, and other SNS members echoed this message. "We want to decrease unemployment by creating the right environment for foreign investment," said Marko Đuric, who later went on to become the head of the 'Office for Kosovo and Metohija' of the Republic of Serbia. In Western media, these messages resonated loud and clear. "This election is about the economy, about jobs and growth, about putting people to work," said William Infante, head of the UN mission in Serbia, quoted in the Financial Times (Buckley 2012). The same paper also wrote, in no unclear terms, that "what decided the election was the economy" (Buckley 2012). Similarly, the New York Times wrote that "visceral indignation with joblessness and an arrogant political establishment" benefited the SNS (Bilefsky 2012). In a 2013 interview with

The Independent, Vučić underlined the challenge facing Serbia using a military metaphor, stating that "[t]he battles we are facing now aren't with guns and tanks, but the economy" (Sengupta 2013).

In the same period, the discourse about the lamentable state of the Serbian economy was joined by the 'salvific' presence of a new ally, a small but very rich country that had markedly changed its approach towards Serbia from the 1990s, when it vocally opposed Serbia's military actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, to the 2010s, with the flourishing of pragmatic business relations: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Bartlett et al. 2017). "We discussed everything including history and geography and afterwards he walked me to my hotel room and our friendship began," Vučić said in a TV broadcast, about his warm relationship with the powerful Emirati Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ) Al-Nahyan (Vasović and Doherty 2013). The Serbian media reported MbZ as addressing Vučić – who was then Deputy PM and Minister of Defence – as 'my brother Aleksandar' (Marković 2013) and highlighted that the sheikh "left Putin to meet with Vučić" (Raković 2012). The relations between the two countries clearly benefited from this 'connection at

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the top' between Vučić and MbZ (Bartlett and Prelec 2020; Prelec 2019). In this period, government officials spoke about the UAE's help in glowing terms, even stating that economic cooperation with the UAE was to be preferred to that of Western institutions. "For Serbia, the financial arrangement with the UAE is 100 times more valuable than the one with the IMF, and if it manages to push that through, the agreement with the IMF will no longer be needed" (Dobrić 2013), said then Minister of Finance Mlađan Dinkić in October 2013. Earlier that year, Dinkić and Aleksandar Vučić visited the UAE and met with MbZ, who visited back in early 2013, signing a series of deals. In August 2013, Dinkić was named the Vice-President of the Committee for Cooperation with the UAE, while Aleksandar Vučić was named its President (RTS 2013). Upon being appointed, Dinkić thanked Vučić 'for the trust placed in him' and said: "I will endeavour to channel the friendship with the family of Sheikh Mohammad and other influential people in the Emirates for the benefit of the citizens of Serbia" (RTS 2013)[1].

Abroad, commentators and media outlets took note. Reuters wrote: "Serbia is banking on an unlikely alliance with the United Arab Emirates to upgrade its vital farming industry, revive military production and get badly needed cheaper finance" (Vasović and Doherty 2013). Deutsche Welle noted that "the Emirates have appeared out of nowhere and have been presented to the Serbian public as the saviours of the tottering Serbian economy" (Rujević 2013). The Financial Times reported that "Serbia plans to borrow billions from the United Arab Emirates as the country's deputy prime minister warned that it could face bankruptcy without urgent steps to cut public sector wages", noting that Aleksandar Vučić (defined as "the deputy premier widely seen as the most powerful man in Serbia's coalition") said that the $1bn UAE loan, with announced further loans taking the total to $2bn-$3bn by the end of 2014, "could almost be "considered a gift", given its favourable interest rate and conditions" (Buckley and Kerr 2013).

All the while, it is relevant to note that cooperation with other countries did not cease, indicating the emergence and progressive solidifying of the 'multiple-stools' policy

approach: "Serbia is diversifying the portfolio of investors to as many countries as possible... In addition to the EU, we have Russia with energy deals, China with infrastructure investments and now we have the Gulf," said Saša Đogović of Belgrade-based Institute for Market Research (Vasović and Doherty 2013). Indeed, economic relations with Russia were never broken – on the contrary. Post-2012 election ties with Russia grew, helped also by the presence of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) among the ruling coalition (a party enjoying warm relations with Russia since Milošević's times), and by Nikolić's open support for Vladimir Putin (Veljović 2012). Significantly, unlike Montenegro, Serbia did not join in the sanctions against Russia in relation to the Ukraine crisis (Bechev 2014). This decision, too, was motivated by economic considerations: "Relations with Brussels have since been strained after Serbia declined to join EU sanctions against Russia, warning that its economy would be too badly hit" (Buckley 2014).

Serbia's economic hardship and this purported salvific help of 'friends coming to the rescue' was an important part of the discourse that spearheaded Vučić's victory at the parliamentary election in 2014. As noted by Bloomberg: "Aleksandar Vucic, the favorite to become Serbian prime minister after elections this month, is campaigning as the candidate who can bring home investment from the United Arab Emirates, including a $4 billion plan to redevelop Belgrade's waterfront. The former nationalist, known in the 1990s for his anti-Muslim rhetoric, is stressing his ties with the Persian Gulf nation's business and political leaders as a source of investment ahead of the March 16 ballot" (Filipović and El Baltaji 2014). The very decision to hold an early election in 2014 was, in fact, outright motivated by the economic reforms in store, as explained by political scientist Mikucka-Wojtowicz: the "head of state's decision to dissolve the Skupština [Serbian parliament] was based on the government motion which stated that painful reforms were in store for Serbia and that new legitimisation from voters was vital in order to implement them. The main initiator of the early elections was the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Aleksandar Vučić" (Mikucka-Wójtowicz 2017).

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1   It is interesting to note that, in the change of power between the DS and the SNS, Dinkić (formerly a DS member) was a prime candidate to be tried and sent to jail as part of an "anti-corruption effort" by the new guard (the jailing of some tycoons such as Miroslav Mišković won Vučić initial praise). However, in spite of the pre-election threat, he not only avoided jail, but became Minister of Finance and Economy in 2012-2013. Vučić explicitly stated that Dinkić was appointed to the function of Vice-President of the Committee for the Cooperation with the UAE "because he knows people [there]" (RTS 2013).

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The campaigning strategy worked, and the SNS easily imposed themselves as the dominant party at the 2014 election. In 2015, this same discourse continued steadily, although with a partially new set of actors (Dinkić's connections with the UAE were no longer needed). Siniša Mali, economic advisor to the prime minister and candidate for the mayor of Belgrade, stated: "The UAE believes in the political stability of Serbia, in our human capital and it [the

investment] is the result of friendship and understanding between [Serbian Prime Minister] Aleksandar Vucic and Sheikh Mohammed [bin Zayed the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi]" (Donaghy 2015). But after 2016, which was marked by extreme controversy over the demolition of buildings to make space for the UAE-connected luxury development Belgrade Waterfront, the dominance of the UAE in government officials' discourse decreased somewhat.

Switching Between 'Salvific' Stools: From the UAE to China – While Not Neglecting the Others

After 2016, the UAE faded away from being the dominant 'friend coming to the rescue', and slowly, but steadily, this role was taken by China. As reported by Politico: "'You'll see what my real passion is,' [Vučić] said, kneeling next to a multicolored map of Serbia criss-crossed with planned highways and rail lines. "It's roads and economy." [...] To turn his "passion" into reality, the Serbian president is relying not just on Europe, but on an old ally farther east — China." (Karnitschnig 2017). This partial shift is also reflected in the twitter activity of Aleksandar Vučić (handle: @avucic). The #UAE hashtag (used to publicise official meetings and communications about the UAE on twitter) is present on six occasions in 2015, whereas it later almost disappeared, being used only once in 2017. On the other hand, tweets mentioning China (always in a positive light) have increased sharply in 2020. For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, Vučić was not personally present at the delivery of help from the UAE, while he lavished Chinese help with high praise (Ruge and Oertel 2020; Hall and Hopkins 2020). Tweets mentioning warm relations with Russia, on the other hand, have remained a constant, indicating that the different tone used by pro-regime media in attacking Russia in 2020 (N1 2020) has not been matched by the official communication of the President.

Why this change in narrative? The most likely explanation is that the UAE had run its course serving as part of the salvific aid narrative. In 2015, protests against the Belgrade Waterfront project were gaining ground, while urban planners started to voice concerns about the elitist character of the project (Cukic et al. 2015). Demonstrations intensified after the events that occurred in the central Belgrade district of Savamala in April 2016, when masked men demolished shop windows and damaged buildings in an area where the Belgrade Waterfront was to rise: a cloak-and-dagger operation that took advantage of the confusion offered by its having taken place on election

night. This is an event that was never clarified by the central government, but that was widely understood as being connected with the highest city authorities (Pećo 2017).

The ruling party has surely taken note of this unpopularity, choosing not to put forward then-mayor Siniša Mali as their candidate for the 2018 local election. At the same time, China's increased economic presence in South Eastern Europe was low-hanging fruit to exploit for narrative purposes: in the words of a former diplomat in Serbia's Foreign Ministry, while in 2012 Serbia "did not see China as playing a particularly meaningful role", as soon as 2014 the situation changed, with it gradually becoming "a player in the Balkans to an unprecedented degree" (Vuksanović 2017).

In the Serbian government's public discourse, praise for China went from strength to strength in the second half of the 2010s: from defining the Chinese as saviours of the Serbian economy and best friends (RTS 2015), to announcing the production of flying cars (SEEbiz / Beta 2018), to stating that Vučić was "bringing back 3bn euro from China" after "one of the most significant meetings [he] had ever had" (Pink 2018), to saying that China "does not have a more loyal and more sincere friend than Serbia" in the frame of a celebration of bilateral relations called "steel partnership for joint prosperity" (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia 2019), to stating that China "has given Serbia a hand when no one else would do so" (MacKinnon and Gramer 2020), and to announcing even bigger, "the biggest", Chinese investments in Serbia (Mondo.rs 2020).

While the SNS' 'hot and cold' mood towards Russia did not change significantly for the better part of the decade, there are indications that, in 2020, the favour of Belgrade officials has shifted more strongly towards China, while becoming much cooler towards Russia – a development that has

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been partially connected with the rising investments of the former, and stagnating economic presence of the latter (Vuksanović 2020). It is also relevant to note that when, in September 2020, Aleksandar Vučić signed a (non-legally binding) agreement on Kosovo at the White House that foresaw, among other points, potential difficulties in economic relations with Russia and China, the way Aleksandar Vučić presented the Serbian gains at home was that 'Trump had given him the keys to the White House' and that 'Serbia was going to get billions in investments from the US', including through the opening of a US development fund in Belgrade (Vladić 2020; Informer 2020). Once again, the 'salvific' economic narrative of a friend from abroad coming to the rescue was crucial in the way Vučić presented this foreign policy success as a victory at home, thus confirming the pattern identified in this analysis.

In summary, the discussion in this section showed that the projection of successful economic performance was,

and still is at the time of writing (Hall and Hopkins 2020), a key element of the SNS' electoral victories and continued domination on the Serbian political scene. At the earlier stages of SNS rule, in 2012-2014, discourse about the economy was focused on highlighting the danger in which Serbia finds itself, while later it centred on the success that the new government brought to the country (Filipovic and Savić 2019). A big part of these portrayed accomplishments relates to the indeed remarkable increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) achieved during the 2010s, although doubts have been raised on whether the benefits such investments bring to the country actually touch the whole population (Pavlović 2020; Dragojlo 2020; Prelec 2020a). The analysis of Serbian government officials' discourse in domestic and international media has shown that, while in the initial phase the salvific role of a non-Western country coming to Serbia's rescue was played by the UAE, this narrative later shifted to Beijing.

The Intensification of Serbia–China Relations Over the Past Decade

From the discussion presented above, it became clear that a very prominent narrative used by the Serbian government under Aleksandar Vučić, especially from 2016 onwards, has been the beneficial role China is promised to have in terms of its impact on the Serbian economy. But was 2016 really a watershed in Sino-Serbian relations? What has changed in recent years, and how are Sino-Serbian relations forecasted to develop from here? In order to answer these questions, this section examines the recent history of Serbia-China relations over the past decade.

The first striking piece of information is that high-profile institutional cooperation between the two countries was established before the SNS came to power: in 2009, a joint letter of strategic partnership between Serbia and China was signed during a visit by then-President Tadić to China. In the document, the two parties agreed on deepening economic and technical cooperation in the field of infrastructure (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2009), thus opening the way for a large number of infrastructure projects through a financial scheme that included lending by China through its Exim Bank for the purpose of those projects, with the obligation to hire Chinese companies as contractors (Dragojlo 2016). This is a typical model of how China operates in the Western Balkans and other underdeveloped regions (Mardell 2020).

The 2009 Agreement still serves as a basis for lending projects in the field of infrastructure and energy that China is implementing in Serbia, such as the reconstruction of the Kostolac thermal power plant, works on the upgrade of the Nikola Tesla thermal power plant in Obrenovac (Belgrade), and others. For comparison, in the six decades from 1957 to 2008, Serbia (or the former Yugoslav Federation) and China signed a total of 39 agreements, while in the seven-year period from 2009 to 2016 they signed 59 agreements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia 2020).

China, on their part, places Serbia within a wider plan of expansion of its influence in the CEE region. Through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, China is seeking to diversify its economy and, increasingly, build influence throughout the world. While its economic relations with Western European countries, especially in terms of trade, were further developed over the past several decades, relations with Central and East European countries lagged behind. To stimulate business and investment relations with this wide region, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has spearheaded the 16+1 initiative with Central and East European countries (also known as China-CEE) in 2012, and then upgraded it to 17+1 with the entrance of Greece in 2019. When China introduced the 16+1 initiative in 2012 and the Belt and Road initiative in 2013, the prospects

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for deepening cooperation increased. But in spite of this regional outlook, the curation of rapport with the countries of the region remained something that China preferred to do, fundamentally, on a bilateral basis, through state-to-state relations (Tonchev 2020; Vangeli 2020).

Relations between the two countries intensified considerably in the second part of the 2010s. After the visit of President Xi Jinping in 2016 to Serbia, the Chinese company Hesteel acquired the Smederevo steel mill, making it the first Chinese brownfield investment[2] in Serbia. The Smederevo industrial plant was owned by a US company from 2002 to 2012, when the owner returned it to the Serbian government. The plant was a heavy burden on the State budget, incurring considerable losses. The closure of the mill was not an option for the State because of the negative consequences it would have in the Smederevo region, where the company is the biggest employer. The Chinese purchase in Smederevo is considered the basis for a new and improved image of China in Serbia (Novaković and Todorivić Štiplija 2020). The first Chinese greenfield investment is the Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin, valued at approximately $900 million. Some sources – though contested, with other analyses downplaying China's actual economic presence in Serbia (Nova Ekonomija / Business Info Group 2020) – indicate the presence of up to 16 greenfield investments in Serbia by 2019 (Shehadi and Hopkins 2020).

There is thus no doubt that the Chinese and the Serbian leaderships have been successful in finding a common language, leveraging their clear commonalities of interest. On the occasion of the signing of a state-level agreement worth $3 billion in September 2018, Finance Minister Siniša Mali proudly stated that Serbia will host "China's largest industrial park in Europe," among other projects (Živanović 2018). In 2019, Chinese companies announced up to a $625 million investment in Serbia, making it the fourth-biggest recipient of Chinese investment in Europe in that year (Shehadi and Hopkins 2020).

China is seen as supporting Serbia's position on Kosovo (an important point, considering the permanent place Beijing holds in the UN Security Council), although it has never made a special public statement on the issue. The political endorsement is much more outright from Belgrade's side: Serbian officials supported China on the issue of purported 'terrorism' in the Chinese province of Xinjiang, as well as in relation to the Chinese law on national security, which refers to the special administrative region of Hong Kong. Serbia was the only European country (together with Russia) to sign on to a declaration of support to China's policy in Xinjiang issued by the government of Belarus. Considering the atrocious human rights infringements that are being carried out on the Uighur population in Xinjiang by Chinese authorities (Wood 2020; Chao 2020), the statement of support by Belgrade is a clear sign that it will stand by China, no matter what[3].

With the coronavirus crisis in spring 2020, these problems were put under a magnifying glass. The narrative of the Chinese as 'brothers' and as 'saviours' of the Serbian economy, and later of the Serbian nation, has intensified during the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis, leveraging Vučić's tight grip over the media (Vuksanović 2020; Ruge and Oertel 2020). Throughout spring 2020, it was used by the Serbian leadership to deflect from the government's problems in handling the coronavirus crisis and lay the groundwork for a crushing result at the parliamentary elections in June (Cvetković 2020). Although this framing has been a particularly clear during the coronavirus crisis, it is to be seen as a culmination of a longer trend, as analysed in the previous section.

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2   The term 'brownfield investment' refers to a type of foreign direct investment (FDI) in which a company or government entity purchases existing production facilities to launch a new production activity, whereas the term 'greenfield investment' involves the building of a new facility from the ground up.

3   What is the reason for this strong endorsement? While this paper does not have the ambition of proving causality, the analysis presented in the preceding sections offers evidence of at least one important reason for the Serbian leadership to be so supportive of the Chinese government. This is the fact that China's investments are integral to the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party, by underpinning the narrative of the preservation of state ontological security analysed here.

Conclusions

The paper has analysed the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)'s discourse in relation to the narrative of 'economic adversity' Serbia found itself embedded in at the beginning of their rule in 2012, and of an 'economic rebound' under their guidance (from 2012 to 2020 - with the likely continuation of their rule for several years to come). It has been argued that the increase in investment from non-Western countries, although still a far lesser source of FDI than EU countries, has allowed the Serbian government to shape a narrative of friendly states coming to the rescue of Serbia. This has been identified as a 'multiple-stools' policy (rather than just two – East vs West – positions); by drawing funds from several countries, Aleksandar Vučić and his party sought to present to the domestic audience and to the outside world the image that Serbia has a range of friends to rely on. The analysis has highlighted that, while the 'friendly nation' most quoted by Serbian officials in 2012-2015 was the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this has somewhat changed in the second part of the 2010s, when China's role started to be praised much more strongly. This coincided with an increasing economic presence of China in Serbia, through brownfield and greenfield investments, mostly focused in the (heavily polluting) manufacturing industry.

These findings help us gain a better insight into the SNS' strategy in relation to their policy towards non-Western actors. A central consideration relates to the fact that the deals with the non-Western countries addressed in this paper (China, the UAE and Russia) are less transparent, bound to considerably less scrutiny, and raise more red flags in terms of their impact on the environment than investments coming from the EU and other Western countries. The presentation of such deals as sterling successes that are able to 'save' Serbia, as it was shown in this paper, could be seen as a way of bypassing such questions. This is true rhetorically, but it also applies in very practical terms, as the inclusion of such deals within the framework of a bilateral state agreement allows authorities to turn down Freedom of Information requests, citing the 'strategic importance for the state' of such investments, which trumps the public interest argument (personal archive; Novaković and Todorović Štiplija 2020).

The increasing importance of China for Serbia, throughout the 2010s and especially from 2016 onwards, should therefore be perceived within this wider setting of the economic lens as all-important for the narrative of success presented by Vučić and his party. So far, economic performance and the narrative built around economic success have trumped considerations related to transparency and the environment in the Serbian government's calculations – to little pushback from the EU. The inroads Serbian-Chinese cooperation has made in 2020, which now exceed the strict economic sphere and encompass Serbia's unabashed support for China's actions even when it clearly infringes human rights (as in the case of Xinjiang), indicate that this relationship could become even bigger and more significant with time. Seen in this context, the findings of this study resonate far and wide: the narrative pattern of 'salvific aid' identified here serves to bypass concerns about human rights, labour rights and the environment, while manipulating the real economic situation. As long as Aleksandar Vučić will stay in a position to seek power, it is likely that this narrative will continue to play a key role in his political communication tactics.

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WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
"STEEL FRIENDSHIP" — FORGING OF THE PERCEPTION OF CHINA
BY THE SERBIAN POLITICAL ELITE

STEFAN VLADISAVLJEV

2. "Steel Friendship" — Forging of the Perception of China by the Serbian Political Elite

Stefan Vladisavljev

Executive Summary

The Serbian political elite have come to perceive China as a trustworthy and beneficial partner and are portraying it as such to the wider Serbian public, generating a positive picture of the country among Serbian people. Serbia has also been an important partner of China in Central and Eastern Europe, and Serbian politicians have embraced this relationship and have endorsed it through a number of mechanisms. This budding relationship is often described by members of the Serbian political elite as a "steel friendship" between the two countries. Partnership between Serbia and China has been intensifying since 2009, with the signing of a strategic agreement on economic, technological and infrastructure cooperation between two countries, and has reached the level of strategic partnership since then.

The Chinese presence in Serbia, often exaggerated, has helped the current ruling coalition led by president Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to consolidate political power. Over the last decade, the centralization of political power and the control of governance mechanisms have paved the way for the ruling political elite in Serbia to popularize political and economic cooperation with China, elevate it to the level of strategic partnership, and present it as such to the Serbian public. On the other side of the political spectrum, the current opposition leaders were Vučić's predecessors in the development of relations with China, and used to present it as a "foreign policy pillar" and Serbia's close partner. This has created a lack of criticism from opposition leaders when it comes to the rising level of cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing.

This study identifies who the main Serbian political actors promoting closer ties with Beijing are, and in what ways and by what mechanisms they utilize China to gain domestic political points. It argues that the commitment to the Sino-Serbian partnership will remain constant in the approach of the Serbian political elite, regardless of the political party and the politicians in power.

Introduction

The Chinese presence in Serbia has been steadily rising over the past decade. The increased number of infrastructural projects and financial agreements and the development of political and cultural relations have made China one of the most popular foreign policy partners for the Serbian ruling political elite.

The rising presence has created a basis for the partnership between the two countries, named the "steel friendship" by the ruling political elite in Serbia. This study focuses on the Serbian political elite, which is using China to gain political points and facilitate centralization of domestic political power through a presentation of the partnership as beneficial and positive to the Serbian public. While the Chinese outreach in the Western Balkans and Serbia has been well documented in the literature (Zweers, et al. 2020), how that outreach was utilized by the Serbian political elites for internal purposes has not until recently been a focus of researchers (see Prelec 2020).

For the past decade, the Serbian political elite, led by president Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Progressive Party, has balanced its foreign policy approach on the proclaimed "four pillars of the foreign policy" (Novaković 2013) – the European Union, Russia, the United States of America, and China. Serbia has thus seen itself as a country that tries

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to balance between East and West, where for a long time "East" included first and foremost Russia, a country with which Serbia has close and traditional ties (De Launey 2014). Recently, while trying to maintain working and amicable relations with all of the four pillars, the meaning of "cooperation with the East" changed as decision-makers in Belgrade have increasingly relied on cooperation with China, and less on Moscow (Velebit 2020).

For this reason, this study focuses on cooperation with China, and identifies who the main Serbian actors promoting closer ties with Beijing are, and in what ways and through which mechanisms they use China to gain domestic political points. The rise of popularity of the Sino-Serbian friendship is one of the tools that the ruling political elite in Serbia is using to consolidate centralization of its decision-making process and to assure that its position of power cannot be contested. The first part of the study maps the most important mechanisms that actors in Serbia are using to foster a closer relationship with China and present it as favorable to the Serbian public. The main part of the study then identifies the most important proponents of cooperation between Serbia and China. The focus is put on the government representatives, prime-ministers, and ministers, and the most prominent members of the relevant political parties and institutions.

Research is based mainly on existing literature, publications, press releases, official and media statements by the identified actors, and other publicly available data. These are complemented by findings collected by the author through interviews with the representatives of Serbian political parties and media. The COVID-19 pandemic and the parliamentary elections held in Serbia have limited the number of collected responses, but it still includes relevant representatives from different sides of the Serbian political spectrum, as well as representatives of state-owned and independent media outlets.

A Front–Row Seat for the "Steel Friendship"

Serbia has become an important partner of China in Central and Eastern Europe. China has increased its presence, and has become popular among Serbian citizens. Serbian decision makers have used different mechanisms to instrumentalize the rising "steel friendship". The way that China has been presented to the Serbian public has resulted in the positive perception of their partner from the Far East among Serbian citizens. Research published by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in 2017 found that China is viewed by 52% of Serbian citizens as an actor with a positive effect on Serbia (BCSP 2017). Follow-up research, conducted by the BSCP in November 2020 showed that 16% of Serbian citizens see China as Serbia's "best friend" and partner (BCSP 2020), putting it in second place, behind Russia with 40%. Research from March 2020 published by the Institute for European Affairs shows that the positive presentation of joint projects and overall cooperation with China brings results. The research found that 40% of Serbian citizens perceive China as the biggest donor to Serbia. These perceptions have contradicted available data, as according to the Serbian Ministry of European Integration only 0.6% of total international development grants to the Republic of Serbia between 2010 and 2016 have come from China, while 59.9% have come from the countries of the European Union (Ministry of European Integration 2019). Nevertheless, the overall positive image that was created has allowed the Serbian political elite to popularize cooperation with China for their political gain.

The rise of the Chinese presence in Serbia can be traced from 2009 onwards, when a strategic agreement on economic, technological, and infrastructure cooperation was signed between the two countries. (Le Corre and Vuksanović 2019). But there are some elements of cooperation predating that year. During the 1999 NATO intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Chinese embassy was destroyed in one of the aerial attacks on Belgrade (Ponniah and Marinković 2019). This event has been perceived as a tragic moment in joint Sino-Serbian history. It is also used as a symbol of friendship, showing that Serbia and China were not enemies in the conflict, but that both sides have suffered joint casualties, as stated by the former Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić (Danas Online 2019). Commemoration of the Chinese casualties is held every year on the date of the bombing of the embassy, and it is attended regularly by Serbian officials and the Chinese ambassador. During the commemorative event in 2020, Predrag Markovic, vice president of the Socialist Party of Serbia, said: "this day has scarred our collective history. The suffering of civilians, the indiscriminate destruction, the targeting of the innocent, and especially the attack on the embassy of a friendly nation will always be considered a crime by us" (Global Times 2020).

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The second important point of understanding that predates 2009 is the fact that China and Serbia are mutually supportive of each other when it comes to territorial disputes. On one side, China has not recognized Kosovo as an independent state and it stands on the side of Serbia when it comes to the territorial integrity of Serbia in regards to the Kosovo issue (Hammond 2020). On the other side, Serbia has strongly supported the "One China" policy, with official statements coming from the highest level of Serbian officials stating that "Serbia supports the preservation of Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty, the policy of "One China" and Chinese efforts to the peaceful unification of the Country" (Vučić, Letter to the President of the People's Republic of China 2020). Serbian territorial integrity in regards to Kosovo is a hot button political issue amongst the Serbian public. A vast majority of Serbs view Kosovo as a part of Serbia and are not willing to relinquish sovereignty in exchange for EU integration (Institute for European Affairs 2020a). The fact that China, as a major power and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, is standing on Serbia's side on this issue endears China to the wider Serbian population and facilitates the positive presentation of the Sino-Serbian partnership. As Anastas Vangeli argued during the 2020 Belgrade Security Forum panel (Belgrade Security Forum 2019), one of the reasons why China is in a favorable position is the fact that it has a clean record in the region. In other words, Beijing's support on the Kosovo issue and a joint history of victimhood in the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 serve as grounds on which popular support for Sino-Serbian cooperation is built.

Joint ventures in infrastructural projects, foreign direct investment, and general economic cooperation have been the main tools for the cultivation of Sino-Serbian partnership and the display of it to Serbian citizens during the past decade. The economy has been the cornerstone of mutual relations and has positioned China as one of the most important foreign partners for Serbia. Economic cooperation thus facilitated the development of political ties between the two countries.

One of the main features of political cooperation between the two countries are bilateral visits by senior officials. Regular bilateral visits on the highest level have been an indicator of burgeoning political ties. Those visits are promoted in the media as well and are used as opportunities to present new developments in the cooperation to the Serbian public. Each visit is used to reach new agreements on future joint projects that intensify partnership and cooperation between the two sides (TANJUG 2019a). Serbia is one of a few Eastern European countries that had a chance to welcome both the prime minister of China, Li Keqiang, and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Keqiang visited Belgrade during the summit of the 16+1 platform,[1] held in the Serbian capital in 2014 (Press release, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014), while Xi Jinping visited Serbia on a bilateral basis in 2016 (CorD 2016). High ranking officials of the Chinese Communist party have visited Serbia on several occasions as well, and their visits have been followed by the highest-ranking Serbian officials and highlighted by Serbian media (TANJUG 2019b). Visits of Serbian officials to Beijing have increased in frequency, with the president or prime minister visiting China at least once a year.

Dedication to the preservation and development of cooperation between the two countries is also shown in official statements made by the Serbian officials. Prime ministerial keynote addresses praising cooperation and dedication to improve cooperation between two sides, official presidential letters, and media statements made by the most prominent representatives of the ruling party have been a standard in the relations of the ruling political elite with China, as will be shown in further parts of the study.

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1   From 2012 — 2019 it was known as 16+1 platform for the cooperation between China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries. When Greece joined in 2019, the platform changed its name to 17+1.

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Serbian Ruling Political Elite – Fall of the Old Power and Rise of the New

Elections for the Serbian parliament and presidential elections held in 2012 have marked the entrance of a new actor – the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, abbr. SNS)– as the leading political power, and currently the latest shift of power on the Serbian political scene.

SNS was founded in 2008 when a group of members of the Serbian Radical Party, led by the vice-president of the party Tomislav Nikolić, decided to separate and take a different political direction (KU Leuven 2020). The separation came with the shift of Nikolić's political direction from far-right, nationalist, and anti-European narrative to a more moderate, pro-European direction, closer to the center of the political spectrum. Nikolić's departure from Radicals was followed by that of Aleksandar Vučić, who joined Nikolić's faction and became a member of the newly-founded SNS.

At that time, the leading political power in Serbia was the Democratic Party, which held the majority in the Serbian parliament, forming a coalition with the Socialist Party. In addition to the parliamentary majority, the leader of the party, Boris Tadić won his second term as president of Serbia in 2008, ensuring his position until 2013.

The first parliamentary elections after the foundation of the SNS were scheduled for 2012. In an attempt to boost the result of his party, Tadić resigned from the presidency, forcing early presidential elections to be held at the same time as parliamentary ones (Bojić 2012). The results of both parliamentary and presidential elections showed that Tadić's decision was harmful both for him and his party.

The 2012 elections were won by the SNS, which came to power by forming a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party (Kojić 2020). In addition to the parliamentary majority, the presidential candidate of the SNS, Tomislav Nikolić, won the presidential elections, over sitting president Tadić (Bilefsky 2012a).

Results of the 2012 elections meant that Serbia got a new president, as well as a new ruling majority in the national parliament. That majority was led by the SNS, but as a result of the post-election trade, Ivica Dačić, representative of the Socialist Party, was appointed as a new prime-minister (Bilefsky, 2012b).

These results thus marked "the end of an era" and the beginning of a new one, for the Serbian political scene. SNS and the Socialist Party have remained the two biggest political parties in Serbia until today. They have consolidated and centralized power, which led to the Freedom house index for Serbia dropping to the level of "partly free" in 2020 (Freedom House 2020)[2]. The majority of the decision-making process is controlled by representatives of these two parties, who have held the most important political positions, including the position of the president and prime-minister, since 2012. The identification of the Serbian political elite responsible for the development of cooperation with China therefore largely focuses on the identification of the main actors coming from the above-mentioned parties.

The First Phase of Cooperation – Setting the Stage for Sino–Serbian Friendship

In many ways, the period between 2009 and 2012 can be seen as the first phase of the development of relations between Serbia and China. The main promoter of cooperation with China before 2012 was the former Serbian minister of foreign affairs, Vuk Jeremić. In his statements during the ministerial mandate, Jeremić said that "Serbia-China friendship has never been stronger" (Xinhua 2011) and that the potential for cooperation in the future for Serbia and China, based on political relations as they were at the moment was "truly boundless" (BETA, TANJUG

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2   2020 Freedom House overview for Serbia: Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations. Despite these trends, the country has continued to move toward membership in the European Union (EU).

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2011). Even after his mandate as minister of foreign affairs ended, Jeremić continued to be seen as a person close to the Chinese Communist Party (Jirous 2019). In particular, he has promoted the Chinese political agenda through his work as president of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), launched in 2013. On the official website, CIRSD is presented as a public policy think-tank registered in Belgrade and New York[3], but among the members of its board of advisors is Li Wei, former high-level official of the Chinese Communist Party and emeritus president of the Development Research Center of the State Council of China.[4] CIRSD participated in the organization of the Silk Road Forum in 2018 (CIRSD 2018), and is a publisher of Horizons magazine (CIRSD n.d.) that contains many affirmative and positive articles about Chinese global outreach and Chinese policies.

Although Tadić's administration set the stage for cooperation with China, which was not much developed before 2012, and concluded the first infrastructural projects agreements, it lost power before the first concrete results of the Sino-Serbian partnership were realized. An illustrative case is the first major infrastructural agreement, the construction of the Mihailo Pupin bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade, which was reached based on the framework agreement on infrastructure cooperation in 2009. Its construction started in 2010 (Beta 2010), but the bridge, also known as the Serbia-China friendship bridge (Vučić 2014), was officially opened only in 2014. That gave the SNS and prime minister Vučić the chance to reap the benefits of the finalization of the first joint project between Serbia and China, though it was arranged by their predecessors.

The Era of Tomislav Nikolić – Embracing Chinese Presence

Unlike the previous government led by the Democratic Party and president Tadić, the newly appointed governmental figures coming from the SNS have had a chance to present the results of the cooperation to the Serbian public because, since 2012, cooperation between Serbia and China has developed extensively (Bjeloš 2019).

"There was a man in our country 200 years ago and he was a prophet, and had never heard of China, but he said: 'People will come from the east - yellow people and will rule the world, and drink water from the River Morava'. It is a Serbian river. Today, they drink and will drink more water and work together. We have gone farther than our prophet could have imagined" (BETA 2014).

This is a direct quote by the former president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, during the meeting with the Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang in 2014. The meeting followed the 16+1 platform summit in Belgrade and marked the first visit of the highest-level Chinese officials to Belgrade in 28 years (TANJUG 2014). Nikolić held the presidential mandate (2012-17) during a period of intensification of relations between Serbia and China, when the first major infrastructural project was finalized, the first foreign direct investment was agreed upon, and bilateral visits of Serbian officials to China, and Chinese officials to Belgrade

became a regular occurrence. In addition to participation in said events, Nikolić was one of the signatories of the Joint Statement on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Press Release, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016).

Nikolić's role in fostering cooperation with China was thus significant but not crucial, as his role in Serbian politics became mainly symbolic after 2012. Following his election as president in 2012, Nikolić stepped down from the position of president of the SNS because the law on the president of Serbia implies that President should not hold any other public position and the fact that Tadić had remained president of the Democratic party was largely criticized by Nikolić during the opposition days (BETA 2012). That decision was a legitimate one but resulted in the loss of real political power, which was instead increasingly consolidated in the hands of Aleksandar Vučić, then newly appointed leader of the SNS (Buckley 2013).

With the end of his term in 2017, Nikolić did not run for his second mandate and withdrew from Serbian politics almost completely. The candidate of the SNS at the presidential elections became Vučić, prime minister at that time, who claimed a landslide victory and confirmed that he was the undisputed political powerhouse in Serbia (Rudić 2017).

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3   CIRSD official website: https://www.cirsd.org/en/.

4   Li Wei's biography: https://www.cirsd.org/en/leadership/board/he-mr-li-wei.

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However, even after his withdrawal from top-level national politics, Nikolić is still a relevant actor when it comes to cooperation with China, as he was appointed as a chair of the newly established National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China in May of 2017. It is a governmental institution founded to direct and coordinate the implementation of strategic partnership agreements that Serbia has signed with Russia and China.[5] Nikolić, as a chair of the Council, participated in the bilateral meetings and has been recognized as an important actor by Chinese officials as well (Press release 2020), but his role is now more ceremonial and he does not hold real political power in his hands anymore. It is Vučić who took over effective control both over Serbian foreign and domestic policy.

Here Comes Vučić

As previously noted, Aleksandar Vučić has been the central political figure in the Serbian political scene since 2012. He held a position of the first vice-president of the Serbian government from 2012 to 2014, then the position of the prime-minister from 2014 to 2017, and since 2017 has served as Serbian president. During this whole period, he has also been the president of the SNS (Stojanović 2019). His position as the most powerful politician in Serbia is undisputed and often supported even by high-level European officials. For example, the president of the European People's Party, Donald Tusk, endorsed the SNS led by Vučić ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2020 (EWB 2020).

The majority of the joint projects with China have been based on government-to-government agreements, which have enabled Vučić to be the "face of the cooperation" with China during the period of deepening ties between the two countries. A current member of the Serbian parliament from the SNS highlighted and acknowledged Vučić's merits in strengthening ties with China in an interview with the author, saying that Serbia has succeeded to position itself as a reliable, adequate, and a good partner to China due to the hard work of the (current) president Aleksandar Vučić.[6] Furthermore, President Vučić has been recognized as a reliable partner by the Chinese side as well. In the official statements by the representatives of China, cooperation with Serbia, and the lead role of President Vučić has been continuously presented in an affirmative and positive tone (FoNet 2020). The uncontested position of Vučić is seen positively as it means that the agreed projects will not be challenged and questioned, that there is a certainty of domestic support.

From his place of political power, Vučić's activities that have popularized the Sino-Serbian partnership have been especially significant. Presentation of the big infrastructural projects backed by Chinese loans was a main mechanism of the promotion of cooperation with China. As Tena Prelec argues, Vučić and SNS have been using the topic of economic assistance from abroad to build and consolidate dominance on the Serbian political scene from 2012 to 2020 (Prelec 2020). The 16+1 summit was held in Belgrade in 2014 and marked the first official visit of Chinese prime-minister Li Keqiang after 28 years (Deutsche Welle 2014). At the occasion, Li Keqiang together with Vučić also attended the opening ceremony of the Pupin bridge, the first major Sino-Serbian infrastructural project. Vučić used the opportunity to say that "that the Pupin bridge is a sign of true friendship and unity among the citizens of China and Serbia" (Press release 2014). The event started the custom of holding a large ceremony to celebrate the finalization of each joint project, during which the friendship between Serbia and China is usually praised. An example is the opening of the "Miloš the Great" highway in 2019, attended by the Chinese residing ambassador to Serbia, Chen Bo. During the ceremony, president Vučić stated that "the country in past several years came a long way from the brink of bankruptcy to the status of the most attractive investment destination globally, and noted that "much of the success was achieved in cooperation with our Chinese friends" (Xinhua 2019a).

In addition to the promotion of the infrastructural projects, foreign direct investments coming from China have received much of Vučić's attention. The purchase of the Smederevo steel mill by Chinese Hesteel in 2016 marked the first major Chinese foreign direct investment in

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5   More about the office of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China can be found at: http://www.knsrk.gov.rs/lat/o-nama.php.

6   Written Interview with the member of the Serbian parliament and the member of the SNS, November 2020.

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Serbia and was showcased during the visit of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, to Serbia that year (CorD 2016). Vučić has presented it as evidence of Chinese interest in Serbian economic development, a component of comprehensive strategic partnership and confirmation of the "steel friendship" between the two countries (TANJUG 2019c).

Also, Vučić's role in promoting the Belgrade-Beijing partnership at the beginning of the 2020 COVID-19 crisis in Serbia showed that he is the most prominent Serbian actor when it comes to the fostering of the Sino-Serbian friendship, and the extremely positive presentation of that partnership to the Serbian citizens. In March of 2020, Vučić stated that the only country that can help Serbia in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is China, and that he had asked Chinese President Xi Jinping for help and was expecting a positive response because the Chinese leader was not only a "friend of Serbian people" but also a "brother of this country" (Vladisavljev 2020). At the same time, he stated that "European solidarity does not exist and that it is a fairytale on paper" (Evans 2020), and showed that at that moment, the Serbian allegiance was closer to Beijing than to Brussels.

The behavior of president Vučić at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis were noticed by EU officials, and that is the main reason why the European Commission's 2020 progress report on Serbia states that "assistance provided by China at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in Serbia was particularly emphasized by Serbia's political leadership" and that the "COVID-19 crisis was marked by pro-China and EU skeptical rhetoric by high-ranking state officials" (EC 2020 report 2020). Vučić has been aware of the concerns coming from the EU and has responded to them in the past, as he did in the aftermath of the European Union – the Western Balkans Summit was hosted online by Croatia in May of 2020. On that occasion, speaking to Serbian journalists, Vučić said that Serbia was open to cooperation with anyone and maintained its autonomous foreign policy. He further stated that while it has membership in the European Union as strategic goal, Serbia would bow to no one and would not speak against China, Russia, or the United States because they were partners to Serbia and that Serbia would continue to have good relations with all of them (Vučić, Manje govoriti o perspektivi, više o proširenju 2020). Vučić also showed his devotion to the

rising partnership with China with the speech he gave at the reception in the Chinese embassy organized in celebration of the 71st anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. He insisted that "Serbia vowed to maintain the 'brotherly friendship' with China, no matter what kind of pressure it takes" (CGTN 2020).

However, it must be noted that Vučić rarely uses similar rhetoric when speaking directly with the representatives of the European Union or the United States. The praise of China's presence is reserved for the domestic public and the occasions when he is speaking with Chinese officials. Also, during the COVID-19 crisis, in follow-up statements after stirring attention with his pro-Chinese acclamations, he acknowledged the help coming from the European Union, and said that it "is by far the biggest donor to Serbia"[7].

Vučić would be the most important proponent of any other topic that should be communicated and presented to the Serbian public. Currently, China has a positive image among Serbian citizens and that makes it a good candidate for political promotion to gain political points. President Vučić is using every opportunity to do so. While keeping the facade of a pro-EU leader, Vučić Is leaning closer to Beijing and intensifying relations with the Chinese autocratic regime. With that and the unclear path towards European Union membership in mind, Vučić still does not want to lose the support of Brussels. Therefore, he tends to plays different characters to assure that he will still be able to gain benefits from both relationships, without deciding which foreign policy direction both him as a leader, and Serbia as a country will finally take. The political points that Vučić is gaining from the popularity of China are facilitating his undisputed position of power and further centralization of the decision-making process in Serbia.

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7   Data about the European Union assistance to Serbia are available at: http://europa.rs/eu-partnership-with-serbia-eu-best-partner-and-biggest-donor-for-20-years-and -in-the-frvont-line-against-covid-19/?lang=en.

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Prime–Minister and the Government – Dedicated Operatives

According to the Constitution, the Serbian government should be the leading part of the executive branch with the institution of the president having a more symbolic role. In practice, however, executive power is centralized in the hands of president Vučić (Freedom House 2020), while the Serbian government, currently led by prime-minister Ana Brnabić, operates more like an extension of presidential political will (European Parliamentary Research Service 2019) than as an independent political actor. Nonetheless, the institution of government and the ministerial positions are still crucial for the operative aspects of the sectoral cooperation between Serbia and Chinese actors.

While presented as strategic and comprehensive (Xinhua 2016), cooperation between Serbia and China is developed more in some sectors than in others. Political and economic cooperation, based on infrastructural projects, foreign direct investments, trade, and energy are the cornerstones of the mutual ties. Therefore, Serbian political elites rely chiefly on these sectors to preserve the cooperation between the two countries and develop an image of beneficial cooperation for Serbia. Aside from president Vučić, members of the Serbian government in charge of said sectors have been advocating for the Sino-Serbian partnership and actively participating in the presentation of it in a positive manner. This chapter will focus on members of the Serbian government who are also a part of the Serbian political elite and are taking an active role in the process of the development and fostering of partnership between Belgrade and Beijing during the past decade.

Ana Brnabić holds the prime-ministerial position since 2017, succeeding Aleksandar Vučić, who won the presidential elections the same year. Brnabić's contribution to the development of the cooperation with China is defined by the overall foreign policy direction and decision to establish a comprehensive partnership with China. Those operative aspects have had the most prominent results in the sectors of infrastructure, energy, and mining, and trade, tourism, and telecommunication. In 2020, Brnabić started her second term as prime-minister and made it clear in her statements during reappointment that cooperation and the further development of relations with China would remain a priority for the newly formed government (Press Release, Cabinet of the prime-minister 2020). Devotion

to cooperation with China was also highlighted in Brnabić's 2020 prime ministerial keynote address, stating that Serbia would remain dedicated to comprehensive relations with China, both through bilateral relations and through cooperation within multilateral platforms like 17+1 (Keynote Address of prime minister Ana Brnabić 2020). Brnabić has been visiting Beijing regularly, meeting the highest-level Chinese officials, including president Xi Jinping. During those visits, the importance of friendship and cooperation between the two countries has been highlighted (Press Release 2019b). Prime minister Brnabić has publicly promoted Chinese presence and partnership between the two countries even outside official statements and press releases. In March 2020, she stated that she would try to put in motion a proposal to erect a monument dedicated to the cooperation between Serbia and China and "steel friendship" between the two countries (Milenković 2020).

As leader of the Serbian government, Brnabić is leading and overseeing different ministries, including the ministry of construction, transport, and infrastructure. Infrastructure projects are a major aspect of cooperation between Serbia and China and the basis on which comprehensive friendship is built. Zorana Mihajlović was appointed as minister of infrastructure for two terms, from 2014 to 2020 (N1 2016). Having one of the main aspects of cooperation between two countries in her portfolio, Mihajlović played an important role in the presentation of those projects to the broader Serbian public. In her statements, she often highlighted the significance of the joint infrastructural projects and their financial value, without mentioning that those projects are based on preferential financial agreements – Chinese loans – and that Serbia will have to repay the whole amount with interest included (Press release 2019b). By not disclosing transparent and complete information about the relative amounts of Chinese loans and of foreign direct investment, she additionally facilitated the presentation of the Sino-Serbian partnership to the domestic public and contributed to the creation of the widespread but false image that China is the largest investor and donor in Serbia. In addition to her position within the government, Minister Mihajlović is a member of the SNS presidency. Following the 2020 elections, she was appointed a Minister for Energy and Mining and will be thus still included in cooperation with partners from

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China because mining and energy are important sectors in developing relations with Beijing.[8]

The predecessor of Zorana Mihaljović at her newly acquired position of Minister of Mining and Energy was Aleksandar Antić, a member and vice-president of the Socialist Party who held the ministerial position from 2014 to 2020. Joint projects in the mining and energy sector have been some of the most ambitious, received major attention from the Serbian public, and have become an essential part of the crafting of the positive image of China in Serbia. Two such projects have already been finalized, Kostolac power plant and Bor Mines. The former has been reconstructed and upgraded with the help of Chinese loans (CINS 2016) and the latter has been purchased by the Chinese Zijin company (Reuters 2018). The mining sector is especially important, given that the Zijin purchase of the Bor Mines was one of the largest Chinese foreign direct investments in Serbia so far, with the total investment amount reported to be 1.26 billion USD (AlJazeera Balkans 2018). On the Serbian side, minister Antić was the official leading the operative aspects of these projects. Additionally, Antić was an unofficial spokesperson for the relations between the two countries and the joint projects, especially in the framework of the 17+1 that he coordinated on the national level (TANJUG 2018). As part of the ruling majority and when he was speaking about cooperation between Serbia and China, he stressed the importance of president Vučić's efforts to improve cooperation between the two countries (FoNet 2019). While not being part of the SNS and as a minister that operates under prime-ministerial guidance, not presidential, Antić did not differ from the established narrative of friendship between the president of Serbia Vučić and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Although he was not appointed as a minister in the government formed after the 2020 elections, Antić remains a prominent figure of Serbian politics as a vice president of the Socialist Party, and his role in the future when it comes to the relations between Serbia and China is yet to be seen.

Another important aspect of cooperation between Serbia and China is trade, presented as a great chance for Serbia due to the large Chinese market, while disregarding the existing figures showing that there is a large imbalance between Serbian export to China and Serbian import from China (CRI 2019). Even low export numbers are presented as a potential for Serbian companies to improve their products and place them on the Chinese market (Beta 2019). The chance for the improvement of trade relations, as well as the continuous rise of Serbian export to China, from 7.2 million USD in 2010 to 329 million in 2019,[9] have made trade a popular topic for Serbian officials. The person in charge of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunication since 2012 was Rasim Ljajić. In many ways, he was different than any other minister in the past eight years. First of all, he is not part of the SNS or the Socialist Party but a leader of the Social Democratic Party of Serbia and he is also recognized as a leader of the Bosniak minority with its stronghold in the Sandžak region. Ljajić is considered as a staple of Serbian political life for 20 years because he held a ministerial position from 2000 to 2020. Being in charge of trade, tourism and telecommunication has positioned him as an important facilitator of the partnership between Serbia and China. In his media statements and official appearances, Ljajić frequently emphasized the importance of strategic partnership and trade relations with China (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019), and has positioned himself as the main proponent of deepening ties with China in the sphere of telecommunications. On several occasions, Ljaljić stated that Serbia is more than satisfied with cooperation with China and Chinese companies in the digital sphere and that Serbia sees in China a partner for the further work on 5G network and overall digitalization of the country (B92 2019).

Participation of the government representatives in spreading the positive image of China in Serbia was defined by the heavily centralized division of power and the characteristics of the overall Sino-Serbian partnership. Prime-minister Brnabić plays an important role, but she still serves as an extension of presidential power. The ministers of infrastructure, energy or trade whose role is described above are the most visible ones because of the sectors that they have under their portfolios. It seems to be the position that defines the actor of promotion, meaning that personal changes do not impact the trend of the preservation and development of relations with China, as well as the presentation of the partnership as beneficial for Serbia. The Minister of Infrastructure, Minister of Energy, and Minister of Trade in the Serbian government will continue to follow

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8   Chinese loan was used for the reconstruction of thermal power plant Kostolac B (RTS 2011), and Chinese Zijin Mining has purchased the Mining and Smelting Combine Bor in 2018 (N1 2018).

9   Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.

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the official political agenda set by the center of power, president Vučić as leading part of the executive branch of power and his SNS as dominant party in the Serbian

parliament. If that agenda includes the preservation and further development of Sino-Serbian relations, they will be a part of it.

Political Parties – One Above All

Political parties play an important role in the Serbian political scene. Even though the centralization of power in Serbia looks like a one-man show, with Aleksandar Vučić as the main political figure, it also includes his political party and its officials. The Serbian political scene is dominated by the SNS and the 2020 Parliamentary elections have confirmed that their dominance is undisputed. President Vučić's party won the elections with an overwhelming majority, gathering more than 60% of total votes with only two more parties winning more than the 3% of total votes needed to pass the census and enter the parliament (Official election results 2020). Despite holding the majority by itself, the SNS included the Socialist Party as a partner in the newly formed government, continuing a partnership that goes back to 2012, and the first parliamentary majority formed with those two parties in charge. The following section sheds more light on the ways how the cooperation with China has been developing on a party-level.

Deepening ties with their Chinese counterpart and promoting said ties to the Serbian public is facilitated by the friendly approach of the Chinese Communist Party. In addition to the regular bilateral visits, Chinese representatives in Serbia are also taking an active role in popularizing Sino-Serbian cooperation and spreading a positive image of their country. SNS celebrated 10 years of existence in 2018. The only foreign representative that took the stage during the celebration was, at that time, Chinese ambassador Li Manchang. He spoke not only as an ambassador but as an envoy of the Chinese Communist Party, stating that "Progressives, as the biggest political party in Serbia under the leadership of Vučić, play an "immensely important role" by setting development of the country and people's interests as their priorities" (Xinhua 2018).

Of the two major ruling parties, the SNS is still leading the way when it comes to cooperation with China and further development of it. In addition to president Vučić and ministers that are part of the government, the SNS has established intense party-to-party cooperation with the Chinese communist party. During the 2019 visit of a high-ranking official of the Chinese Communist party

to Belgrade, both parties pledged "all-time friendship" (Stojanović 2019). That proclamation was not surprising and followed the official visit of the SNS members to Beijing earlier that year. As reported, during the visit, officials of the SNS had a chance to learn more about the organizational structures and practices of the Chinese Communist Party, from the local to the national level (TANJUG 2020). A friendly relationship with the Chinese ruling party has been appreciated and answered with support coming from the SNS Officials. Speaking as the vice president of the SNS, Marko Đurić has openly supported Chinese efforts to suppress the Hong Kong protests in 2019 (Xinhua 2019b). Đurić also gave assenting comments on the Chinese treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province. Speaking about this sensitive issue, Đurić stated that "the level of protection of minority rights in Xinjiang is something that many countries in my part of the world could envy" (Xinhua 2019c), expressing agreement with the official Beijing rhetoric on how this issue is being handled.

The Socialist Party of Serbia has been seen as the main promoter of and a party with close ties to Russia (Heil 2020), but some of its leading figures, such as former Minister of Mining and Energy Antić, have managed to position themselves as facilitators of the Chinese presence in Serbia. President of the party, former prime minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić has had his moments in the facilitation of the "steel friendship", most notably he was the first foreign representative that visited China in February 2020 when he traveled to Beijing to show support to China in battling the rising pandemic. (Beta 2020b). In addition to the national level, the Socialist Party has played an important role in the establishment of cooperation with China in the Serbian autonomous province Vojvodina. Member of the Socialists and provincial secretary for commerce, Ivan Đoković has been a vocal promoter of cooperation between the two countries through bilateral visits, facilitated commercial agreements, province to province cooperation between Vojvodina and interested Chinese provinces (RTV 2019).

The question is what will be the role of the Socialists in the future given that after the 2020 election the party has lost

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the position of Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Energy and Mining, with Ivica Dačić now taking a role of the Speaker of the Assembly and Aleksandar Antić becoming a head of "Koridori Srbije", the governmental body in charge of coordination of highway construction in Serbia. Socialists are participating in the ruling majority, but their real power is dubious (Deutsche Welle 2020) and it looks like now more than ever they are playing second fiddle to the SNS.

Even though there are reasons for concerns that the overall cooperation between the two countries could be harmful to Serbia, with some researchers arguing that Serbia is on the path of becoming a Chinese client state (Conley, et al. 2020), the Serbian opposition has not been vocal about the potentially harmful consequences and has not criticized cooperation with China at all. This situation is partly attributable to the current chaotic state of the Serbian opposition, which lacks a clear leader or an idea on how to move forward. There are, however, also other reasons that come into play. Firstly, it is not in the interest of the opposition to criticize China because it would bring them no positive points among voters and cooperation with China will be needed if and when they come to power. Secondly, the current members of the opposition were part of the government when the first agreements with China were made. Boris Tadić and Vuk Jeremić are now seen as prominent opposition politicians, but they were the

decision-makers at the time when China had been starting to become a relevant actor in Serbian politics. While there is no evidence that Tadić holds connections with Chinese representatives in any way, Jeremić is still president of a think-thank that favorably presents China (CIRSD), and there is evidence that he holds connections to the high-ranking officials of the Chinese communist party (Jirous 2019). Therefore, the lack of criticisms can be explained by the lack of concrete benefits for the opposition and the potential consequences if they come to power.

The official presentation of the Chinese presence in Serbia in a positive light by the SNS and the Socialist Party, including the appreciation shown by the president and members of the government, is the leading cause of the Chinese rise in popularity in Serbia. The hegemonic role, political power, and overall presence in Serbian political life have enabled the ruling SNS and its members to set the political agenda however they find it suitable. When it comes to the Sino-Serbian case this includes a presentation of the cooperation with China and the "steel friendship" between the two countries as solely positive, lacking any kind of critical stance. Other parties that are part of the ruling coalition are aligning their programs and policies with the program set by the strongest party, and opposition parties, burdened by their issues and challenges, are not disputing the stance taken by the ruling coalition at all.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how the Serbian political elite has been fostering the partnership with China and presenting it as positive and beneficial to the Serbian public by identifying the main actors involved and mechanisms they have been using. The study draws on existing research, interviews by the author, official and media statements from the most prominent members of the Serbian political elite, including current and past members of the Serbian government and most important political parties. Based on these sources, it has shown how economic and political cooperation, bilateral visits, common stances on political issues like territorial integrity, as well as the recent joint history of victimhood have resulted in an overall positive image of China among the Serbian public.

The positive perception of Sino-Serbian relations has enabled leading politicians and members of governing institutions to use China for their political gains, either by highlighting the existing cooperation and potential

of future development or by asserting their role in the creation of the "steel friendship". The popularity of China among Serbian citizens gives the opportunity to use the mentioned cooperation for further centralization of power of the current ruling political elite. The main actors that the study has identified are the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, certain ministers of the Serbian government led by the prime-minister Ana Brnabić, and political parties, with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) as the leading political party in Serbia.

Aleksandar Vučić is the most relevant figure in the development and promotion of the Sino-Serbian partnership in Serbia. As president of Serbia and president of the SNS, Vučić has managed to concentrate power exceeding his formal constitutional role and become undoubtedly the most powerful and popular politician in Serbia. In his efforts, Vučić continues to praise the Sino-Serbian partnership, but changes his rhetoric while

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speaking with European leaders, maintaining the facade of ''pro-European Union'' leader. Still, when he sits with his Chinese counterparts, he presents Serbia as a country open to almost any kind of cooperation. As the result of the cooperation, Vučić tends to present a partnership with China (often exaggerating the state of relations) as the most important partnership for Serbia, especially when it comes to the impact that China has on the Serbian economy. Vučić has thus become "the face" of the cooperation with China, his role in tightening mutual ties is often highlighted by other representatives of the Serbian political elite, and he is recognized as a reliable and devoted partner from the Chinese side as well.

Due to the high concentration of power in the hands of the president, the Serbian government is a mere extension of his political will and not an autonomous actor, as it is supposed to be according to the constitutional structure of Serbia. Ana Brnabić as prime minister and the ministers in charge of the sectors important for cooperation with China seem to be contributing to the fostering of cooperation and designing of a positive image of said partnership mainly from the title of their executive position. Personal changes, therefore, do not impact the trend of the development of the cooperation with China in a specific sector. Ministers included in this publication are relevant, first and foremost, because of their political party and designated appointment coming from the center of power. They stay on good terms with Chinese counterparts while they hold the ministerial position, and new person takes their role after they step down from it.

The ties with China have been developed and fostered also on the party-to-party level, especially in the case of Vučić's SNS which cooperates and pledges friendship with the Chinese communist party. While their role in Serbian politics is limited, neither opposition political parties criticize the development of the Sino-Serbian partnership as current opposition leaders like Boris Tadić and Vuk Jeremić have played a prominent role in the establishment of the relations between two countries before the SNS came to power and no benefits are arising from such criticism.

The Chinese presence, often exaggerated, has helped the current ruling coalition led by Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS to consolidate political power. During the past decade, the centralization of political power and the control over the governing mechanisms have enabled the ruling political elite in Serbia to popularize cooperation with China, elevate it to the level of strategic partnership, and present it as such to the Serbian public. As long as the Serbian ruling political elite led by president Vučić can benefit from the cooperation with China, it will continue to foster and promote it. He will not be contested by the opposition leaders. Current leaders of the opposition were Vučić's predecessors in the evolution of relations with China, and have used to present China as a ''pillar of the foreign policy" and close partner of Serbia. The lack of criticism coming from opposition leaders therefore comes from the joint history of cooperation with China and the intention to keep China as a partner in the case of resurgence and coming to power again. Dedication to the Sino-Serbian partnership will remain constant in the approach of the Serbian political elite, regardless of the political party and politicians in power. As long as a partnership with China can be presented as beneficial and positive, representatives of the Serbian political elite will continue to utilize it for their personal gain.

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3. China's Ideational Impact in the Western Balkans, 2009–2019

Anastas Vangeli

Executive Summary

As a global actor with a distinct trajectory marked by its economic rise and pro-active approach in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, China already has a significant ideational impact on how elites in various regions think not only of the global political economy, but also their role in it. This is also the case in the Western Balkans, which has noted increased interaction with China not least by being part of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's platform for cooperation with Central, East and Southeast Europe dubbed "17+1." However, often, the complexities that characterize the process of ideational impact are overlooked by researchers and policymakers alike.

This study aims to disaggregate different forms of China's ideational impact. It proposes two criteria that help distinguish between them: the role of China's intentions (i.e. some forms of impact are intended while others are not), and the degree of mediation (i.e. some forms of impact take place as a result of direct, unmediated interaction, while others are mediated). Such a framework also accounts for the agency of regional actors, as well as for the impacts of other external actors (in the first place, the EU and the US).

The paper shows that in the period 2009-2019 China has managed to affect the way Western Balkan elites think of China, but not to the extent Chinese actors originally aimed. While actors from the region have welcomed the idea of regional prosperity under a Belt and Road framework, they do not desire broader global transformations. Moreover, contrary to Beijing's attempt not to get involved in domestic political debates, China has become an increasingly politicized topic due to both external and internal factors. Most significantly, as a result of the tensions between the US and China, Western Balkan actors now increasingly subscribe to (and sometimes instrumentalize) a primacist, zero-sum vision of global politics. A key contradiction that is shaping the attitude of Western Balkan actors, is the belief (or rather desire) that growing Sino-Balkan economic cooperation can be achieved in isolation from any significant disturbances in the geopolitical status quo. Referring briefly to the dynamics that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, the paper concludes that external inputs will remain the key variable that shapes the thinking on China among Western Balkan elites.

Introduction

The explosion of interest in China worldwide, motivated by the perception of China as a global game-changer, shows one important aspect of its rise that often goes under-researched: China already has a significant ideational impact, or rather an impact on how others think about the world and their role in it. Two elements shape this process: (i) Global China emerges as an abstract subject in discussions of global affairs at a conceptual level; and (ii) it emerges as a potent external actor, increasing its interactions, presence and visibility all over the world, shaping debates on a policy level. Taking the overall trend of increased interest in China's global imprint as an invitation, this paper examines the ideational impact

of China (both as an abstract subject and an actor in the material world) in the Western Balkans – a region which has had a burgeoning relationship with the world's second largest economy in the past decade (2009-2019), and in particular, with the development of the platform for cooperation between China and the seventeen countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) dubbed "17+1" and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The ideational changes induced by China's rise, even though manifesting differently across different areas of the world, are part of a global trend that is unfolding simultaneously in all corners of the planet. In that sense, it

is unavoidable to discuss the relevance of these processes in the Western Balkans as well. However, there are several particularities which add on to the significance of discussing the ideational impact of China in the Western Balkans. For one, China is a relative newcomer to a region already crowded with the significant presence of other external actors. At the same time, the Western Balkans is also a region that to some extent (as other places around the world) has been caught off guard by China's rise and the changes it brings to the global stage. During the past three decades the Western Balkan elites devoted little attention and resources to observing non-Western actors and their parts of the world. In fact, while the West has been deepening its ties with China since the 1970s, the Western Balkan countries had been divesting their pre-existing linkages after 1990, as has also been the case in much of post-socialist Europe (Wasserstrom 2000). Finally, the Western Balkans is a region that historically has been shaped – and it has also internalized the view – of being a venue rather than an agent in the global political economy, and in that sense, the countries located in the region have developed a relatively lesser sense of agency in dealing with global powers. All of these aspects make the topic of inquiry additionally intriguing.

In the following section, the paper develops an analytical framework for studying ideational impact, which is subsequently applied to the case of China in the Western Balkans. The paper studies both China's intended and unintended ideational impact, both in their direct and mediated forms. Empirically, the paper draws upon secondary literature and media sources, and on fieldwork carried out by the author in the period 2014-2018 in the form of participant observation carried out in "Track 2" diplomatic and scholarly events in China, CESEE and beyond, as well as interviews with Chinese and Western Balkan experts.

Analytical Framework and Theoretical Considerations

This paper studies the ideational impact of rising China as an external actor, and the rise of China as a broader phenomenon on the Western Balkan elites' understanding of: a) the rise of China itself; b) the dynamics of the global political economy (in light of China's rise); c) the position of the Western Balkan region in a changing global constellation.

Ideational impact refers to the changes in thinking and behavior of individual and collective actors that happen as a consequence of a particular external stimulus. In the domain of global politics and economy, actors are continuously impacted by a wide array of such external stimuli. Changes in context and circumstances, social and political events and performances, disruptive, low-probability, high-impact events, embodied and emotional experiences, and other social and natural phenomena can all have a particular ideational impact in an unpredictable way – think of, for instance, the manifold impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple impacts on how we think about a whole range of issues, or the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers on thinking on security, or the impact of the Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear accidents on thinking about energy and the environment. So too does the rise of China impact our thinking on global politics and economics.

The emergence of China as a global actor, and moreover a pro-active actor with increased engagement with the rest of the world in general, and the Western Balkans in particular, is an external stimulus, or rather a set of stimuli that take place over a prolonged period of time, continuously inspiring a change in thinking and behavior among the Western Balkan policy, business and knowledge elites (as among their counterparts from all over the world). This impact occurs both in the domain of foreign and security policy, as well as in that of economic development and cooperation.

Previous research (Vangeli 2019a) has shown that in the context of China's new relations with CESEE – including the Western Balkans – instances of ideational impact can be found in the interactions of knowledge actors and the emergence of nascent transnational knowledge networks and epistemic communities convened by Chinese actors. Taking this research agenda forward, this paper therefore sets out with the task of extending the study of China's ideational impact in the Western Balkans by focusing on the impact (1) beyond the domain of interaction and exchange of knowledge elites; and (2) in relation with developments in the global political economy in the period 2009-2019 (that is, from the emergence of China as an actor in the region in the aftermath of the global financial crisis up until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has itself had a particularly disruptive effect, deserving of a separate study). To do so, the paper disaggregates the concept of ideational impact by taking into account the role of intentions, and

the degree of mediation of this impact (direct vs. indirect) (Figure 1), and applies it to the case of Sino-Balkan relations.

Figure 1. A model to study ideational impact

	Intentional	Unintentional
Direct		
Indirect		

The ideational impact of China, as defined here, approximates the concept of "ideational power" as devised by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016), referring to "the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements," as this approach allows for distinguishing between different manifestations of ideational power – both direct and indirect (e.g. power-through-ideas, power-over-ideas, and power-in-ideas). The direct forms of ideational impact (e.g. persuasion-as-influence, conversion, soft power, sharp power, etc.) are just some of the many possible pathways of ideational impact taking place, but they are far from the only ones. Other changes in the broader constellation of actors and ideas, not necessarily linked to China's actions directed at the Western Balkan countries, matter just as much in understanding its ideational impact.

The ideational impact of China, importantly, does not necessarily occur as an outcome of external "promotion" of norms and values, nor does it take the place of a coerced emulation of the so called "China Model." In reality these developments take the form of gradual, incremental, somewhat "subterranean" transformation(s) of the global ideoscapes that is the cumulative result of a number of processes of reconfiguration of interactions, relationships and fields of practice. At the core, the impact is relational and dialogical – as it concerns the relations between non-Chinese actors and China, the dispositions and the positions of non-Chinese actors in the world, and the relations between non-Chinese actors with one another.

Context–(re)shaping

The ideational impact of China is primarily a "context-shaping" one (Hay 1997, 50; Vangeli 2019b), meaning that it redefines "the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others" (Vangeli 2018a). With the arrival of China, the context of the relationship between a number of different non-Chinese actors and their own immediate fields of practice is profoundly affected. Suddenly, a number of policymakers from various sectors ranging from trade and economics to culture, tourism, healthcare or education; knowledge producers and civil society as well as media workers; business actors of all sizes and from various industries find themselves faced with the immense task of dealing with China – a country of 1.4 billion inhabitants, with immense socio-political and economic complexities, and most importantly, a country that has been associated with the most unprecedented economic rise in human history, while still being ruled by a Communist Party. For an increasing number of actors in the Western Balkans, the rise of China is not something that happens far away anymore – it rather happens in front of their own eyes on a daily basis, with all the novelties and quagmires it brings.

Consider this example: researchers from a non-governmental organization from the Western Balkans who have been socialized into a Western, "end of history" mindset, with their agenda being dominated by questions pertinent to the advancement of liberal democratic ideology, and the practice of operating in a liberal civil society environment suddenly face a novel and, to them, alien situation. They now have to discuss China, a country they know little about, or are invited to a conference in China and end up in a conference room in Beijing with communist paraphernalia surrounding them. Over time they witness and partake in a process in which China, a country no one really cared about only a few years ago, becomes one of the key topics for discussion in the region. By the same token, businesses that had no ties to China flock to fairs in China in a frenzy to join the Chinese market (and vice-versa, Chinese businesses are increasingly coming to the region); professionals in a variety of fields have to be updated with the latest developments from China and opportunities for linking up; and even the broader public is exposed to an ever-increasing amount of news about China. Overwhelmingly, there is a sense of being puzzled with the nature and implications of China's involvement; however, despite this, there is no significantly-developed public discussion on it in the region.

Over time, of course, actors from the region will get synced up with this new reality and will know (a bit more than they know now) how to position themselves and act with regards to China. However, this in-between situation, the period in which China has emerged and the debate on

China is still unsaturated, creates an opening for ideational structures to undergo significant transformation in any direction, as the new context is not fully established yet, while the old one is withering away.

Intentions and Mediation

China today openly showcases its ambition to change the world, not least by changing how others think about it. It also possesses the resources to do so. However, there are two significant caveats to this. First, China's resourcefulness is finite, meaning that it is not an omnipotent superpower, and it faces certain constraints and limitations in its quest. Furthermore, even though the top leadership may see ever more ambitious, significant parts of China's elite are still self-conscious and aware of the numerous challenges China faces at home and abroad, as well as the costs that come with being a world superpower that changes the world (Zhao 2018). In other words, the display of ambition on the part of China is still moderate. Second, pro-activity and resourcefulness do not automatically convert intentions into profound ideational impact. They are necessary, but far from sufficient conditions for China to successfully impact others in the manner it intends to. An increasing body of work points out to the limitations and obstacles that China faces, ranging from souring deals to changing public (and elite opinion); some are suggesting that China may be overstretching and overreaching, to its own detriment (Fickling 2018). In sum, what these debates show is that China is neither in an ideal position to change the world, nor is its (ideational) impact a straightforward consequence of its efforts and intentions.

The ideational impact of China, as argued in this paper, can take different paths. On one hand, in the era of pro-activity, Chinese actors and their overseas counterparts are establishing unprecedented levels of linkages, which allow direct communication, and an unmediated impact to take place. Diplomatic exchanges, China-led diplomatic forums, people-to-people exchanges, programs, and similar endeavors are blossoming, facilitating ideational impact through direct, unmediated interaction between Chinese actors and their overseas counterparts. The increased Chinese economic presence through development projects, foreign direct investments, increased trade, and commercial activities and linkages also allows for direct, unmediated (ideational) impact to take place. Of particular significance here are the embodied experiences of non-Chinese elites who now (or at least in the pre-COVID days) increasingly traveled to China and have been getting first hand, unmediated insights from the ground. While to some extent Chinese actors have a capability to control the discourse of official interactions, non-Chinese actors have their own agency, and ultimately it is their own interpretations and understanding that determines the direction of the ideational impact. This is a particularly significant development in cases such as the one of the Western Balkans, where prior to the increase in interaction with China, the image and understanding of China during the pre-2010s almost in its entirety has been shaped through the mediation of Western media and channels for communication. While the density of mediated messages on China increases, today the social representation of China in the region is a cumulative result of the projections of a multiplicity of images of China, including the ones that have been produced by an increasing number of actors who have had their own first-hand insights.

The mediated messages on China, however, must not be discarded from this discussion. Today, China changes the global debates, and creates a different worldview in particular among policy, business, intellectual and media elites in the West, which in turn, are in a position to affect the ideational structures in the Western Balkans. As China features ever more prominently in the external (and domestic) affairs agenda of the US and the EU, and as Western elites undergo their own processes of ideational impact as a result of the emergence of China as a global actor, this then has a second-order, mediated effect on how elites in the Western Balkans experience a China-induced ideational change.

Figure 2. Disaggregating ideational impact

	Intentional	Unintentional
Direct	Shaping pragmatic positions vis-a-vis China	Inspiring a new open-ended understanding of China
Indirect	Shaping a new understanding of global dynamics	Inspiring a primacist understanding of world affairs

If one combines the different aspects, that is the role of intentions, and the direct/indirect pathway of impact, we can break down the different forms of ideational impact in a 2x2 matrix (Figure 2). The *direct intentional impact* refers to the intended actions (and their consequences) that China takes to shape the immediate Balkan countries' attitudes pertinent to Sino-Balkan cooperation; it is manifested in the facilitation of a somewhat (economically) liberal, pragmatic understanding of the Western Balkans' relations with China. The *indirect intentional impact* refers to the intended actions (and their consequences) that China takes to reshape the broader context in which Balkan actors operate; it is seen in the shaping of a new worldview that is attuned to the dynamics and changes in balance/power caused by the rise of China. The *direct unintentional impact* refers to the unintended consequences of China's actions and the mediated external impulses that impact the Western Balkan countries' understanding of China and their own relationship with it; it manifests itself through the politicization of the topic of China. The *indirect unintentional indirect outcome* refers to the unintended consequences of China's actions and the mediated external impulses that shape the broader context in which the Western Balkan actors operate; and it is the seen in the ignition of a 'status-quo-under-threat' kind of worldview, in which global actors are seen in a struggle for primacy and are engaged in strategic competition (Evans 2011). How these forms of ideational impact work in practice in the Western Balkans, is elaborated in the following sections.

China's Intended Ideational Impact in the Western Balkans

In the taxonomy of Chinese policymakers, the Western Balkans, framed as part of the broader CESEE region, are part of the Global South (Kowalski 2018), and therefore was to be included in the China-led South-South cooperation initiatives, treated particularly amicably and with a certain level of solidarity atypical for the relations of China with the developed Western countries (Yang 2015). In their perception, what classifies CESEE and the Western Balkans as part of the Global South is not so much their cultural or civilizational legacies, but rather the structural economic factors that make them dependent capitalist economies, according to the varieties of capitalism perspective (Nölke and Vliegenthart 2009). According to the Chinese official discourse, in the relationship with what they see as the Global South (which includes the Western Balkans), China aims to foster "sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith," treating the less developed more amicably than they treat the more developed countries (i.e. they treat CESEE, including the Western Balkans, differently than they do Western Europe) (Yang 2015).

The intentions in terms of exercising a particular ideational impact in the Western Balkans have therefore been quite modest in terms of scope, while ambitious in terms of depth. Scope-wise, being a newcomer to the region, Chinese diplomats and experts had to only convey to the Western Balkan countries the idea that China is a reliable partner, and that the vision and support for development it provides are worthwhile and feasible opportunities for cooperation. However, given that South-South cooperation also carries a particular normative load, Chinese diplomats, experts and entrepreneurs coming to the region also needed to facilitate a deep process of re-imagining the global political economy, and mainstream the vision of a dynamic and evolving multi-polar world order – very much in line with the official messaging by Beijing. Consequently, Chinese actors had the task of promoting a new geographical reading of the region and its role in the global economy, taking the Western Balkans as an intersection between the various economic corridors – both the overland "economic belt(s)" stretching through Central-East Europe and Turkey, as well as the maritime routes throughout the Wider Mediterranean. They also tried to re-frame the relative underdevelopment of the region as an untapped potential, and its status as a region still not being included as an equal part in the "West" (both formally as a non-EU region; and informally, as a region seen that has yet to fully "Westernize") as a relative flexibility. In this respect, they have achieved mixed success in exercising such an ideational impact: while they have had some success in shaping the image of China as a partner, they have not managed to fully re-shape the understanding of the global order in the region.

Direct–Intentional Impact: China as a Friend in Need

China's goal of projecting an image of itself as a reliable partner in tough times is straightforward and simple, although achieving it in practice is not the easiest of tasks for Chinese actors in the Western Balkans. A major obstacle on the way has been the distance and unfamiliarity between the two sides heading into the post-crisis world. Historically, the Western Balkans has not featured prominently in China's foreign policy. While the 1960s were a period of blossoming Sino-Albanian ties, and the late 1970s and the 1980s saw intense contact between Yugoslavia and China, during the 1990s this contact was significantly reduced. Moreover, Western Balkan policy and knowledge elites have been rather Western-centric and have devoted little resources to their relations with non-Western actors. While this unfamiliarity has granted China the benefit of the doubt, the Western-centrism has been an offsetting ideational force.

For China, the promotion of new ideas in the Western Balkans has had less to do with its particular interest in the region, but rather with the general turn in China's foreign policy posture. In the Chinese geopolitical imaginary, the Western Balkans has been associated with political unreliability as a result of the turmoil from the region's continuous instability since the 1990s.[1] Inherent problems related to low economic efficiency, corruption, and the minuscule size of the markets of the Western Balkan countries have rendered the region far from being the most optimal business partner of China. In that sense, Chinese actors had to work first on changing their own understanding of the Western Balkans as a region that offers opportunities – in light of the broader shifts in China's foreign policy discussed above (i.e. the South-South shift that peaked with the Belt and Road) – and only afterwards, pursue closer relations with it. At the same time, they had to reconcile the idea of the Western Balkans as part of the Global South with the self-understanding of the region as "Europe in the making;" and more importantly, with the economic interests of Chinese commercial actors that have been particularly attracted by the proximity, the economic integration and the market access of the Western Balkan countries to the EU (Liu 2019).

The understanding of China by the Western Balkan leaders prior to the period of China's arrival in the region (2009-2011) has also been far from enthusiastic. China has been imagined as a physically and culturally distant and backwards society, associated with cheap, low-quality and often counterfeit exports (Gjorgjioska and Vangeli 2017). However, the enthusiasm significantly increased around the time of the announcement of the special platform for China-CESEE cooperation (back then still 16+1). As this was a period when the EU and the US were still facing the immediate consequences of the global financial crisis, they had little resources and attention to devote to the Western Balkans. China's charm offensive with the Budapest and Warsaw summits of the 16+1 in 2011 and 2012 provided a sense for the Western Balkan countries that they are still relevant and part of global economic flows. Concrete proposals for cooperation and mechanisms to bankroll physical cooperation projects further facilitated the shift in attitudes in the region. At least on the official level, after the advent of the 16+1 cooperation in the period until the victory of Donald Trump in the US (2016), the interest demonstrated by China has been reciprocated with enthusiastic discourse from the Western Balkan elites. Driven by the idea that China is on its way to becoming a new regional power, then Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha in 2012 called on Albanian schools to start teaching Chinese language (Musabelliu 2020). In 2013, former Croatian president Stipe Mesić co-authored a book on China and its potential role in the Balkans and in Croatia mimicking the approach of Kissinger and other authoritative Western voices on China [this book was critically received as selective and one-sided (Đurić Mikušević 2013)]. In 2014, then Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović has lauded the "high quality" cooperation with China, the entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes the Sino-CESEE relationship, and saw China as a partner for Montenegro's economic renewal (Mina Business 2014).

This in itself constituted a significant change in thinking: while for a long time China was not considered a worthwhile option, in a short period of time it became an influential part of the decision-making calculus all over the region. In 2016, then Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Denis Zvizdić has argued that the cooperation with China helps in accentuating "the comparative and competitive advantages of the region" (FENA 2016). But more than words, deeds – such as the proliferation of joint projects in infrastructure and industrial capacities (Vangeli 2019b) – illustrate this point even

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1   This point was discussed in an interview with Chinese scholars on the history of Sino-Balkan relations during meetings in October 2014 and July 2017 in Beijing.

stronger. A string of projects – most notably highways, power plants, and restored industrial capacities – have been accompanied with enthusiastic messaging about China bringing "salvation and hope" to the region (Borić 2019). On the surface, China had succeeded in exercising its most immediate goal. This was particularly reflected in the coverage by Western policymakers, experts and media, who have developed a narrative of China taking over the Western Balkans.

Yet, there have been several caveats to this shift in thinking. In economic terms, Western Balkan countries have embraced China primarily as a source of finance and provider of know-how for the implementation of economic projects eschewed by traditional stakeholders in the region.[2] China in this sense, was not seen as the partner they have desired or chosen, but rather the only one that was available for particular undertakings. However, outside these projects, not only the strong preference for partnerships with Western actors has persisted, not least because they have re-asserted their positions in the region (Pavlićević 2019).

Second, the most significant shift in thinking has occurred within the (narrow) insiders' circles - officials and experts – that have worked on closely aligning developmental agendas and arranging joint developmental projects between the Western Balkan countries in China, but not beyond them (Vangeli 2019a). As the ones who have worked closely with China, insiders have taken part in the collective co-production of a new geoeconomic imaginary, and the re-thinking the economic perspectives of the Western Balkans in the context of China's global vision. At the official 17+1 and Belt and Road themed events there has been no shortage of enthusiasm, and talk of things such as building high-speed railways, state-of-the-art highways, restarting of rusting industrial capacities, investments in advanced technologies, and so on.[3]

It is hard to distinguish to what extent such discussions have been mere mental exercises for a select few insiders, and to what extent a harbinger of a sweeping trend. Even in Serbia, a significant outlier that has had a much more ample relationship with China compared to the other Balkan countries, the Sino-enthusiasm has been

mostly constrained to the circles of political elites and insiders in cooperation with China; moreover it has had a strong personal overtone, being associated primarily with President Aleksandar Vučić. At the same time, aside from Vučić, there have been no other Balkan leaders nor authoritative knowledge elites who have pushed similarly enthusiastic discourse towards China. While arguably the increased presence and platforms for interaction could create a potential "critical mass"[4] of a greater number of influential actors who would develop a different understanding of China (and perhaps a more sympathetic one), so far this has not taken place.

Third, the change in the thinking towards China among the Western Balkan elites, even among the most enthusiastic ones about China, has taken place within the strict boundaries of the discourse of the strategic orientation of the region towards integration into the EU (and in most cases, NATO as well). Official statements by Balkan political leaders have frequently argued that while they do welcome China, its global vision and its calls for deepening Sino-Balkan cooperation, they have always taken in account the relationship with the West and avoided jeopardizing it. In 2013 the then Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, argued that Macedonia is not aiming at positioning itself in-between China and the West, and wants cooperation with both (Kanal 5 2013). Illustratively, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, in a joint press-conference with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, has argued that he seeks an approval from the EU for every deal that Serbia makes with China (Kurir 2018).

Finally, even when enthusiasm towards China has been displayed in the Western Balkan countries, this itself has not helped fully overcome narrations that appear unsophisticated at best, and racist at worst. In other words, while Balkan actors have deferred to China's stature as a global economic power, many of them have not developed any sensitivity towards Chinese people and culture. In the most brazen example, at the occasion of welcoming Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Serbia, the then Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić has infamously quoted a poem by the obscure 19th century prophet Tarabić that said "yellow people will come from the East, they will conquer the world and will drink water from the river of Morava"

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2   Conversations with regional stakeholders in Tirana, May 2019 and with experts in Skopje, September 2020.

3   Participant observation by the author in a series of 17+1 and Belt and Road forums 2014-2018.

4   Concept discussed by a CESEE diplomat during an event in Sofia, June 2018.

(N1 Srbija 2014). Leaked audio tapes in Macedonia showed that despite the enthusiasm of the former VMRO-DPMNE elites about the now controversial highway projects financed through a tied loan of China's Ex-Im bank and implemented in partnership with Sinohydro, a significant element of racial profiling has remained when discussing China (i.e. the Minister of Transport was overheard making racially insensitive jokes in one of the leaked conversations). Prejudice towards China and the Chinese have been visible in the region during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Indirect–Intentional Impact: Changing Trajectory of the Western Balkans in the World

The policy elements of China's global vision and its emergence as a global actor are to be sought in the Belt and Road initiative and its associated mechanisms, as well as the "shadow order" (Heilmann 2008) of international institutions and mechanisms established by China. The Belt and Road is of particular significance, as it is a vision that is underpinned by a particular geoeconomic vision, as well as a set of normative principles that comprise a novel policy logic compared to existing arrangements in the region, embracing state-led development which is at the core of China's overseas initiatives, including the idea of policy rights, development responsibilities, and the acceptability of risks that diverge from some of the core policy principles of the EU (Vangeli 2018b). These have included embracing political will as overriding free market logic as a driver of economic cooperation, and special legislation that circumvents public procurement as a go-to regulatory instrument. Most notably, in a string of joint projects with a negative impact on the environment, Western Balkan policymakers seem to have internalized a trade-off between economic development and environmental sustainability, while Chinese policymakers and companies have not stood up to the standards for environmental protection (Tsimonis et al. 2019).[5] As we will see in the later sections of this paper, these practices have been increasingly challenged and already to a certain extent revised, not least as a result of the pressure of the EU and the US.

Additional ideational pillars are to be found in the rhetoric of developing a sense of a shared future of planetary scope, and working towards the construction of a community of common destiny for humanity (CCD) (Zhang 2018). Championed by Xi Jinping, the concept of constructing CCD provides a general direction for a globally responsible China to lead by example and steer the development of global affairs under a particular set of principles.[6] CCD emphasizes the interdependence between China and the rest of the world, and is often juxtaposed against the growing nationalist tendencies in the West, in particular, against the slogan "America First" promoted by former US President Donald Trump (Gardels 2018). In their relations with CESEE; the notion of CCD has been instrumental in the endeavors by Chinese actors to gradually change the international context from one of geopolitical/geoeconomic struggle, to one of rather desecuritized (Jakimów 2019), benign cooperation, and indirectly promoting a different narrative of a world in which China has an ever-more central role.

China's global vision is ultimately aimed at those that did not fare well under Western-led globalization: actors coming from developing countries, transitional economies and developed countries ravaged by crises; it is therefore understandable that ideas of corridors, belts, roads, industrialization and modernization will not be as appealing to the most advanced economies – who have already reached significant levels of development.[7] In theory, such a worldview is poised to be appealing to Balkan audiences; nevertheless, in reality there are as many obstacles to its diffusion as there are catalysts.

For one, the "New Silk Road" narratives have indeed managed to trigger the geoeconomic imagination of insiders in the cooperation with China (but also of people outside the insider circles). The idea of taking advantage of the Western Balkan's geographical position and turning its structural weaknesses into advantages has inspired many in the region. The promise of the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line connecting Budapest, Belgrade, Skopje

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5   In 2020, according to Financial Times, Chinese actors have been increasingly pursuing green development projects, which now represent the majority of all the Belt and Road investment (Shepherd 2021). But the Western Balkans seems to be an exception to this trend.

6   These principles are to be found in the discursive practices of China's top leaders; for instance, talking in front of the UN General Assembly and presenting the idea of constructing CCD for humanity, China's President Xi Jinping discussed the principles of developing international relations on equal footing, engaging in "mutual consultation and show mutual understanding," develop a global security architecture based on "fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits," promotion of open and inclusive development, boost "inter-civilization exchanges" and "build an ecosystem that puts mother nature and green development first" (Sonnad 2015).

7   However, OECD countries also note increasing connectivity and infrastructural gaps themselves.

and Athens (and even a Danube-Morava-Vardar-Aegean waterway); the promise of expanding the highway network in the region, re-industrialization, technological upgrade and other investments have helped create narratives about the geoeconomy of the region, different from anything else before. While these narratives have been to some extent reinforced by the advent of certain projects on the ground, overall, they have been primarily based on ideational considerations, and sometimes wishful thinking by Western Balkan actors. The imagination of Western Balkan actors even trumps the one of their Chinese counterparts. At one event, a Chinese expert responded to the wish lists of some Western Balkan and other CESEE interlocutors by stating that "China is not Santa Claus."[8]

Yet, local actors have envisioned a prosperous Western Balkans (under the Belt and Road) not as a product of a significant geopolitical and geoeconomic transformation, but rather as an outcome of a mere China-driven nudge of their economies (Dimitrijević 2016). Regardless of their shared interests with China, Western Balkan policymakers and experts have remained firm believers in the end of history narrative, and subscribe to the idea of belonging to the West civilizationally, and to the Global North developmentally. In other words, whereas they have embraced economic cooperation with China, they never embraced a role as part of the Global South, but rather had continuously restated their identity as a part of the North who has not quite made it there yet (but could make it with China's help, among others').[9] In fact, far more often, Western Balkan actors perceive the world through the East-West dichotomy, rather than the North-South one. For many, then, the "Eastern" overtone of the cooperation with China is a major deal breaker; they do not want to have anything to do with the "East," even when the stakes are high. A discussion with local scholars and stakeholders has led to one of them proclaiming that North Macedonia should not get involved with projects with China even if it is economically beneficial, since the country has a strong pro-Western orientation and interest in maintaining its Western

partnerships. It was proclaimed that the country should be ready to even pay a higher economic cost for staying true to its strategic orientation.[10]

The strengthening of the Western identity of the Balkans as a byproduct of the relations with China, even though it may intuitively suggest that China has been failing in the region, is paradoxically not necessarily far off from China's intentions. Chinese policymakers, while openly expressing their vision for a new world, are aware about the constraints posed by incumbent power relations, and thus sometimes express contradicting points. Therefore, it is not surprising when authoritative Chinese voices, while thinking of the Balkans in "Global South" terms, also express support for the accession to the EU of the Western Balkan countries, arguing that "China believes this will make its own investment safer;" while at the same time warning Western Balkan leaders "not [to] fall into the trap of seeing China as an alternative to the EU" (Liu 2019, 102).[11] The legacy of the Euro-optimistic thinking in China plays a particular role as well: aside from the economic interdependence between the EU and China, who comprise the largest trading relationship in the world, Chinese policymakers and experts have historically seen the process of European integration as a net positive development for the world, and to be something in accord with China's interests (Shambaugh, Sandschneider, and Zhou 2007).[12] However, this has not really had a significant impact on the worldview of the majority of Balkan actors.

Altogether, ideas of a Sino-centric world order, driven by the CCD rhetoric in ideational and the globalization of China's developmental state in material terms, have provided novelties in the debates on the role and trajectory of the Western Balkans in the global political economy. Yet, enthusiasm about closer cooperation with China did not automatically translate into enthusiasm about any significant changes on the global stage, while Chinese actors themselves have also supported this point of view. Instead, the debates on global issues have been absent

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8 Event in Budapest, July 2018.

9 During 17+1 events, official speeches made by Western Balkan and other CESEE officials always include references to the commitments to the EU and NATO (Serbia being an exception to the latter). For example, see the speech by the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić to the China – CEEC Think-Tank Symposium in Beijing 2016, who pointed out to the fact that "[Serbian] citizens have elected the European path and embraced reforms as the only way to make their economy competitive and achieve the European standard of living" (MFA Serbia 2016).

10 Event in Tetovo, October 2018.

11 After all, Chinese authoritative voices have also called China's relations with CESEE "South-South cooperation with North-South characteristics," too.

12 To a significant extent, China's support for European integration is owing to the belief that China needs united and strategically autonomous Europe as a check of the hegemony of the United States.

from Sino-Balkan dialogues, as the interactions between the two sides were always framed as pragmatic, economy-oriented and almost non-political in nature (Jakimów 2019). The lack of consideration of the global context, however, has proven to be short-sighted and one of the key blind

spots of the contemporary Sino-Balkan relationship. It is the changes on the world stage, beyond the Western Balkans, that have most shaped the region's relationship with China in the last few years.

China's Unintended Ideational Impact

Ideational impact is not always intentional, or it does not unveil itself in the intended way. As Arrighi (Arrighi 2008, 8) has long ago hypothesized, the combination of China's advance and the backtracking of the West could indeed have major consequences for the global constellation of power. These consequences could occur regardless of the intentions and desires of the Chinese leadership.

The change of posture of the CCP and the Chinese government does not happen in a vacuum, but rather against the background of a changing global landscape with an open-ended trajectory. With the growing number of problems experienced at home in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, key promoters of the hegemonic liberal democratic normative blueprint – chiefly, the US and the EU – have slowed down in terms of their efforts to promote their values abroad (and increasingly struggle to uphold their values at home) (Carothers 2015). As a consequence, the global financial crisis affected the balance not only of economic power, but also reduced the appeal of the liberal-democratic script (Womack 2017).

What stands in the way for Chinese policymakers are the unintended consequences of Chinese actions, and the reactions they inspire among others – both actors in the regions where they are present (in this case, the Western Balkans), and external stakeholders. While China has immense resources at its disposal, it still has to overcome the lack of experience, transgressive practices and behavior and the differences in culture and values which complicate the ever-increasing volume of its interactions abroad. At the same time, beyond China's actions there are numerous strategies

of contestation and adaptation proliferated among a number of actors; these efforts are increasingly transnationally coordinated (e.g. the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China). They also (re)shape the ideational structures of others. An exclusive focus on Chinese actions – even if the most refined one – thus cannot fully explain China's ideational impact.

The transnational public debates on rising China, the (re)interpretation of the global political economy in which China occupies an ever-more central role, and the inevitable challenge for actors from all over the world to adapt to the new reality are all open-ended processes. These debates, by definition, do not only concern China and "us in relation to China," but also the question of "our dispositions" and "us in relation to the West," which interweaves the debate on China with important questions pertaining to(self-identification and positioning at the national, regional and global levels (Pan 2018).

These interpretive processes can never be fully disentangled; and therefore, an objective, value-neutral framework to understand Global China (and its implications for "us") is impossible to reach. Instead, what happens is a constant deliberation, conversation, and a quest for creating a provisional inter-subjective framework for understanding a world in which China plays a significant role. The notion of such processes of negotiating the meaning of China renders the actual knowledge of China – and in particular China's intentions – ever less significant for the outcomes of the grand processes of interaction, and for the assessment of China's ideational impact. Instead, what matters is "our" discussion of China and the various factors that shape it.

Direct–Unintentional: China as a Contentious Issue

The arrival of China as an external actor in multiparty democracies makes relations with it a (potential) subject of debates and potential political divisions. The sheer size of China, coupled with its extraordinary socio-political and economic trajectory, and its global aspirations, make it a hot topic for societal actors in all countries of the world. And the discussions on China in some parts of the world in

turn affect the discussions on China in others. Thus, with its increasing visibility and presence in the Western Balkans, China has become an important issue in domestic debates in the region, while the Western Balkans has joined the global discussions on China.

The topic of (relations with) China has become gradually more significant, complicated, and contentious in the region, as interaction with it has proceeded. While in the period of establishing the new cooperation parameters with China (the early 2010s) few actors seemed to have an opinion on China, by the 2020s, the topic of China has morphed into a full blown (foreign) policy dilemma. Paradoxically, then, the less experience Balkan actors had with China, the more certain they seemed about how to proceed with it; and as they have been gaining experience in dealing with it, they have also grown more uncertain about it. Illustrative is the shift of the former Montenegrin President Đukanović from a Sino-enthusiast who oversaw the signing of the expensive Bar-Boljare railway deal, to an alarmist about China's economic influence in the Western Balkans in 2019 (Stojanović 2019). In North Macedonia, cooperation with China under the 17+1 and Belt and Road frameworks featured prominently in the electoral program of Social Democratic Union of Macedonia in 2016; however, after coming in power in 2017, one of the first moves of the party has been to halt and renegotiate ongoing projects done in cooperation with Chinese actors.

The decreasing certainty in the thinking about China is a result of the restoration of Manichean East-West dichotomies in the region, as a consequence of recent global political developments (see the section below). While regional actors initially did not interpret the arrival of China in the Western Balkans as necessarily contradicting the values and interests of the West, over time, this narrative has been gradually changing. The impact of China in this sense has been the creation of an altogether new, parallel discussion about the prospects for development of the region beyond traditional notions and partners. The rising uncertainty in the thinking on China has led to an increase in the bifocal portrayal (Pavlićević 2018) as an opportunity vs. threat, or rather a simultaneous opportunity-cum-threat.

Another unintended consequence, rooted primarily in domestic developments, is what can be termed 'politicization by association.' In principle, when going abroad, while cultivating relations with a broad range of actors (including the opposition) (Hackenesch and Bader 2020), Chinese actors have a strong preference in discussing with incumbent officials, and have a strong preference for official channels for communication. Due to this association, when the incumbents in the region are controversial, China itself becomes part of the controversy.[13] This is a particularly significant issue in cases where domestic politics are strained, and there are elements of state capture or other form of transgressive governance. Such has been the example of the relations between China and North Macedonia under the Gruevski regime (2006-2015), where a strong anti-Gruevski sentiment has also produced distrust towards China (Gjorgjioska and Vangeli 2017). Additionally, China is politicized cooperation with it is often used as a way to win domestic political support, the most recent example being the one of Serbia, where China has been central to the economy-oriented political communication strategy of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and President Vučić (Prelec 2020). By extension, China is necessarily associated with Vučić in the Serbian public discourse (Vladisavljev 2021).

The terms of discussion on China, therefore, are becoming increasingly different from what China projects. While China wants to be associated with narratives of economic progress, without many questions being asked about (geo) politics, in practice this is rarely the case. However, the emergence of China as a contentious topic in the Western Balkans is distinct from the process of the normative charge of the China debate in Western societies. In the West, there is a spirit of economic competition with China, and fear of too many linkages with China. In the Western Balkans, China is increasingly challenged from different perspectives: the fear is getting caught in a cross-fire of great power competition, and a moderate backlash by once-enthusiastic supporters who become disillusioned due to unfulfilled expectations (Turcsányi 2020). In fact, for all the discussions on the "China Model," the differences in norms and values, and the different mode of cooperation, it is worth remembering that the approach of the Western Balkan leaders to China in many ways echoed their approach to attracting other foreign direct investment. Once they have come to terms with the distinctiveness and the true weight of the partnership with China, they had to either backtrack, double down, or maneuver out of the diplomatically unfavorable situation.

At the same time, some points of convergence between trends in the West and in the Western Balkans do exist. Liberal media and liberal civil society organizations

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13   The EU and US as traditional stakeholders are also often held up to a similar standard, however their position in the region is much stronger and stabler than the position of China.

play a crucial role in the process. They act as watchdogs – following both China's footprints in the region (and addressing questions such as financial and environmental sustainability of projects carried in cooperation with China, security implications, labor relations, and so on – directly challenging the proposed pragmatic economic logic of

the cooperation), but also following the Western debates on China, drawing lessons, and working on aligning themselves with the positions of the EU/US. They find new ways to connect, and forge a common geopolitical identity in relation to the common "Other" that China resembles – which has never been the case before.

Indirect–Unintentional: Primacist Worldview

China's arrival inevitably impacts the broader context in which Balkan actors operate in ways that are unforeseen, unintended, and even take place as a 'boomerang effect.' Moreover, the most significant unintended consequences of China's actions are the ideational shifts among powerful actors in the West, who then have a significant impact on how actors in the Western Balkans think about China.

The most dramatic change as a result of the rise and pro-activity of Global China took place in the United States (US). As a result of China's new global posture, under President Donald J. Trump, China was put front and center in America's national security strategy. All aspects of US-China relations, including both commercial and people-to-people ties are seen as belonging in the domain of national security (Rosen 2018). As part of this foreign policy shift, American diplomats in the last few years have urged their partners from abroad, including the Western Balkans, to be more vigilant about China (Kuhn 2020).

Europeans, while adopting a slightly meeker approach, have also been adjusting to a world in which China plays an ever more central role. After a long period of cooperation-cum-competition and co-evolution (Austermann, Vangeli, and Wang 2013), as a result of the shift in the dynamics of the EU-China relationship, the EU now defines China simultaneously as a partner in policy areas where there is agreement (e.g. climate), an economic competitor and a systemic rival – and often paradoxically juggles the three epithets simultaneously and interchangeably (Bütikofer 2020). Economic relations are a subject of securitization (Rogelja and Tsimonis 2020), and investment – as a result of the surge of Chinese capital in Europe – is now subject to protective regulation (Duchâtel 2020), while China's strategy to become global innovation leader has prompted pan-European debates for new industrial policies (*The Economist* 2019). In light of China's pro-activity, national debates on China undergo deep transformation (Esteban and Otero Iglesias 2020). Developments in the United

Kingdom (UK) (Warrell 2020), and Australia have followed a similar pattern (Kassam 2020).

These developments have dramatically changed the ideational context in which Balkans-China relations develop as well. At the moment of its arrival in the Western Balkans (late 2000s), China still had a rather cooperative relationship with the West, and in particular with the EU, despite Europeans' concerns. China has for a long time contemplated tripartite cooperation (China-EU-Balkans). Initially, a number of people in the Western Balkans picked up interest in China and in exploring possibilities for cooperation with China in order to "Westernize" themselves: up until the 2010s, having a prolific relationship with China was a sign of being a successful participant in globalization. Some policymakers and intellectuals picked up an interest in China by reading Anglophone works such as Kissinger's "On China."[14] The new possibilities for interaction with China were really seen as an opportunity to catch up with the rest of Europe, which had built substantial relations with China ever since the 1970s. However, with the ideational shift in Europe and the US in recent years, such thinking has diminished. Even more so, the EU has problematized Balkan-China relations and reframed its agenda so as to respond to China's initiatives (Pavlićević 2019). A similar, but much more resolute transformation was seen in the attitude of the US, which has taken the Western Balkans as one of the venues in which its global efforts to contain the advance of China take place.

This in turn has had a significant impact on how Balkan actors have been rethinking the role of China in the region, as well as their own relationships with China. While the prospects of economic cooperation and the promise of geoeconomic vision still retain significant attractiveness, the actions of China are increasingly interpreted through the lens of zero-sum competition among the major powers. China is increasingly seen with cautiousness, economic cooperation is increasingly seen as a politically sensitive

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14   Interview in Belgrade, April 2018.

and even a security issue, and what has begun as an exercise in diversifying the Western Balkan countries' global partnerships is increasingly seen a risky endeavor that may be at odds with the EU reform agenda (Markovic Khaze and Wang 2020).

This new reality, in some ways, benefits the Western Balkans actors. While for many of them getting sucked into great power competition is an undesirable scenario, it still offers opportunities. For one, the relationship with China can be framed as helping in the attainment of the pro-Western agenda, e.g. in terms of economically catching up with the rest of Europe (even if this may sound awkward to Westerners), but even more significantly, it can be used as a point to attract the attention of Western actors. As the then Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov had put it, China has been filling up the void left behind by the West (Foster 2017). Similar point has been argued by the then President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, who has called on the EU not to leave the region dependent on China (and Russia) (Stojanović 2019). To some extent, this strategy may have already had an effect - in response to China, the EU has reasserted itself in the region (Pavlićević 2019), and so has the US too.

Concluding Remarks

In general terms, we can distill the findings from this paper into the following four points:

(i) in the period 2009-2019 China has exercised a direct intentional impact and has managed to affect the way Western Balkan elites think of China, but not to the extent Chinese actors originally desired;

(ii) the new geoeconomic vision of China has been acknowledged in the region, but embraced selectively – Western Balkan actors have welcomed the idea of regional prosperity under a Belt and Road framework, but without buying the idea of broader global transformations;

(iii) contrary to China's desire not to get involved in domestic political debates and its desecuritization efforts, it has become an increasingly politicized topic; and

(iv) contrary to China's intention to promote a benign vision of the world based on cooperation, as a result of the tensions between the US and China, Western Balkan actors increasingly subscribe to (and instrumentalize) a primacist, zero-sum vision of global politics.

These findings are displayed in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Outcomes of China's ideational impact in the region

	Intentional	Unintentional
Direct	Accepting Chinese initiatives as a Plan B	Politicization of China as both an opportunity and a threat; emergence of China as a domestically contentious topic
Indirect	Acknowledging but not fully internalizing China's view of the world; accepting Chinese visions for the region	Reinforcing the understanding of a Western-centric world under threat

As previous research has shown, within knowledge networks of dense and regular interaction, where a certain level of intersubjectivity has been established, notable elements of China's ideational impact can be observed. Taking a broader look at Balkan societies, this paper however confirms that this impact slowly dissipates the further one moves from those networks. At the same time, whatever snapshots have been taken at different points in time, Sino-Balkan relations today become ever more convoluted, thereby making the question of ideational impact highly complex. The reasons for this are manifold – and they are to be found both at the micro and macro levels – or rather the interaction between the dispositions and interests of regional actors, and the dynamics in global politics and the global economy.

Moreover, while the debate on China in the region is still in its nascent stages, we can identify a key contradiction that is shaping the attitude of Western Balkan actors, which also permeates throughout the analysis presented here. It stems from the belief (or rather desire) that growing Sino-Balkan economic cooperation can be achieved without causing

any significant disturbances in the geopolitical status quo. Conversely, the most significant ideational non-impact among Western Balkan elites has been the misrecognition of the point that the rise of China and its ability to become an economic actor in the region is a result of a disturbance of the status quo to begin with. While cooperation with China may have once appeared as a shortcut to success, it is therefore increasingly becoming a risky strategy for local actors. Some are ready to embrace the risk, while others look for ways to avoid it.

While this analysis focused on developments in the period 2009-2019, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has even further advanced the zero-sum global power constellation and increased anxieties about the future of the Western Balkans (Latal 2020), and about the trajectory of the planet as a whole. China has become an ever more sensitive topic. Yet, recent developments suggest that this trend may take on a new direction. On one hand, the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the European Union and China at the end of 2020 and the launch of the EU-China High-level Environment

and Climate Dialogue point out to potentially significant changes in the Brussels-Beijing relationship; or at least at the return of constructive diplomacy. On the other hand, even though Chinese authoritative sources have greeted the inauguration of the incoming US President Joe Biden (Wang 2021), Biden himself has embraced a tough line on China which is in some ways more explicit than the one pursued by his predecessor Donald Trump (Churchill 2021). Given how much such developments matter for China's indirect impact on the Western Balkans, it is to be expected that in the coming period the thinking on China in the region will be further shaped by these trends in the West. Should the positions of the EU and US on China significantly diverge, eventually, Western Balkan leaders may eventually be faced with a choice not whether they embrace a "pro-Western" or "pro-Chinese" attitude, but rather whether they embrace a "pro-European" or "pro-American" stance on China. Should such a scenario take place, it may resemble a curious twist in how China has been challenging and (re) shaping the thinking of actors in the region in ways never before anticipated.

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Part II
Domestic Cleavages and External Actors' Involvement – An Active or Passive Role?

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
BIH'S DECISIVE ELECTORAL REFORM STRIKES NEW DIVISIONS
AMONG INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACTORS

SREĆKO LATAL

4. BiH's Decisive Electoral Reform Strikes New Divisions Among Internal and External Actors

Srećko Latal

Executive Summary

The deepening political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose extent was revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 local elections has revived public interest in country's electoral reform. After avoiding and delaying reforms of its defunct electoral system for years, Bosnia Herzegovina's leaders are now forced to deal with this issue amidst the multidimensional health, political and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reform of BiH's election system is one of country's biggest challenges since the Dayton Agreement as it opens critical questions about relations amongst its three constitutive peoples and the very nature of the BiH political system. The importance and complexity of the debate on the reform draws also regional and international attention, especially from neighbouring Croatia and Serbia or the EU, US and Russia. Positions of key local actors on eventual electoral reform range widely, and take various, often opposite directions.

This paper analyses the different positions and strategies of key actors on the eventual electoral reform of BiH's defunct and corrupt electoral system and outlines its local, regional and international context. It focuses primarily on key internal and external actors, which are engaged in negotiations. Given the state of almost complete political deadlock as well as mistrust among local leaders, the outcome of this reform is likely going to be determined by external influences.

The analysis shows that the different positions reflect divergent views, which Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Serb parties have on BiH's past, present and future. If successful, the reform would not only fix the country's election system, but also patch-up the Washington Agreement and relations between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat leaders, which is critical for the survival of BiH.

It further argues that given the depth of local political deadlock, the outcome of this reform will once again end up depending on the engagement of the US and EU, as well as other foreign influences. The renewed attention, which Washington and EU capitals have recently been paying to the Balkans looks encouraging. Nevertheless, if the West wants to achieve a breakthrough in BiH after 15 years of failed reform attempts, it will finally have to put its money where its mouth is, and find a different approach to addressing BiH's problems.

Any Western efforts will be facing opposition not only from local but from regional and other international actors. One of the key roles in BiH's unfolding electoral reform will be played by Croatia, which has already thrown all of its political and diplomatic muscle behind Bosnian Croat leadership and is determined to make sure that in future Bosnian Croat officials are elected by what they see as "legitimate" Bosnian Croat voters. In its efforts, Croatia may find unlikely allies in Serbia and Russia, since Zagreb, Belgrade and Moscow want to keep BiH's political system highly decentralized and ethnically-based.

The upcoming reform is caught in a legal and political quandary. On the one hand six rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, ECHR, require from BiH legislators to remove ethnic discrimination from BiH Constitution. On the other hand, BiH Constitutional Court in its 2016 ruling calls upon them to change the election law to ensure that political representatives of one constituent people are not elected by other ethnic groups.

Finding a proper balance between these two almost opposing poles, as well as among different ethnic, political and technical solutions for BiH electoral reform within such a difficult environment and limited timeframe will be exceptionally hard. Yet failure should not be an option, as it would risk the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina and by proxy the stability of the Balkans and the whole of Europe.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the full extent of the dysfunctionality of BiH's political, administrative, and judicial systems, as well as its public services. Nevertheless, BiH's political crisis deepened even further towards the end of 2020, before, during and after the country's local elections. In addition to increased nationalist and populist rhetoric – a traditional part of BiH election customs – the elections brought with them numerous claims of election fraud, most of which the BiH Court rejected.

The extent of election manipulation witnessed in the 2020 local elections, and the failure of the BiH prosecution and judiciary to address it, has convinced local and international officials and experts that thorough electoral reform can no longer be avoided. Some of the officials stressed that holding any further elections in BiH is "pointless" since the current system does not reflect voters' opinions anymore. The holding of future elections was further put into question by Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb leaders, who warned that their parties would boycott and/or block the upcoming 2022 general elections unless the electoral system is fixed by then. Sources close to these parties stress that these warnings should be taken seriously, and that blocked elections could push BiH into anarchy.

These and similar statements, the deepening political crisis, as well as the recent 25th anniversary of the BiH Dayton peace agreement, have as of late revived public interest in electoral reform, both in BiH and abroad. The complexity of this reform is validated by the fact that over the last 15 years, at least five different reform attempts have failed, despite the strong and concrete engagement of the US and the EU. Finding a compromise is even more difficult in light of the fact that all key internal and external factors have divergent agendas, interests, as well as perceptions of the scope and direction of electoral reform.

This paper analyses the widely ranging positions of key actors on the eventual electoral reform and aims to outline the local, regional and international context of the upcoming reform of BiH's defunct and corrupt electoral system. It does not put so much attention to internal, legal, or technical aspects of electoral reform, since most of these issues have been debated and different options and

scenarios have been formulated during previous electoral reform attempts over the past 15 years, and upcoming negotiations will most likely rely on some of these already-existing drafts.

Instead, this paper focuses primarily on key internal and external actors, which are and will be engaged in negotiations. Given the state of almost complete political deadlock, as well as mistrust among local leaders in BiH, the outcome of this reform is likely going to be determined by these external influences.

The paper also takes a deeper look into the roots of BiH's structural and political crises, especially the fate of the alliance between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat political parties, which was established by the 1994 Washington Agreement. This alliance, which was once considered key to the subsequent Dayton peace agreement, now lies broken in pieces, destroyed by the short-sighted politics of Bosniak and Bosnian Croat ruling and opposition parties alike. Amidst past warnings from Western officials and the deepening local crisis, this paper raises the question whether BiH can survive – at least in its current form – without an urgent revival of the Washington Agreement.

Another question that will determine the outcome of BiH's electoral reform – and the future of the country itself – is the one about the nature of BiH and its electoral, political and administrative systems, and whether it should remain set along ethnic lines, or if it would be better to evolve towards more civic-based models.[1] A parallel question on this very issue is whether BiH society at present really offers a choice between ethnic and civic models, or whether this debate is also being used as part of a local all-out political war.

The paper first shows how 2020 local elections and COVID-19 exposed the depth of BiH's dysfunctionality. In order to provide better insight into the positions, interests and strategies of different internal and external actors in the upcoming electoral reform, as well as possible obstacles and windows of opportunity that will be encountered along the way, it then provides a chronological overview of a series of similar reforms, which were attempted but have failed since 2006. The main analytical part outlines positions

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1   In this particular case, civic election model(s) refer to those based on one person – one vote system without any ethnic electoral quota, preferred by Bosniak parties and strongly rejected by Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb ones, which see it as a critical violation of the Dayton peace accord and a way for the domination of more numerous Bosniaks.

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and strategies of relevant local, regional and global actors involved in the electoral reform debate. It first analyses the positions of Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb political parties, then looks at the situation in Croatia and Serbia and finally examines also the stance and potential role of the US, the EU and Russia.

COVID–19 and 2020 Local Elections Reveal the Depth of the BiH Crisis

COVID–19 exposes BiH's dysfunctionality

The outbreak of COVID-19 has revealed the full depth of the BiH crisis, which has bankrupted country's administrative, political and judicial systems, as well as its public services. Instead of coordinating their emergency efforts, BiH's numerous administrative units[2] have established different health and security measures and regulations, creating further confusion, frustrations and concerns among the population. The public health system across the country effectively collapsed, with hospitals establishing different regulations for those infected with COVID-19, while almost completely abandoning all other patients.[3]

Meanwhile, BiH politicians intensified their populist and nationalist rhetoric, completely blocking the political and decision-making system. The depth and seriousness of the deadlock was reflected in the fact that the ruling parties at the state level were unable to agree over the division of emergency COVID-19 funds provided by the IMF more for than three months after the funds were approved.[4]

The all-out political war, which the country has witnessed in recent years has collapsed all functioning ruling coalitions on almost all administrative levels. Meanwhile, the main parties in the BiH Federation – the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action, SDA, and the Croat Democratic Union, HDZ – did not even try to implement the results of the 2018 general elections and establish a new Federation government. Instead, the outgoing Federal government of Fadil Novalić continued hobbling along in a caretaker

mandate, without a stable ruling majority and facing several criminal investigations.[5] Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, local media revealed numerous corruption scandals where governments circumvented regular procedures and engaged inappropriate companies for procurement of critical medical equipment, yet none of those scandals led to any verdicts.

BiH administration at the state and entities' level failed to establish any coherent programs to assist local companies and their workers in facing the consequences of the economic slowdown caused by COVID-19. As a result, more than 30,000 people lost their jobs only in the first two months of the pandemic.[6] Although BiH statistical agencies showed a slow-down in this trend in subsequent months, experts warned this data was just the tip of the iceberg, since most companies that were forced to close down and lay off workers due to COVID-19 were from the gray or black economy, which usually passes unnoticed by official statistics.[7]

The dysfunctionality of local governments was confirmed once again in early 2021, when BiH remained one of the last countries in the world to get hold of COVID-19 vaccines. BiH authorities originally opted to order vaccines through the EU-supported COVAX facility, but were still empty-handed as of early March due to delays in that system. Facing growing pressure from the population, BiH's different administrative units meanwhile tried to

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2   BiH has three administrative levels: the state level with the tripartite Presidency, the Council of Ministers and a bicameral Parliament; it also has two entities – BiH Federation and Republika Srpska – with presidents, governments and bicameral parliaments; the Brcko district also has its own government. The BiH Federation is further divided in ten cantons, each with its own government and assembly. The country also has 142 municipalities – 79 in the BiH Federation and 63 in Republika Srpska – each of the 24 official cities has a government and council. Altogether, the country has 143 ministers, 615 legislators, 80 courts and 20 prosecutors' offices. For more details see the Al Jazeera report from November 22, 2020.

3   "Who should be blamed for the collapse of the health system," Žurnal.ba, October 28, 2020.

4   "BiH received IMF loan but politicians cannot agree how to divide it," Direktno.ba, July 20, 2020.

5   "The respirators' scandal: BiH Federation Premier will be handed over to BiH prosecution," Radio Free Europe, May 29, 2020.

6   "BiH workers lose jobs and rights due to Coronavirus," Deutsche Welle, April 20, 2020.

7   Interview with a senior international official, December 2020

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launch their own individual procedures to acquire whatever vaccines they could get hold of. The RS entity proved to be most successful in these efforts, once again thanks to its government's links with Russia, which provided Republika Srpska with the first batch of SputnikV jabs on February 1.[8] The Bosnian Serb member of the BiH Presidency and the undisputed leader of the ruling Bosnian Serb party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, SNSD, Milorad Dodik, offered to assist BiH's other entity, the BiH Federation, with acquiring these vaccines, but his offer was rudely rejected by the ruling Bosniak SDA party.[9] Regardless of the growing public demands on BiH authorities to obtain vaccines, Dodik's SNSD party in BiH House of Peoples on March 2 blocked proposed changes of the legislation that would speed up this process, on the grounds that it would transfer some of the entities' powers to the state level.

Throughout this period, BiH authorities struggled to cope with the looming humanitarian crisis, which thousands of foreign migrants were facing in the middle of the Balkans' harsh winter. In 2020, BiH's Service for Foreigners' agency registered a drop in the number of migrants transiting through the country on their way to the EU, mainly due to global travel restrictions caused by COVID-19.[10] Yet the International Organization for Migrations (IOM) reported that reduced capacity for the accommodation of migrants – which was cut from 8,282 to 4,760 beds in the last quarter of 2020 – forced some 2,500 migrants to live in squats in forests and abandoned buildings, despite freezing temperatures.[11] EU and IOM officials blamed this situation on inefficient and disorganized local officials, while local officials criticized the EU and IOM[12] for mishandling this crisis and dropping it on BiH. Local authorities stressed that most of the EU funds earmarked for the migrant crisis in BiH have been paid directly to IOM, adding that the EU has allowed Bosniak territories – especially the Bihać region in the north-west – to bear the brunt of this crisis, while Bosnian Croat and Serb officials have refused to accommodate a single migrant.

Future elections made pointless without electoral reform

The BiH political crisis deepened even further before, during and immediately after the country's local elections, which were held across the country on November 15 and in the city of Mostar on December 20. In addition to increased nationalist and populist rhetoric – a traditional part of BiH pre- and post-election customs – the elections were tainted by numerous claims of election fraud, most of which the BiH Court rejected. Due to clear evidence of widespread electoral fraud and other violations of election regulations, BiH's Central Election Commission, CIK, moved to organize new elections in several voting centres in the cities of Doboj and Srebrenica, as well as in Travnik, where the two top candidates for the position of city mayor both died of COVID-19. However, the BiH Court rejected requests for new elections in the city of Mostar, despite ample evidence of election manipulations. This provoked strong protests, especially from Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb politicians who complained that the BiH Court as well as CIK are under political control of Bosniak parties.[13] On the other hand Bosniak parties boycotted repeated elections in Srebrenica, claiming that CIK has failed to root out all electoral manipulations organized by Bosnian Serb parties.

While electoral fraud was considered a problem in BiH's election system for years, the extent of election manipulation witnessed in the 2020 local elections, and the failure of the BiH prosecution and judiciary to address it, reinforced opinions of local and international officials and experts that thorough electoral reform was necessary.

"It is pointless to have any further elections in BiH without a proper reform of the election system. The current system does not reflect voters' opinions anymore," a senior BiH official said.[14]

8   "The first contingent of Sputnik vaccines for RS arrives to Sarajevo," N1, February 1, 2021.

9   "SDA: Dodik's offer to help us acquiring vaccines is hypocritical," Radio Sarajevo, February 2, 2021.

10   The agency registered a total of 16,190 migrants who applied for asylum in BiH during 2020 (Al Jazeera report, February 2, 2021). However, aid workers say that the real number of migrants was significantly higher – possibly even over 20,000 – since not all of the migrants have applied for the asylum.

11   IOM report, January 23-28, 2021.

12   "What are the real reasons behind Bosnia's migrant crisis?," Euronews, January 20, 2021.

13   "Dušanka Majkić desperate after the BiH Court decision," Slobodna Bosna, January 5, 2021.

14   Interview with a senior BiH official, January 2021.

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The leaders of the main Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb parties, HDZ's Dragan Čović and SNSD's Milorad Dodik, upped the ante even further at the end of 2020, when they warned that their parties would boycott or even block the upcoming 2022 general elections unless the election system is fixed by then.[15]

These and similar statements stirred by local elections, as well as the recent 25th anniversary of the BiH Dayton peace agreement, have as of late revived public interest in electoral reform, both in BiH and abroad. However, none of the main political parties has so far come up with any concrete proposals. After months of growing expectations, Čović has recently informed a group of Bosnian Croat parties gathered in the Croat National Assembly (HNS[16]) that his HDZ party would publicly reveal their proposal for electoral system reform by early March.[17] Subsequently, HDZ and SDA delegations led by Čović and Izetbegović met on February 23, and agreed to form three inter-party working groups. The three groups should offer solutions for outstanding political problems in the BiH Federation by the end of March; a proposal for electoral reform by the end of April; and ideas on speeding up progress on the country's EU path in the next few months.

Yet it is unclear whether the eventual joint HDZ-SDA proposal will include "only" amendments to the BiH election law, or if it will also address the flaws of the BiH Constitution as outlined in the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).[18] In fact, the scope, depth and direction of BiH's electoral reform represents one of the main points of divergence among all key internal and external actors, since the reform can be done in many different ways, and go in different directions.

Some (especially Bosniak and US) experts and officials have been in the past maintaining a maximalist approach, calling for thorough structural reform that would include serious changes of both constitutional and electoral law, and would hopefully enable the evolution of BiH elections more towards civic models, as suggested by the ECHR rulings. Some pundits warn that such an undertaking would require much time and effort, which BiH currently does not have, since any reform would have to be finished by this summer, or the end of the year at latest, before the start of pre-election campaigns ahead of the 2022 ballot.

On the other hand, Bosnian Croat and Serb leaders maintain rather minimalist approaches. Enjoying full support from Zagreb, Belgrade and Moscow, they insist on maintaining BiH's ethnic voting models and making only minimal changes in line with the ruling of the BiH Constitutional Court on the appeal by Božo Ljubić,[19] which should in their view block Bosniaks from electing representatives of other ethnic groups.

Complexity of this reform is reflected in the fact that BiH decision-makers have failed to agree on this issue for the past 25 years, despite several serious attempts led by the US and EU, at times when they were much more present and influential in the country than today.

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15   "Dodik reveals Čović's secret plan," Republika, November 1, 2020.

16   Croatian National Assembly (HNS) is an ad-hoc body gathering most but not all of the Bosnian Croat political parties, which was established in 2000 by the leadership of the HDZ party. The official reason behind its formation was better protection of Croat interests in BiH through the establishment of a common political bloc that could stand against the more numerous Bosniak or Bosnian Serb parties. Maybe an even more important reason was to pre-empt any serious opposition to HDZ. For the same reasons, Čović, who was elected HDZ president in 2005, revived this body in 2010 and used it more and more in subsequent years.

17   Interview with a senior Bosnian Croat official in Mostar, January 2021

18   Since its first such decision in December 2009 in the case Sejdić-Finci Vs. Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ECHR has issued a total of six rulings (Sejdić and Finci, Zornić, Šlaku, Pilav, Pudarić and Baralija) which identify different flaws in the BiH Constitution, which discriminate against citizens of BiH, preventing them from actively participating in the election process due to their ethnic background and/or place of residence. For details see the ECHR rulings.

19   In its ruling from December 1, 2016, BiH Constitutional Court partially accepted the appeal filed by Bosnian Croat politician Božo Ljubić, declaring that election of representatives of one constituent people by other ethnic groups is unconstitutional. The Court also ordered BiH Parliament to adjust the election law, but the Parliament failed to do so. For details see the court ruling in the case U-23/14.

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Chronology of BiH's Failed Electoral Reforms

A full 25 years after the Dayton accord, most local, regional and international actors disagree over what went wrong with the Dayton Agreement, why, and what should be done about it. An overview of the Dayton Agreement, its subsequent evolution and disintegration, as well as roles that various actors played in the process, may offer some insight into what could be done to promote future reform(s).

BiH: a post–war success story

BiH's Dayton Agreement was made possible by another, today almost forgotten but equally important Western peace plan for BiH – **the Washington agreement**. This agreement was signed under US auspices in Washington DC in March 1994, by Bosnian Premier Haris Silajdžić, Croatian Foreign Minister Mate Granić, and President of Herzeg-Bosnia[20] Krešimir Zubak. It stopped the war within a war between the predominately Bosniak BiH Army and joint Bosnian Croat and Croatian forces, and established the BiH Federation, which combined territories controlled by the Bosnian government and Herceg-Bosna.

The Washington agreement created a tense but effective truce between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat forces, which started turning the tide in the BiH war as both the BiH Army and HVO were able to focus once again on their common enemy – Bosnian Serb forces. This eventually paved the way for the so-called the **Split agreement**, which was signed by Bosnian and Croatian Presidents Alija Izetbegović and Franjo Tudjman, Bosnian Premier Silajdžić and Herceg-Bosna President Zubak in the Croatian port town on July 22, 1995, under the auspices of Turkish President Süleyman Demirel. The Split declaration was a political and military agreement, which established a confederation between Croatia and the BiH Federation[21] and called on the Croatian Army to intervene militarily in BiH.

It enabled a large-scale deployment of the Croatian Army in BiH, whose close cooperation with the BiH Army soon led to the lifting of the siege of Bihać, the capture of the Croatian southern town of Knin, which had been under Serb control since 1991, and other strategic positions in the region during that summer. The Washington and subsequent Split agreements proved to be turning points in the military conflicts in BiH and Croatia. They came as a result of the realization by the US administration that a rapprochement between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats and their political and military cooperation was of critical importance for eventual establishment of peace in BiH, both as "an example of ethnic reconciliation" in the country, as well as "a stabilizing balance of power vis-à-vis the Serbs."[22]

The Washington agreement, the renewed alliance between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, and the NATO bombing campaign against Bosnian Serb military positions in the summer of 1995 paved the way for the **Dayton Agreement.**

The peace agreement ended the country's three and a half year war, established its new constitution, and outlined key aspects of the international community's military and civilian role in ensuring its implementation. The Dayton Agreement established the Office of the High Representative, OHR, which was in charge of overseeing the civilian implementation of the agreement. Operating with approval from the UN Security Council and empowered with a peacekeeping mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, NATO established a peacekeeping force, initially deploying over 60,000 troops to oversee the separation of the warring sides' military forces and their gradual disarmament.

However, from the very beginning, the civilian implementation of the Dayton Agreement was blocked by some of country's ethnic wartime leaders, who were allowed to remain in power immediately after the war. This situation forced the international community to engage much more

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20 At the beginning of the BiH war in April 1992, Bosniak and Bosniak Croat forces stood jointly against much stronger Bosnian Serb forces, which were reinforced by what was left of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), as well as paramilitary units from Serbia and Montenegro. Yet as of October 1992, they turned against each other and fought a bitter war within a war, as the Bosnian Croat Defence Council (HVO) – supported by Croatian government and the Croatian Army (HV) established the autonomous entity of Herceg-Bosna in Croat-dominated territories in southern, central and parts of northern BiH.

21 Despite this agreement, the idea of political confederation between Croatia and BiH Federation never took flight.

22 "Bosnian Muslim-Croat Federation: Key to Peace in Bosnia?," Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, June 26, 1998.

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pro-actively in the implementation of the agreement. Since 1997, SFOR used its mandate to arrest persons indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Around the same time, countries involved in the ad-hoc group charged with overseeing implementation of the peace process, the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), reinforced the mandate of the High Representative to allow him to use his executive powers to prevent a blockade of the civilian implementation of the peace agreement by either imposing decisions or removing local officials from their posts.

In subsequent years, the international community provided tens of thousands of foreign peacekeepers to oversee peaceful implementation of the peace deal. The US and the EU, together with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other donor countries and international organizations also provided more than 5 billion US dollars for the immediate reconstruction of the war-devastated country. By 2000, BiH infrastructure was

rebuilt to nearly pre-war levels, while its internal structures, legislation and services were revamped.

The next big change came in 2002, when the then High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, imposed amendments to the constitutions of both entities to put them in line with the 2000 BiH Constitutional Court ruling.[23] Until then, Bosniak and Bosnian Croat parties in the BiH Federation government operated on the basis of full parity. Another breakthrough came at the end of 2005, when BiH leaders agreed to reform the country's defence sector, which the original Dayton Agreement entrusted to the two entities. By merging the entities' military forces and ministries, the state level defence ministry and joint BiH armed forces were established in December 2005. With all these developments, Bosnia and Herzegovina was by 2006 generally considered one of the few post-war success stories in the world, although by that time it was effectively operating as an international protectorate.

Origins of Dayton's disintegration

Questions about what went wrong, when, and who was to be blamed are still fervently debated among diplomats and experts, yet despite thousands of analyses and policy papers, they are still a source of controversy. In addition to blaming each other, most local and regional actors most often blame the downfall of Dayton on Western interventionism, yet they remain deeply divided over whether the US and EU have done too much, or too little, and whether the US has pulled out from BiH too early or too late. International actors follow a similar pattern – they all pin the responsibility for BiH's renewed crisis on local leaders, as well as on each other. Different schools of thought are additionally divided between those who believe that the main reason for Dayton's downfall was its complexity and vagueness, while others blame it on its often flawed and inconsistent implementation. As is often the case, the truth is somewhere in between all these different opinions.

There is no question that the main responsibility for BiH's renewed crisis lies with its local actors, mainly politicians,

but also intellectuals and media, who failed to grasp the historic opportunity provided by the Dayton Agreement and cleanse their own ranks from corrupt, populist and nationalist ideas and practices. Yet in hindsight it is clear that equal responsibility for Dayton's demise lies with those who were in charge of its design and implementation – the international community and especially the OHR. Instead of nurturing the growth of local democracies under international tutelage, they often sought shortcuts to democracy, experimented with solutions, applied double standards and in general tinkered with the local political scene. In the process, the OHR lost its initial position of unbiased arbiter and became an actor on its own. Very often, especially during the mandate of the late High Representative Paddy Ashdown, the OHR pressed for reforms that were too far outside of the original Dayton Agreement, such as attempted centralization of police forces, which failed by 2005. OHR ignored Western experts who warned that OHR's "rule by decree"[24] not only confused the local political scene by constantly "moving the goalposts" but also robbed BiH of the opportunity to

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23 Acting upon an appeal filed in 1998 by the late Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegović, who claimed that Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats were discriminated against in Republika Srpska, and Bosnian Serbs in the BiH Federation, BiH Constitutional Court in 2000 made an historic ruling requiring the two entities to amend their constitutions to ensure the full equality of the country's three "constituent peoples" throughout its territory. After local leaders failed to reach an agreement on this issue, Petritsch imposed what was at the time considered a compromise solution.

24 "Travails of the European Raj," European Stability Initiative paper, July 3, 2003. In the paper authors stated: *"The OHR has been allowed to evolve into a latter-day version of the Utilitarians' "vigourous despot," assuming ever wider responsibilities in the name of preparing society for self-governance."*

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develop its own authentic democratic culture and practices. By doing so, from once being the solution to BiH problems, the OHR itself had itself become a part of the problem.

April package:
One could argue that Dayton's downfall started in April 2006, when the BiH House of Representatives rejected the so-called April package of constitutional changes. This constitutional reform was prepared through a long and careful consultation process led by the US diplomat and former deputy High Representative Donald Hays, and was strongly supported by the US administration. The US envisaged this reform package as its exit strategy: it was supposed to cement the progress which BiH had achieved in previous years, thus enabling America to disengage from active participation in Bosnia's daily politics.

The package envisaged the BiH Parliament electing one president and two deputies, one for each constituent people, who were supposed to rotate every 16 months, with much more ceremonial roles than the current presidency; it strengthened the mandate of the Council of Ministers and its Chairman; it created state ministries for agriculture, technology and the environment; it established a new category of shared competences between the State and entities in the areas of taxation, justice and electoral affairs; it included the "EU clause" that would have allowed the State level to assume necessary competences from the entities; it provided for an enlargement Parliament, etc.

At that time, many local politicians and experts saw the April package as a mere cosmetic change and called for even bigger modifications, hoping that it would make the country more centralized and efficient. On these grounds, but even more so as a part of their pre-election campaign, the reform was torpedoed in the House of Representatives by Bosniak and Bosnian Croat opposition parties – Party for BiH of Haris Silajdžić (SZBiH), and Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ1990). Today, however, most experts fear that most of the proposals from the April package are far outside of BiH's reach, which only shows how much has BiH devolved in the last 15 years.

Despite the failure of the April package, the US administration gradually disengaged from Bosnia's daily politics and transferred the responsibility for BiH's

safekeeping to Brussels. The idea was that in BiH, like in the rest of the Balkans, the EU accession process would gradually ensure key reforms, thus cementing the progress achieved by then. Yet the EU proved to be unwilling and/or unable to establish itself as a strong political actor in the Balkans, while the EU's enlargement perspective proved to be too far-off, vague and unrealistic to inspire true reforms in the region. The EU and US's withering presence in the Balkans created a power vacuum, in which local leaders gradually abandoned reforms, while other foreign actors – China, Russia, Turkey and other Islamic countries – strengthened their influences.

Prud agreement:
Local leaders – the president of the SDA at that time, Sulejman Tihić, as well as Dodik and Čović – tried to make their own deal, outside of any Western-mediated negotiations. On 8 November 2008 they met in the small village of Prud, close to Tihić's home town of Bosanski Šamac, after which they announced a historic compromise that took everyone by surprise. The so-called "Prud agreement" included long-reaching reforms related to state property, the census, reconstruction of the Council of Ministers, resolving the legal status of the Brčko District, and other constitutional changes.[25]

Čović, Dodik and Tihić have met three more times to clarify outstanding issues and fill in the gaps in their original agreement. Local officials close to this process said the breakthrough was enabled mainly thanks to Tihić, who was able to ignore and neutralize Čović's populist and Dodik's nationalist politics. However, by mid-2009, this process effectively died under strong pressure from opposition parties. Much of the criticism came from the Bosniak ethno-political bloc, as opposition parties and SDA conservatives alike attacked Tihić and blamed him for betraying their national interests.[26]

Butmir package:
EU and US officials made another attempt at reform in 2009, when they tried to persuade local leaders to accept the so-called Butmir package, which was essentially a repackaged and slightly toned-down April package. Yet by that time, BiH's renewed political crisis has already spoiled personal and political relations within and among the three ethno-political blocs. As US diplomats moved to prepare

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25   For further details on the Prud agreement see ICG report "Bosnia's Incomplete Transition: Between Dayton and Europe," March 9, 2009.

26   Interviews with local politicians, 2008-2010.

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the ground for negotiations, they were informed by more or less all key local political actors that the moment for compromise has passed and that there was no willingness for a new agreement.[27] Nevertheless, the US and EU still decided to launch the initiative. Among other issues, this move was prompted by the long-expected decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which in December 2009 found the BiH Constitution in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights,[28] and called for changes to it in the election of the BiH Presidency and House of Peoples. However, by April 2010 the so-called Butmir process was effectively dead, killed by the all-out political war inspired by the approaching general elections that were scheduled for October of that year.[29]

This was also the time when the fragile political alliance between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat politicians started falling apart, a scenario which US experts had warned about back in the late 1990s.[30] For some time, the main Bosniak and Bosnian Croat parties – SDA and HDZ – established a joint front against a bloc of Bosniak and Bosnian Croat opposition parties – led by Party for BiH (SBiH) of Haris Silajdžić and HDZ1990 of Božo Ljubić. Yet both of these coalitions broke apart in August 2009, when Bosniak and Serb ministers (mainly from the leftist Socialist Democratic Party, SDP) outvoted their Croat colleagues on changes to a key international development project, the Herzegovinian portion of the Trans-European Corridor Vc. When the dust settled down, a new balance of political forces was established in which the Bosniak and Bosnian Croat ethno-political blocs stood against each other.[31]

BiH Federation constitutional reform:

In parallel to the talks on the reform of the state constitution in relation to the Sejdić-Finci ruling, which the EU facilitated between 2012 and 2014, in early 2013 the US Embassy supported formation of an independent expert group, tasked with putting together a proposal for the reform of the BiH Federation's constitution. After an intense consultation process, in May 2013 the group presented its 188 recommendations to the FBIH Parliament. Despite the fact that many of these changes were technical and not political, and although almost all officials and experts agreed that these changes would have significantly improved the entity's constitution, the proposal was eventually rejected by the FBiH Parliament and quickly forgotten.[32]

The main reason for its failure was the fact that its main sponsor, former US Ambassador Patrick Moon, ended his mandate in August 2013, and after his departure neither the US Embassy nor the US State Department bothered to follow through with this proposal. The fate of this botched reform underlined the indolence of local leaders and their dependency on international engagement, but also the inconsistency of Western officials.

Füle package:

The last big EU-led reform attempt was initiated by former Slovak Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle, who led negotiations with BiH decision-makers through 2012 and 2013 aimed at adjusting the BiH Constitution and election system in line with the Sejdić-Finci ruling. Different local and Western diplomats privately say that this push was doomed to fail almost from the outset, due to the deepening political crisis in BiH, as well as severely depleted EU authority in the country. This situation made any reform impossible without much stronger and consistent engagement from the US.[33]

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27   Interviews with US diplomats and BiH officials, 2009-2010.

28   ECHR ruled on parallel appeals from BiH citizens Dervo Sejdić and Jakob Finci, who in 2006 filed a case against BiH because as a Roma and a Jew, respectively, they were not eligible to be elected into the BiH tripartite presidency and the upper chamber of the state parliament – the House of Peoples. These two institutions are only open to Bosnian Serbs from the Republika Srpska and Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats from the BiH Federation entity. Thus they exclude minorities, as well as members of one of the three main ethnic groups from the "wrong'" entity. For details see the ECHR ruling from December 22, 2009, cases 27996/06 and 34836/06, and the final judgment.

29   Bieber, Florian, "Constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina: preparing for EU accession," European Policy Centre (EPC) policy brief, April 2010.

30   In his 1998 CRS report, Steven Woehrel, a specialist in European Affairs Foreign Affairs and National Defence Division warned about this possible scenario: "The long-term viability of the Federation is open to question, however, due to continued mistrust between the two sides and significant differences in their perceived interests."

31   For a detailed explanation of structural and political problems which haunted the BiH Federation, see the ICG report "Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – A Parallel Crisis," September 28, 2010.

32   For details of this reform and its recommendations, see the Expert Group materials.

33   Interviews with top local and international officials from 2012 onward.

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Besides fixing the BiH Constitution in line with the Sejdić-Finci ruling, Füle's negotiations also tried to address the so-called "Bosnian Croat question" – the reduced presence of Bosnian Croat parties in the BiH Federation executive branch following the OHR's 2002 constitutional changes, as well as the capacity of more numerous Bosniaks to outvote Bosnian Croats and elect two representatives to the state presidency.

Over the years, these developments shifted the fragile ethno-political balance established by the Washington agreement and threatened to collapse the Dayton peace accord. The position of Bosnian Croat national parties – mainly the HDZ – was further weakened by the 2006 split within the party and the creation of a splinter party, HDZ-1990. Bosnian Croat parties' representation in state and Federal institutions were further undermined by the brain drain, which affected this smallest of the three constituent groups more than other two.

A combination of these elements, as well as the OHR's direct intervention for the first time after the 2010 elections enabled the establishment of the FBiH government without HDZ representatives. A growing alliance between Čović and Dodik prevented a group of Bosniak parties from also electing the state government without Bosnian Croat parties.[34] Furthermore, HDZ also lost its position in the BiH Presidency, where Željko Komšić from the leftist SDP party won the Croat position for the first time in 2006. That development by itself did not bother Bosnian Croat national parties too much, since Komšić's 2006 victory clearly came as a result of HDZ and HDZ1990 running with individual candidates.[35] Yet in the 2010 elections Komšić repeated the feat, humiliating candidates from the Bosnian Croat national parties by winning almost double their joint tally.[36] Results clearly showed that Komšić was elected by a majority of Bosniak votes, which did not violate any BiH regulations or laws, but was clearly against the spirit of the Washington and Dayton Agreements.

Bosnian Croats' electoral plight initially drew attention and sympathies from the West. As a result, from an early stage Füle-led negotiations tried to fix this issue in parallel with fixing Sejdić-Finic. After several rounds of futile talks, EU and US experts jointly prepared a new kind of proposal, built on the American presidential system, suggesting the introduction of electorates and gerrymandering within BiH electoral districts. This proposal was tested, tweaked, and retested several times and was finally offered to BiH leaders in early 2014. Under strong US and EU pressure Bosniak and Bosnian Serb parties generally accepted the proposal, which was then rejected by Čović himself, to the EU and US' great surprise and shock.[37]

Čović rejected the proposal on the grounds that it did improve Bosnian Croats' chances for electing their representative into the presidency, but did not guarantee it.[38] Most Western officials, however, saw this rejection as evidence that Čović was not trying to resolve the "Bosnian Croat question" but was trying to keep it open, since it kept radicalizing Bosnian Croats, thus maintaining HDZ's and Čović's reign. One way or the other, this marked the end of Füle's negotiations.[39]

The failure of Füle's negotiations also meant the end of EU-driven constitutional reform, as EU and US officials became acutely aware that BiH officials did not want to resolve the country's problems, but preferred to keep them open in order to use them for their own political purposes.[40] However, as part of its principle of avoiding criticism of local politicians, EU officials avoided talking about the details of the breakup of Füle-led negotiations, therefore enabling Čović to continue demanding justice for the Bosnian Croat plight.

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34 For details on the making of the FBiH and the evolution of political relations and legal framework see ICG's report "Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – A Parallel Crisis," September 28, 2010.

35 In 2006, HDZ and HDZ1990 candidates Ivo Miro Jović and Božo Ljubić jointly won some 130,000 votes to Komšić's 116,000.

36 In 2010 Komšić won 337,000 votes, which was almost double compared to the joint sum of 170,000 votes won by HDZ and HDZ1990 candidates Borjana Krišto and Martin Raguž.

37 Interviews with BiH, EU and US officials, 2014 onwards.

38 Ibid.

39 European Commission Memo "Bosnia-Herzegovina - EU: Deep disappointment on Sejdić-Finci implementation," February 18, 2014.

40 Ibid.

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The SDA and most other Bosniak national and leftist parties in the 2014 elections tried to appease Bosnian Croats by deliberately proposing that weak ethnic Croat candidates allow Čović to be elected to the presidency.[41] Yet Čović apparently missed their message of goodwill and used his mandate in the presidency to radicalize his nationalist positions. Bosnian Croat officials and experts also stress that they wanted new regulations rather than Bosniaks' goodwill to allow Bosnian Croats to elect their own political representatives. In the 2018 elections Bosniak parties responded in kind to Čović's renewed nationalist drive. Komšić ran for the BiH Presidency again and humiliated Čović by winning 225,500 votes, again almost exclusively from Bosniak-dominated areas. Čović managed to muster close to 155,000 votes, which is considered to be a significant portion of the Bosnian Croat electorate in BiH, yet even that did not prove to be enough for victory.

Electoral Reform Revisited

After their repeated failures to bring about a reform of BiH's Constitution and electoral system, the EU and the US have abandoned this issue for several years. However, the deepening of the BiH crisis amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb leaders' threat to blockade future elections, as well as the EU and US's renewed attention to BiH have in recent months brought this issue back into local and international attention. Nevertheless, finding a compromise will still be difficult due to the fact that divisions and animosities among key internal and external factors have only worsened in recent years and months. This worsening political climate is being also reflected in actors' divergent agendas and interests, as well as perceptions of the required scope and direction of the electoral reform.

Some believe that the reform must include changes to the BiH Constitution regarding the election of the BiH Presidency and House of Peoples to meet the requirements of the ECHR rulings. However, BiH has less than a year for this reform before pre-election campaigns kick into full force at the end of 2021. Therefore, some experts warn that achieving something that BiH was unable to do for the past 15 years – even at a time of much stronger EU and US influence – in such a short period of time looks like a mission impossible.

Actors are also bitterly divided over the direction of this reform. Some insist on changes that would shift the BiH election system more towards a civic model, while others insist on dialling it back towards the ethnic voting model that existed in the original Dayton Agreement, which was also confirmed by the BiH Constitutional Court in the Ljubić ruling. Some of the actors do not care too much about

ECHR rulings and focus on technical changes to the election law, especially reorganization of election districts, de-politicization and professionalization of the election system in order to reduce or completely prevent election fraud. Some parties do not seem to mind the current regulations and would be happy to keep most if not all of the election system as it is, as long as they can tinker with it.

Western diplomats and legal experts stress that most of these options and scenarios have already been analyzed and can be found amongst some of the old proposals that are still sitting in officials' desks. This should save at least some of the time, as instead of pondering and drafting new solutions, politicians and diplomats will be able to propose or repackage some of those past solutions. Yet the main obstacle will still remain lack of political will for a serious reform, among both ruling and opposition parties alike.

Given the poor personal and political relations among key local actors, most experts and foreign diplomats presume that strong Western involvement will be required to shift deeply entrenched local positions. Foreign influences, however, will bring their own risks for the success of the eventual reform and for the overall situation in the country, since most regional and global actors have conflicting, one-sided views on this issue. Furthermore, given the heightened tensions on the global scene, especially between Russia on the one hand and the US and EU on the other, as well as their conflicting positions in the Balkans, BiH and its electoral reform could become one of the arenas for the fast-developing new Cold War.

This is the basic outline of the state of play among local, regional and international actors:

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41   Interviews with Bosniak officials, 2014-2015.

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Local actors: politicization and conflicting views block progress

Positions of key local actors regarding eventual electoral reform are spread far and wide, and go in different, often opposite directions. These positions reflect different views which Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Serb parties have on BiH's past, present and future. While Bosniak national and leftist parties want BiH to become a more centralized country, Bosnian Croat and Serb parties insist on BiH being a highly decentralized country with a weak state and near-autonomous entities and cantons. An additional obstacle for any kind of compromise is the deepening politicization of all key issues in the general public, where ruling and opposition parties alike, as well as their affiliated media and intellectuals, undermine any reform attempts as part of their endless power struggles.

Bosniak parties

All Bosniak parties nominally support constitutional and electoral changes that would push BiH more towards a civic state. Leftist opposition parties like SDP and Naša Stranka are often very aggressive in their push for a civic state, and their officials are frequently much more radical in public statements, which most Bosnian Croat and Serbs see as disguised Bosniak nationalism, while some leftist intellectuals call it civic nationalism.[42] In December 2020, SDP tabled amendments to the BiH Constitution which were originally proposed as a part of the April package in 2006, yet this proposal was quickly rejected by the BiH Parliament's Constitutional and Legal Commission as being unconstitutional.[43]

The ruling Bosniak SDA party, on the other hand, is usually more muted in its positions and its officials often avoid direct verbal clashes with Bosnian Croat or Serb leaders. SDA leader Bakir Izetbegović has in several recent public statements acknowledged that any electoral reform should respect a balance between the ethnic and civic models.[44] Izetbegović recently spoke about electoral reform with Matthew A. Palmer, the deputy assistant at the US State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, where he underlined that electoral reform would have to be conducted in line with principles that he and HDZ leader Čović had agreed to as part of the US and EU-brokered agreement on June 17, 2020.[45] On the other hand, Izetbegović on several occasions also stressed that before SDA agrees to electoral reform, HDZ would have to lift its blockade of the establishment of a new BiH Federation government,[46] which Čović repeatedly criticized as yet another of Izetbegović's political tricks.

SDA's recent shifting positions during the implementation of Mostar's local elections were also seen by many Bosnian Croats as further evidence of Izetbegović's inconsistent and swindling policies.[47] Some local and international officials suspect that SDA may not have too much motivation to support electoral reform, because it seems to be counting on Bosniaks' larger numbers as well as its influence on the Central Election Commission (CIK) and the BiH Court to continue gaming the election process.[48]

Most Bosniak parties, media and intellectuals, however, seem to be oblivious to the fact that by robbing Bosnian Croats of their legitimate political representatives Bosniaks have pushed BiH to the edge of dissolution, which would hardly happen without a new war.[49] Many Bosnian Croat officials and intellectuals warn that Bosniaks' continued attempts to maintain dominance over Bosnian Croat parties are pushing both Bosnian Croats and Serbs against the idea of a joint country.[50]

42   "Perfidious civic nationalism," Dani magazine interview with Dino Mustafić, July 1, 2013; "Croats are right to be frustrated by Komšić, Bosniaks would impose representatives even to Others" Dnevni.ba interview with Damir Nikšić, October 20, 2020.

43   "SDP club in the BiH Parliament calls upon the adoption of the April package," Oslobodjenje, December 9, 2020.

44   "Izetbegović: We have to find a balance between ethnic and civic principles," FENA, January 20, 2021.

45   "Izetbegović spoke with Palmer: speed up EU and NATO integration process, broader debate needed on electoral reform," Faktor, February 16, 2021.

46   HDZ has been blocking the establishment of a new BiH Federation government since the last general elections in October 2018, insisting on the adoption of electoral changes before a new FBiH government can be established. However, officials close to both parties admit that neither SDA nor HDZ have so far had much interest in establishing a new government, since SNSD would require at least one ministerial post, which would only further complicate the balance of power in that body.

47   Interviews with Bosnian Croat officials and intellectuals, February 2021.

48   Interviews with local and international officials, 2020-2021

49   Interviews with local and international officials and experts.

50   "All those who are trying to eliminate Croats from BiH authorities are pushing Serbs towards secession," op-ed by Frano Vukoja, Večernji List, February 22, 2021.

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The level of antagonism between Bosnian Croat and Bosniak political, media and academic circles has reached an all-time high in recent months, raising the question whether the American idea for the Washington Agreement – an alliance between Bosniaks and Croats – can be saved and revived. Without it, the Dayton construct – and BiH itself – has little chance of surviving.

Bosnian Croat parties
The main push for electoral reform comes from Bosnian Croat politicians who – although increasingly dissatisfied with Čović's politics – line up behind HDZ in hopes that jointly they would be able to secure legitimate political representation for themselves. Bosnian Croats are focused on making sure that Bosnian Croat representatives in the BiH Presidency, as well as in the state and BiH Federation Houses of Peoples, are elected by Bosnian Croats, not Bosniaks or other ethnic groups. They are also concerned that if the 2022 elections are held under current regulations, Bosniak parties will for the first time win a majority in the Croat caucus in the FBiH House of Peoples. That would enable them to elect their own candidates to executive positions of the BiH Federation, thus making it a fully Bosniak entity.[51]

Bosnian Croat national parties, however, bear their own part of the responsibility for the gradual weakening of Croat positions, as well as the dwindling of the Croat population in BiH. HDZ1990 leader Božo Ljubić was one of the main forces in bringing down the April package in 2006, while HDZ's Čović rejected the EU and US proposal in 2014. Either of the two agreements would have fixed the so-called "Bosnian Croat question" in BiH. Furthermore, while Bosnian Croat national parties complained against what they called illegitimate ethnic representation in the BiH Federation, they completely ignored the fact that Bosnian Serb parties have been for years regularly electing Bosnian Croat representatives in Republika Srpska. Also, Bosnian

Croat leaders have in subsequent years showed little good will, skill and/or diplomacy in negotiating a positive solution. These facts have made many Western diplomats start suspecting that the Bosnian Croat leadership's true intention was not to reform the system, but to keep the problem open, thus keeping the national leadership in power.

Instead of choosing diplomacy and negotiations to resolve this problem, HDZ officials have steadily radicalized their positions in state and Federation institutions, using them to block their functioning, including the signing of important international agreements, adoption of budgets, etc. By hijacking the work of joint institutions, HDZ tried to blackmail Bosniak parties, mainly SDA, into accepting electoral reform agreeable to HDZ. Yet the only thing this has achieved so far is to antagonize and unify Bosniak parties and diminish chances for a resolution of this issue.

Despite all the hubbub, none of the Croat national parties in BiH have so far offered their own proposal for the reform of the BiH constitution they so bitterly demanded. In 2017, HDZ proposed amendments to the election law, which other local as well as international officials quickly dismissed as being even worse than the original law.[52] According to the latest information, HDZ is working on a new proposal for electoral reform, which is expected to be presented in March 2021. At the same time HDZ and SDA working groups will be working on solutions to these problems and it is not clear how will these two parallel processes work out. Therefore, it is still not clear whether these proposals will include only proposed changes to the election law, or if they will also offer solutions for the changes of the BiH Constitution. HDZ also calls for the reshuffling of the Central Election Commission (CIK), which they deem illegal and hold to be controlled by SDA and Bosnian Serb opposition parties.[53]

51   Interviews with Bosnian Croat officials and intellectuals, September 2020- February 2021.

52   Interviews with Western and BiH officials, 2017.

53   On March 12 2020, the BiH Parliament appointed Vanja Bjelica-Prutina and Jovan Kalaba as the two new Bosnian Serb members of the CIK. Bjelica-Prutina comes from the RS opposition SDS party, while Kalaba is a senior member of another RS opposition party, the PDP. The two were elected with votes of these two opposition parties as well as the main Bosniak SDA. By voting for these candidates, SDA went against its official coalition partners, the SNSD and HDZ. The SDA repeated the same manoeuvre on May 20, when its MPs in the state parliament voted for Željko Bakalar to become the new Bosnian Croat member of the CIK, again against the votes of SNSD and HDZ. This appointment added insult to injury for both of these parties - but especially for the HDZ - since Bakalar came from the office of the Croat member of the presidency, Željko Komšić, whose legitimacy has been disputed by the HDZ, as he was elected to his position thanks to Bosniak votes. SNSD and HDZ complained that these appointments violated BiH regulations as well as the principle that prohibits appointment of political figures in the CIK, yet the BiH Court has rejected these claims.

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Bosnian Serb parties

Political implications of the electoral reform are mainly linked to the position of Bosnian Croats and their power-sharing with Bosniaks in the BiH Federation, and do not have direct and immediate implications for the Bosnian Serb parties. Yet this did not stop RS leader Milorad Dodik from engaging strongly on this issue. Dodik's engagement is mainly motivated by his realization that the gradual collapse of the Washington agreement and Bosniak-Croat relations in BiH represents his historic opportunity to achieve what seems to be his long-term goal: the breakup of BiH and independence of Republika Srpska.[54]

By establishing and then steadily reinforcing his alliance with Čović, Dodik is tilting the balance of ethno-political powers in BiH, which increasingly resembles the situation from the early 1990s. Furthermore, Dodik, as well as other Bosnian Serb leaders, are concerned that if the BiH Federation effectively becomes a fully Bosniak entity, it could enable Bosniaks to use their larger numbers to gradually undercut Republika Srpska and over the course of several election cycles take control over the entire country.[55]

This is why Dodik and Čović announced already in October their intention to block and/or boycott the 2022 general elections if no electoral reform is carried out by then. Local officials say these warnings should be taken very seriously.[56] In his recent public appearances, Dodik offered few new details about his plan, saying that without electoral reform, the SNSD-led RS government would prevent the establishment of local election boards and would not allow any public buildings to be used for the elections.[57] This scenario would pitch the country into political and legal chaos and anarchy, and could lead to its final breakup.

While Dodik is for the time being not expected to come up with his own proposal for electoral reform, he will continue insisting on the rejiggling of the CIK, and on keeping BiH as decentralized as possible. The fact that at the end of 2020 RS officials rejected rather mild conditions required by the IMF for a new program of financial support for BiH, despite the increasingly difficult economic and financial situation in that entity, shows that Dodik is determined to block BiH's EU integration process regardless of whatever negative consequences it may have for the people of RS.[58] The same goes for SNSD's decision to block legislation that would speed up acquisition of urgently needed COVID-19 vaccines.

Croatia and Serbia: (un)friendly neighbours

Croatia

One of the key roles in the unfolding drama of BiH's electoral reform belongs to Croatia. It has already thrown all of its political and diplomatic muscle behind Čović and his HDZ, and is determined to make sure that in future Bosnian Croat officials are elected by what they see as "legitimate" Bosnian Croat voters. Croatia has been steadily increasing its support for Čović after the leader of the sister Croatian HDZ party and Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković cemented his control over HDZ and the Croatian government following HDZ internal elections and then the Croatian general ballot in 2020. Facing little opposition from within his own HDZ, Plenković is determined to use 2021 to force Bosniaks to accept whatever electoral reform Bosnian Croats deem acceptable.[59] This unquestioning support which Zagreb provides to Čović is as of lately reflected in almost weekly visits by Croatian ministers, as well as in initiatives which Croatian officials are undertaking in EU institutions.[60]

54   Interviews with Bosnian Serb officials and experts.

55   Ibid.

56   Interviews with SNSD, HDZ and other local politicians in Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo, December 2020- January 2021.

57   "Dodik announces blockade of 2022 elections," Dnevni.ba, February 18, 2021.

58   Interview with a senior Western diplomat, December 2020.

59   Interviews with Croatian officials and experts, Zagreb, December 2020 – February 2021.

60   According to EU diplomats, in the second part of 2020 Zagreb circulated a memo among selected members of the European Council, calling for EU support for electoral reform in BiH. Croatian deputies in the European Parliament have already in recent years initiated and tried to influence several resolutions on BiH. Most of these activities support Bosnian Croat claims for legitimate representation.

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This is not a new approach, since Croatia has held similar positions towards BiH on and off since the breakup of Yugoslavia. The fact that Zagreb does not have a detailed understanding of BiH's complex political scene, and shows little interest in improving its relations with BiH, leads to a situation in which Croatia fully buys into Čović's claims and positions, ignoring his own responsibility for the increasingly weak status of Croats in BiH. These Croatian attitudes have aggravated Bosniaks and radicalized their positions towards Zagreb as well as Bosnian Croats, thus damaging relations between the two neighbouring countries.

Given the recent changes on the geopolitical scene, these Croatian positions and activities are causing even more of a stir than before, often undermining Croatia's own positions in the EU, whereas more and more EU officials and leaders see Croatia as a biased, malign influence in BiH's affairs. This situation could hurt Plenković himself, who is said to have ambitions to run for some of the top positions in the next European Commission.[61]

Interestingly, in their joint endeavour Bosnian Croats and Croatia have recently found support from an unlikely ally – Russia – which is also resolute not to allow any further reforms that would bring BiH closer to EU and NATO integration. Following the December 2020 meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, the Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman publicly stated that Croatia shares the same positions towards BiH with Russia, contrary

to the US and EU views.[62] In a more recent interview he stressed that "Croatia would not allow imposition of any artificial model that would be harmful for any ethnic group."[63]

Serbia

Contrary to the positions of Zagreb, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has always held a bit more moderate official attitude towards BiH. The biggest difference between Plenković and Vučić is that Vučić does not take Dodik's positions for granted, and is sometimes discounting or even opposing Dodik's more radical views and initiatives, especially when such policies bring bonus points in Serbia's relations with the EU and US. Unlike Zagreb, which refuses to recognize legitimacy of BiH's presidency as long as Komšić sits in it,[64] Vučić has regularly stated that he respects BiH's sovereignty, but also advocates for the continued existence of Republika Srpska as one of BiH's entities.[65]

In the upcoming BiH electoral reform, Vučić is expected to position himself again in a way that will provide him with maximum influence on the process and secure his position as one of the key political actors in the region. His concrete role will mostly depend on which positions Dodik and other RS leaders will take in this process, but also on the positions of the EU and US. In the past, Vučić has openly stood against Dodik's extremist ideas when they threatened to undermine his own positions and relations with Washington and Brussels, as was the case in the 2016 referendum in RS.[66]

EU, US and Russia: enablers and/or disablers?

Since the late 1990s the US and EU have been closely coordinating their efforts in the Balkans, with clear political leadership by the US while the EU plays a more supportive role, focused more on technical, legal and financial issues. This division of labour changed significantly since the US gradually disengaged from the region as of 2010, when the EU took up the leading role. However, the EU was never able

– or willing – to impose itself as a strong political actor in the region.

In its approach, the EU relies exclusively on the EU enlargement perspective, which has significantly undermined the EU's position in the region after Balkan leaders realized that the EU has effectively removed a realistic enlargement perspective from the table for many

61 Interviews with Croatian officials and experts, Zagreb, December 2020 – February 2021.

62 "Lavrov and Grlić Radman: Croatia and Russia share the same position towards BiH," Herceg-Bosna, December 16, 2020.

63 "Croatia will not allow that anyone imposes civic model in BiH," interview with Grlić Radman, Večernji List, February 27, 2021.

64 Ibid.

65 "Vučić: Srbija supports BiH's territorial integrity but also has right to support continued existence of Republika Srpska," Danas, July 23, 2020.

66 RS held a referendum that was seeking public opinion on the continuation of celebrations of the RS national day, despite the BiH Constitutional Court ruling it unconstitutional on the basis that it discriminated against non-Serbs. Dodik organized the referendum despite strong warnings from the US and EU, and even Vučić, who openly spoke out against it.

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years, if not forever. The weakening of the Western presence in the region has created a power vacuum, which was over the years filled by other external actors with their individual interests in the region, such as Russia, Turkey, China, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The presence and coordination of EU and US efforts in the region suffered another major blow following the 2016 victory of Donald Trump in the US Presidential elections. Trump's narrow focus on America, his aversion to the EU, and his self-serving foreign policy have further complicated and weakened Western positions in the Balkans.

The USA

Some Western diplomats argue that BiH has benefitted from Trump's foreign policy, as it remained below his radar, thus allowing the local US Embassy to deal with local issues as best it could. In this situation the current US ambassador Eric Nelson did well, staying away from the public focus and from big statements, and managing to overcome some of the local deadlocks through closed-door diplomacy conducted in close cooperation with the head of the EU delegation, Johann Sattler.

The election of Joe Biden as the new US president at the end of 2020 has fuelled major expectations, especially among Bosniaks and some American experts, who hope that Biden's expertise in foreign policy and his past connections with the region will bring back the old-style, hands-on American engagement. Some of the American and/or Balkan experts proposed that the new US administration should go back to using the OHR's executive powers, sanctions, and even reinforcing the current NATO-led peacekeeping forces in order to halt and reverse the BiH crisis.[67] Some pundits, however, find such proposals unrealistic and even potentially harmful, as they ignore changes that in recent years took place on the local, regional and global scene, because of which such radical American course could easily trigger similarly radical reactions from Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat and Russian officials.

Several US officials and diplomats confirmed that the new US administration will indeed strengthen its positions in the Balkans, yet they stressed that this will mainly be within Biden's plan to rebuild American relations with and presence in Europe.[68] These officials, however, stressed that the Biden administration will at least in the first year be fully preoccupied with cleaning up the mess left by Trump, and it will have no appetite for big new international interventions. Some American officials and experts went even further and stressed that even before Trump took over the White House, the USA had lost its exclusivity and moral high ground, and will need to restore it before it jumps into new international adventures.[69] In this situation the US's old "bull in a china shop" approach in the Balkans would risk doing more harm than benefit, these pundits say.[70]

Nevertheless, the US will certainly play a role in the upcoming BiH electoral reform, but it will likely be less pronounced and more diplomatic than some Bosniak and American experts would hope. This was reflected in the US Embassy posting on social networks on February 17, in which it called on BiH leaders to "get down to business" on constitutional, electoral and other reforms and to "stop waiting for the international community to do their job for them."[71] This notion was further underscored by Palmer himself, who in a recent interview stated that some in BiH expect the Biden administration "to ride over the hill on a white horse"[72] carrying new proposals for constitutional reform. He added that this is "contrary to what they should think and do."[73]

However, the US should think twice about the direction and scope of the reform it will support and/or require from local actors. US diplomacy in BiH in principle has a general tendency to push for bigger constitutional changes, driving BiH as much as possible towards a civic state. Yet none of the local parties has the capacity to prepare and implement any deeper constitutional reforms, while Bosnian Croat and Serb leaders are unlikely to accept such a direction for the reform, regardless of pressure and possible sanctions.

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67   For details see "Fixing Dayton: A New Deal for Bosnia and Herzegovina," Wilson Center publication, November 2020.

68   Interviews with and statements from different US diplomats participating in online events, December 2020 – February 2021.

69   Interviews with US diplomats and experts, December 2020 – February 2021.

70   Ibid.

71   US embassy in Sarajevo Twitter posting, February 17, 2021.

72   "Matthew Palmer: US's continued engagement and partnership with Western Balkans," interview by the VOA, February 24, 2021.

73   Ibid.

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A mistake in the Western approach would easily further diminish already the slim chances for this reform.

The EU

The EU position in BiH and the rest of the Balkans has grown even more precarious since the outbreak of COVID-19, despite its pledge to provide the region with nine billion Euro in investments, grants and loans for its economic and social revival. The EU's already weak image was additionally tainted by Bulgaria's blockade of the North Macedonia accession process, its simplistic approach to the ongoing migrant crisis affecting BiH in particular, the EU's own internal divisions regarding the rule of law and human rights, as well as the failure of the EU-supported COVAX system, which most Balkan countries hoped would help them to acquire COVID-19 vaccines.

While Brussels and EU capitals managed to only further estrange themselves from the Balkans in this period, the EU delegation in BiH managed to somewhat strengthen its political clout thanks to the new head of the EU delegation, Johann Sattler, who proved to be more willing and able to engage in local politics than any of his predecessors. Close coordination between Sattler and Nelson managed to help SDA and HDZ in reaching an agreement in July 2020, which enabled the holding of Mostar local elections for the first time since 2008. While this dynamic diplomatic duo will certainly be an important asset in the upcoming negotiations on electoral reform, any breakthrough will require more concrete engagement from Brussels.

However, the EU's internal divisions regarding the rule of law and human rights' principles may also undermine EU's role in the BiH reform, since it is clear that Brussels and some EU capitals – starting with Zagreb – may have different views, interests and agendas in this process. Furthermore, EU engagement in the upcoming negotiations could be further diluted if the EU – as is usually the case – tries to push for overly broad and complicated reform. Currently, the EU wants electoral reform to address six rulings from the ECHR: constitutional and legal issues outlined in 14 priorities from the Opinion on the BiH application for EU membership from May 2019;[74] 22 recommendations

outlined by OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; the ODIHR report after BiH's last general elections in October 2018;[75] as well as recommendations from the Council of Europe GRECO reports.[76]

Even with maximum political will for compromise, which is nowhere to be seen, the capacity of BiH institutions has been weakened to the point where they would require years to carry out such a broad reform. Given the urgency of the electoral reform and possible dire consequences of its failure, the EU and US may be better off identifying the minimum acceptable reform that would enable holding of the 2022 elections in a calmer atmosphere and then using the subsequent four years for deeper changes.

Russia

For the past several years Russia has somewhat reduced its political and economic presence in BiH. In this period, Russia paid more attention to the burning issues in its own neighbourhood, such as the situation in Ukraine or Belarus, while in the Balkans it focused its attention and efforts on Serbia as its most important ally in the Balkans. Yet this has started changing in recent months, as Russia radicalized its positions under the threat of new sanctions from the EU and fearing new American foreign interventionism following Biden's election. Russian experts say there are signals indicating that Kremlin is planning "diplomatic counter-offensives" in troubled regions such as the Western Balkans and Middle East, where they expect the Biden administration to try to further undermine Russian influence.[77]

The Russian hardening of positions on BiH was already visible during the latest visit of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to BiH in December of last year, where he said that there are "efforts to bring down Dayton, to erode it" adding that "this may cause risks and grave consequences."[78] That visit was also marked by a diplomatic scandal, as upon his arrival Lavrov first met Dodik in East Sarajevo, violating usual diplomatic protocols. In response, Bosniak and Bosnian Croat members of the BiH Presidency refused to meet the Russian Foreign Minister, which was then followed by a brief disruption in BiH's supplies of Russian natural gas,

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74 Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership application.

75 For more details see the full report and recommendations.

76 GRECO Compliance Reports of Third and Fourth Evaluation Rounds on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

77 Interviews with Moscow-based Russian expert, November 2020 – February 2021.

78 "Russia's Lavrov says Bosnia's peace deal must not be changed," Reuters, December 14, 2020.

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which was seen as a sample of the Kremlin's payback for the diplomatic snub.

Given the growing political tensions on the global scene, experts and Western diplomats are concerned that Russia will use its influence in the region and especially links with Dodik to try to influence BiH's electoral reform, probably supporting Bosnian Croat and Serb positions.

Controversy over BiH's new High Representative

A key role in BiH's upcoming reform may belong to Christian Schmidt, Germany's former Federal Minister and delegate in the European Parliament, who was confirmed by Berlin as Germany's candidate for the new head of BiH's Office of the High Representative on January 20. Rumours about Schmidt's nomination started circulating in local and international media in December, triggering a major controversy among EU capitals and diplomats who were not even consulted by Berlin about this appointment.

The controversy was made even bigger following reports that Berlin has cleared this appointment with Moscow, which could block this appointment in the UN Security Council. Sources and media reported that both countries apparently preferred a German diplomat to sit in the High Representative's precarious chair, to control or prevent more radical interventions from the new US administration,

or the existing High Representative, Austrian veteran diplomat Valentin Inzko.

Yet even if this agreement existed, it seemed to be off the table now, after the latest escalation of diplomatic war between Russia and the West, following the humiliation of the EU High Representative Josep Borrell during his recent visit to Moscow and the parallel expulsion of European diplomats by the Kremlin. Only a few days later, the Russian ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Bocan-Harcenko, told Tanjug news agency that Russia is against the appointment of a new High Representative.[79]

This situation now places Germany in a difficult position. By withdrawing its nomination Germany would humiliate and weaken its position on the global scene. On the other hand, any attempt to push this nomination through without a Russian green light in the UNSC would risk tearing BiH apart. In that scenario, Russia could withdraw from the Peace Implementation Council, PIC, while at the same time Dodik would declare the Dayton peace agreement implemented, which would allow him to ignore any subsequent statements or actions from the OHR and PIC. This would create two parallel political realities in BiH, which could lead to dangerous escalation of local, regional and global tensions.

Conclusions

After avoiding and delaying reforms of its defunct electoral system for years, the country and its leaders are now forced to deal with this issue amidst the multidimensional health, political and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reform of BiH's election system is one of country's biggest challenges since the Dayton Agreement, as it opens critical questions about relations amongst its three constitutive peoples. This reform is especially important for the relations between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat ethno-political blocs, which have been steadily worsening since the collapse of the Washington agreement in the early 2000's. The revival of Bosniak-Croat relations is critical for the long-term survival for BiH, as it offers a positive example of ethnic

reconciliation, but also establishes a balance of ethnic powers and relations within the country and its immediate neighbourhood.

BiH's electoral reform also opens the question about the very nature of the BiH political system, whereas some internal and external actors are trying to use this opportunity to replace BiH's mainly ethnic political system with civic models. While the establishment of a fully democratic and civic society is certainly a legitimate and positive goal, this transition is currently not only unrealistic but also potentially harmful. Without first developing genuine and authentic civic political options, media, academic and civil society, any push towards civic political models would inevitably lead to the further strengthening of Bosniak and/or civic

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79   "Bocan-Harcenko: Russia is against the appointment of a new High Representative in BiH," RTRS news report citing ambassador's interview for Serbian news agency Tanjug, February 10, 2021.

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nationalism, which is strongly rejected by Bosnian Croats and Serbs, as well as by Zagreb and Belgrade.

BiH's electoral reform also reveals the extent to which the BiH political scene has become politicized, divided and dysfunctional in recent years. This and other similar reforms are not only important for the country's path to the EU, but also for better functioning of BiH's administration. Nevertheless, most local parties have been ignoring peoples' interests while maintaining populist and maximalist positions, using this process as a part of their endless zero-sum power-struggles.

This task comes at difficult times for both the US and the EU, as they are preoccupied with major internal and external challenges themselves. Yet investing whatever effort needed will pay off many times over, since a positive outcome would enable BiH to hold the 2022 election in a calmer situation and potentially open doors for further constitutional and/or electoral changes in subsequent years. Another failure of this critical reform, however, may push BiH beyond the point of no return. Combined with the fact that all key regional and global actors have a stake in BiH and the rest of the region, the disintegration of BiH could open the question of the stability of the Balkans and all of Europe.

In this situation, the US and EU will once again have a critical role in overcoming local deadlocks and steering negotiations in positive and constructive directions. This reform, however, will also represent a major challenge for the West, which has made several similar attempts that have all failed over the past 15 years – at a time when both the US and EU have had a much stronger presence and influence in BiH than what they have today. Any Western engagement in the upcoming reform will be further undermined by the much bigger internal and external challenges which both the EU and US face today.

The importance and complexity of BiH's electoral reform draws attention from other external influences, whereas all regional and global actors – from Croatia and Serbia to the EU, US and Russia – have conflicting views, interests and agendas in BiH. While some of these actors – like Croatia – see this almost as an internal political issue, others – like Serbia or Russia – appear to be ready to use their influences in BiH as part of their regional and global powerplays. These external influences will certainly not make the upcoming negotiations any easier, if not much, much harder.

Finding good ethnic, political and technical solutions for BiH electoral reform within such a difficult environment and limited timeframe will be exceptionally hard, and will once again demand strong and wise engagement from Washington, Brussels and EU capitals. Having in mind everything that this reform puts at stake, another failure should not be an option. Another botched reform could lead to boycott and/or blockade of the 2022 elections. Unless given proper attention by internal and external actors, this could finally push BiH towards becoming a truly failed state and its eventual disintegration – a path that could lead to new social violence or ethnic conflict.

5. Erdogan as an Admired Sultan or an Instrument in Political Competition? Locals' Perceptions of the Turkish Presence in Serbian Sandžak

Stefan Jojić

Executive Summary

This paper seeks to fill the gap in research of Turkish policy in the Balkans, providing original insight into Turkey's presence in the Sandžak region of Serbia with a special focus on local perceptions. More specifically, this study deals with locals' understanding of the Turkish presence, as well as differences in perception between different ethnic, political, ideological, and interest groups. The article also deals with how the foreign factor is being used in political confrontations between different political-interest groups in Sandžak. Given its historical, demographic, and geopolitical features, and declared significance for strategists in Ankara, Sandžak region is a fruitful area for exploring Turkey's foreign policy in the region.

The research draws on primary and secondary sources, and data obtained from dozens of interviews with elites and citizens of Sandžak cities and towns. The results confirm the assumed divergence between the perceptions of ethnic Serbs citizens and political elites, and their Bosniak counterparts. While the former mostly have negative attitudes about the Turkish presence, which they observe through the lens of a more or less transparent *realpolitik* agenda, the latter group is characterized by positive attitudes about Turkey's presence.

However, the Bosniak elites are not homogenous in their perception and not all of them see the Turkish presence in solely positive terms. Unlike their opponents from other Bosniak parties, members of the conservative Justice and Reconciliation Party and liberal elites can be singled out as having somewhat more pragmatic and critical views of Turkey. Hence, this case signals a clear divergence in attitudes about Turkey among different political and ideological poles of the Bosniak populace.

The results also indicate that Turkey's reputation among the Bosniaks of Sandžak is instrumentalized by local political-interest groups in their mutual clashes. Intending to undermine the positions of rivals in Turkey or to influence local public opinion, some local actors try to present others as enemies of Turkey, while promoting narratives about their own close ties with Ankara. The paper provides original insights in the Turkey's engagement in the region and is of interest to researchers of socio-political realities in Sandžak and the Balkans, as well as those interested in presence of Turkey in Sandžak, the Balkans, and Europe in general.

Introduction

Contrary to the passive foreign policy during the most of the 20th century, after Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) came to power Turkey has pursued a more ambitious and unilateral policy in international relations. In line with the guidelines formulated in the early 2000s by Ahmet Davutoglu (2014), a former leading Turkish foreign policy figure, Turkey has increased its international activities in many areas and promoted its interests in its geographical vicinity. The Western Balkans are also on the radar of AKP's ambitious foreign policy agenda, and the multiethnic region of Sandžak with its unique Ottoman legacy plays an important role in Turkish presence in the region. Once dividing and now divided by Serbia and Montenegro, the

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Sandžak region was among the last territories to remain under the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. In addition to its specific geographical position, the geopolitical importance of the region is reflected in its demographics, since the area of both Serbian and Montenegrin part of Sandžak is inhabited by a mixed population of Christians and Muslims. The importance of this region has been widely recognized by key foreign policymakers in Ankara during the 21st century, making this area suitable for Turkish foreign policy research.

Hand in hand with Turkey's intensified activities, academic and public interest in Ankara's foreign policy has also increased, sparking debate on Turkey's influence in neighboring regions, including the Balkans. While there have been many recent reports investigating the Turkish presence in the Balkans, little is known about local perceptions of that presence. With a focus on locals' perceptions and Serbian part of Sandžak as its spatial focal point, this paper aims to fill this gap. With its socio-political and geographical specificities, more broadly discussed in the following chapters, Sandžak is a promising area for exploring perceptions of Turkey's foreign policy in the era of Erdogan. This study aims to analyze perceptions of the political, intellectual, media, and religious elites, and residents of Sandžak (both Muslim and non-Muslim) of the Turkish presence in the region. It examines the following research question: In what ways do locals understand and perceive the Turkish presence in Sandžak, its pros and cons, and the reasons for its engagement? How do perspectives differ between various socio-political groups in the region?

How do local actors use Turkey's presence and popularity for their own political interests and clashes?

In order to answer the research questions, it was necessary to employ data collected through both desk and field research. During 2020, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local elites – representatives of the local administration, politicians, religious leaders, journalists, and NGO representatives. Furthermore, 57 interviews were conducted with citizens of four municipalities in Serbian Sandžak – Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, and Prijepolje to obtain the data necessary for the examination of lay-citizen perceptions. Interviews were tailored for different categories of interviewees and included both closed- and open-ended questions. By conducting in-depth and comprehensive research, the paper aims to bring a better understanding of various groups' perceptions of the Turkish presence in the region and get beyond the widespread notion that Muslims have a much more benevolent attitude towards Turks than non-Muslims.

The first chapter gives a brief overview of Turkey's presence in the Western Balkans. The second chapter deals with the socio-political specificity of Sandžak. The third chapter gives insight into locals' perceptions and the differences among various ethnic, political, and interest groups. It also deals with the political dynamics of interactions between Turkey and Sandžak, observing both Turkey's relations with local political actors and the way the Turkish card is being played by locals in their political clashes.

Turkey in The Western Balkans

After the centuries of Ottoman domination over the Balkans, the period between the collapse of the Empire and the last decade of the 20th century could be described as one of Turkish absence rather than presence in the Balkans. Turkey's visibility in this region increased during the 1990s when Ankara took a strong stance on the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo as a promoter of the interests of Muslim communities in conflict areas (Jojić, 2018). But real increase in Turkey's presence in the Balkans came during the 2000s, when the AK Party formulated an ambitious foreign policy.

Since the Balkans were defined as an area vital to Turkey's foreign policy (Davutoglu 2014) during the early period of the AKP's rule, Turkey significantly increased its presence there in many spheres. In political terms, Turkey has worked to establish closer relations with the Balkan countries, especially those with significant Muslim populations, while seeking to impose itself as a mediator in resolving conflicts between the region's various actors.[1] The activities of the Diyanet, Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs, should be considered in terms of strengthening Turkey's political influence as well. The Diyanet engaged in supporting education, construction of mosques, and other forms of

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1   As key communities for Turkey's long-term interests in the Balkans, Davutoglu highlights Bosniaks and Albanians as "heirs of the Ottoman Empire" (Davutoglu 2014, 134).

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material support (Muhasilović 2018, 64; Oktem 2012, 43), in close cooperation with local Islamic communities.

A good indicator of increased Turkish activism in the Western Balkans is in the economic field, where, thanks to free trade agreements between Turkey and countries in the region, economic and trade relations between the two sides significantly deepened (Bechev 2012, 136-143; Hake 2020, Jojić 2018b, 65-75). Another important consequence of Turkey's economic development is the growth of unilateral material assistance to the countries of the Western Balkans, where the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı – TIKA) stands out as the most visible actor. By restoring Ottoman cultural heritage in the Balkans, as well as assisting local communities with their material needs, TIKA "presents itself in a timely constructive manner by considering both the past and present" (Nuroglu 2013, 2).

The Turkish presence can also be noticed in the area of education. On the one hand, a large number of young people have obtained higher education in Turkey through a system of state scholarships provided by Turkey (Pačariz 2020, 92), while on the other hand young people have been encouraged to study at some of the Turkish universities opened in Balkans (Ajzenhamer and Trapara 2013).

Increased Turkey's regional activity has been accompanied by popularization of the term "neo-Ottomanism", instigated by political, academic and media circles outside of Turkey, raising suspicions that Turkey is motivated by "imperial nostalgia" in advancing in its neighborhoods (Bechev 2012, 131; Tanasković 2010; Prasanna 2020; Bechev 2017; Somun

2011). The popularity of the term "neo-Ottomanism" was further enhanced by the rhetoric of Turkish officials, especially Davutoglu who frequently referred to Ottoman times in positive manner. The term itself provokes a lot of controversies and, due to the danger of evoking negative memories, is extremely unpopular in pragmatic circles in Turkey.[2] With the desire to restore the empire or not, the foreign policy agenda of modern Turkey is based on ambitions of global proportions, with a focus on areas once under the control of the Ottoman Empire, including the Balkans.

The dynamics and various aspects of Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans states are to a large extent reflected by its presence in Sandžak. According to Davutoglu (2014, 285), Sandžak, along the banks of the Drina river, is an area of vital geopolitical interest for Turkey and the link between Bosnia and the Albania, the region's two predominantly Muslim states. In political terms, Turkey maintains close ties with political actors in Sandžak, primarily with competing Bosniak parties, which were even reconciled through the efforts of Turkey's diplomacy. Another, far more complex area of Turkish involvement in Sandžak was an attempt to mediate the conflict between the two Islamic communities competing for influence in the region. Turkey also distributes material assistance to Sandžak, where actors such as TIKA comes to the fore. Finally, Turkey is also active in the economic field – for decades there has been significant trade between Turkey and Sandžak, especially in the field of the textile industry, while recently Turkey has emerged as a financier of and contractor for infrastructure projects. However, Sandžak lacks profitable and employment-oriented Turkish direct investments.

Socio–Political Reality of Sandžak

Sandžak is a multi-ethnic cross-border region covering northern Montenegro and south-western Serbia. Although the area is not formally organized as an administrative region, its Bosniak inhabitants have a strong sense of distinct regional identity. As one of the last regions in the Western Balkans to remain under Ottoman rule, Sandžak is one of the areas with the most surviving traces of

its Oriental past. The region owes even its name to its Turkish past – Sandžak (sanjak) was the name for a type of administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire. After Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, the Sandžak of Novi Pazar occupied a unique position on the peninsula as the northernmost Ottoman territory in Europe, dividing Serbia and Montenegro. Through to frequent invocation

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2   A typical example of academic critics towards the term "neo-Ottoman" is the work of Inan Ruma (2012, 133) who labeled neo-Ottomanism as "…fancy, but inherently empty shell".

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of its status as a former Ottoman province, the modern identity of this region was formed over time (Morrison and

Roberts 2013). However, the issue of the name is among the points of contention between Serbs and Bosniaks.[3]

Location of Sandžak on the map of Serbia and Montenegro

Note: In 2014, the Montenegrin municipality of Plav was divided into two – Plav and Gusinje.

Sandžak's socio-political reality is specific because of its multiple ethnic, religious, and political cleavages that are concentrated on the small territory. The population of Serbian Sandžak consists of two dominant ethnic groups – Bosniaks (Muslims) and Serbs (Orthodox Christians). In the largest urban center, Novi Pazar, Bosniaks are a majority, as well as in Sjenica and Tutin. Serbs are a majority in Priboj and Nova Varoš, while the ratio in Prijepolje is nearly equal. In the overall demographic structure of Sandžak, Bosniaks predominate with almost two thirds of the total population, with an increasing trend in their demographic share over past decades.

Demographic structure of the Serbian part of Sanždak

	Novi Pazar	Tutin	Sjenica	Prijepolje	Priboj	Nova Varoš	**TOTAL**
Population	100 410	31 155	26 392	37 059	27 133	16 638	**238 787**
Bosniak*	81.21%	93.5%	78.55%	44.01%	21.2%	7.89%	**64.83%**
Serbs	16.16%	3.49%	19.55%	51.61%	75.85%	89.54%	**32.48%**

Note: Data according to 2011 census. Source: Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, https://www.stat.gov.rs/.
* The number of Bosniaks also includes those Sandžak residents who still declare themselves as Muslims in the national sense.

The demographic complexity of this society is also reflected in local political dynamics. Ethnic Serb political parties are mostly monolithic political subjects, with parties strongly leaning towards Belgrade and gathered around the ruling

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3   While the name Sandžak is most frequently used by the Bosniak/Muslim population, Serbs usually refer to it as an area of Raška (Raška oblast) or Old Serbia (stara Srbija). The Serb/Montenegrin population from Montenegro would simply call it the North (Sjever).

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Serbian progressive party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS). The situation with Bosniak parties is much more complex. Sandžak is dominated by three Bosniak political parties of similar strength. The oldest party is the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak (Stranka demokratske akcije Sandžaka – SDA) led by Sulejman Ugljanin, who imposed himself as the political leader of the Bosniaks of Sandžak in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, Rasim Ljajić, a former secretary of the SDA, left the party to form his Sandžak Democratic Party (Sandžačka demokratska partija – SDP) at the end of the decade. The party soon grew into a respectable political force, taking part in many coalition governments at the national level. During the last decade, the Justice and Reconciliation Party (Stranka pravde i pomirenja – SPP), led by the former key Muslim religious figure in Sandžak, Muamer Zukorlić, has emerged as a new force on the political scene of Sandžak. His religious authority among Bosniaks in Sandžak, the position of the continued informal leader of his Islamic community, together with its resources, enabled Zukorlić to quickly become one of the three most influential Bosniak political actors, if not the most influential.

A significant point of conflict on the socio-political map of Sandžak is the division that emerged in the Islamic Community in 2007. After the adoption of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities in 2006, prescribing there may only be one Islamic community on the territory of Serbia, the hitherto non-united muftiates in Serbia had to be united into a single Islamic community. In early 2007, a group of disgruntled imams of the Muftiate of Sandžak left the organization and embarked on the independent formation of a single Islamic community. As a result, there are two Islamic communities in Serbia today. The first is the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS), founded by the imams remaining in the former Sandžak Muftiate and loyal to Mufti Muamer Zukorlić. The other, founded by a group of dissatisfied imams, was named the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) and is based in Belgrade. The first community, led by the President of the Meshihat and the Mufti, is a functional part of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH). The ICoS has its own Riyaset and calls for the continuity of the Islamic Community of Serbia, founded in 1868, later merged into the Islamic community of Yugoslavia.

Turkish Presence in The Eyes of Locals

The following sections analyse locals' views of Turkey's presence, with an aim to enrich existing knowledge about Turkey's engagement in the Balkans from the receiving side. Examining how locals view, understand and make use of the Turkish presence helps to break some stereotypes about the assumed clear borders between the perceptions of different ethnic and religious groups. The first and second sections offer answers to questions about how locals see the political aspect of the Turkish presence. In that sense, differences in dominant perceptions between Serbs and Bosniaks will be examined, as well as within the Bosniak

population itself. The third part provides an insight into the perceptions of Turkey's role in mediation between ICoS and Zukorlić's ICiS. The fourth section deals with the perception of the economic aspect of Turkey's presence in Sandžak. The fifth section refers to the interaction between Turkey's presence and local political dynamics, observing Ankara's direct influence on those dynamics and its relations with local actors. The last section examines how Turkey passively affects local political dynamics, by being an object and an instrument used by locals in their political competition.

Turkey – imperial actor with neo-Ottoman ambitions?

In accordance with popular understanding of perceptions of the Turkish presence in the Balkans, the Serb citizens of Sandžak and their political elites hold a mainly negative view of the Turkish presence, seeing it through the framework of neo-Ottomanism and the hidden political agenda behind Turkey's activities. Many ethnic Serb citizens see a plan to return to the Balkans and achieve their imperial ambitions behind the increased Turkish presence.

Some quoted Erdogan's famous statement from Prizren in 2013 that "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo" and Davutoglu's statement about golden Ottoman times in the Balkans as evidence of Turkey's intentions. A member of the Serbian party from Sjenica views Turkey's entire foreign policy, especially in the Balkans, through the prism of neo-Ottomanism, pointing to Davutoglu's guidelines from his capital work "Strategic Depth" and his later statements.[4]

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4   Personal interview with a Serb party member, Sjenica, July 3, 2020.

Another member of the Serbian party from Prijepolje supported his position, bringing up the previously mentioned statements of Erdogan about Kosovo and the call for Turks in Europe to have more children "because they are the future of Europe".[5]

The key Bosniak political actors in Sandžak, as well as most of my interviewees of Bosniak ethnic background, reject the term "neo-Ottomanism" as a way to stigmatize Turkey, but it is interesting to note that, unlike the Serb respondents, not all of the Bosniak citizens were familiar with the term. Rasim Ljajić, the president of the SDP, sees the term as a "political phrase and nonsense" (Sandzakhaber, 2016). Most of the Bosniak interlocutors perceive neo-Ottomanism as a malicious term for describing contemporary Turkish foreign policy and something aimed at manipulating the domestic non-Muslim population's negative sentiment about Turkey. But the opposite perception of the term was present as well. For example, a journalist from an independent media outlet from Novi Pazar does not see neo-Ottomanism as a gimmick of Serbian Orientalists as most of the Bosniak non-liberal elite do, but as Erdogan's intention to manipulate his own public, playing the card of imperial nostalgia with his own voters.[6] According to this understanding, the term was not coined by malicious domestic Turkophobes in order to spread the fear about Turkey's return to the Balkans, but by Turkish political elites with the goal of mobilisation of their voters.

Erdogan – sultan of Sandžak's big brother state

Contrary to anti-Turkish attitudes among Serbs, many among the Bosniak citizens and part of the political elite perceive Turkish presence in positive terms and cited fraternal assistance and support as a motive for the presence of Turkey in Sandžak. For many citizens of Bosniak background, Turkey is perceived as a "big brother" and President Erdogan as a "sultan". Esad Džudžo, former president of the Bosniak National Council,[7] sees Turkey as a "protector country" of Bosniaks (Sandzakhaber 2014). A political activist from Novi Pazar and a member of the local administration in Sjenica, both coming from the SDA, have a similar stance, referring to the fact that good state relations between Turkey and Serbia are beneficial, since Turkey's intensive presence makes Bosniaks feel secure.[8] Among the Bosniak residents of Sandžak, negative emotions towards Erdogan are very rare and for the vast majority, he is simply a "sultan".[9] Some of them cited Turkey's rise during Erdogan's rule as his greatest source of credibility. Noticeably, respondents had a strong identification with the rise of Turkey, affected by narratives about glorious common past and a privileged position of Balkan Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.[10] Part of the credit for this situation may be found in the local media, which broadcast Turkey's foreign policy activities with special enthusiasm.

Erdogan's popularity in Sandžak is vividly illustrated by the events that followed Turkey's 2016 coup attempt when rallies in support of Erdogan in Novi Pazar briefly united members of opposing Bosniak political camps. A few days after the coup, the local SDP administration in Novi Pazar issued a statement fully supporting the legally elected Turkish government and warning citizens of Turkish opposition figure Fethullah Gulen's "terrorist" network in Sandžak (Politika 2016). Several interviewees pointed to the case of the mayor of Novi Pazar's adviser for international cooperation, who was removed from the local political scene shortly after being identified as a Gulenist.[11] The overall attitude of the political actors in Sandžak towards the situation in Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt speaks to the importance of relations with Ankara in their local political calculations. Local self-government has gone far beyond its competence in its treatment of Erdogan's opponents, in an obvious attempt to prove itself a loyal partner to Ankara. On the other hand, mutual support for Erdogan has united opposing political actors from Sandžak like never before.

However, despite prevailing sympathy among Bosniak citizens and elites towards Erdogan's Turkey, critical voices also exist among more liberally-oriented Bosniaks. Sead

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5   Personal interview with a Serb party member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

6   Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

7   National councils are representative bodies of national minorities in Serbia.

8   Personal interview with an SDA member, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020; Personal interview with an SDA member, Sijenica, July 6, 2020.

9   During Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar in 2017, thousands of gathered citizens ecstatically chanted "Sultan Erdogan".

10   "We were elite then" (during the Ottoman times, A/N), proudly said one middle-aged Bosniak citizen. Personal interview by author, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

11   Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 23, 2020; Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020; Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020..

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Biberović, director of the pro-civic Urban In NGO from Novi Pazar, points out the absurdity of the abstract and unrequited love of most Bosniaks towards Turkey, comparing it with Serbs' sentiments towards Russia.[12] Biberović's opinion could be considered among pragmatic views, that also include the views of most respondents of liberal provenance and a few from a conservative milieu close to Zukorlić's SPP. Unlike the uncritical stances of the SDA and SDP, members of Zukorlić's structures share the valorization of Turkey's role in Sandžak with liberals. They mostly judge Turkey's presence in terms of concrete benefits for the local population, relying less on the emotional component and identification with the Turkish rise itself. In observing Turkish politics, both Sead Biberović and Jahja Fehratović, Zukorlić's close associate, emphasize the need to differentiate between the Turkish state, people, and Erdogan himself.[13] But the vast majority of Bosniak respondents do not make that distinction – Erdogan is the most popular politician among them, even when their own political representatives are taken into account.

Turkey and the economy of Sandžak – a betrayal of raised expectations

Although significant Turkish investments have been announced, the economic field is a problematic case for finding evidence of Ankara's declared intentions to help the „brotherly" Bosniak people, who perceive Turkey as economically potent enough to solve many of their problems.[14] Investments in the manufacturing sector and agriculture have not gone further than pompous announcements during Turkish officials' visits to Sandžak. Most of my interviewees pointed to the trade that has been going on for decades between the businessmen of Sandžak and those from Turkey, especially in the textile sector. However, putting aside visible TIKA investments, most of my interlocutors point out the absence of direct profit- and employment-oriented investments from Turkey, despite the promises.[15] Several years ago, then minister Rasim Ljajić announced an investment from a prestigious clothing manufacturer from Istanbul, but it was never realized. During Erdogan's visit to Serbia and Novi Pazar in 2017, contracts were signed for the export of traditional Turkish dumplings from Sandžak to Turkey, which never started. Another project agreed to during the same visit, which also required some investments in processing facilities, was the annual export of 5,000 tons of beef to Turkey, but it was never realized as well.

The failure to realize the mentioned projects caused discontent among the elites with whom I had the opportunity to talk. The indignation is greater given the fact that there are hundreds of Turkish factories operating throughout Serbia. The interviewees mostly agree that the often-repeated assessment that "Turks give investments to Serbs and love to Bosniaks" absolutely corresponds to the truth. Salahudin Fetić, journalist close to Zukorlić, recalls Erdogan's statement that "Sarajevo and Istanbul are brothers, while Belgrade and Ankara are partners", alluding to the emotional rather than utilitarian relations between Bosniaks and Turks.[16] The most frequently cited reasons for the lack of investment are pragmatic ones – the unfavorable geographical position of Sandžak, bad infrastructure, and poor local administration. However, Jahja Fehratović, a close associate of Zukorlić, questions this argument, citing the example of Turkey's investment in Raška, only 20 kilometers away from Novi Pazar.[17]

Unlike Fehratović and most of Zukorlić's other associates, the members of SDA and SDP I talked to have an uncritical tone about the lack of direct investments, rather seeing the reasons for this in the geography and bad infrastructure of Sandžak, or even obstacles posed by the central government in Belgrade. A high-ranking member of the SDA, with the experience of meetings with

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12   Personal interview with Sead Biberović, director of Urban In NGO, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

13   Both pointed to the strong historical ties between Bosniaks and Turks, whose relations cannot be viewed only through the framework of the contemporary Turkish government's attitude towards Bosniaks.
       Personal interview with Sead Biberović, director of Urban In NGO, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020; Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

14   Many of my Bosniak citizen interviewees see Turkey as an economic power, and the rapid infrastructure development over the past 20 years was the most frequently cited indicator of its strength.

15   Even though TIKA had significant investments in the restoration of public infrastructure or Ottoman cultural heritage, it rarely invested in productive fields. Distribution of raspberry seedlings or agricultural equipment to Sandžak residents are among the rare production-oriented donations, though ones of marginal reach.

16   Personal interview with Salahudin Fetić, director of Sandžak TV, Novi Pazar, June 29, 2020.

17   Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

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delegations from Turkey, points out the desire of the Turks not to provoke public opinion in Serbia by investing in Sandžak.[18] According to him, Turkey first intends to change its negative stereotypes among the Serbian public by investing throughout Serbia. Turkey's increased regional presence has been accompanied by narratives of a Muslim population-centric 'return to the Balkans', and investment across Serbia before direct investment in Sandžak could contribute to a favorable shift in Serbian public opinion.

The only economy-related project is the reconstruction of the road connecting Novi Pazar and Tutin, misinterpreted as a direct foreign investment by many interlocutors. The project, announced back in 2010, is currently under realization by the Turkish company "Tashyapi". However, the reconstruction is being funded with loans provided by Turkey, which is why the investment cannot be classified as FDI. Some of my interviewees pointed out the unfavorable aspects of the project, namely the engagement of a foreign company instead of competent domestic companies, and the fact that the project is financed through a loan.

Despite the close ties between Bosniak citizens and politicians with Turks, the mentioned cases indicate that Turkish business is guided by profit rather than emotion. Otherwise, at least one among the hundreds of Turkish manufacturing facilities opened in the rest of Serbia would end up in Sandžak. Instead, Turkish businessmen preferred to invest in more geographically favorable areas with developed infrastructure. The Turks' insistence that the reconstruction of the Novi Pazar – Tutin road get carried out by a Turkish company and with Turkish labor despite the competence of local enterprises to perform such work shows that Turkish investors worry little about the added value of their project for the local population. On the other hand, the apparent divergence between Ankara's rhetoric and economic activity speaks to its insincere approach to Sandžak. The rising of expectations by top officials, followed by pompous media content, further fuels the narrative of Turkey as a protector of Bosniaks. However, Turkey does not act in accordance with its declared intentions.

The attitude towards local economic issues, therefore, remains the most significant litmus test of overall attitudes about the Turkish presence in Sandžak, through which both liberals and Zukorlić's conservatives perceive the true intentions of Turkey. Given that there are no direct investments in Sandžak on the Turkish side, some of the interviewees expressed the view that raising locals' expectations was for Turkish domestic use, and in the service of Erdogan's personal interests.

A pro-civic NGO activist from Novi Pazar considers the failure to fulfill promises made during Erdogan's visits to be hypocritical.[19] He states that the visits were organized and timed in a way that, at key moments for the AKP, raised Erdogan's rating at home, especially among Bosniak descendants from the Balkans living in Turkey.[20] His stance is shared by a journalist from Novi Pazar, who sees "the way of populist reign in Turkey" in Ankara's activities in the Balkans, and the tool with an echo for domestic use, serving the mobilization of voters.[21] NGO activist from Sjenica cites that "misuse of sentiments" as a negative side of Turkey's presence.[22] And indeed, Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar and promises made there were timed in a way that they could produce some benefits at home. Namely, crucial presidential elections were held a few months after his visit, when Erdogan materialized the results of the 2017 Constitutional referendum, further centralizing power.

Turkish religious diplomacy in Sandžak

The case of division between two Islamic communities operating in Serbia is one of the most significant issues of contestation among Bosniaks in Sandžak, with reflections on the religious, political, and legal spheres of Sandžak's socio-political everyday life. The features of the conflict go beyond the continuous raising of questions of "legality" and "legitimacy", or its effect on the quality of religious services provided to the Muslim inhabitants of Sandžak. The conflict has an unequivocal political connotation and is a first-class political issue for some local actors, especially Zukorlić

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18   Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.

19   Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

20   Ibid

21   Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

22   Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Sjenica, July 3, 2020.

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and his SPP. The political dimension of the conflict can also be seen through the engagement of mediators from Turkey, who have been repeatedly offering their assistance to the warring parties in order to reach a compromise. Turkish mediation in the reconciliation of the two Islamic Communities in Serbia not only represents a significant component of the Turkish presence in Sandžak but is also a game-changer in the way in which some local political and religious authorities perceive this presence.

The first of its initiatives for reconciliation, known as "the Turkish initiative", dates back to 2011. It was a diplomatic one, with Ahmet Davutoglu, at that time Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, as its main protagonist. Later initiatives were taken over by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a Turkish state institution dealing with religious issues both domestically and internationally. The first initiative was unsuccessful and definitively abandoned in 2012. During Diyanet's subsequent initiatives, the attitudes of Zukorlić's ICiS toward the Turkish reconciliation attempts were further sharpened, as they accused Diyanet of trying to take control over their community and condemned the initiatives as interference in its internal affairs (Mesihat 2013).

The most severe ICiS statements against Turkey were issued in 2019, during Diyanet's representatives' visit to the enthronement of ICoS' Senad Halitović as Sandžak Mufti. Zukorlić himself, the former Mufti of the ICiS, called on Erdogan and Diyanet to stop those who break up the Islamic community in their name, while the ICiS threatened to sever relations with Diyanet (Mesihat 2019; Snews 2019). Interlocutors close to Zukorlić, such as Rešad Plojović, believe that mediation initiatives were Turkey's attempt to subsume local Islamic communities under the service of the Turkish Diyanet.[23] The ICiS's refusal to agree on such terms then, according to him, resulted in Diyanet's hostility towards ICiS (Plojović 2019). Salahudin Fetić, close to Zukorlić, also believes that Diyanet did not want a partnership on equal terms, but a superior relationship, as

in the case with the Islamic Community of Montenegro.[24] Jahja Fehratović, another of Zukorlić's close associates, sees Diyanet as a political instrument of Turkey's current state apparatus used to govern Islamic communities in Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro.[25]

In contrast, leader of the competing ICoS, Sead Nasufović, who is close to Turkey, talks about more than 30 attempts by Diyanet to reconcile the two Islamic communities, stating that Diyanet approached impartially.[26] Reis has a manifestly positive attitude towards the role of Turkey, seeing the reasons for the failure of the mediation attempt in the rigidity of Zukorlić's ICiS.[27] Members of political parties rivalling Zukorlić's also emphasize the positive side of Turkish initiatives. A senior member of the nationalist SDA highlighted Turkey's good intentions to help the reunion of the Islamic communities, given Turkey's interest in Bosniak unity.[28] The SDP member holds a similar stance, seeing Diyanet's engagement as a fraternal hand given to locals.[29]

The case of Turkish intervention into mediation between two Islamic communities is an important one, given the fact that it produced ruptures in the perceptions of Turkey within the Bosniak populace. The positive attitudes of the SDP and SDA towards Turkish mediation may be observed as a pragmatic political calculation. While they did not risk worsening relations with Ankara, the religious dispute is a place where their and Turkey's counter-Zukorlić interests meet. Moreover, if the dispute between two Islamic communities remains in force, Zukorlić would have a continuous obstacle in his attempts to establish good relations with Turkey. Otherwise, the positions of the SDA, the nationalist Bosniak Party, which insists so much on Bosniak unity with Sarajevo, would be hardly understandable. Their support for the ICoS, based in Belgrade and outside the jurisdiction of Sarajevo, certainly does not contribute to bringing Sandžak closer to Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the ICoS, the positions are quite clear

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23 Personal interview with Rešad Plojović, the ICiS official, Novi Pazar, July 2, 2020.

24 Personal interview with Salahudin Fetić, director of Sandžak TV, Novi Pazar, June 29, 2020.

25 Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

26 Personal interview with Sead Nasufović, Reisu-l-ulema of the ICoS, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

27 Ibid
    The issue of IC unity has been permanently raised to a political level by Zukorlić's ICiS, adding the issue of Bosniak national survival in Serbia on the table, while inviting the other side to unconditionally return under the auspices of the only legal Islamic community. More in: Mesihat (2016).

28 Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.

29 Personal interview with an SDP member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

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– any initiative that offers the possibility of any compromise solution is better than agreeing to the rigid demands of the ICiS for their unconditional abolition. Finally, for Zukorlić and his ICiS, any cooperation with Turkey in the reunion plan would undermine their hard line. They chose

independence at the cost of lack of Diyanet material assistance and at the expense of the political interest of SPP to dominate the Sandžak political scene, something certainly more achievable in the case of good relations with Turkey.

Turkey and the local political dynamics

Turkey's presence affects local political dynamics in Sandžak to a large degree, whether actively through relations with local political actors, or passively where the Turkish card is played by locals for their own political interests and in their own disputes.

Turks have the closest political cooperation with Ugljanin's SDA. A member of that party sees the reason in fraternal relations between SDA and Erdogan's AKP and good personal relations between the two party leaders.[30] Although none of the three dominant Bosniak parties in Sandžak, nor media close to them, lack support for Turkey, the SDA remains Erdogan's favorite on the ground.[31] However, the problem for this long-term arrangement is the fact that SDA is losing power in Sandžak – after the 2020 local elections, they remained in power only in Tutin. For that reason, Rejhan Kurtović, a member of Zukorlić's SPP, does not see anything good in Turkey's favoring of the SDA.[32] He considers it a declining party, kept alive only by funds and support from Turkey, and wonders whom Turkey will rely on once the SDA greatly weakens.

Turkey's second favorite is Ljajić's SDP, which can be partly attributable to Erdogan's close relations with the Serbian president and the SDP's participation in every single state-level coalition government with Vučić's SNS. It is Ljajić who can offer more to Ankara than the rival SDA these days, especially after Ugljanin sharpened his rhetoric against Belgrade, which in turn ignores his SDA for their pro-Sandžak-autonomy agenda.

Muamer Zukorlić and organizations close to him stand out as political actors the least close to Turkey. However, now the political leader, and once the Chief Mufti of the ICiS, Zukorlić together with his entourage do not attack Erdogan directly. Instead, they object exclusively to lower

levels of government, diplomatic representatives of Turkey in Serbia or Diyanet, which they see as an actor who provides wholehearted support to the rival ICoS (Fehratović 2013). Tense relations between Zukorlć and some actors from Turkey date back to the time of the split in the Islamic community, and was later further strained during Turkish attempts to interfere. According to Rešad Plojović from the ICiS, Zukorlić was marked as a disruptive factor during the mandate (prior to 2010) of the former Turkish ambassador to Serbia, Suha Umar, who allegedly provided false information about Zukorlić to Ankara (Plojović 2019). Plojović pointed out that the ICiS had written to Erdogan on several occasions about the omissions of his diplomatic officials, but without success.[33]

In 2017, Zukorlić himself expressed hopes that the departure of a key duo blamed for straining relations between his ICiS and Turkey, Davutoglu and Mehmed Gormez, Diyanet's president, could resolve the misunderstanding (Sandzakpress 2017). However, Zukorlić's relationship with relevant Turkish actors has not significantly warmed. Zukorlić's political opponents see the reason for this in his alleged closeness to religious-political movements of which Turkey is not in favor, such as Gulenism or Wahhabism.

Regardless of criticism of certain Turkish actions by some Bosniak actors, the overall media image of Turkey, and Erdogan specifically, remains very positive in Sandžak. Even media close to Zukorlić supported Erdogan at key moments, such as the confrontation with the Gulenists or the situation after the failed 2016 coup attempt (Sandzakpress 2014; Sandzakpress 2016a). Media close to Ljajić's SDP are also highly supportive of Erdogan. For example, the portal Sandzakhaber (2020) supported Erdogan's decision to send an army to Libya in early 2020

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30   Personal interview with an SDA member, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

31   There are frequent mutual inter-party visits between Erdogan's AKP and Ugljanin's SDA. Also, the Bosniak National Council, which is under SDA's control, is in excellent relations with Turkey's state authorities.

32   Personal interview with Rejhan Kurtović, a member of SPP, Sjenica, July 5, 2020.

33   Personal interview with Rešad Plojović, the ICiS official, Novi Pazar, July 2, 2020.

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in a laudatory article with the title "Sultan has made his decision". Such headlines and the enthusiastic transmission of Turkish foreign policy activities are certainly part of the reasons why Turkey was perceived as a leader and protector of the Muslim world.

Given Turkey's image in Sandžak, maintaining close relations between Sandžak politicians and the Turkish authorities certainly has positive implications for their local popularity. The partisan media are working hard to publicly expose their representatives' meetings with Turkish officials. But when it comes to their rival meeting Turks, they hardly ever mention them. Media outlets close to parties present key local political figures in a way that fits their own political interests.

Turkish factor as an instrument in local political competition

The popularity and importance of Turkey are also used as a weapon in local parties' mutual competition. It is often the case that actors in Sandžak label each other as enemies of Turkey, in order to tarnish the reputation of the other side in the local public image or damage its image in Turkey. A pro-civil NGO activist from Novi Pazar points out the public's negative attitude and the anti-Turkish stigma against anyone who publicly expressed a critical tone towards Turkey and Erdogan.[34] A theologian from Sjenica supported such a view, referring to the recent trend of labelling a person or organization as Gulenist in order to damage his reputation in Turkey.[35]

Zukorlić can again serve as an illustrative case in point as it was his figure which was most often accused of Gulenist or Wahhabist ties by other public officials. Rifat Fejzić, the Montenegrin Reis (Islamic community leader) and close to Diyanet, used his position to publicly proclaim Zukorlić as an enemy of Turkey (Sandzakpress 2016b). Similarly, the Snews web-portal, close to the SDA, linked Zukorlić's associates to those on the Turkish wanted list (Snews 2020). A similar opinion is held by a high-ranking member of the SDA, who was allegedly familiar with the cooperation between Zukorlić and some people close to Gulen's movement before the coup in Turkey.[36] He later added that within "Zukorlić's Islamic Community the Wahhabis have room to act", something that certainly would not be welcomed gladly by the Turkish side. Portal Sandzakhaber (2017a), close to the SDP, went a step further in stigmatization, describing the non-positive comments of BDZ supporters (predecessor of the SPP) about Turkey and Erdogan on social media as "betrayal". Also, the same portal accused Zukorlić and his close associates of maintaining close relations with the Mufti of Albania, allegedly a "vassal of the FETO organization" (Sandzakhaber 2018).

Two days prior to Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar, SDP's Sandzakhaber (2017b) reminded the local public of a text by one of Zukorlić's associates, Jahja Fehratović, in which he criticized Turks for the way they were involved in mediation between the two conflicting Islamic communities. An SDP member interviewed by the author also understood both the Gulenists and the Wahhabis to be "on the Mufti's team", asking in a concluding manner if anyone ever saw Erdogan shake hand with Zukorlić during his visits to Novi Pazar.[37] More recently, Sandzakhaber (2019) accused Mustafa Cerić, former Bosnian Reis and close to Zukorlić, for acting in an anti-Turkish manner when he publicly blamed Erdogan for not pushing Vučić to recognize the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. Sandzakhaber described the act as a "manifestation of turkophobic discourse produced by the Arabic centers of power".

Structures close to Zukorlić did not stand aside in this labelling, and also resorted to the stigmatization of competitors as Turkey's opponents. Immediately after the coup, Zukorlić's media declared Reisu-l-ulema of the competing Islamic Community of Montenegro and his closest associates as Gulenists (Sandzakpress 2016a). Moreover, former Reisu-l-ulema of rival ICoS Adem Zilkić and his closest associates were in the same manner labeled as enemies of Turkey (Sandzakpress 2016a). As part of the same campaign, one of those marked as Gulenist was Sead Ibrić, an Islamic theologian and president of the „Most" organization from Novi Pazar. Although he does not hide his connection with the Hizmet movement, whose spiritual leader is Fethullah Gulen, he sees the „Gulenist" stigma as a

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34   Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

35   Personal interview with an Islamic theologian, Sjenica, July 4, 2020.

36   Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.

37   Personal interview with an SDP member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

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form of inaccurate personalization of the movement.[38] On the other hand, relying on his familiarity with the Hizmet movement and the people targeted in the campaign, Ibrić sees the campaign as an attempt by Zukorlić to fawn over the Turkish government. If Fejzić and Zilkić, leaders of two competing Islamic communities, were indeed close to Erdogan's enemies, it is hard to understand how they preserved good relations with Diyanet and Turkey. Most recently, Zukorlić's media reported how Rasim Ljajić, president of the SDP and then-minister in the Serbian government, was on strike in Turkish media because of Serbia's arms exports to Armenia, even though it was only his statement about the issue that was transmitted in media Sandzakpress referred to (Sandzakpress 2020).

These examples speak to the importance of Turkey for local political dynamics, something expected given its image in Sandžak. But instead of exerting an open influence on the local political scene by using its leverage in Sandžak, Turkey rather appears as an object in local political ambitions. The (mis)use of narratives about relations with Ankara seems like a pragmatic political strategy for local political actors. On the one hand, local politicians are recommending themselves to Turks and proving their loyalty. This way, locals are promoting themselves in front of domestic and international audiences as friends of Turkey, simultaneously struggling for the favor of Ankara and local opinion, strongly in favor of Turkey. On the other side, their strategies aim to damage an opponent's reputation in Turkey and to discredit it in front of Sandžak public opinion. Promoting narratives about the other's anti-Turkish stances certainly rejects and alienates some of the opponents' voters, while an echo might also be heard in the Turkish embassy.

Conclusion

Despite growing interest in studying Turkey's presence in the Balkans over the past two decades, there is a lack of research on how locals perceive that presence. With a focus on Sandžak residents' perceptions and relying on a mix of desk and field research, this study aimed to bridge that gap, using the region's socio-political specificity as a base for adding to existing knowledge about Turkey's presence. For that purpose, the study's research focus was related to the understanding of Turkey's presence by the locals, determining the difference in perceptions between different socio-political groups, as well as on the way that the Turkish factor is used by locals for local political interests and competition.

The results confirmed the expected differences in the attitudes of the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, i.e. Bosniaks and Serbs. Serb citizens and their local political representatives mostly view Turkey through the lens of perceived negative historical experience, and see the modern Turkish state as an imperial power pursuing its neo-Ottoman agenda in the Balkans.

In contrast, many Bosniak citizens, together with the representatives of the Bosniak parties SDA and SDP, have a positive opinion about the presence and role of Turkey in Sandžak. Bosniak citizens tend to see Turkey as a protector, a "big brother," and a country that under the leadership of "Sultan" Erdogan experienced a renaissance that allowed it to play a much larger role in international relations and act in the role of leader in the Islamic world.

However, the perception of Turkey's presence among Bosniak elites is not monolithic, as one could assume. Among the political elites, the most pragmatic and critical position was held by interviewers coming from a milieu close to Zukorlić, a conservative political and formerly religious leader. Even though they never questioned Turkey's significance for Bosniaks or Erdogan himself, they blamed Ankara for favoring the rival SDA, the unfavorable role Turks played in mediating between the two warring Islamic communities, and the lack of direct Turkish investment in the economy of Sandžak. Despite the unfulfilled promises and data showing dubious Turkish involvement in the economic sphere, the representatives of the opposing SDA and SDP parties did not blame Turkey for the lack of direct investments. Zukorlićs' negative views on Turkey's economic passivity are shared by pro-civic NGO activists and journalists of liberal provenance, who add the abuse of local pro-Turkish sentiment for the internal political interests of the ruling clique in Ankara to the list of objections to Turkey's presence.

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38   Personal interview with Sead Ibrić, director of Most NGO, Belgrade, December 1, 2020.

Last but not least, the research indicates that Turkey's popularity in domestic public opinion is being used by local actors to settle scores with political opponents. The importance of relations with Turkey for their political status in Sandžak imposed the using of Turkish card as a pragmatic political strategy. While political actors and their media promote their own cooperation with Turkish representatives, they keep silent about their rivals' collaboration with Turks and promote narratives according to which political opponents are enemies of Turkey. Labeling opponents as enemies of Turkey may prove to be an effective strategy, given that it not only decreases the reputation of the rival political option before local public opinion but also results in an echo that may be heard in Turkey.

The geopolitical significance of a certain area and the declared will to help do not imply exclusively economic help. While it could likely do more to address many of the economic problems in Sandžak, Turkey does not do so, avoiding acting on raised local expectations. Interest-driven policy, both in a policical and economic sense, contributed to the divergence of local views, not only between the clear and expected emotion-based stances of Bosniaks and Serbs, but also among Bosniaks themselves. The cases of paternalism-oriented mediations or abusing economic matters for Ankara's own political interests are among factors that shaped that divergence decisively, signaling that the Turkish presence in the region is not a one-directional process. Instead, the Turkish presence is observed in different ways by locals, and as such it becomes a part of local political dynamics.

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6. Is the EU Taking Friends for Granted? Partisanship and Support for External Actors in North Macedonia

Martin Naunov

Executive Summary

Aggregate survey results have often led analysts to assume that the "East vs. West" debate in North Macedonia is not a polarizing issue and that Macedonian citizens are overwhelmingly eager to see their country embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutional structures. In this paper, I analyze a number of surveys—including surveys by IRI, NDI, and USAID—and show that while virtually all ethnic Albanians are in favor of EU and NATO membership, ethnic Macedonians are, in fact, largely divided on questions related to the country's geopolitical future. I show that partisanship is a major driver, or at least predictor, of this divide—those favoring the ruling Social Democratic party (SDSM) are largely pro-Western in their orientation while supporters of the second major party, the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE, display partiality towards Russia. I argue that this divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites, despite the claim by all major parties (including VMRO-DPMNE) that they are pro-Western.

In an effort to better illustrate the party elites' rhetoric and stance in the "East vs. West" debate and begin to illustrate the importance of elite cues, I look at two of the most momentous occasions in the recent history of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration: the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change referendum. In short, I contend that the party elites' rhetoric regarding EU, NATO, and Russia during these events begins to lay bare VMRO-DPMNE leaders' strategy to feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community—thereby allowing them to reap the economic benefits that EU ties facilitate—while simultaneously ingratiating themselves with Russia and snubbing key Euro-Atlantic principles concerning human rights and good governance. I show that VMRO-DPMNE's strategy of "playing it both ways" has not eluded rank-and-file voters who have, for the most part, successfully deciphered party elites' cues and have become well-aware of the difference between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE in terms of genuine commitment to improving the country's EU and NATO integration prospects. As such, in response to this rhetoric, I explain how support among VMRO-DPMNE voters for EU and NATO integration has fallen substantially.

Finally, this paper cautions that further undue complications with respect to North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations could compromise Macedonian citizens' trust in the credibility of EU's commitment to the country. In turn, this would not only undercut the EU's power to drive democratization but could also erode support for Euro-Atlantic integration which, I show, is already more precarious than is often assumed.

Introduction

Immediately after North Macedonia gained independence in 1991, the country's political elites acted decisively to align the country with the Euro-Atlantic community. In 1993, the Macedonian Parliament voted unanimously to undertake the necessary steps for joining NATO and, in 1995, North Macedonia became the second post-Yugoslav county to join NATO's Partnership for Peace, outpaced only by Slovenia. Similarly, in 2001, North Macedonia became the first country in Southeast Europe to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU and gained candidate status four years later in 2005, earlier than any other post-Yugoslav country but Slovenia.

North Macedonia's name dispute with Greece, however, significantly obstructed the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. The dispute centered on North Macedonia's

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determination to maintain its name as "The Republic of Macedonia" following the 1991 break-up of Yugoslavia, a decision that Greece insisted appropriated its cultural identity and implied territorial claims over a Greek region also called Macedonia. This bilateral dispute, for example, led Greece to, in 2008, wield its veto power to block then-Macedonia's accession to NATO, despite disapproval by all other NATO member states, which insisted that the country had met all requirements for NATO membership.

Ten years after the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, however, and following intense diplomatic negotiations, in June 2018 the governments of Greece and then-Macedonia signed the Prespa Agreement, setting up a framework for changing the latter country's name to "The Republic of North Macedonia." As long as the Prespa Agreement was upheld—which required the Macedonian Parliament to amend the constitution and officially change the country's name—Greece vowed to no longer brandish its veto prerogative and a torrent of EU and US leaders, for their part, promised Macedonians a propitious outlook for their country's integration in the Euro-Atlantic family.

Domestically, the adoption and ratification of the name-change agreement spurred fiery public debates and protests, as well as the failure of a name-change referendum due to the turnout rate (37%) being well below the 50% threshold necessary to validate the results (Marusic 2018). Internationally, the painful compromise by now-North Macedonia was seen as manifesting Macedonians' steadfast commitment to the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

Survey polls are often conjured up to provide further solace to Western observers about Macedonians' loyalty to the West amidst concerns over the increasingly activist foreign policies of "black knight" actors like Russia and China. Namely, citizens of North Macedonia continuously express greater levels of support for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration compared to citizens of other countries in the region. Specifically, a recent poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI; 2019) shows that 65% of Macedonian citizens say they would vote to join NATO compared, for instance, to only 6% of Serbian citizens stating they would do the same. For Montenegrin and Bosnian citizens, these figures are 33% and 49% respectively—still considerably lower than the support for NATO among Macedonians (IRI 2019). Similarly, compared to citizens of Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, citizens of North Macedonia are the

least likely to support their country joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (IRI 2019).

Although comforting, these aggregate survey results are somewhat misleading as they falsely imply that the "East vs. West" debate in North Macedonia is not at all a polarizing issue—that Macedonians have completed their geopolitical calculations and are overwhelmingly eager to see their country embedded in the Euro-Atlantic institutional structure. In this paper, I delve deeper into surveys by the IRI, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Tim Institute, and TV Sitel-Detektor and show that while ethnic Albanians are overwhelmingly in favor of EU and NATO membership, ethnic Macedonians are, in fact, strongly divided on questions related to the country's geopolitical future.

All of the aforementioned surveys are nationally representative, with sample sizes between 1,100 (IRI) and 1,228 (USAID). Furthermore, IRI and NDI fielded the same questions in other countries in the Balkan region, allowing me to draw comparisons between North Macedonia and other Western Balkan countries with respect to mass attitudes towards international actors such as the EU and Russia. With the exception of USAID's Media Consumption Survey, which surveyed respondents above the age of 15, all the other surveys sampled respondents aged 18 and above. Most of the surveys I analyze were conducted in 2018 through face-to-face interviews—specifically, the IRI and the NDI surveys were conducted in November 2018 while the USAID and the Tim Institute surveys were conducted in August and September 2018; Data from the Detektor survey comes from 2019.

Relying on the above-mentioned surveys, I show that the divide among ethnic Macedonians on questions pertaining to North Macedonia's desired geopolitical future is partisan in nature—supporters of the Social Democrats (SDSM) are largely pro-Western in their orientation while supporters of the second major party, the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE, have a penchant for stronger ties with Russia. I suggest that this divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites, despite the claim by all major parties (including VMRO-DPMNE) that they are pro-Western. While a more detailed discussion of party cueing can be found later in the paper, in short, party cueing refers to the concept that political parties do not simply reveal or channel voters' attitudes on issues, they also shape them; put differently, when party elites take a position on a given issue, rank-and-file voters tend to fall in line and embrace

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the stance of their preferred party (Brader et a., 2020; Brader and Tucker 2012; Campbell et al., 1960; Lenz 2013).

Finally, I caution that further stumbling blocks with respect to the EU's accession negotiations with North Macedonia that are unrelated to the Copenhagen Criteria, such as the name issue with Greece, would likely jeopardize Macedonians' trust in the credibility of the EU's commitment to the country. In turn, this would not only compromise the EU's power to drive democratization (Vachudova 2005) but could also erode support for Euro-Atlantic integration which, I show, is already more precarious than is often assumed.

What Does the Public Opinion Data Tell Us?

Ethnicity

In the aggregate, survey results on topics related to Macedonian citizens' views towards foreign powers suggest united support for the country's integration in the Euro-Atlantic community.

A 2018 poll by NDI (NDI 2018), for instance, shows that Macedonian citizens feel generally positive towards the Euro-Atlantic community: 49% of Macedonians feel favorably towards the EU and only 18% evaluate the EU unfavorably; similarly, 27% of Macedonians said they feel unfavorable towards NATO but nearly twice as many (45%) evaluate NATO favorably. For Russia, respondents seem split: 32% of Macedonian citizens see it favorably and 33% unfavorably. Nevertheless, NDI (2018) maintains that "Macedonia's citizens show a clear preference" and "profess the strongest support" for Euro-Atlantic institutions when compared to Serbian and Montenegrin citizens, who "express greater support for Russia and China than for Western countries and the EU."

Probing beneath the surface of aggregate survey findings, however, indicates profound divides between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian citizens, divides that call into question conclusions that Macedonian citizens are united in their commitment to the country's Euro-Atlantic progress.

For contextual awareness, about 64% of North Macedonia's citizens identify as ethnic Macedonians while ethnic Albanians constitute approximately a quarter of the country's population (Census 2002). In 2001, the country nearly slid into civil war as rebels demanding greater rights for the ethnic Albanian minority launched an uprising against the Skopje authorities. While ethnic relations have improved in the past two decades, tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians continue to prevail.

Ethnic divides are also conspicuous in citizens' attitudes towards foreign powers and North Macedonia's place in the world. A 2018 poll, for instance, reveals that close to 55% of ethnic Macedonians evaluate NATO either negatively (28.5%) or neutrally (26.3%), compared to only 18.8% of ethnic Albanians expressing the same sentiments (Media Consumption Survey 2019). Similarly, while one out of four (23.2%) ethnic Macedonians would oppose the country joining the EU, virtually no ethnic Albanian (0.4%) would vote against EU integration (Detektor 2019).

Still, although lower compared to the aggregate levels and those among ethnic Albanians, levels of support among ethnic Macedonians for EU and NATO integration remain relatively high. However, so do levels of support for intensified cooperation with non-democratic countries, in particular Russia. For instance, a 2018 nationally representative survey shows that, on average, ethnic Macedonians trust the Russian government more than they trust the EU and the US (Tim Institut 2018). Ethnic Albanians, on the other hand, appear extremely distrustful of the Russian government (Tim Institut 2018). Furthermore, Russia ranks second highest—preceded by the US but followed by the EU—for the international actor ethnic Macedonians perceive the most supportive of North Macedonia's interests.

Thus, closer investigation is needed into the attitudes of ethnic Macedonians about their country's geopolitical future. What are the key factors, in other words, that determine whether a given respondent is pro-Western oriented or whether they harbor sentiments that are more favorable to Russia? In what follows, I begin to puzzle out the support for "black knight" actors in North Macedonia. I do so by focusing my attention on a factor that social scientists have continuously found critical in driving peoples' attitudes: partisanship.

Parties and Partisanship

Ethnic Macedonians are for the most part split into two partisan camps—supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SDSM) and supporters of the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE (Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020). Currently in opposition, VMRO-DPMNE was the governing party for over a decade. As the governing party, between 2006 and 2017, VMRO-DPMNE called for EU and NATO membership as a matter of foreign policy, all the while curtailing human rights and pursuing economically corrupt and ethno-populist domestic strategies (See e.g. Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020). In 2017, a coalition led by SDSM succeeded in unseating the incumbent populist-authoritarian regime. The new SDSM-led government put EU and NATO membership front and center of their governing strategy and nimbly clinched an agreement with Greece, ending the 27-year name-change dispute with Greece that had blocked the country's Euro-Atlantic integration (Naunov 2018).

Before discussing party elites and their strategies in greater detail, however, I first describe partisan divides on a mass level. I contend that Macedonians' geostrategic preferences should not be taken for granted: preferences over North Macedonia's geostrategic positioning is, in fact, a significant cleavage that divides people across party lines with a large portion of VMRO-DPMNE supporters being hostile to, or at least skeptical about, the Euro-Atlantic community and most SDSM supporters maintaining their pro-Western inclination.

There is a 35 percentage-point gap between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE supporters in their attitudes regarding international relations that further North Macedonia's interests (IRI 2019). While the vast majority of SDSM voters agree that North Macedonia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with the EU (93%) and NATO (88%), only a small majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters (58% and 53% respectively) share the same sentiments (IRI 2019).

This leaves over 40% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters disagreeing that EU and NATO integration advance North Macedonia's interests. In comparison, in neighboring Serbia—the one Balkan country analysts continuously warn has a high level of anti-Western sentiments—72% of PM Vučić's right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) supporters agree that strong ties with the EU advance Serbia's interests. In fact, only supporters of Vojislav Šešelj's ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) are more hostile

to EU integration compared to VMRO-DPMNE supporters in North Macedonia (IRI 2019).

Although the percentages of VMRO-DPMNE supporters that disapprove of stronger ties with the EU and NATO are disquieting in and of themselves, these data points become even more revealing when combined with data on attitudes towards Russia. Namely, while VMRO-DPMNE supporters are practically split on whether or not greater ties with NATO advance North Macedonia's interests, they are united in their view on relations with Russia—82% of VMRO-DPMNE assert that cultivating strong relations with Russia furthers North Macedonia's interests (IRI 2019).

In addition to purely geostrategic preferences, ethnic Macedonians are divided across partisan lines over the country's values and culture. The majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters hope that North Macedonia moves closer to Russia in terms of morality and values (61%) as well as culture and intellectual life (54%). That said, although VMRO-DPMNE supporters revere Russia's rigid morality politics, they are generally aware of its economic inferiority and, thus, the majority of VMRO-DPMNE supporters would prefer that North Macedonia approximates Western Europe as opposed to Russia when it comes to economy and socio-economic benefits. SDSM voters, however, remain consistently pro-Western in their orientation; over 75% of them state that they would like for North Macedonia to have more in common with Western Europe over Russia in all societal spheres ranging from views on values and morality to standards of living (IRI 2019).

In fact, when it comes to values and morality, the majority of SDSM voters (52%) opine that the EU is helping North Macedonia adopt a more egalitarian conception of values and rights, although a sizable minority (20%) believe that the EU and developments in EU countries concerning abortion, sexual rights, and religious liberty are, instead, pushing Macedonian citizens to renounce "our traditional values." Among VMRO-DPMNE supporters, these numbers are literally flipped: only 20% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters believe that the EU is helping the country expand rights in a liberating direction while the majority (54%) insist that the EU is unduly pressuring the country to abandon its time-honored values (IRI 2019). In fact, the majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters (54%) deem Russia's President Vladimir Putin as a defender of Christendom and of true European values, ranging from family relations to treatment of Muslims (IRI 2019).

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Here too, the attitudes among VMRO-DPMNE supporters largely resemble those found among Serbians and are even more worrying than attitudes found among supporters of the ethnic Serb SNSD political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Specifically, 54% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters and 51% of Vučić's SNS supporters believe that the EU is pushing their country to jettison its traditional values, as opposed to helping them embrace a more liberating conception of values and rights. In comparison, 41% of supporters of B&H Serb President Milorad Dodik's SNSD party in B&H—a pro-Russia party that espouses Serb nationalism—are similarly wary of the EU's influence in the human rights sphere.

To be sure, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM supporters are not divided in every aspect of geopolitics. For example, the majority of both SDSM (53%) and VMRO-DPMNE (54%) supporters do not have a preference regarding whether foreign investment comes from the EU or from non-Western powers including Russia, as long as it creates new jobs (IRI 2019). Similarly, all Macedonian citizens are aware that Germany and EU countries remain the biggest investors in the country: only 6% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters and 1% of SDSM supporters believe Russia to be the biggest investor in the country (IRI 2019). However, for most questions concerning geopolitics, partisanship has a strong and significant effect. Table 1 below, for instance, reports the results from regression analysis of IRI data on the effect of partisanship on citizens' attitudes towards the EU and Russia. Namely, as Table 1 illustrates, the effect of partisanship on attitudes towards Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia remains statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance, even when controlling for other demographic characteristics such as age, education, religion, employment, and place of living. Specifically, compared to VMRO-DPMNE voters, SDSM supporters are both significantly more likely to support stronger relations with the EU and as well as significantly more likely to oppose strong relations with Russia.

Table 1: Support for Strong EU/Russia Relations

	Dependent variable:	
	Russia (1)	EU (2)
Party (SDSM)	-0.471***	0.996***
	(0.096)	(0.087)
Education	0.0002	-0.042
	(0.031)	(0.028)
Age	0.120**	-0.0005
	(0.059)	(0.053)
Religion	0.358***	-0.106
	(0.093)	(0.084)
Place of Living	0.003	-0.064***
	(0.022)	(0.020)
Employment	0.026*	0.019
	(0.015)	(0.014)
Constant	1.590***	3.506***
	(0.409)	(0.370)
Observations	407	406
R^2	0.117	0.273
Adjusted R^2	0.103	0.262
Residual Std. Error	0.952 (df = 400)	0.860 (df = 399)
F Statistic	8.796*** (df = 6; 400)	24.989*** (df = 6; 399)

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

While the data at hand does not allow for examining longitudinal trends in attitudes towards the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, prior studies indicate that disillusionment with the West among VMRO-DPMNE voters has been on the rise. One study, for instance, finds that "while in 2014, 77% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters were in favor of EU membership, this percentage dropped to 60% in 2017 and reached its low of 49% in 2018 (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019)." On the other hand, the authors observe that support among SDSM voters for EU integration, even if it is contingent on a name change, doubled between 2014 and 2018. These attitude shifts, I contend, are at least in part a result of elite cueing.

Party Cueing

Political parties do not simply reflect citizens' attitudes on issues, they also shape them. A volume of scholarship has consistently demonstrated that when party elites take a stance, rank-and-file voters align their attitudes with the position of their preferred party (Brader and Tucker 2012; Lenz 2013). Social scientists have offered experimental and empirical evidence of the strong effects of party cueing on public opinion across various party systems, ranging from old and stable democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom to newer democracies such as

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Hungary and Poland (Brader et al., 2013, 2020; Merolla et al., 2008; Petersen et al., 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010).

In essence, individuals rarely have the time, interest, or tools to cogitate over the complexities of political issues and, thus, they often treat parties as heuristics, or resource-saving shortcuts, that allow them to efficiently form an opinion on subject matters. Indeed, as Bisgaard and Slothuus (2018) put it "one of the major influences of political parties in contemporary democracies might be their ability to shape how citizens interpret a complex reality." Individuals tend to adjust their interpretations of reality both by following cues from their preferred party and by rebuffing and objecting to cues from the opposing parties (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018).

Of course, not all issues are created equal and it is relatively harder—although still very much possible—to move citizens' opinions on morality-imbued issues. In any event, for the purposes of this paper it suffices to note that scholars have generally found mass attitudes on issues concerning international affairs—including high-salience issues such as a war their country is waging—to be particularly malleable and responsive to party cues (Zaller 1992). In fact, levels of Euroscepticism specifically have also been found to change among the mass public as a result of party cues (Hooghe 2007; Hooghe and Marks 2007).

What is interesting in the case of North Macedonia, however, is that all major parties claim to be committed to advancing the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. In February this year, for instance, the Macedonian Parliament ratified the NATO accession protocol without any

opposition. And yet, as I have shown earlier in this paper, rank-and-file VMRO-DPMNE supporters have adopted increasingly unfavorable views of theEU and NATO.

To the naked eye, this could seem like VMRO-DPMNE supporters are becoming increasingly anti-Western in their orientation despite party cues attempting to push them in the opposite direction. I argue, however, that such a conclusion would be rather naive and misguided. VMRO-DPMNE elites, like right-wing elites in other countries such as Serbia, have found a way to play it both ways. They pragmatically purport to be pro-Western as a matter of foreign policy, as this carries tremendous economic rewards such as greater market access and international aid. At the same time, however, and especially throughout the past five years, VMRO-DPMNE elites have not only consistently ignored key Euro-Atlantic principles, but they have also openly defied expressed EU demands concerning corruption, ethnic intolerance, and democratic erosion. As a consequence, most voters have become aware that VMRO-DPMNE's commitment to the EU and NATO is disingenuous and almost solely pragmatic. As such, while over 81% of Macedonian citizens agree that SDSM as a party supports the country's NATO membership, less than 35% have the same impression of VMRO-DPMNE (Tim Institut 2018).

The 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change referendum are two important occasions that begin to make clear both the importance of elite cues as well as the difference between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE elites in their commitments to Euro-Atlantic integration.

Wiretapping Scandal
In 2015, SDSM's leader Zoran Zaev unveiled that the VMRO-DPMNE government massively wiretapped over 20,000 people—including judges, entrepreneurs, journalists and even foreign diplomats and the party's own MPs and Ministers—in a country of less than 2 million people (Berendt 2015). The released wiretapped conversations laid bare VMRO-DPMNE's corrupt, authoritarian rule, revealing gross executive interference in the legislative and judiciary branches, including instructing judges to dismiss criminal charges against party officials, directing the Public Prosecutor to selectively prosecute political opponents, orchestrating electoral fraud, and misusing police and public administration for the party agenda (Al Jazeera 2015; Priebe 2015).

While SDSM's leader Zoran Zaev persistently implored the EU and the US to get more involved and help forestall further democratic backsliding in the country, VMRO-DPMNE elites lambasted the EU and the US for goading Zaev into planning a coup d'état. Gruevski, himself, maintained that "foreign powers" are behind the wiretapping and the ensuing protests; SDSM, Gruevski alleged, was simply used as a pawn by "foreign powers" that were spearheading the effort to unseat him (Cvetkovska 2015). Although Gruevski remained vague as to who exactly those foreign powers were, his surrogates rendered the culprits unambiguously clear: the US and the EU. The Macedonian media landscape, heavily controlled by the then-ruling VMRO-DPMNE, was flooded with unsubstantiated theories about how and why the US and the EU are fomenting unrest in then-Macedonia in an

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effort to unseat then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The most widely-read pro-VMRO-DPMNE journalists Milenko Nedelkovski and Mirka Velinovska, for instance, wrote prolifically about certain USAID and State Department officials—whom they claimed were CIA agents—and EU officials trying to export "a Ukrainian scenario" to Skopje in an effort to counter the country's strengthening relations with Russia and replace Nikola Gruevski, a patriotic PM who was unafraid to stand up to Western aggressors and defend national sovereignty, with Zoran Zaev, a puppet PM that would kowtow to the West (See e.g. Velinovska 2016a,b; Todorovska 2017).

In fact, Russia also interjected publicly more often than usual. Similar to the rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE party surrogates, the Russian foreign ministry maintained that VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski were being shamelessly battered by the West for refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and for being in favor of joining the Russia-led South Stream and Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline projects (Holodny 2015). The Kremlin issued multiple press releases in support of then-PM Gruevski, framing the growing anti-Gruevski sentiment in the country as "gross interference by the West" (Noack 2017).

Although it is possible that the former administration's veering course did not reflect a genuine foreign policy shift towards Russia but rather opportunistic calculations by Gruevski, who had begun to lose Western support following the wiretapping scandal, it most certainly had an effect on mass attitudes towards international actors. While closely before the wiretapping scandal, in 2014, 77% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters favored EU membership, in the aftermath of the wiretapping scandal and the protests and protracted negotiations it engendered, support for EU among VMRO-DPMNE voters fell to 60% in 2017 and 49% in 2018 (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019). Although the data at hand does not allow me to study longitudinal trends for attitudes towards Russia among VMRO-DPMNE supporters, it is likely that a similar, and perhaps even more prominent, attitudinal change has occurred although in the opposite direction, with VMRO-DPMNE sympathizers becoming increasingly fond of Russia.

Name–Change Referendum

The name dispute, and specifically the 2018 name-change referendum, further clarifies the effectiveness of party cues and exposes VMRO-DPMNE elites' duplicitous commitment to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Again, the EU and NATO have long made clear that North Macedonia does not have a future in Euro-Atlantic structures without resolving the name dispute with Greece. As such, both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM elites claimed they were determined to negotiate a name-change agreement with Greece and promised to hold a referendum once such a deal had been reached. Yet while VMRO-DPMNE made a habit of antagonizing Athens through tactless "antiquization" projects such as Skopje 2014 (Marusic 2014) and failed to reach an agreement for over a decade as a governing party, the SDSM-led government successfully negotiated a name-change agreement—the Prespa Agreement—with the Greek government in less than a year after rising to power (Naunov 2018).

On one hand, SDSM acknowledged that the name change is a necessary albeit painful compromise, but urged Macedonian citizens to consider the manifold socio-economic and security benefits of EU and NATO accession (See e.g. Dimitrov 2018 a, b, c). On the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE alleged that the Prespa Agreement severely impairs the country's national identity (See e.g. Mickoski 2018; Telma 2018). Aware that they were bound to lose (in large part due to the virtually unanimous support for the Prespa Agreement among ethnic Albanians), VMRO-DPMNE elites pushed for a boycott of the name-change referendum so as to prevent the referendum from meeting the required threshold to be deemed authoritative (See e.g. RFE/RL 2018).

In the months preceding the scheduled name-change referendum, a torrent of European leaders such as Angela Merkel traveled to Skopje to spell out to both party elites and citizens that upholding the Prespa Agreement was imperative for unblocking the country's Euro-Atlantic integration process and to exhort VMRO-DPMNE elites to forgo their boycott strategy (See e.g. Sitel 2018). In spite of that, VMRO-DPMNE elites continued to argue that the Prespa Agreement was not necessary for advancing then-Macedonia's EU and NATO integration (See e.g. Siljanovska Davkova 2018; Mickoski 2018). Similarly, while VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski's pro forma stance was that they "leave it up to citizens" to decide whether and how to vote, party officials and surrogates, including the country's then-President Gjorge Ivanov, inundated citizens with calls for boycott (See e.g. Dimeska 2018; RFE/RL 2018).

In turn, while most VMRO-DPMNE supporters continued to oppose name-change and boycotted the referendum, support among SDSM voters for EU integration contingent on a name change doubled between 2017 and 2018, from 35% to 67% (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019). Again, during the same time period, support for EU accession among VMRO-DPMNE voters dropped from 60% to 49% (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019).

At the same time, VMRO-DPMNE officials remained silent on the alleged Russian fingerprints concerning the Prespa name-change agreement; namely, both the Macedonian and Greek authorities alleged that Russia was attempting to undermine the name deal. In fact, Athens expelled two Russian diplomats for conducting illicit activities aimed at undercutting the name-change negotiation processes with then-Macedonia (BBC 2018). According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), one of Russia's richest businessmen, Ivan Savvidis, reportedly disbursed at least $300,000 to Macedonian politicians, far-right nationalist organizations, and soccer hooligans who were involved in the anti-NATO and anti-name change

movement (Cvetkovska 2018). While Zaev and his SDSM-led government publicly rebuked Russian attempts at sabotaging the Prespa Agreement, such as funding hooligans to protest and "commit acts of violence" ahead of the referendum, VMRO-DPMNE officials remained conspicuously silent (Feder 2018).

In any event, the 2018 name-change referendum as well as the 2015 wiretapping scandal reveal VMRO-DPMNE leaders' strategy to feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community— allowing them to reap the economic benefits that EU ties facilitate—while simultaneously ingratiating themselves with Russia and flagrantly defying Euro-Atlantic values and principles concerning human rights and good governance. VMRO-DPMNE's strategy of "playing it both ways," however, has far from eluded rank-and-file voters; most citizens have successfully deciphered the party cues and are well-aware of the chasm between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE in terms of how genuine their commitment is to improving the country's EU and NATO integration prospects (Tim Institut 2018).

Conclusion and a Note About the Credibility of EU Commitment

This paper used survey data—including public opinion polls by IRI, NDI, and USAID—and made clear that, unlike ethnic Albanians who overwhelmingly support North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, ethnic Macedonians differ with respect to their visions about the country's geopolitical future. Furthermore, the paper shed light at the nature of this divide—partisanship. Namely, while most supporters of the ruling SDSM party are eager to see their country embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutional structures, most voters of the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE have a penchant for stronger relations with Russia. Importantly, the paper proposed a mechanism that has engendered the observed partisan divides; relying on the social science literature on partisanship as well as on two case studies— the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change referendum—the paper argued that the partisan divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites. Specifically, the paper contended that VMRO-DPMNE elites have espoused a strategy whereby they feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community while simultaneously pandering to Russia and disregarding key Euro-Atlantic principles of democracy and good governance. This strategy, the paper showed, has not escaped rank-and-file

VMRO-DPMNE voters who have grown more opposed to North Macedonia's EU integration and more favorable to stronger relations with Russia.

That Macedonian citizens are not unified in their visions of the country's geopolitical future merits emphasis if only because Western diplomacy is full of lessons that it is often not beneficial for the US or the EU to see you as a loyal friend—although they might find it easier to twist your arm, they also find it less worrisome to take a rain check on you and put you on hold (Serwer 2019). Despite negotiating a controversial new name, the new Macedonian government was refused the opportunity to start membership negotiations by France, mainly due to President Macron's dissatisfaction with the enlargement process in general (Cvetanoska 2019; Emmott et al., 2019). At numerous occasions, Bulgaria too has brandished its veto prerogative, conditioning its support for North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations on factors that have no connection to the Copenhagen Criteria and are perceived as highly offensive by Macedonian citizens, including but not limited to demands that North Macedonia acknowledges that the Macedonian language is not a separate language but a

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dialect of Bulgarian, as well as that the country relinquishes any claim that a Macedonian minority exists in Bulgaria (Marusic 2019; Maksimovic 2020; Topalova 2020).

However, asking North Macedonia for a rain check again and again could irreparably endanger Macedonian citizens' trust in the EU and in the credibility of EU commitment to the country which, this paper shows, is already more precarious than is often assumed. The loss of credibility is a considerable issue because "for the EU to have leverage or 'traction' on domestic politics, a state must be a credible future member of the EU (Vachudova 2005, 65)." In fact, an increasing number of Macedonian citizens have already started to perceive the EU as a club that will never allow North Macedonia in—over 30% of ethnic Macedonians believe this and another 16% doubt this will happen in the next decade, if ever (Detektor 2019).

Further delays and asymmetric power plays by countries such as Bulgaria that condition their vote on criteria outside the Copenhagen criteria run the risk of increasing disenchantment with the West and enfeebling pro-EU and NATO players while empowering authoritarian and ethno-populist forces not only in North Macedonia but across the region. Disillusionment with the West, in turn, is arguably the most propitious entry point for greater influence by major authoritarian governments, especially Russia but also China (Chrzova et al., 2019). The EU ought to prevent this and it needs to deliver its part of the bargain by ensuring a fair and transparent negotiations process with North Macedonia. his is the only way to emulate its 1990s work in the CEE region, when involvement by the EU was key in deterring illiberal impulses and empowering exponents of liberal democracy.

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7. Infodemics, a Snap Election, and a (Lukewarm) Western Welcome: North Macedonia's Identity at Stake on Twitter

Ognjan Denkovski

Study 1 — Instruments of Disinformation

Executive Summary

The study examines the presence of (foreign) computational propaganda methods for disinformation purposes in North Macedonia, a landlocked country on the Balkan Peninsula, one of six Western Balkan countries involved in EU accession-related discourse. The study is focused on the period surrounding the 2020 election, originally scheduled for April 2020, but postponed to July 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We build on insights from North Macedonia's first computational propaganda campaign, namely the #bojkotiram ('I am boycotting') campaign on Twitter, which significantly shaped discussions surrounding the 2018 name-change referendum. We apply several botnet identification techniques, including looking out for repetitive naming patterns, large numbers of similar accounts created prior to key events and activity rates which exceed normal human behavior, usually achieved through retweeting. Using these approaches, we identify a large network of users created in the run-up to the election and sympathetic to VMRO-DPMNE, North Macedonia's right-wing party, as well as to Levica, a far-left party opposed to North Macedonia's NATO and EU integration. Many of the identified accounts oppose North Macedonia's name-change, while also promoting conspiratorial content and anti-Western attitudes. Conversely, very few of the accounts identified expressed support for SDSM (North Macedonia's Western-oriented centre-left party), the name-change or progress in the country's Euro-Atlantic integration process. These findings are not aligned with results from public opinion polls regarding North Macedonia's foreign policy, which show that most citizens are in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration. Moreover, we find that the network identified has extensive overlap and interaction with accounts originally created for the #bojkotiram campaign, which is still active on Twitter.

The analysis suggests that the network identified in the current study is likely run by local actors, as we did not identify any direct foreign involvement. However, even if no foreign actors directly contributed to the development of the network identified, the findings show that the conditions for easy entry by actors interested in developing disinformation campaigns in the country are present, both in terms of technical know-how and existing networks of (automated) accounts which promote anti-Western sentiments. Researchers focused on identifying and responding to disinformation campaigns on social media in the Western Balkans are advised to consider the naming characteristics and closely related account creation dates identified in this study, while paying particular attention to topics and issues pertinent to right-wing voters and parties in the region, such as those endorsed by North Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE or Serbian SNS.

Introduction

Social media platforms and online news outlets play an increasingly prominent role in the development, dissemination and reach of news content. In this media environment, the creation and spread of news have become largely horizontal processes, allowing unverified reporting to easily reach and influence millions across the globe (Nemr and Gangware 2019; Denkovski and Trilling 2020). State actors have begun making use of these trends to advance political objectives in foreign policy through online disinformation campaigns and 'astroturfing' – centrally organized campaigns which imitate grassroots movements and shape discussions about key issues. These campaigns often make use of computational propaganda methods, defined as "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks" (Woolley and Howard 2016, 3; Keller et al. 2019; Harris 2014).

The current study examines the presence of (foreign) computational propaganda methods for disinformation purposes in North Macedonia, one of six Western Balkan countries involved in EU accession-related discourse. The study is focused on the period surrounding the 2020 parliamentary election, originally scheduled for April 2020, but postponed to July 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This election was the most meaningful political event in the country since the name-change referendum in 2018, when the country officially adopted the name Republic of North Macedonia, thus resolving a dispute with Greece which dates back to 1991 (Fidanovski 2018). Largely as a result of the name-change, as of March 2020, North Macedonia became a NATO member state and was also officially invited to start EU membership negotiations. In the research project that this study is part of, we build on the assumption that there would be an increase in computational propaganda approaches during this electoral period which took place amidst several significant developments on the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path.

Computational propaganda methods for political purposes are not new in North Macedonia. Research conducted by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab showed that automated accounts significantly shaped discussions surrounding the 2018 name-change referendum through the #bojkotiram ('I am boycotting') campaign, largely in an attempt to discredit the referendum (Karan 2018). The development of this campaign coincided

with the development of a network of 9,000 Twitter accounts which supported the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Vučić, accounts since shut down by Twitter for violating Twitter's Terms and Conditions (Bush 2020). The coinciding timing of the two campaigns suggests that computational propaganda methods became a viable approach for political campaigns in the region in this period. As the network involved in the #bojkotiram campaign was never shut down by Twitter, we expect that continued presence of computational propaganda methods in the country would be linked to this network, covering similar identity-related issues and targeting citizens opposed to the name-change. These views are often compounded with anti-Western sentiments and thus aligned with the interests of foreign actors (most notably Russia) opposed to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region.

The research project is based on two approaches and data sets, presented in two studies. In the current study, we apply a user characteristic analysis based on account creation dates, activity rates and content shared by all Twitter accounts which interacted with the accounts of major political figures and media outlets in the country in the period between February and August of 2020. In doing so, we attempt to identify networks of (semi-) automated accounts focused on similar issues - investigating the presence and application of instruments of computational disinformation. The study answers the following research questions: a) whether computational propaganda methods were used in the period surrounding the 2020 election and b) whether these can be traced back to foreign actors, such as foreign governments or government-funded organisations.

In the second study (forthcoming), we use a separate data set representing general Twitter discussions in North Macedonia, where we combine automated and manual content analysis approaches to analyse the most shared news domains on Twitter in this period, as well as the most relevant politically substantive hashtags. Results from both analyses are used to determine whether computational propaganda methods were used on Twitter in North Macedonia in the period surrounding the election, to what end these methods were used, as well as whether they can be traced back to foreign actors.

The Political Context in North Macedonia

Politics in North Macedonia are largely shaped by the activities of the two major ethnic Macedonian parties, the center-left Socialist Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the center-right party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Identity (VMRO-DPMNE). The role of the ethnic Albanian parties is also relevant, which represent the largest ethnic minority in North Macedonia, making up 25 per cent of the population according to the latest census data from 2002 (State Statistical Office 2003). The most prominent ethnic Albanian party is the Democratic Union for Integrity (DUI), which since 2006 has been part of every coalition government.

Some of the key debates in the current political landscape in North Macedonia originated in the period between 2006 and 2016 when VMRO-DPMNE was in a ruling coalition with DUI. VMRO-DPMNE, which in the early 1990's presented itself as a right-wing nationalist party, over time adopted a more moderate stance, with an increasingly pro-Western orientation and a technocratic approach, particularly in the first years of Nikola Gruevski's leadership (Šedo, 2013). However, following North Macedonia's unsuccessful bid at joining NATO in 2008 due to Greece's objections over the country's name, VMRO-DPMNE introduced (ethno-) nationalism as one of the key platforms for the party, thus moving away from mainstream positions and endorsing far right ideologies and policies (Bieber 2018, Vangeli 2011; Petkovski 2015).

One key element of this platform was the state policy of 'antiquisation' – linking Macedonian national identity to Alexander the Great. This policy further marginalized ethnic Albanians within the country, while also creating a deeper division in the country's relationship with Greece, making a resolution of the name-change issue nearly impossible (Ceka 2018; Vangeli 2011, Crowther 2017, 752; Petkovski and Nikolovski 2018). However, the policy was met with broad grassroots support among the ethnic Macedonian population frustrated with the slow Euro-Atlantic integration process, allowing the party to set the agenda for identity-based political debates in the country until the present day. Successfully ruling as a "machine party" relying on populist policies and nationalist rhetoric as substitutes for ideological principles, VMRO-DPMNE managed to "deeply entrench" personnel in state administration, blurring the lines between state and party and allowing for the active monopolization of power, abuse of state institutions and electoral fraud

(Günay and Dzihic 2016, 533; Hislope 2013, 621, Bieber 2018; Crowther 2017). The lack of substantive ideological principles underlying the party's platform implied that during this period, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE largely catered to different segments of the ethnic Macedonian population on grounds of identity-related issues, with VMRO-DPMNE promoting a conservative identity linking back to ancient Macedonia, while SDSM largely promoted a more liberal, Western-oriented identity.

Following the 2015 wiretapping scandal, which uncovered extensive illegal surveillance of 20,000 public figures by VMRO-DPMNE, prompting widespread protests around the country, early elections in 2016 eventually brought SDSM to power in a coalition with DUI (Bieber 2018). This change in leadership was welcomed by both the EU and NATO, as SDSM pledged to resolve the name-issue with Greece and to bring North Macedonia back onto its Euro-Atlantic integration path (Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2019).

SDSM and DUI endeavored to resolve the name-issue by organizing a referendum to change the country's name, ultimately resulting in the 2018 Prespa Agreement with which the country officially adopted the name Republic of North Macedonia. As the name-change agreement and referendum were directly tied to the Euro-Atlantic future of the country, the legacy of VMRO-DPMNE's 'antiquisation' policy, as well as the official party position of boycotting the referendum under the new leader Hristijan Mickoski, directly contributed to the low turn-out– a mere 37%. Moreover, anti-Western party cues, developed in the final years of the VMRO-DPMNE regime, had already substantially shifted the opinion of VMRO-DPMNE supporters away from the EU and NATO (Naunov 2020). As a result, between 2014 and 2019, support for EU membership among VMRO-DPMNE supporters dropped from 77% to 49%, with identity and value-based concerns cited as dominant predictors of Euroscepticism (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019; Damjanovski et al. 2020; Blanuša et al. forthcoming; Ceka 2018). In contrast, SDSM and DUI supporters expressed near unanimous support for EU integration throughout this period, with 89% and 99% in favor in 2018, respectively (Damjanovski and Kichner 2019). In the meantime, new actors had emerged in the country's political scene, including Levica ('The Left'), a far-left party opposed to the name-change, as well as to North Macedonia's NATO membership. Over time, its leader Dimitar Apasiev, has become an increasingly relevant figure in North Macedonian politics.

In the 2020 election, which this study is focused on, SDSM managed to snatch a narrow lead (46 out of 120 seats in parliament) and after months of negotiation, a new coalition government was formed by SDSM and DUI – effectively resulting in a continuation of the previous ruling coalition and a reaffirmation of the public's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. However, this reaffirmation was secured only by a narrow margin, as VMRO-DPMNE won 44 seats, while Levica won 2, showing that public opinion regarding the future of North Macedonia remains deeply divided.

Several actors, both local and foreign, made use of these divisions in the period surrounding the name-change referendum. Most relevantly, North Macedonia experienced the first large-scale computational propaganda campaign in the country, manifested through the #bojkotiram ('I am boycotting') hashtag on Twitter (Karan 2018; Zafeiropolous 2019). The campaign was orchestrated by a Twitter user who goes by the name of 'Cheese' (@C4i7Z), who with the help of a small team operated a network of thousands of (semi-) automated accounts which promoted fake stories and conspiracy theories aimed at undermining the referendum (Woolley and Howard 2016; Karan 2018; Zafeiropolous 2019; Blanuša et al. forthcoming).

As the #bojkotiram campaign gained traction, Russia also made use of these developments in an attempt to discredit the referendum and its results. For instance, Russian *Sputnik* launched an English language disinformation campaign targeting proponents of the name-change, while the Russian government initially questioned the validity of the referendum and name-change, only to ultimately accept the outcome (Teslova 2019; Noack 2017). At the same time, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's Facebook account was engaged by foreign bots, which, although never directly linked to Russian actors, utilized techniques similar to those of Russian networks elsewhere (Naunov 2019). As a result of these developments, when North Macedonia officially became a NATO member state, NATO officials stressed the need for greater involvement in the country's response to foreign fake news and influence (Marusic 2020). On the basis of these events, we expect that if foreign influence was present in the period surrounding the election, that this influence would most likely be tied to actors sympathetic to the identity narratives promoted by VMRO-DPMNE, as well as actors opposed to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country.

Data Collection and Analysis

Disinformation campaigns based on computational propaganda are frequently focused on the accounts of politicians and media outlets (Howard and Kollanyi 2016). This was also the case in North Macedonia during the #bojkotiram campaign, as numerous bots interacted with the accounts of local politicians, either in an attempt to amplify their messages or to attack political opponents. In the current study, we examine all interactions with the accounts of 26 political figures and media outlets in the country, including those of PM Zaev, Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev and VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski.[1] The set of accounts included in the study was determined with the goal of achieving a near-representative sample of the country's political landscape while taking into account the activity rates of the accounts, as well as the size of their follower networks. Few Albanian politicians were included in the study as most ethnic Albanian political figures either do not have a Twitter account or do not actively use it. We collected all replies to posts from or mentions of these accounts, effectively capturing all interactions with these accounts which occurred between February 2020 and August 2020. The data set contains 51,969 unique posts, replies or @'s from 5,646 unique users.

For the analysis, the study combines a number of existing methods for botnet identification, including looking out for repetitive naming patterns, detecting large numbers of similar accounts created prior to key events, as well as activity rates which exceed normal human behavior (Howard and Kollanyi 2016; Stukal et al. 2017; Zannettou et al. 2020; Bush 2020). Firstly, in an attempt to detect spam-like behavior which is characteristic of automated accounts, we examine the most active accounts in this data set, looking for users with activity rates which exceed normal human behavior, as well as the issues that they discuss. Secondly, we look into the creation dates of all accounts that interacted with the list of politicians and outlets, as a large number of new accounts created in a short period

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1   See Appendix A for a full list of accounts considered.

of time is a common characteristic of networks created for computational disinformation purposes (Bush 2020; Zannettou et al. 2020). The artificial nature of a network created in a short period of time can be confirmed by an examination of repetitive account naming patterns, which is conducted as the third step of our analysis (Gurajala,

White, Hudson and Matthews 2015; Inuwa-Dutse, Liptrott & Korkontzelos, 2018). Finally, we examine the follower networks of a group of users identified as suspect in the study so as to determine whether the follower networks of these accounts are organic or a result of an artificial injection of followers.

Study Findings

Which accounts shaped discussions with political figures in the period surrounding the election?

The analysis of the most active accounts in the data set revealed a substantial number of spam-based users which appear linked to a single network focused on vilifying SDSM and Western officials, while amplifying the messages of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica. The activity rates of these accounts do not appear to be organic. For instance, the account with the highest number of interactions with the accounts of politicians and media outlets is @burdush_gv, with 801 interactions in the 6-month period examined. Since being created in July 2013, this account has posted 180,900 times, amounting to an average of 55 tweets per day. Most of this content amplifies messages from VMRO-DPMNE leaders, attacks SDSM policies and promotes anti-Western or conspiratorial views. The second most active account in this list is @realTotoMK, with 774 interactions in the 6-month period examined. Since July 2018, this account has posted 46,000 times, a majority of which were retweets, amounting to an average of 61.3 tweets per day, many of which are similar to or the same as those shared by @burdush_gv. The account @C4i7Z, one of the key instigators

of the #bojkotiram campaign, is also among the most active accounts in this data set, with 99 interactions in the 6-month period examined, having posted 151,600 tweets since November 2012.[2]

These findings suggest that many of the discussions with political figures in this period were driven by users sympathetic to VMRO-DPMNE and opposed to the name-change – users whose activity rates cannot be characterized as organic, suggesting at least partial automation of these accounts. Other users identified were highly engaged with the account of Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev and with the content shared by the #bojkotiram network. None of the most active accounts identified supported SDSM or North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Having identified the most dominant users in this period and their issue-focus, we proceed to examine whether these users and other accounts exhibiting similar behavioral patterns can be classified as belonging to an artificial network.

Account creation dates and usernames as means for detecting artificial networks

As part of the second step of the analysis, Figure 1 shows the creation dates of all accounts that interacted with the list of politicians and outlets examined. The figure shows that in the period between 2006 and 2018, the number of accounts created in any given month was steady, usually with less than 50 new accounts per month. A slight increase in the number of accounts created occurred around June 2018, coinciding with the development of the network involved in the #bojkotiram ('I am boycotting') campaign. While the following two-year period shows a well

above-average increase in new accounts, the most striking increase occurred in the three months prior to the initial election date, with as many as 500 new accounts created between January and March of 2020. As there is no reason to assume that the number of politically engaged Twitter users in North Macedonia organically surged in this period, we examine whether the large number of new accounts can be classified as artificial and thus as belonging to the same network of users.

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2   See Appendix B for an overview of the top 50 most active accounts in this data set.

Figure 1. Creation dates of accounts interacting with the accounts of political figures and media outlets considered (by quarter)
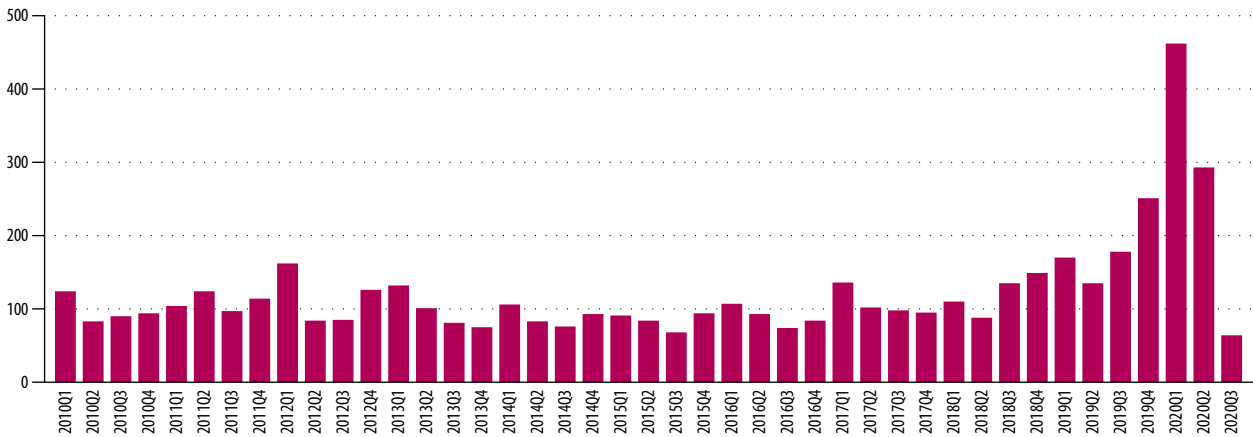
To do so, we rely on insights from past research, which show that when creating a large number of fake accounts, those responsible often rely on some degree of automation in the account naming process (Gurajala, White, Hudson and Matthews 2015; Inuwa-Dutse, Liptrott & Korkontzelos, 2018). This approach allows for a detection of such groups through an examination of repetitive account naming patterns. A manual review of the usernames in the data set suggested two naming patterns worth investigating, namely:
- Usernames based on long arbitrary strings consisting of at least 1 number, such as o8zOS0lCcThHno0 or MFFMRb7tSblpyzW
- Usernames based on 'generic' names followed by a set of 8 arbitrary digits, such as Makedon27584769 or Maximus03283435

We used a regular expression (regex) search pattern, a form of text search which allows for querying patterns of text rather than literal search strings (e.g. the regex pattern \d can be used to match all digits in a string of text), to identify all usernames longer than 10 characters which also contain at least 1 number. While these criteria are relatively crude (in that they also identify users which match the query

criteria, but not the naming patterns observed), a manual review of the retrieved accounts verified that a majority do match one of the two naming patterns. We find that 808 out of the total 5,645 users interacting with the accounts of politicians and media outlets match one of these two naming patterns, making up 14% of the total accounts in the data set and generating 17% of the overall interactions in the 6-month period examined.

Figure 2 shows the account creation dates of all accounts matching one of the two naming patterns. The creation date of a majority of these accounts is after 2018, with significant increases in the months prior to the original election date in April 2020. These increases are likely not organic, since between 2010 and 2018, on average, less than 5 accounts matching the naming patterns were created every month. Figure 2 provides some more context to the findings presented in Figure 1, as the sudden surge in accounts interacting with the accounts of politicians and media outlets can at least partly be explained by the increase in accounts matching one of the two naming patterns. These accounts made up 31% of all accounts created in the period between August 2019 and August 2020.

Figure 2. Creation dates of accounts matching one of the two naming patterns (by quarter)
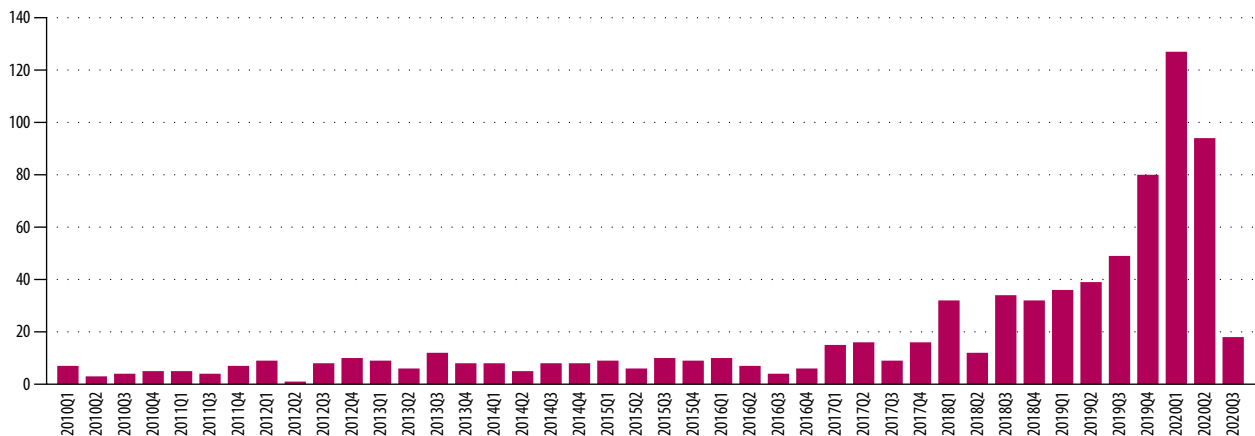
Characterizing the profiles and content shared by the accounts which match the naming patterns

Most of the accounts matching these naming patterns offer little information about the true identity of the users, with profile pictures and bios often based on political content. A majority of the accounts appear to be closely aligned with VMRO-DPMNE or Levica, with a focus on the name-change referendum or North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Much of this content appears originally sourced from some of the most active accounts identified in the first step of the analysis, including @burdush_gv and @realTotoMK, as well as the 'Apsaana' hashtag and account, the current manifestation of the #bojkotiram campaign, which is described in greater detail below. In interactions with political figures, most of these accounts focus on attacks of SDSM and Western officials. We present two examples of these interactions.

– Mini59150498 - *Zoran_Zaev* Со спогодбата од Преспа изврсивте најтежок чин велепредавство *и* когатогаш ќе одговарате \n*НикогашСеверна* ('*Zoran_Zaev You've committed the greatest act of treason with the Prespa Agreement and at some point you will answer for it #NeverNorthern*')

– Alex50981439 – *RT sargesae Sekerinska3* Благодарение за геноцидот врз македонскиот народ *и* Македонија (*'Sekereinska Thank you for the genocide of the Macedonian people'*)

A profile that is representative of many of the accounts identified in the current analysis (no personal information

available, a political focus and high activity rates) is presented in Image 1.

Image 1. The profile of mpp2mLJTRMmAZ3V – a highly active account in the #Bojkotiram network representative of many users identified in the current study

Many of the accounts identified are also among the most vocal in the discussions with political actors examined in this study, despite their relatively recent creation date, including accounts such as @Mini59150498, @Mirjana63251676 and @Mince62984985, all of which were created after November 2019, representing Macedonian women living abroad. @Mince62984985 and @Mirjana63251676 have 297 interactions with the accounts of politicians in the 6-month period examined, while @Mini59150498 has 232 interactions. These accounts

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3   Radmila Sekerinska is the current Minister of Defense.

and accounts with similar characteristics also retweet conspiratorial news items in English, including support for hydroxychloroquine as treatment for Covid-19, shown in Image 2. @Mince62984985 has already been flagged by Twitter due to 'unusual activity'.

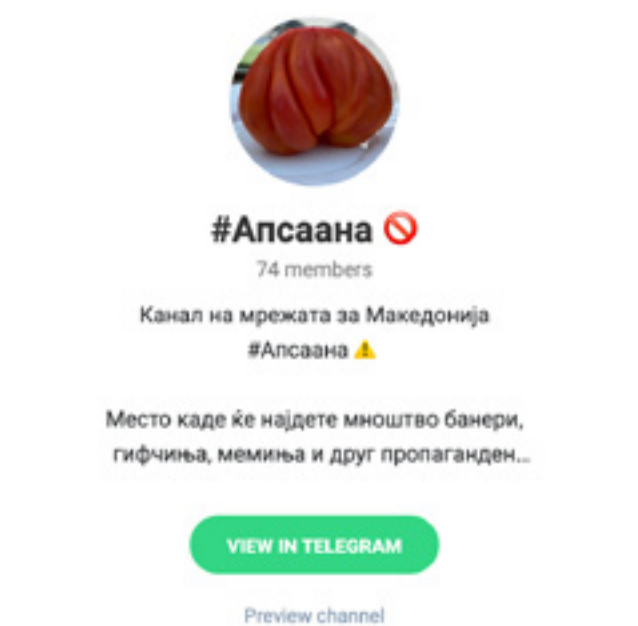*Image 2. False news content shared by @Mirjana51628319*

Many of the accounts matching one of the two naming patterns share content from the account @aps_aana, a

continuation of the #bojkotiram campaign and a common source of content for the #bojkotiram network. The term '*apsaana*' is best understood as an equivalent of the 'lock her up' campaign against Hillary Clinton, in reference to SDSM officials. The bio of this account reads "After 1st meme war, #Bojkotiram net HQ in Veles, Macedonia with overseas departments launch @Apsaana for the 2nd Battle for Macedonia 2019. Name is identity". The bio invites users to a Telegram group with "banners, gifs, memes and other propaganda material", as demonstrated in Image 3. This account, as well as several accounts which match one of the two naming patterns, are followed by official VMRO-DPMNE accounts, including @mkd_finance, the official Finance Commission of VMRO-DPMNE and @VMRO_DPMNE, the official VMRO-DPMNE party account, as well as Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev.

Image 3. @aps_aana Telegram propaganda group

Analyzing the follower network

Having analyzed the creation dates, naming patterns and profile characteristics of accounts identified in this analysis, for the following step we analyze the follower networks of the users which match one of the two naming patterns and which also interacted with the accounts of politicians and media outlets at least 18 times (an arbitrary threshold, which nonetheless implies high levels of activity) – a total of 63 users. The follower network of these 63 users includes 11,698 unique followers and 35,894 unique relationships

(a user followed by a user). These findings show that many of the followers of the 63 accounts follow more than one of the accounts, around three on average, suggesting a potentially tightly connected network. For instance, @pandorabox97, an account created in June 2020, followed 35 of these accounts by July 2020. Another example of an account from this follower network is @TheJoke91877592, an account which combines political content (largely attacks of SDSM officials), memes and pornographic

content, and @MdVOBqSyLIG2PMA, an account which protects its activity from non-followers, with the following bio publicly displayed 'Само ретвитам цена по договор' (I only retweet, price per negotiation), potentially suggesting an account available for hire. Around 25% of the followers identified (3,015 accounts) match one of the two naming patterns examined in the study. Figure 3 shows the creation

dates of these accounts, showing that a majority were created following 2018, with the highest number in the period leading up to the 2020 election, suggesting that many of these accounts were created specifically for the election, likely so as to increase the engagement rates of already existing, highly active accounts in the network.

Figure 3. Creation dates of accounts matching the naming patterns among the followers of the 63 accounts examined (by quarter)
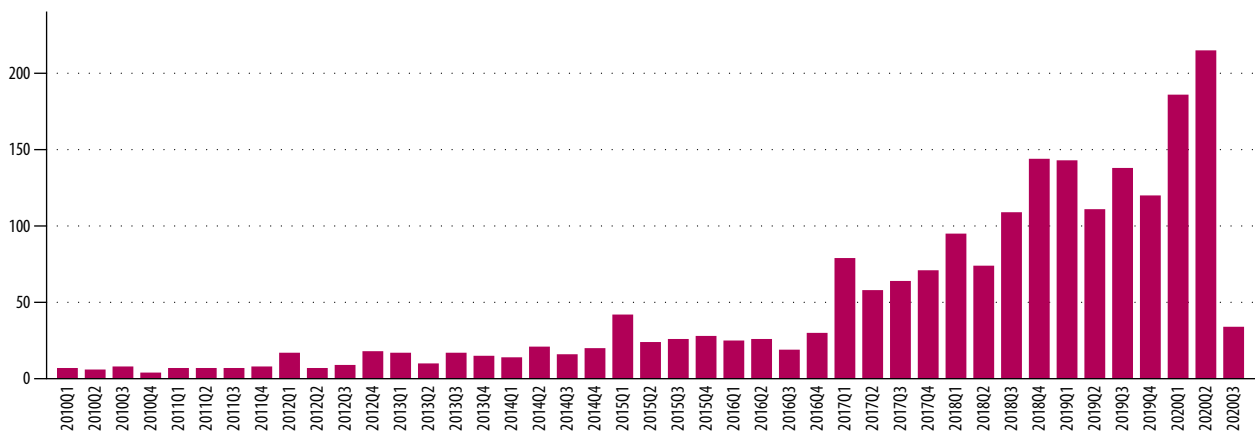
User characteristic and network analysis summary

In summary, the user characteristic analysis shows that a large number of the accounts interacting with the accounts of the politicians and media outlets examined were created in the period prior to the original election date in April 2020. Many of these accounts spam the accounts of politicians and media outlets, with much of their remaining activity based on retweets from several highly active hybrid accounts, as well as the account @aps_aana, a continuation of the #bojkotiram campaign. Topically, a majority of the accounts identified amplify the messages of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, oppose the name-change referendum and attack SDSM officials, as well as Western institutions. The repetitive naming patterns used by many of these accounts, their consistent issue focus and the fact that a large part of

the follower network of the suspect accounts identified was also created shortly prior to the election, suggest that these accounts belong to a network that was artificially created for election-related goals of political actors. However, the analysis did not reveal a direct link between the accounts identified in this analysis and foreign intervention, as the network is most likely run by local actors with ties to #bojkotiram campaign. Nevertheless, given that the content spread by the network is aligned with past Russian narratives in the country, as well as Russia's opposition to the Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia, current or future Russian involvement in the activity of this network cannot be excluded as a possibility.

Examining a unique case of a pro–Western bot

While the network identified appears to largely focus on right-wing, anti-Western content, a few accounts such as @Pepi91084061 focus on promoting the Euro-Atlantic prospects of North Macedonia. Since its creation date in March 2020, this account has exclusively retweeted content from Zoran Zaev and Radmila Sekerinska, the current Minister of Defense of North Macedonia, pertaining to North Macedonia's NATO and EU accession progress. Due to its unique nature, we also examined the

follower network of this account. One of the followers of this account is @TeresaW65457824, a U.S.-based account created in March 2020 which also matches one of the two naming patterns identified in this study. Like many of the accounts identified in this study, @TeresaW65457824 does not have much content, except two pictures of a woman, suggesting a female user. Examining the accounts followed by @TeresaW65457824 reveals that many of these accounts match the naming pattern of a random name followed

by 8 digits, suggesting that this account may belong to a network similar to the one identified in the current study. Most of these accounts are clearly automated, including @tomdavi77420795 and @michael55576158, both of which largely interact with pornographic accounts and do so with repetitive and limited vocabulary.

Image 4. Interactions from an automated 'pornographic' account followed by @TeresaW65457824
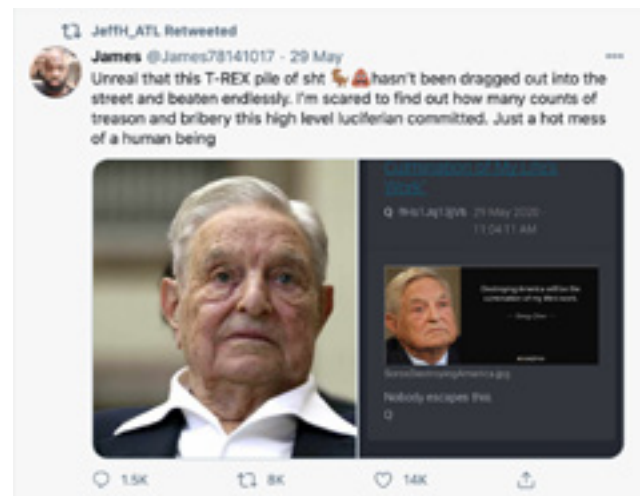

Another account followed by @TeresaW65457824 is @@AtlJeffh, whose bio includes hashtags like #ProLife, #ConservativeGaysForTrump and #BlueLivesMatter. This account dates back to February 2020 and largely posts conspiracy theories about George Soros, Bill Gates, vaccination and 5G networks.

Image 5. A post from @AtlJeffh

As an account focused on amplifying pro-SDSM and pro-Western content, @Pepi91084061 is an almost unique case in this study and the account does raise several questions regarding the connections between automated accounts in the Western Balkans and automated accounts globally. Firstly, the account is connected to a network which shows that the naming pattern identified in this study is likely common in botnets globally, suggesting that local actors involved in computational propaganda likely borrow already-established techniques from botnets abroad. Secondly, this seemingly pro-Western account appears to interact with accounts which belong to a network entirely ideologically opposed to it, suggesting that automated accounts are prone to error when establishing connections. Finally, the network of accounts followed by @TeresaW65457824 points to a potential underexplored characteristic of botnets observed both in this network and in the network identified in North Macedonia – a combination of accounts focused on pornography, memes and political content, likely to increase the overall reach of highly active, political accounts within a network.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that computational propaganda methods continue to shape online political discussions in North Macedonia. The study identified the existence of a large group of users likely created and managed by a single source, which holds explicit ties to VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials, as well as the #bojkotiram network. The analysis demonstrated that this network of users was a) likely created purposefully in the run-up to the election, b) demonstrated many of the characteristics of botnets globally, such as peculiar naming characteristics, closely matched creation dates and high rates of retweeting and c) that the network largely focuses on issues related to the name-change and Macedonian national identity. Much of the content shared (but, primarily retweeted) by the users identified appears to be sourced from several highly active hybrid accounts, some of whom are the key instigators of the #bojkotiram campaign. The network's goals are best described as vilification of actions from SDSM and

Western officials, most notably PM Zaev, and amplification of posts from VMRO-DPMNE officials and Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev.

The current analysis does not provide sufficient support for linking this network to foreign actors. Regardless, even if no foreign actors directly contributed to the development of this network, the findings show that the conditions for easy entry by actors interested in developing disinformation campaigns in the country are present both in terms of technical know-how and existing networks with followers sympathetic to anti-Western discourse. Given continued uncertainty about the Euro-Atlantic integration path of the Western Balkan countries, it is safe to assume that computational disinformation based on anti-Western narratives will continue to be a threat to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region.

However, it is worthwhile to note once again that the data used in the current analysis is derived exclusively from accounts which interacted with the accounts of politicians and media outlets examined in the study and that it does not consider general posts from Twitter users in North Macedonia. As such, this data set cannot be considered representative of Twitter discussions in North Macedonia as a whole. Consequently, in the second study of this research project (which can be accessed here), we further examine the potential presence of foreign disinformation campaigns through an analysis of the domains and hashtags which shaped Twitter discussions in the period surrounding the 2020 election, using a separate data set of Twitter content in North Macedonia.

Considering the findings, we can provide several recommendations for future research investigating the presence and role of (foreign) computational disinformation in Western Balkan countries. Firstly, researchers are advised to consider the naming characteristics and closely related account creation dates of groups of accounts according to the practices suggested in this study, while paying particular attention to topics and issues pertinent to right-wing voters and parties in the region. Researchers are also advised to examine the follower networks of suspect accounts for assessing potential artificial injections of large numbers of followers for these accounts. Secondly, researchers are encouraged to examine the links between botnets in the Western Balkans and botnets abroad so as to gain an understanding of how networks of automated accounts form relationships and to what extent this process is manually controlled or automated. Finally, researchers are also advised to further examine the potential strategies used by computational disinformation networks for increasing engagement, particularly the specialization of different accounts within one network. The findings from the network studied in this project, as well as from the U.S. network briefly described, suggest that one approach that these networks use may be to deploy fully automated accounts which specialize in creating engagement for a network through pornographic content or memes, with the ultimate goal of redirecting organic users to the content shared by hybrid, semi-automated accounts which focus on politically substantive content. Provided an identification of the types of profiles that make up computational propaganda networks, these characteristics can be used for precise, automated identification of high-risk accounts or networks of accounts.

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Appendix

Appendix A – politician and media list (N=26)

NovaTvMk – the official account of Nova TV

Zoran_Zaev – the official account of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev

SDSMakedonija – the official account of SDSM

o_spasovski – the official account of the Minister of Internal Affairs Oliver Spasovski

bobihrist – the official account of journalist Bobi Hristovski

Sekerinska – the official account of the Minister of Defence Radmila Sekerinska

MickoskiHM – the official account of VMRO-DPMNE President Hristijan Mickoski

AlexandarMKD – the official account of VMRO-DPMNE Vice President Aleksandar Nikolovski

SPendarovski – the official account of President Stevo Pendarovski

VladimirGjorcev – the official account of the former VMRO-DPMNE representative in the National Assembly Vladimir Gjorcev

VMRO_DPMNE – the official account of VMRO-DPMNE

Ilijadimovski – the official account of the former member of National Assembly and former VMRO-DPMNE spokesman Ilija Dimovski

NaumStoilkovski – the official account of VMRO-DPMNE spokesman Naum Stoilkovski

GjorgjieskiOrce – the official account of former VMRO-DPMNE Executive Committee member Gjorgjievski Orce

Bujar_O – the official account of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani

Sekulovska – the official account of journalist Biljana Sekulovska

VladaMK – the official account of the North Macedonian Government

dw_macedonian – the official account of Deutsche Welle North Macedonia

AmbassadorEU – the official account of the EU Ambassador to North Macedonia

USAmbNMacedonia – the official account of the US Embassy in North Macedonia

RSE_Makedonski – the official account of Radio Slobodna Evrope (Radio Free Europe) North Macedonia

Apasiev – the official account of Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev

levica_partija – the official account of Levica

TKarakamisheva – the official account of Professor at the Faculty of Law "Iustinianus Primus" Skopje and ex-member of the Venice Commission Tanja Karakamisheva, a vocal VMRO-DPMNE supporter

MFA_MKD – the official account of the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Dimitrov_Nikola – the official account of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Nikola Dimitrov

Appendix B
a list of the 50 most active accounts in the data set and their number of interactions

Account	Number of interactions	Account	Number of interactions
burdush_gv	801	uJHyOw0SgfDl4Pv	153
realTotoMK	774	Zoki79889487	152
siljanstrkot2	444	ivanase	143
Ajdemajkata	377	asteriksiobeli1	142
Fortiifikacija	317	datarudari	138
Alex50981439	300	VladimirJosifo1	138
Mince62984985	297	TetkaBiberce3	135
Mirjana63251676	297	nerazzurro7777	129
VladaMK	296	StrakeTunder	128
SeirChair	295	Fingerprint83	125
PerdiccasArgead	276	come_justice	125
izgledakevrne	267	6Siberian	123
Mini59150498	232	aps_aana	119
LfwrzyMu4fFe8bO	231	DenicaMMM	117
Makedon27584769	208	mitkodimitrovsk	114
Mince51295074	201	StevanoAna	114
GoceOdPrilep	199	billii71	113
Kuglica6	188	voinot_od	110
Denica3011	187	gorgietod	110
AngelMakedon	184	Vujkoto_Vane	109
Zoran_Zaev	177	MikaJanev	108
micetrkaleski	177	Macedonian100	105
syfer11	176	na_sheki	100
ficho_vozi	156	C4i7Z	99
Maximus03283435	155	Omg01595452	99

Appendix C – list of accounts matching the regex search pattern (at least one digit and longer than ten characters) that appear in the data set more than 18 times (N=63)

Maja64343870

peroburgija38

Mirjana63251676

Macedonian100

Ivo62294418

topolovsek11

Alex50981439

LfwrzyMu4fFe8bO

ANGELa99046218

Maximus03283435

Mario52511053

r2d2skywalk

aleksandar_1972

Hedonist100

XtYqT9aUDXD1cNm

HaNa_Taurus666

lionsnevercry28

Aleksan63657112

somnitelen69

antonio5791

forever89726201

finodete_666

nerazzurro7777

Zoki79889487

Maked0n4et01

uJHyOw0SgfDl4Pv

Zoran49415118

zan_valzan73

mpp2mLJTRMmAZ3V

Matrixx41653205

your_baby03

februar1967

Fingerprint83

Vlatko100janosk

Nikola40539926

aerodrom1312

rockatansky191

5UR7B6DbXYBoWNS

Policemen81

Filip29640326

toreador_34

Vildan27765654

Morgan77134232

Boban11425548

Mini59150498

aP41IWsLgUTQD1T

Geko80640289

Cruella48986676

Marjan59394575

Undergraund2001

Makedon27584769

SuzanaSuzy17

andretolstoi74

alexandrou56

jemailjbond007

bruno2101978

B1PcG6cyiRrcoTr

The12728539

007_Ergenot

Mince62984985

f3g7GqRrbPRIZ5c

Mince51295074

Omg01595452

Study 2 — Content of Disinformation

Executive Summary

Disinformation campaigns often base their activity around social media posts or statements from political leaders whose messages are amplified or used for facilitating political attacks on opponents. This was also the case for the network identified in Study I of this research project – a network developed for the purpose of the 2020 election in North Macedonia, which focused its activity on amplifying posts from the centre-right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and Levica ['The Left'], while also vilifying officials from the centre-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). However, not all disinformation campaigns rely on the activity of organized, centrally controlled networks. Rather, many disinformation campaigns are the result of content published and shared by news outlets with dubious agendas, unclear ownership and a lack of transparent editorial policies. This content is then disseminated among organic groups of social media users susceptible to the views promoted by these outlets.

This study presents the second part of a research project analyzing the presence of foreign computational disinformation in North Macedonia in the period surrounding the 2020 election. The electoral period and the study are situated amidst several significant developments in North Macedonian foreign politics, including NATO membership and the expected start of EU membership negotiations – developments which challenge the goals of foreign actors opposed to the Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkan countries, most notably Russia. To conduct the analysis, we regularly collected the 100 most popular tweets aggregated by North Macedonia's most visited news domain *Time.mk*. These tweets were collected every two hours of every day between early February and early

August of 2020 – a total of 138,983 unique tweets shared by 5,604 unique users. We use this data to determine the most shared domains (specifically news outlets) in this period, as well as to determine which hashtags fueled discussions surrounding the election. We additionally link our findings to the outcomes of Study I of this research project, where we identified a large network of accounts created in the run-up to the 2020 election for the purpose of increasing the visibility of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials, largely as a means of amplifying content in opposition to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration, while also vilifying SDSM officials. Firstly, we show that posts from the accounts of VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski, as well as those from Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev, frequently made it among the top daily tweets in this period, despite their relatively low numbers of follower on Twitter. This finding suggests that the network identified in Study I of this research project was effective in promoting the tweets of these actors among organic Twitter communities in North Macedonia. Additionally, we show that outlets such as *Infomax*, an outlet with at least indirect links to Russian state-funded news, as well as outlets such as *Freeglobe, DokazMakedonija* and *Kolozeg*, all of which support VMRO-DPMNE and promote conspiratorial views based on global and domestic right-wing content, shaped the discussions of Twitter users in North Macedonia in this period. Finally, we demonstrate that the most popular, politically substantive hashtags in this period promote opposition to North Macedonia's name-change as well as to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. While the study did not identify direct foreign influence, the findings show that computational disinformation methods were used to shape public discussions primarily with content aligned with the geo-political goals of foreign actors opposed to the country's progress on its Euro-Atlantic integration path.

Introduction

Disinformation campaigns based on computational propaganda methods, defined as "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks", play an increasingly important role in the formation of public

opinion regarding key issues and events (Woolley and Howard 2016, 3; Keller et al. 2019; Harris 2014). Often, these campaigns base their activity around social media posts or statements from political leaders whose messages are amplified or used for facilitating political attacks of

opponents. In other cases, such as that of the *Sputnik*-linked group shut down by Facebook in 2019 for spreading anti-NATO propaganda, state-funded outlets serve as the primary source of content disseminated by automated networks of accounts on social media (Waterson 2019).

However, not all disinformation campaigns rely on the activity of organized, controlled networks. Rather, disinformation campaigns can also thrive through the spread of unverified content published and shared by news outlets with dubious agendas, unclear ownership and a lack of transparent editorial policies – content then spread among organic networks of social media users susceptible to the views promoted by these outlets. For instance, recent research regarding the spread of conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic, shows how for-profit news outlets such as *InfoWars* played a major role in the spread of conspiracy theories about 5G networks among Twitter users in the UK (Ahmed et al. 2020).

As elsewhere, state-funded, for-profit and ad-hoc outlets also play an increasingly meaningful role in the shaping of public opinion in Western Balkans countries. Most notably, in recent years, Russian state-funded outlets such as *Russia Beyond the Headlines* and *Sputnik* have begun infiltrating the media sectors in Serbia, North Macedonia and other Western Balkan countries (Klepo 2017). Research shows that an increasing number of sympathetic or for-profit local outlets have made use of this presence and either actively republish content from Russian outlets or base their own reporting on this content (Stronski and Himes 2019).

Building on the assumption that there would be an increase of content sourced from foreign state-funded outlets during North Macedonia's 2020 election, this study presents the second part of a research project analyzing the presence and use of computational propaganda and foreign influence in North Macedonia in the period surrounding the July 2020 election. In Study I of this research project, we focused on the activity of instruments of disinformation campaigns, as we described the activity of a network of purpose-built accounts focused on vilifying officials from SDSM and Western institutions, while contesting the name-change and amplifying the messages of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica. While no direct link could be identified between this network and foreign influence, much of the content shared by the network was characterized by sentiments which play into the agenda of foreign actors opposed to the Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia and its neighbours.

However, Study I exclusively focused on users which interact with the accounts of 26 political figures and media outlets (selected to obtain a representative sample of the political landscape within the country) and thus worked with a data set not representative of North Macedonian Twitter as a whole. As such, the study could not provide sufficient indication of what the broader userbase of Twitter in North Macedonia discussed in the period surrounding the election, as well as what topics and news outlets shaped public discussions in this period – two potential avenues for detecting (foreign) disinformation campaigns.

In the current study, we extend the analysis to an additional data set, namely data from *Time.mk's* Twitter aggregator (North Macedonia's most visited news domain), which generates a list of the most popular tweets in North Macedonia on any given day (Alexa 2020). We focus on two aspects of this data: the most shared domains on Twitter (with a particular focus on news domains) and the most popular, politically substantive hashtags, which can provide an indication of the dominant themes which shaped discussions during this time. We use this data to answer the following research questions: a) which domains (news outlets) and hashtags shaped discussions on North Macedonian Twitter in the period surrounding the 2020 election and b) can this content be linked to foreign influence or the network identified in Study I? The electoral period and the study are situated amidst several significant developments in North Macedonian foreign politics, including NATO membership and the anticipated beginning of EU membership negotiations – developments which challenge the goals of foreign actors opposed to the Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkan countries, most notably Russia.

Foreign Disinformation and Its Consequences in the WB – the Penetration of Russian Narratives As Aided by Local Political Elites

News articles shared on social media often act as the primary source for the spreading of narratives from disinformation campaigns – narratives usually disseminated as part of a broader set of articles from outlets with state-funding or dubious ownership structures. For instance, disinformation campaigns from Russia have extensively relied on the content shared by state-funded outlets such as *Russia Today (RT), Sputnik* and *Russia Beyond the Headlines,* all of which boast content in numerous languages. The agendas of these outlets have been publicly discussed. In several interviews, *RT's* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan discussed *RT's* role in the "information war" against the "whole Western world", noting how "information weapon[s]" and audiences should be used in "critical time[s]" (as cited in Nimmo 2018). In practice, this goal has frequently resulted in the production and spread of news articles based on false and misleading information presented with highly charged language.

With this approach, Russian outlets have also successfully entered the media market in the Western Balkans, especially so in Serbia. Notably, both *Sputnik* and *Russia Beyond the Headlines* have Serbian-language versions, while *Russia Beyond the Headlines* also has a Macedonian-language version. The success of these outlets in Western Balkan countries has been aided by the free-for-all policy of Russian outlets, which do not charge a fee for republishing their content – an ideal condition for the region's largely underfunded media sector (Stronski and Himes 2019; Klepo 2017).

As a result, an increasing number of sympathetic, underfunded or for-profit local outlets have made use of this possibility and either actively republish content from Russian outlets or base their own reporting on this content, including outlets such as *Vostok Vesti* and *Srbija Danas* ['Serbia Today'] in Serbia (Stronski and Himes 2019; Denkovski and Trilling 2020). One study suggested that in 2016, one-third of outlets in Serbia published articles about international actors without noting sources or authors, many of which based on pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes similar to those promoted by Russian state-funded outlets (CRTA 2018). While there is less evidence to suggest that Russian outlets have had the same levels of success in North Macedonia, the increasing relevance of these outlets in Serbia, as well as the comparable media systems of the two countries, suggest that Russian state-funded outlets may well become increasingly influential in North Macedonia.

The potential increasing influence of Russian state-funded outlets is supported by the actions of domestic political elites which build on and amplify the narratives of these outlets for the purpose of achieving political goals, often by exploiting notions of pre-existing identity ties or shared, conservative values (Naunov 2019; Metodieva 2019). For instance, in 2015, during North Macedonia's major wiretapping scandal, former PM Gruevski of VMRO-DPMNE began calling for the 'desoroization' of North Macedonia – a narrative originally developed in Russia and Central Eastern European countries, regarding the (cultural) influence of billionaire philanthropist George Soros and left-wing organizations funded by the Open Society Foundations (Stronski and Himes 2019). Around the same time, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russian state-funded outlets further incited tensions in the country, by peddling accusations towards the EU and NATO of conspiring to divide North Macedonia between Bulgaria and an 'Albanian Platform' (Novinite 2015; Noack 2017). VMRO-DPMNE officials both amplified these narratives and produced new ones in an attempt to remain in power, substantially radicalizing their supporters as a result (Ceka 2018; Blanusa et al. forthcoming).

After Gruevski stepped down from party leadership as a result of the 2015 wiretapping scandal, VMRO-DPMNE, led by Hristijan Mickoski, continued to maintain a party platform based on conservative views and identity-related issues, ultimately resulting in explicit opposition to the country's name-change referendum – a vital step for the country's progress on its Euro-Atlantic integration path. As a result, between 2014 and 2019, support for EU membership among VMRO-DPMNE supporters dropped from 77% to 49%, with identity and value-based concerns cited as dominant predictors of Euroscepticism at the time (Damjanovski et al. 2020; Naunov 2020). In the meantime, new actors emerged in the country's political scene, including Levica, a nominally socialist party led by Dimitar

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:

INFODEMICS, A SNAP ELECTION, AND A (LUKEWARM) WESTERN WELCOME: NORTH MACEDONIA'S IDENTITY AT STAKE ON TWITTER
STUDY 2 — CONTENT OF DISINFORMATION   OGNJAN DENKOVSKI

Apasiev, which is opposed to the name-change, as well as to North Macedonia's NATO membership.[1]

With this context in mind, we expect that if foreign state-sponsored content influenced discussions in North Macedonia in the period surrounding the July 2020 election, that this content would be sourced from Russian state-funded outlets and designed to appeal to the voter base of VMRO-DPMNE, Levica and citizens generally opposed to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. If such content was present and influential, we also expect it to have also influenced the dominant hashtags in this period, which for the purpose of this study are considered indicative of the most prominent and relevant topics for voters in the period surrounding the election.

Data collection and analysis

To examine the most influential news domains and hashtags in the period surrounding the election, we collected the 100 most popular tweets aggregated by the website *Time.mk* every two hours of every day between early February and early August of 2020 – a total of 138,983 unique tweets shared by 5,604 unique users.[2] This source of data is useful for two reasons. Firstly, this content can be considered a representative sample of the overall Twitter discussions in the country in this period. Secondly, the tweets analyzed are also viewed by visitors of *Time.mk's* Twitter stream, many of whom are not Twitter users, for which reason the examined content can also be considered influential for non-Twitter users in the country.

For the analysis of domains and news outlets shared, we firstly identify all tweets containing links. To do so, we apply a regex search pattern, a form of text search which allows for querying patterns of text rather than literal search strings (e.g. the regex pattern \d can be used to match all digits in a string of text) to identify and extract all 77,000 tweets with links. We then apply a Python script which extracts and stores the original domain name of all links shared. We then filter out all internal links (links leading to other Twitter posts), as we are only interested in external (news) domains and not links leading to posts from other Twitter users. The domains identified in the remaining 6,056 links are ranked based on their occurrence in the data set.

In the next step, we analyze the content of some of the most frequently shared domains (including Facebook and YouTube links), while also linking our analysis to the findings from Study I from this research project. The news domains identified as relevant for the study are further analyzed in terms of content produced, transparency regarding editorial practices, as well as advertising practices.

Thereafter, and so as to complement the analysis of news domains, we examine the most popular, politically substantive hashtags shared in this period. To do so, we firstly identify all tweets which contained hashtags, after which we strip down all other text content from the tweets except the hashtags. These hashtags are then compiled into a list which we use to rank the occurrence of each hashtag and to identify the users which shared these hashtags. We use this information to determine which topics were most prominent in political discussions among North Macedonia's Twitter users, as well as which users contributed to the popularity of these topics.

Where do the identified links go?

We begin with the analysis of all external links shared, a total of 6,056 links. As a majority of these links lead to Facebook and YouTube, we firstly examine these links in an attempt to identify video or Facebook content that can be linked to computational disinformation. For the analysis of YouTube links, we extracted the title of each video and the channel of the account that posted the video. A manual review of the findings revealed minimal presence of political content, as almost all videos were either music videos or miscellaneous content. Therefore, we conclude that no (foreign) disinformation was shared through YouTube videos in the period surrounding the election.

We then manually review the links leading to Facebook posts. While this part of the analysis did not lead to relevant findings about influential domains, the analysis showed that tweets from VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski which contain links to his Facebook profile made

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1   For more information on the political context in North Macedonia, please refer to Study I of this research project

2   Time.mk does not provide extensive information regarding its Twitter aggregator, for which reason the validity of the data set cannot be confirmed.

it among the top tweets of the day 23 times. No other user in the data set managed to include a tweet redirecting to Facebook among the top daily tweets this many times – a finding which we consider indicative of high engagement from the network of automated and semi-automated accounts identified in Study I, which focused on amplifying the activity of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials through extensively interacting with and retweeting their posts. Based on this finding, we also examine how many times

a tweet posted by one of the 26 politicians and media outlets which formed the basis for Study I made it among the overall data set of top daily tweets. The accounts examined in Study I were selected so as to obtain a near-representative sample of the country's political landscape, taking into account their activity rates and the size of their follower networks. Figure 1 shows the number of times that a tweet posted by one of these accounts made it among the top daily tweets.

Figure 1. Number of times that an account of a politician or media outlet from Study I made it among the top daily tweets
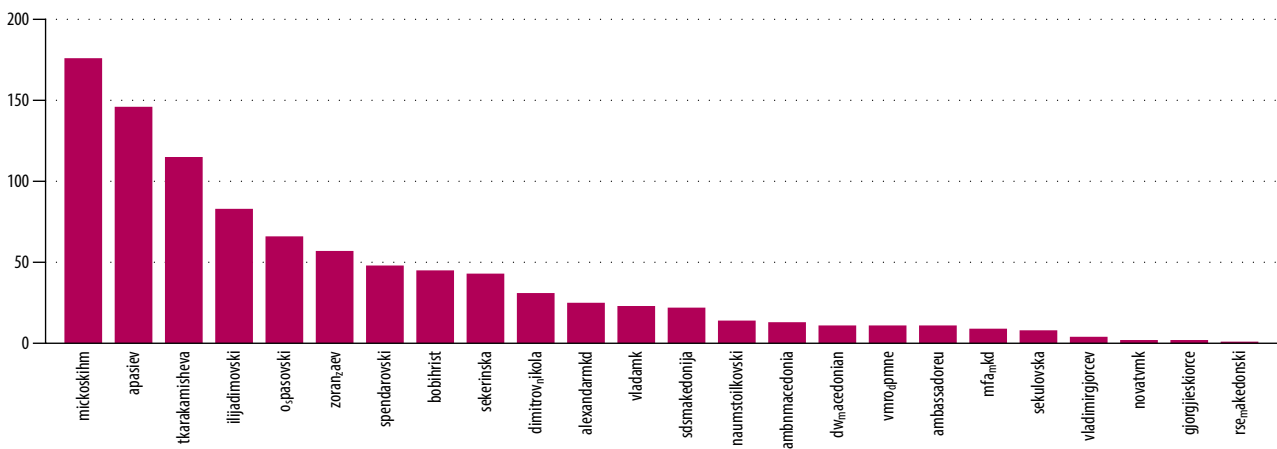
The figure show that as in the case of tweets redirecting to Facebook posts, Hristijan Mickoski (mickoskihm) is also the most prevalent political figure in the entire data set of top daily tweets, closely followed by Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev (apasiev), vocal VMRO-DPMNE proponent Tanja Karakamiseva (tkarakamiseva) and former VMRO-DPMNE spokesperson Ilija Dimovski (ilijadimovski). This is a disproportionately high presence in the top daily tweets for these figures, as their Twitter accounts have substantially less followers (Hristijan Mickoski has 5,765 followers, Dimitar Apasiev 8,662 and Tanja Karakmiseva 4,957) than the 21,000 followers of PM Zoran Zaev (zoran_zaev) or the 16,000 followers of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov (ndimitrov), whose tweets made it among the top daily tweets far fewer times, ranking sixth and tenth in this list, respectively. This finding suggests that posts from the accounts of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials were liked and retweeted by a network of followers capable of creating high levels of engagement, sufficient to include their posts among the top daily tweets a disproportionate amount of times when considering the size of their follower networks. It is likely that a large part of this engagement can be traced back to the activity of the network identified in Study I of this project, as this network accounted for a

majority of interactions with the accounts of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials.

Having examined the relevant YouTube and Facebook links, we examine the remaining domains shared. Firstly, we automatically extract the top-level domains of all links (e.g. .com, .org, .mk, .ru, etc.) to determine whether there was substantial presence of content from foreign outlets. We found that few international links made it among the most popular tweets. However, Serbian *Sputnik* and *Srbija Danas* ['Serbia Today'], a right-wing outlet from Serbia named after *Russia Today* which sources parts of its content from Russian state-funded outlets, were shared on a few occasions. Both of these sites, like other Russian and pro-Russian outlets in Serbia, have an "Arsenal" news category which consists of coverage about Russian military advancements (e.g. new weapons or missile testing), a finding that is relevant further in the analysis.

A ranking of the most frequently occurring domains shows that the most shared news domain in this period is *Infomax,* an outlet focused on promoting the activity of VMRO-DPMNE, while vilifying SDSM officials (primarily PM Zaev) and contesting North Macedonia's name-change – content closely related to the views promoted by the

network of automated and semi-automated accounts identified in Study I. This outlet made it among the top daily tweets 132 times, and was preceded only by links leading to Etsy, Facebook and YouTube. This is unexpected, as *Infomax* is not a popular, mainstream news outlet in the country (it is ranked as the 67th most visited domain in North Macedonia) (Alexa 2020). *Infomax* predominantly made its way to the top tweets of the day through its own account @infomaxmk, which has since been suspended for violating Twitter's Terms and Conditions (sometime around July 2020). This was likely due to spamming behavior through excessive posting, which introduces security risks for Twitter users (Twitter Help Center n.d.). When articles from *Infomax* were shared by other users, this was mostly done by accounts belonging to the network identified in Study I, including @Mini59150498, @zoki79889487, @fohwyjufbyxsahy and @Mince6298498, suggesting that this network not only increased the visibility and engagement of the accounts of political actors, but also played a part in

increasing the visibility of content from *Infomax,* suggesting potential cooperation between outlets like *Infomax* and those managing the identified network.

All of the articles on *Infomax* are written by four authors, each of which contributes well over 10 articles per day, which suggests that most of the content on the website is likely republished from other sources. One of the frequent authors is named Nikola Karev, likely a fake name alluding to a revolutionary hero from the 19th century, while other articles are written by an author named 'admin'. Moreover, the website offers no information about its ownership structure or editorial policy - practices which are not aligned with the expectations of public-service journalism and which introduce challenges for holding those behind *Infomax* accountable for the disseminated content, while also raising concerns about the credibility of this content. Image 1 shows examples of the type of content shared by Infomax.

Image 1. Infomax articles attacking PM Zaev (on the left) and promoting Russian weaponry under the 'Arsenal' section (on the right, showing an article about a new Russian gun and Russian missile testing)

Additionally, we found that *Infomax,* like the Serbian outlets noted above, also has an "Arsenal" category focused on reporting about Russian military and weaponry advancements. Such a category is not common among outlets in North Macedonia (with the exception of North Macedonia's *Russia Beyond the Headlines*) and many of the articles within this category on *Infomax* are sourced from Serbian *Sputnik* and translated into Macedonian, suggesting at least indirect links between *Infomax* and Russian state-funded outlets in the region. This finding suggests that like in Serbia, outlets in North Macedonia may begin to source their content from the freely available content provided by Russian state-funded outlets, raising

concerns about the continued increasing influence of these outlets in the region.

The second most shared domain after *Infomax* was *Frontline* (88 times). On the surface, *Frontline* appears to be an ideological counterpart to *Infomax,* with content largely in favor of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and in support of SDSM policies. Like *Infomax,* this outlet predominantly found its way among the top tweets of the day through its own account @frontlinemk. As with *Infomax,* the high presence of *Frontline* among the most shared domains is surprising, since the outlet is not among the most popular news outlets in the country. However,

unlike *Infomax*, *Frontline* does provide information regarding its editor, as well as authorship information for a majority of its published articles.

When content from *Frontline* was shared by Twitter users, this was done by a group of users entirely distinct from those sharing *Infomax*, and a manual review of these accounts suggests that most represent real Twitter users. Regardless, it is questionable whether the high presence of this outlet among the top daily tweets can be explained by organic engagement from real users. This finding suggests that a network of users may have also contributed to the increased visibility of content favorable to SDSM and North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, however beyond the high presence of *Frontline* among the top daily tweets, the current research project has not uncovered additional evidence in support of this conclusion.

Outlets like *Freeglobe*, *Kolozeg* and *DokazMakedonija* ['EvidenceMacedonia'] did not make it among the most popular tweets often. However, the content that they share and their operational practices are relevant for the current study. Namely, all of these outlets publish conspiratorial content, while providing minimal information about the funding, editorial policy or authors of articles. Most of the articles shared by these outlets are based on conspiratorial narratives about George Soros, Bill Gates and vaccines, as well as domestic political content mixed with right-wing narratives and pro-Russian content. Similarly to *Infomax,* all articles published on *Freeglobe* are written by an author named 'admin' and no information is available regarding the ownership or editorial policy of the website. The outlet *Kolozeg* also does not provide information regarding the

ownership or editorial structure of the website, while all articles are attributed to an author identified solely as 'Kolozeg'. Both of these sites service numerous ads that lead to dubious merchandise websites, largely related to health products, leading to questions about the funding sources which support the activity of the site. The website *Dokazmakedonija* ['EvidenceMacedonia'] also does not list its owners or authors, while most of the advertising banners on the website are fake advertising banners from real products which cannot be interacted with, suggessting that they were used to create a false sense of credibility about the outlet's reporting (see Image 3). These outlets are primarily relevant for the current analysis as they perfectly represent the profile of outlets that can contribute to the success of disinformation campaigns based on extreme narratives. All of these outlets are not transparent about their owners, authors or sources of funding, making it impossible to hold anyone accountable for the consequences of the content they publish and thus allowing for the publishing of unverified reporting based on sensationalist and conspiratorial premises, potentially including content linked to sponsored disinformation campaigns.

It is additionally relevant to consider that during the period surrounding the election, the outlets noted above, as well as *Infomax,* all serviced a banner promoting the campaign *KupuvajteMakedonskiProizvodi*['BuyMacedonianProducts'] – a VMRO-DPMNE campaign developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding, combined with the lack of real advertising banners, suggests that the activity of these outlets may have been funded and supported by domestic political actors sympathetic to VMRO-DPMNE.

Image 2. Freeglobe.mk landing page serving conspiratorial right-wing content
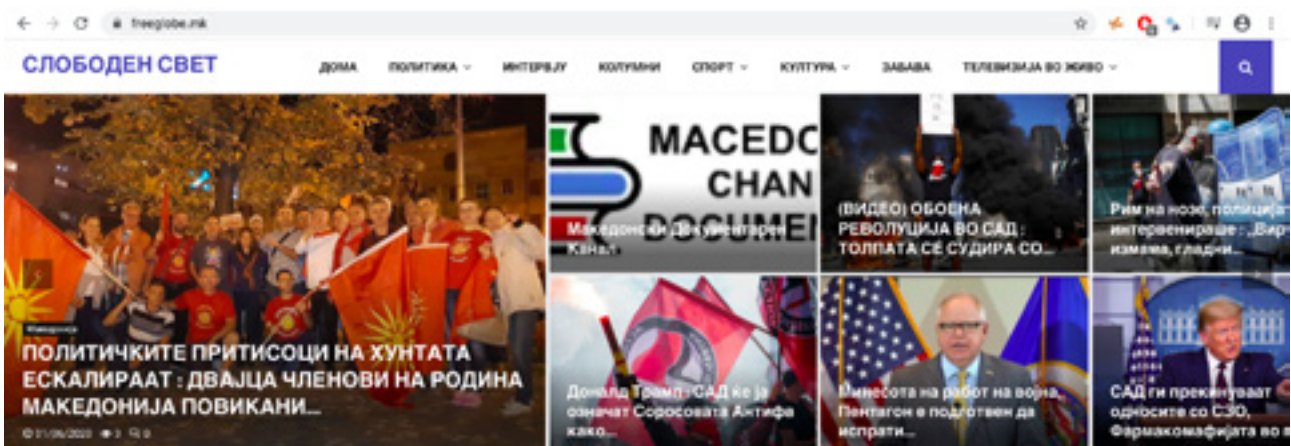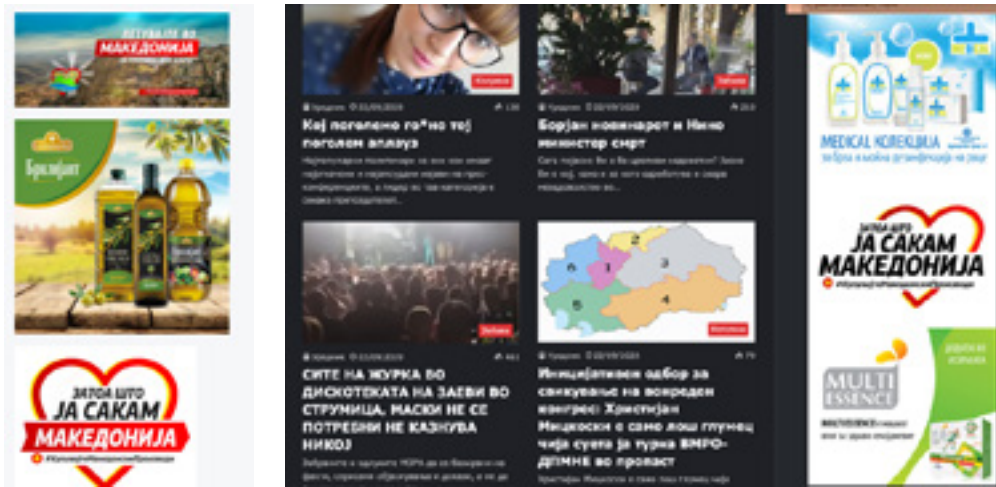
Image 3. Fake ad banners on dokazmakedonija.mk, including the VMRO-DPMNE campaign #KupuvajteMakedonskiProizvodi['Buy Macedonian Products']

The analysis of content from the top daily tweets shows that the visibility of VMRO-DPMNE officials, as well as Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev, was inflated by a network likely connected to the one identified in Study I of this research project. The engagement with posts from these actors by the network ultimately resulted in an inflated representation of the popularity of these actors and their views – a common goal of computational disinformation campaigns. Further, the analysis of domains shared showed that no disinformation campaigns were orchestrated through video content, as all YouTube links examined were music videos or miscellaneous content. The analysis of news domains shared showed that Russian state-funded outlets, as well as Serbian outlets which base their reporting on Russian state-funded news, did occasionally influence discussions in this period. More relevantly, the findings show that *Infomax*, a relatively obscure outlet which is ideologically affiliated with VMRO-DPMNE and opposed to North Macedonia's name-change, was the most shared news domain in this period. This outlet, with its unique 'Arsenal' category based on content sourced from Serbian *Sputnik*, has at least indirect links to Russian state-funded outlets, suggesting that content from Russian state-funded outlets may become increasingly influential in North Macedonia, as it has in neighboring Serbia. The shutdown of the official Twitter account of *Infomax* shows that the account breached Twitter's Terms and Conditions, likely due to foul play in the dissemination of its content, most likely through spamming behavior, resulting in above average activity rates. The presence of the VMRO-DPMNE election campaign 'Buy Macedonian Products' on *Infomax*, *Kolozeg*, *Freeglobe* and *DokazMakedonija*['EvidenceMacedonia'] – outlets sympathetic to VMRO-DPMNE and pro-Russian narratives, which also offer almost no information about their operational practices – suggests that these outlets were likely involved in promoting the views of political actors which fund their activity.

Hashtag analysis

In the next step, and so as to complement the analysis of the domains shared by examining the key topics in this period, we examine the most shared hashtags in the data set. As described above, we firstly applied a regex search string to identify all tweets which contain hashtags, after which we stripped all text from these tweets except the hashtags. Thereafter, we compiled all hashtags in a list and ranked their occurrence. In the next stage, we manually reviewed the 300 most frequently occurring hashtags in this period and selected all hashtags that were politically substantive. A hashtag was considered politically substantive if it explicitly related to North Macedonian domestic politics (i.e. by mentioning SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, Levica or their representatives), or if it explicitly mentioned North Macedonia's foreign policy, primarily its Euro-Atlantic integration process (e.g. by mentioning the EU or NATO).

A manual review of the 300 most frequently occurring hashtags revealed the presence of numerous normal hashtags, such as #dobroutro [#goodmorning] and #tretasmena [#nightshift]. Within these, we identified 40 common, politically substantive hashtags related to issues of identity or North Macedonia's foreign policy, each of which appeared at least 10 times in the period studied. These hashtags largely revolve around three themes, namely: personal attacks towards PM Zaev or SDSM officials (#komunjaro [#communists], #prikazniodzaevistan[#storiesfromzaevistan]), support

for the 'bojkotiram' movement (#dvizenjebojkotiram[#I am boycotting], #apsaana,) and opposition to the name-change (#nevernorthernalwaysmacedonia, #severdzani[#northerners]). These hashtags were mostly shared by users which match the repetitive naming patterns prevalent in the network of accounts identified in Study I of this research project, including @mpp2mLJTRMmAZ3V, @uJHyOw0SgfDl4Pv and @Mini59150498. Some of these users, such as @ivo62294418, @marko19954785, @bruno2101978 and @dean06618857 have since been deleted, potentially suggesting temporary accounts created for the purpose of promoting these hashtags and similar content in the period surrounding the election. Almost none of the most common, politically substantive hashtags were designed to express support for the name-change and North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Personal attacks towards PM Zaev, as exemplified by the first group of hashtags noted, played a central role in the activity of the network identified in Study I of this project, as many of the accounts examined almost exclusively focused on generating hateful discourse in response to his online activity or that of other SDSM officials. This engagement, as well as the hashtags noted here, generally focus on the political failures of SDSM officials, the socialist background of the party (#komunjaro[#communists]) and meme-based personal attacks towards party officials (#prikazniodzaevistan[#storiesfromzaevistan]). Given the outcome of the 2020 election and the continuation of the SDSM-led ruling coalition, this type of content is likely to continue playing an essential role in computational propaganda approaches within the country in the future.

The hashtag #apsaana (best understood as an equivalent of the 'lock her up' campaign against Hillary Clinton in reference to SDSM officials), has played an important role in shaping political discussion on mainstream Twitter as part of the continued activity of the #bojkotiram [' #I am boycotting'] name-change opposition movement, significantly contributing to the popularity of numerous news items and memes in opposition to SDSM, the name-change and the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. The continued popularity and relevance of this hashtag, as well as that of the hashtags directly based on opposition to the name-change (e.g. #nevernorthernalwaysmacedonia) suggest that such issues will continue to play a pivotal role in future political discussions, demonstrating the continued cleavages in public debates within the country, particularly so in the context of discussions about the Euro-Atlantic future of the country. As such, it is likely that hashtags

and content based on this topic will continue to represent a viable entry point for computational propaganda campaigns in North Macedonia in the foreseeable future.

Finally, we compared the engagement levels of these hashtags to other tweets in our data set in Figure 2. The figure shows that tweets containing one of these 40 hashtags generated more engagement (both retweets and likes) than all other tweets in the entire data set of top daily tweets. Given that these hashtags were mostly shared by users identified in Study I of this research project, it is safe to assume that their dominance among hashtags in the top daily tweets is a direct result of inflated engagement rates by automated accounts. These findings are aligned with the findings from the analysis of influential domains, the inflated presence of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica officials among the top daily tweets, as well as with the findings from Study I, suggesting that mainstream discussions in the period surrounding the election were largely shaped by right-wing networks opposed to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and sympathetic to VMRO-DPMNE and Levica.

Figure 2. *Engagement rates of tweets with identity/right-wing hashtags compared to engagement rates of other tweets*
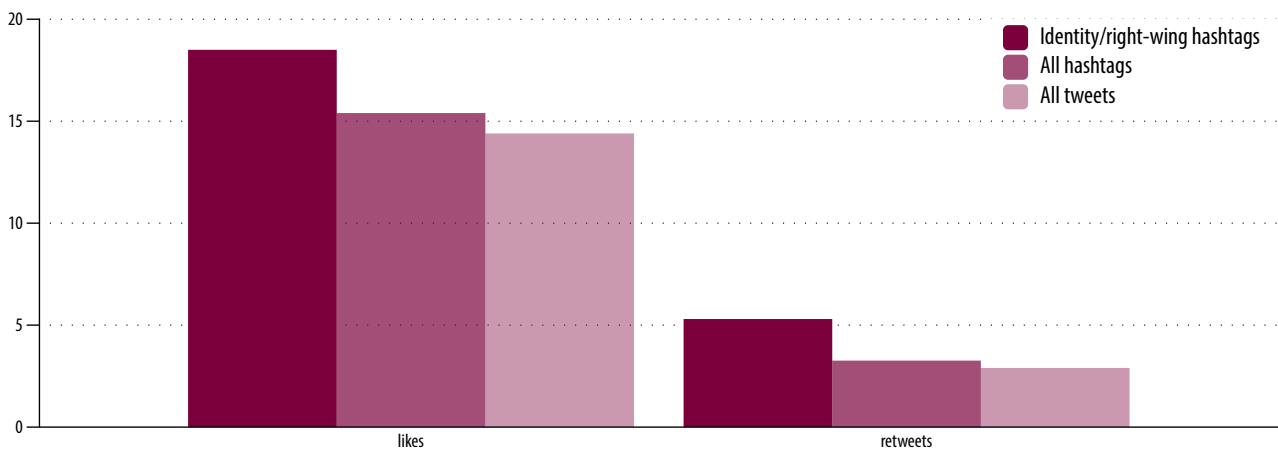
Conclusion

As in Study I of this research project, the analysis shows that computational propaganda methods shaped online political discussions in North Macedonia in the period surrounding the 2020 election. Firstly, the analysis of (news) domains shared showed that a network of users aided the high presence of the outlet *Infomax*, a relatively obscure outlet in North Macedonia. The banning of the official account of *Infomax* on Twitter further points to the possibility that the high presence of this outlet was achieved through foul play, presumably based on excessive posting of content via illicit approaches, which violated Twitter's Terms and Conditions. *Infomax*, and other outlets identified in this analysis, including *Kolozeg, Freeglobe* and *DokazMakedonija* provide almost minimal information regarding their ownership structure or authors and likely republish content from other sources, including Russian state-funded outlets. The presence of the VMRO-DPMNE campaign banner 'Buy Macedonian Products' on these outlets, as well as the lack of real advertisements serviced by these websites, points to the possibility that these outlets are supported and funded by VMRO-DPMNE or individuals sympathetic to their cause. The potential involvement of domestic political actors in the dissemination of content from these outlets is further supported by the inflated presence of tweets from VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski and Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev among the top daily tweets, despite their relatively low follower rates when compared to other high-profile political figures in the country. It is likely that this high presence was made possible through contributions from accounts associated with the network identified in Study I of this research project. Finally, the hashtag analysis demonstrated that a majority of the popular, politically substantive hashtags on

North Macedonian Twitter focused on right-wing, identity-related issues. Many of these hashtags were shared by a group of users belonging to the network identified in Study I, while other accounts contributing to these hashtags have since been deleted, suggesting the use of temporary accounts designed to promote these hashtags in the period surrounding the election. In contrast, almost no hashtags were found in support of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, a representation of public opinion not aligned with extensive research which shows that North Macedonian citizens are largely in favor of this process, suggesting that the overwhelming popularity of these hashtags is unlikely to be the result of organic activity.

While the current findings cannot conclusively point to foreign influence in the period surrounding the 2020 election, it is clear that foreign actors interested in developing disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia can easily cooperate with existing local outlets with questionable financing and agendas, some of which already adopt content from Russian state-funded outlets. The spreading of this content would then be ensured by the large number of accounts designed to be sympathetic to such narratives. Foreign actors interested in further inciting opposition to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration process need only to tap into the already robust resources available, and some may have already done so. Provided continued uncertainty on the Euro-Atlantic integration path of Western Balkan countries and the continued existence of the network of automated accounts identified in Study I of this research project, it is likely that computational propaganda approaches focused on opposition to the

Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia will remain a credible threat in the country.

Researchers examining the influence of (foreign) disinformation campaigns in the region are encouraged to follow the approach suggested in the current study for the analysis of the most popular and influential domains. In particular, we encourage future researchers to take note of the transparency of information provided by outlets flagged as suspicious, as well as to examine the advertising practices of these outlets. Despite the lack of substantive findings from the analysis of YouTube videos shared in this study, we encourage future researchers to further examine the potential spread of (foreign) disinformation campaigns through video content – an increasingly relevant avenue for the dissemination of such campaigns. Moreover, we encourage researchers to examine the prevalence and engagement rates of posts from various political leaders, so as to identify potentially inflated visibility levels of specific political actors as a means for identifying networks that contributed to this presence. Finally, our findings suggest that an analysis of popular hashtags during an electoral period can have substantial merit for the identification of the dominant topics in a given period. An overwhelming presence of ideologically uniform hashtags (such as the right-wing, identity-based hashtags identified in the current study), would suggest artificial promotion of these hashtags, especially if these are not aligned with findings public opinion research – an additional potential approach for detecting networks of users designed for increasing the popularity of these topics.

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Part III
Co-responsibility of the Domestic Political Elite for the Harmful Impact of Foreign Engagements

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
ECO-MONSTERS & ECO-FIGHTERS: CHINA'S INVESTMENTS IN SERBIA'S HEAVY MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY
AS SEEN THROUGH AN ENVIRONMENTAL LENS

TENA PRELEC

8. Eco-monsters & Eco-fighters: China's Investments in Serbia's Heavy Manufacturing Industry as Seen Through an Environmental Lens

Tena Prelec

Executive Summary

In the second half of the 2010s, China has become one of the foremost investors in Serbia. Some of its largest investments, linked to heavy industry, have been accompanied by a manifest increase in pollution levels, sparking great concerns among the local populations and turning many citizens into environmental activists. Is the health hazard real or perceived, and who is to blame? Making use of interviews with activists and experts, as well as of official documents and government responses, the paper analyses the ways in which environmental concerns, governance issues, and a 'closed' government are interlinked. In contrast to the myth of China as a 'bad investor', it is argued that the foremost responsibility lies with the institutions of the recipient country, allowing for such environmental abuses to occur.

The paper analyses two main case studies: the copper smeltery located in Bor (taken over by China's Zijin Mining in 2018) and the steel mill in Smederevo (acquired by the Hesteel Group in 2016). Spontaneous civic activism has arisen in response to the environmental and health hazards in both cases. The perception of finding themselves caught between two fires – an investor looking to maximise its interests, and a government allowing citizens' health to suffer in return for economic gain – has sparked widespread anger among the population. This helps explain why environmental activism is joined with anti-government sentiment: the voices of the activists are not neutral, nor they could be, as the two are interlinked. The cases examined thus illustrate the issues connected with the Chinese investments, but also specific modes of resistance to the dominant conception of power in Serbia.

The problems characterising the case studies presented in this paper are reflected in several other Chinese investments in Serbia (such as the coal-fired plant in Kostolac and a tire factory in Zrenjanin), and beyond Serbia, too (e.g. the Chinese-funded expansion of a heavily polluting coal-fired powerplant Tuzla, in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina). They are not, therefore, isolated cases. The designation of most of these deals as 'Projects of National Interest' situates investors above the laws others have to abide by, and allows authorities to decline most Freedom of Information requests. It is argued that the specific mix of environmental and governance concerns unpacked in this study should be much more front and centre in the policy of EU conditionality and value-based democratic assistance than it is at the moment. These issues should, furthermore, be viewed within the host of clientelistic and kleptocratic practices that both the EU and the new Biden administration in the US have vowed to fight against.

Intro: Serbia Is Choking

On 10 January 2021, thousands of protestors marched through the streets of Belgrade complaining about the unsustainable levels of pollution that have enveloped Serbian cities in recent months and years. The organisers of the 'protest for safe air', comprising several environmental grassroot organisations born in recent years, made simple requests: their main demand is the systematic and transparent monitoring of all relevant parameters of air pollution on the whole territory of the Republic of Serbia, accompanied with the transparent communication of these

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
ECO-MONSTERS & ECO-FIGHTERS: CHINA'S INVESTMENTS IN SERBIA'S HEAVY MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY
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issues through official government channels (Eko Straža 2021; Danas 2021).

While this is the latest in a long string of protests, it surely will not be the last one. In recent years, pollution has reached very high levels across the Balkans and in Serbia in particular, becoming a problem that is impossible to ignore, and as much a health hazard as a quintessential political issue. The pollution caused by 16 coal-based power plants in South Eastern Europe exceeds that produced in the rest of Europe combined (Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) 2019; Hafner and Baumgartner 2020). This exposes the local populations to a huge health risk, while also posing considerable problems to neighbouring European countries, which are reached by the polluted air originating from this area (Coalition 27 2019). The pressure on Belgrade's authorities to address this issue has been mounting since a 2019 report claimed that Serbia had Europe's worst per capita record for pollution-related deaths: 175 per 100,000 people (Global Alliance on Health and Pollution 2019). Since then, Serbian cities have regularly fared among the most polluted in Europe and the world.

Several of the Serbian towns affected by high levels of pollution have one thing in common: their plants have been taken over by Chinese investors over the past half-decade. The scenes of children in Smederevo – home to a steel mill owned by China's Hesteel since 2016 – covered by thick black dust in summer 2020 have reached thousands via online media, sparking outrage (Blic 2020). In Bor, whose copper mine has been acquired by China's Zijin Mining in 2018, alarmingly high levels of sulphur dioxide[1] are not even the highest cause of concern. In September 2020, citizens protested the unsustainable air pollution, pointing out that the deadly toxin arsenic[2] has often been detected in Bor's air. "This is not a protest, but a cry for life", they stated (Jovanovic 2020).

While the new Chinese owners might be one culprit, they are not the only one. Pollution has been damaging these and other cities well before their arrival. Moreover, the politically charged nature of the issue has, so far, yielded more trouble than benefit: in an attempt to obscure pollution data, Serbian authorities seem to have retrenched

further into secrecy, instead of increasing transparency (Pantovic and Harris 2021). A case in point: the firing of expert Milenko Jovanović from the Agency for the Protection of the Environment, in December 2020, after the latter pointed out that the continuous change in the measurement of air pollution parameters was inappropriate (interview with Jovanović, 2011). His reinstatement was one of the requests moved forward by the 10 January protesters in Belgrade.

This paper therefore aims to investigate the question of whether, and to which extent, Chinese investors' influence is impacting Serbia's bad environmental conditions, and analyses modes of resistance to this health hazard in two Serbian cities (Bor and Smederevo). It deals with the intersection of governance and environmental problems, as seen in connection with China's investments in Serbia, while taking stock of the civil society activism that has resulted from a combination of the deep-seated problems with the management of these factories and of a retrenchment into further non-transparency that has ensued after the Chinese takeover.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review addresses the most useful takeaways offered by the incipient literature on Chinese investments in South Eastern Europe in connection with environmental problems, while the 'policy review' lays out the actions taken by the European Union in this respect so far. The empirical sections that follow focus on the case studies of Bor and Smederevo: each of them sets out a brief chronology of the ownership structure over the past decade, providing an overview of the governance-related and environment-related problems, while giving voice to the activists interviewed for this research project. The reaction (or inaction) of national and international institutions is picked up again in the conclusion, arguing for the urgency of a problem that needs to be given absolute priority if Serbia is to truly breath again.

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1   Sulphur dioxide is a toxic gas, released by volcanic activity or as a by-product of copper extraction and the burning of fossil fuels. It is a major air pollutant and has significant impacts upon human health, plants and animal life. Its emissions are a precursor to acid rain and atmospheric particulates.

2   Arsenic is a metalloid ranked among the most hazardous in the world by the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. It is a Group-A carcinogen.

Literature Review: Environment Meets Governance

In light of the burgeoning relations between Serbia and China, policy and academic literature on the subject has been rapidly growing, with a focus on the geopolitical implications, on the economy, on security, and on whether China's soft power and symbolic power are on the rise (Janković 2016; Grubišić 2017; Dimitrijević 2017; Vangeli and Pavlićević 2019; Vangeli 2020). However, the scholarly debate has been slower to devote attention to the environment, although this was identified as one of the main risks of Chinese investments in the region in a 2017 risk-mapping exercise (Andrić, W Zou, and Author 2017).

And yet, as explained above, the urgency of this topic is all too evident. One of the most useful academic contributions to this debate was put forward by a group of researchers comparing the environmental impact of Chinese investments in six South East European countries, including Serbia (Tsimonis et al. 2020). The main argument they put forward is that the adverse environmental impact of many Chinese projects in this region cannot be attributed to "the commonly held perception of the Chinese as inherently 'bad' investors and of host states as 'weak' and dependent". Instead, they find what they term a *synergy of failures* between investors, host states, and regional institutions that results in poor regulation and compliance. Their analysis is useful because it serves to highlight the relevance of state-investor relations as an important element to understand the behaviour of firms from emerging economies such as China, as they "co-create different practices and regulatory norms in liminal regions such as SEE" (Tsimonis et al, 2020: 3). In discussing their conclusions, they state:

> Our findings identify an unfortunate "synergy of failures" by the actors involved as the heart of the problem. On the one hand, Chinese investors **tend to disregard the necessity of environmental impact assessments (EIAs)**, the need for compliance with local regulatory frameworks and the importance of engaging with local communities and civil society. On the other hand, **host governments demonstrate a lack of political will** to pursue sustainable development or enforce compliance, especially at the entry point, which renders them **primarily responsible for the negative environmental impact** of these projects. The closed nature of bilateral negotiations mitigates against effective civil society oversight until many of the environmentally damaging effects are already

happening, or at least until the project has taken on an institutional inertia which can be difficult to stop. This is particularly relevant given the high level of host state involvement in many of the Chinese-invested projects in SEE (Tsimonis et al 2020: 6) (*emphasis added*).

Therefore, it is often not analytically possible to distinguish the impact of Chinese capital from the effects linked to improperly designed or implemented neoliberal reform programmes. Similarly, it is difficult to extricate them from the consequences of weak governance and corruption. As is increasingly recognised in the literature on external actors in the Western Balkan region, the problems deriving from non-Western actors' influence are much more a result of a *demand-side*, rather than of a *supply-side*, problem (Maliqi 2020a; Prelec 2020a). In other words, the quality of the governance of the recipient country matters more than the foreign actor's practices in ensuring that investments are transparent and beneficial for the whole population.

In this sense, it is significant to note that China is far from being the only player to 'not play by the rules' in the region, nor was it the first one. In South Eastern Europe, there is often a long track record of exploitative activities by international corporations (Duanmu 2014; Elliott and Freeman 2004; Moran 2002). In fact, as will be discussed in the case studies below, the companies examined suffered from a range of problems before the Chinese takeover. In more recent times, Western investors were also found to be implicated in funding environmentally-damaging projects in the Balkans (Đorđević 2020).

A final topic worthy of attention is that of environmental protests as linked to anti-government activism. This theme is a burgeoning one in the specialised literature on countries with transitional or hybrid democracies, and is therefore not limited to South Eastern Europe. From Belarus to Kyrgyzstan, from Armenia to Uzbekistan, and from Romania to China, demonstrators have increasingly taken action against perceived environmental injustices, confronting the government (Vesalon and Crețan 2015; Wooden 2013; Christoph Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Buyon 2020). The 2020 Nations in Transit report by Freedom House highlighted the link between eco-activists' demands and anti-corruption sentiment (Buyon 2020):

> [M]any of the ecological issues driving this activism are downstream of governance failures including

clientelism, graft, and gross incompetence. Consequently, in free and unfree societies alike, environmental protests have become ciphers through which citizens can advocate against corruption and for good governance—and expect results.

It is therefore no surprise that grievances related to governance and those related to the environment go hand in hand in the case studies examined in the sections that follow. A note of caution, however, concerns the possibility of such groups to be co-opted by the very regimes they are protesting against. As the political importance of environmental activism looms ever larger, so does autocrats' temptation to create puppet parties or 'Government-organised non-governmental organizations' purporting to fight for the environment, but serving the ruling elites' political interests – a scenario that has already materialised in both Russia and Uzbekistan (Buyon 2020).

Policy Review: The EU's Role

The activity of the European Union (EU) in countering environmental problems identified above has, so far, not been very forceful. The EU's Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) screening mechanism, set up in 2019, was created with China in mind. However, this mechanism was – and still is – primarily aimed at safeguarding the EU against security and public order threats, whereas the environmental issues fare much lower on the scale of priority. The press release announcing the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) (European Commission 2020) mentions 'sustainability' – a dimension containing reference to both labour rights and environmental protection – as the fifth of seven bullet points in summarising the agreement. Market access, ensuring 'equal footing' for EU companies in China, the predictability and legal certainty for investments, and regulating the behaviour of SOEs are all principles cited before concerns regarding the environment.[3]

Voices worried with this situation are, however, starting to make themselves heard in Brussels. In January 2021, a cross-party group of Members of the European Parliament sent a hard-hitting letter to the European Commissioner in charge of Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, raising the problem of the environmental impact of Chinese investments in Serbia and asking for the EU to step up its game in this regard (Group of MEPs 2021). Aside from the cases of Bor and Smederevo that are treated in this study, the letter summarises the issues that characterise the Shandong Linglong tire plant in Zrenjanin. Like the others, this project, too, has been labelled 'of national interest' by the Serbian authorities, which allows it to be treated differently, bypassing standard procedures and walling it off from scrutiny. The opacity of the venture is connected with a series of troubles:

> The establishment of the plant in itself raises questions, given that the land has been alleged to be leased to Shandong Linglong free of charge and with equally generous terms on utilities, taxation or import fees. More than two dozen law suits and administrative requests have already been filed to challenge the irregularities of this project. Claims have been put forward that the population around the site have been barred from testifying with regards to potential environmental impact on their homes. Besides concerns about air quality, the project is currently slated to also be directly linked to the Zrenjanin public water system without any guarantees of filtration or safeguards to maintain water quality, presenting yet another possible hazard to the health and well-being of the surrounding population (Group of MEPs 2021).

In many ways, these issues are strongly at odds with Serbia's EU aspirations. Expanding the coal-based powerplants, such as in the case of Kostolac (Serbia), is a particularly glaring pitfall. Simon Ilse, Head of the Belgrade Office of the Heinrich Boell Stiftung, expressed great concern about China-Serbia cooperation in heavy industry plants, calling it 'a huge step backwards', and adding:

> The gap between climate and energy legislation and goals in the EU on the one hand, and Serbia on the other hand, is increasing to a level that will make it almost impossible for Serbia to catch up because of lock-in effects. According to a recent study by the

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3   While we do not yet know the exact content of the EU-China trade and investment agreement that was signed in December 2020, there are indications that any issues potentially critical of China may have been swept under the rug, to the benefit of economic relations (Fallon 2021).

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Energy Community, to which Serbia is a contracting partner and whose goal it is to bring countries of the East- and South-Eastern European region closer to the EU's Energy Union, Serbia is spending more than double on subsidies for coal than for renewables. If the EU is still the objective, there needs to be a decisive turn-around immediately (Interview with Ilse, 2020).

Two takeaways are clear: that the EU has not taken a very active role in this regard as yet, and that it should. It should do so not only out of selfless considerations.

Safeguarding the rule of law and the environment in its accession countries is also an investment in its own future, as it is a real worry about the grave spill-over effects the air pollution coming from the Western Balkans is already having in nearby EU member states (Coalition 27 2019). The clear link between the potential abuse of public resources and these environmentally-damaging ventures should, furthermore, send alarm bells ringing across the pond. The new US administration has vowed to fight modern kleptocracy (Logvinenko and Michel 2020): cracking down on these practices in its democracy-promotion efforts should be seen as part and parcel of this new agenda.

Bor: From RTB–Bor to Zijin Bor Copper

"We could never boast of being an 'air spa', but it has never been this bad", says Irena Živković, one of the leaders of the protests for clean air that have been taking place in Bor from 2015 onwards (Interview with Živković, 2020). Irena says she is lucky to be in good health now, but is worried about her children. She does not seem to notice her own, continuous, cough: the impression is that she does not consider it even worthy of mention, compared to what many of her fellow Bor citizens are experiencing.

To be sure, many of the grave environmental problems affecting the mining town in Eastern Serbia, rich in copper, gold and other precious metals, predated the arrival of Chinese investors in 2018. Branislav Radošević, an engineer with a long experience of working with companies operating in the Bor area, says: "It is not down to the Chinese alone. If you walked down the streets of Bor in nylon stockings, even a decade ago or more, they would

start to tear apart pretty soon. It is the sulphur dioxide that does it" (Interview with Radošević, 2020). Even worse than the sulphur dioxide, significant amounts of highly toxic arsenic have been recorded in Bor's air. Its provenance has never been clarified.

Bor's heavy pollution is not a new problem, then. But, as with all other interviewees consulted for this project, Radošević is also convinced that the 'new era' marked by the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party and the Chinese investors – from 2018 to date – has brought "a situation worse than we have ever witnessed before" (Interview with Radošević, 2020), in terms of pollution as well as in regard to the lack of transparency. After a short historical overview of Bor's smeltery, this section outlines the damage to the environment and citizens' health, considering available data. Finally, it looks at activists' responses.

A string of economic woes and governance problems

That the area around Bor was rich in precious metal is something that has been known for thousands of years, predating even Roman times. In its modern form, the mining complex and smeltery was developed at the beginning of the 20th century, when the Serbian industrialist Đorđe Vajfert ensured the influx of French capital into the venture. The company, headquartered in Paris, was founded in June 1904 (RTB Bor 2012). In the interwar period, it is rumoured that the main 'gatekeeper' for any business deal in that region was Radomir Pašić, the son of renowned politician Nikola Pašić, who was defined as "the haughtiest daddy's son in Serbian history... leaving his mark on each and every corruption scandal" (Srbija Danas 2020). French capital backed the venture until the Second

World War. Further investment and expansion of the mining area followed under Yugoslavia, until 1999 – when it was restructured (RTB Bor 2012).

Politics has always played a leading role in RTB Bor. Even in the early 2000s, during the reformist governments that followed the demise of Slobodan Milošević's authoritarian regime, the company's activity was not transparent. Question marks hang over a failed takeover by Australian colossus Rio Tinto in this period, which was allegedly already agreed and stopped abruptly (interview with Radošević, 2020). Two failed purchases followed in 2007 and 2008, by Romanian company Cuprom and Austrian A-TEC, respectively.

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Increasingly, RTB-Bor kept running into serious economic difficulties. As with many state-owned companies in Serbia, the opportunities offered by the rich mining company were abused by the elites in power: wages were kept high and excessive employment was long the norm, to keep 'social peace' among the population and ensure a loyal class of voters through clientelistic practices (Cvejić 2016; Günay and Dzihic 2016). Furthermore, the debt incurred towards other state-owned companies, chiefly EPS, to foot the mining and smelting complex's energy bill, was regularly waived or just not paid.

These factors contributed to a worsening economic performance of the company. The bad economic position of RTB Bor was a matter of concern for the International Monetary Fund (IMF), too, which actively encouraged Serbia to either find a strategic partner or to privatise the company altogether (Telesković 2017) and expressed satisfaction after the acquisition by the Chinese investor, judging it an "important step" (International Monetary Fund 2018).

It is within this context that Zijin Mining Group's takeover occurred in August 2018, with the acquisition of a 63% stake in RTB Bor – thence known as Zijin Bor Copper. The Serbian Minister of Energy and Mining Aleksandar Antić (of the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS) announced that Zijin would invest $1.26 billion in the Serbian company, with an extra $350 million foreseen for its recapitalization. The Chinese partner also pledged to open the Cerovo mine and to modernize Bor's smeltery, increasing its capacity. They vowed to keep 5,000 workplaces and to invest $200 million in covering pre-existing debts (Vlada Republike Srbije 2018). No wonder, then, that President Aleksandar Vučić was able to present this and other takeovers, and the Chinese investors, as 'saviours' (Prelec 2020b).

The environmental damage and the response: worse than 'just' sulphur dioxide

A new smeltery was unveiled and made operational in 2015. However, engineers working in Bor contested this move in an open letter to authorities (Solaris media Bor 2015), accusing the government of releasing the smeltery before its construction was finalised and the relevant controls were done. "The truth is simple and inescapable: the launch of the new smeltery […] occurred in a situation that was lacking the basic technical requirements", they wrote[4].

As it turned out, the engineers' worries were not misplaced. The sub-standard smeltery could not cope with an increase in production and, as a consequence, pollution levels rose considerably. This triggered the first protests, after which the first citizen mobilisation was initiated. "We first tried to act through institutional channels, but we encountered a wall, and we took to the streets", says Vladimir Stojičević, an active member of another activists group, Glasno Za Omladinu ('Loud for our Youth').

The pressure paid off, at least to some extent. After authorities conceded to decreasing the level of activity of the new smeltery in 2015, and the high levels of air pollution that were recorded that year decreased somewhat. However, after Zijin Mining's takeover in 2018, the activity has ostensibly resumed, bringing pollution levels back up.

In 2019 the city saw five anti-pollution protests – but levels have further increased in 2020 (Đorđević 2020).

There is mounting evidence to assert that, while the environmental problems had clearly started before the privatisation of the company, the way this was carried out has compounded environmental risks. A first object of controversy is the Agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the Chinese company Zijin Mining: the 1,124-word document (published as an unsearchable pdf file by the Serbian authorities) contains a number of contentious areas. An in-depth study published in 2020 argues that the Serbian government gave the new investor a 'free-pass' on any environmental damage done in the transition period, while crucially 'missing' defining the duration of said period (Novaković and Todorović Štiplija 2020).

Not everyone in the institutions has always turned a blind eye. In November 2019, the Environmental Inspectorate pressed charges against Zijin Bor Copper for air pollution, after an officer took it upon herself to visit the city and measure the pollution first-hand. The Inspectorate's report stated that, in the days observed, the concentration of sulphur dioxide was between 5.6 to 8.3 times higher than the legal maximum (Ministry for Environmental Protection

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4   The issues raised by the engineers included the insufficient amount and inadequate physico-chemical properties of the concentrate; the improperly carried out discharge and transport of slag; the questionable readiness for release of two converters and of the gas treatment system; the failure to include managers and workers in the control of the modernisation works; and the inadequate training of workers to operate the new smeltery (Solaris media Bor 2015).

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of Serbia 2019)[5]. The company, however, ignored the report and continued to operate. The court ruled against Zijin Bor Copper, but only by issuing an undisclosed fine between EUR 13,000 and 26,000 (Danas 2020) – a drop in the bucket for a company whose annual turnover exceeds EUR 465 million (Serbian Business Registers Agency 2020).

Voices of officers trying to bring this issue to light are stifled and marginalised. The most prominent case is the above-mentioned dismissal of air pollution expert Milenko Jovanović from the Agency for Environmental Protection (SEPA) in December 2020. Interviewed for this study, Jovanović expressed his deep worries about the copper mining complex: "Bor is, in my opinion, the bleakest case of them all" (interview with Jovanović, 2021). He raised the issue of highly venomous arsenic particles in the air: a problem unanimously considered a serious risk for human health[6]. Experts lament the non-transparency of the provenance of this substance (interviews with Jovanović 2021 and Radošević 2020). What is more, the smeltery was built in a depression, which means that its chimney is at the level of the buildings; the polluting particles, therefore, reach city dwellers directly (interview with Jovanović 2021).

New trouble could be on the horizon. Zijin did not limit its ambitions to the pre-existing mining activities: in 2019, the company expanded excavations to a new location, 5 km south of Bor (Ralev 2020). This new mining area, called Čukaru Peki, has been touted as one of the biggest unexploited copper and gold deposits in the world (B92 2017). The preparatory activities for the opening of the new pit have already created a natural disaster in the neighbouring villages of Metovnica, Brestovac and Slatina. Given that there is no running water in this area, the only source of water is from a system of underground wells, which have been drying up since the underground mining started. Furthermore, the explosions have damaged several houses in the aforementioned villages. Some villagers are expected to be relocated (N1 2020).

The activists' fight in Bor continues. There are signs that it may not have been in vain: in January 2021, pollution had decreased, although it still often surpassed the limits allowed by law. An important document, furthermore, signalled a way forward. Activists managed to obtain the minutes of a Zijin Bor Copper meeting, from which is appeared that the Chinese managers – and not the Serbian ones – insisted upon the swift resolution of the problems causing high pollution, including the toning down of production in the periods considered of highest risk. The Chinese managers are quoted as saying: "In regard to the protection of the environment, the green transition needs to be speeded up", and "what happened in September, that the pollution limits were overtaken so glaringly, and that I was not informed about it immediately, this is something I am very unhappy about. I hope it will not happen again".

The minutes furthermore indicate that the media pressure had worked: as stated by the Chinese managers, the attention on this issue 'brought damage to the Peoples' Republic of China'. Irena Živković has no doubts: the reaction from the international organisations and the foreign media that have spoken out about this problem are to thank. "I hope that the pressure on the Chinese investors and on our institutions will continue", she says. "It is clear that, after all that was attempted by the citizens, this is the route that gives the best results. In the meantime, we still await the new [more ecologically suitable] plant, and hope that our workers will keep their jobs" (Interview with Živković 2021).

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5   Official data from the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency's measuring point Bor – used for filing this complaint – reveal that from September 13 to September 15 2020 up to 2,000 micrograms of sulphur dioxide were measured in Bor (Spasić 2020). The legally sanctioned level of this substance is between 125 and 500 micrograms, after which the concentration of toxins becomes hazardous for human health. There is considerable uncertainty over these figures, which could be even worse: activists and experts stated that the measurements have, on occasion, surpassed 4000 micrograms of sulphur dioxide during 2020 (interview with Živković 2020 and Radošević 2020).

6   Measurements made by the Institute of Metallurgy in Bor found 4.771 ng/m3 of arsenic in the air in December 2019, while this value has been 600 times over the legal limit of 6 ng/m3 on some days in 2018. The alarm has been sounded by several experts and engineers that work in RTB Bor, but for now nobody is willing to step out of the shadows and publicly state where the arsenic comes from.

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Smederevo: Red Rain, Black Dust

In June 2016, citizens of Smederevo greeted Xi Jinping with a grand welcome, while holding large effigies of China's president in their hands (Ruptly 2016). But soon enough, the situation would drastically change, as the takeover by the new owners went hand in hand with a progressive deterioration of environmental conditions in the city (Pantović 2020; Todorović 2020). As in the case of Bor (and as will be explained in more detail in the following sections), government pollution data are unreliable. Formally, there is no hard proof that pollution has increased considerably over the past half decade: a halt in the air pollution measurement over the course of three years, 2015-2017 means that it is very difficult to draw precise historical pollution data (interview with Jovanović).

However, activists point to a situation that is both extremely troubling in terms of long-standing problems, and getting even worse. The disconnect between the line pushed by the government in relation to the investments coming from China – one of economic development over everything else (RTS 2015; Prelec 2020b) – and the lived experience of Smederevo inhabitants is now conspicuous. As put by one of the activists: "We can't keep talking about profit, day in and day out, while we are dying like rats here" (Marka Žvaka & Pokret Tvrđava 2020).

Smederevo's steel century: from Austria–Hungary to China

As in the case of Bor's mine, Smederevo's steel production goes long back in time – by almost a century. In 1913, the Austro-Hungarian company STEG acquired a mining concession in Eastern Serbia, founding the Kingdom of Serbia's first steel plant. The steel mill, which was then named SARTID, remained majority-owned by foreign capital until the end of World War II. With the arrival of socialism, the company was nationalised in December 1946 (Vreme 2012). The plant then remained state-owned until 2003, when it was acquired by the American company US Steel for $23 million (Tavernise 2003). Between 2008-2010, US Steel invested in ecological improvements; the main chimney was reconstructed and sludge presses installed (Stevanovic 2020).

In the years spanning 2003 to 2012 – when US Steel left Serbia due to the drop in global steel prices, selling the steel mill back to the state for $1 – the industrial complex in Smederevo was the biggest exporter in the country. The new owners, furthermore, funded the modernization of two stations for the measurement of air quality in the local communities of Radinac and Ralja, in cooperation with the Serbian Ministry of the Environment (Jovicic 2016). The 2012-2016 state-run period, by contrast, was marked by utter neglect. Five thousand workers were put on leave, the furnaces were shut down, scheduled maintenance was allegedly being skipped and various tenders annulled.

In April 2016, the Serbian government declared they had finally found a suitable partner in the Chinese company Hesteel Group, which was known as HBIS until that year (Dragojlo 2016). The Chinese firm acquired a 98% stake in the Smederevo steel mill for EUR 46 million, promising to invest EUR 300 million over the following 2 years. In a manner typical of large deals concluded by the Serbian state over the past decade (Pavlović 2016), the 1170-page-long contract between Serbia and Hesteel Group was shrouded by intransparency and included clauses favourable to the investor and detrimental to the Serbian state coffers. The Chinese investor was allowed to choose which parts of the company it would take on board; Hesteel acquired all of the company's assets but left its debts in a sister company which is, at the time of writing, still owned by the state (Teleskovic 2017).

The environmental damage and the response: red & black dust

Nikola 'Kolja' Krstić is fond of his 'no filter' badge. "This is one of the problems we are fighting against", he explains, "the lack of filters in the steel plant". That for him the local grievances had become national, and the private political, is all too clear. When we spoke for the first time, in spring 2020, our conversation was interrupted mid-way by the spirited sound of clanging pots and pans – the anti-government protests that took place during the first coronavirus lockdown, each evening at 20:05, in which he, as many other environmental activists, took part in without fail.

Krstić, the leader of the local eco grassroot movement 'Tvrđava' (Fortress), explained that Smederevo activists were among the first to raise the issue of environmental degradation in Serbia. Starting in 2018, they have been organising a series of actions that receive considerable media coverage, such as the blocking of the railroad in front of the steel mill (Mondo 2018) or the 'masked ball' with

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protective masks in pre-coronavirus times (RTS 2018). As he explained: "Our association of citizens was funded with the aim to improve the quality of life in our community, but also as a defence barrier and a controlling mechanism to the local authorities. One of the main topics that profiled themselves is air pollution, due to it being incredibly high in Smederevo: it is enough to look around and observe the heavy cloak of red dust on houses, cars, and people" (interview with Krstić 2020).

The actions had limited success, but they nevertheless pushed authorities to react. Initially, eco-activists in Smederevo had three main demands: installing proper filters in the steel mill; stopping the illegal deposit of slag in the city; and ensuring the proper measurement of air pollution (Mondo 2018). After the 2018 mobilisation, the director of Serbia's Agency for the protection of the environment contacted the local activists and proceeded to install a new air pollution measurement station – a first small victory.

This was followed by meetings with Hesteel itself and with the Ministry of Energy in early 2019. By threatening to organise more protests, the activists persuaded the steel mill owners and the authorities to take part in a series of other meetings, again with limited concrete outcomes. At one of the latest of such instances, activist Vladimir Milić started the conversation by putting on the table three different kinds of heavy metal that he had collected from his garden and his windowsill that morning (Pokret Tvrđava 2020). Consultations, however, did not produce any concrete results, "mostly ending with empty promises" (interview with Krstić, 2020).

Things were about to get even worse. In July 2020, Smederevo was covered by thick black dust. While occurrences of 'red dust' and 'red rain' have been relatively common in Smederevo for a long time (Marka Žvaka & Pokret Tvrđava 2020; N1 2019), it is the first time that the black particles enveloped the city. "The worst is that,

while we know that it comes from the steel mill, we do not know exactly what it is made of", explains Krstić, "but it is very important for people to understand that this is not just 'normal' dust: what we are talking about here is the by-product of steel melting activity" (interview with Krstić, 2021).

Such problems are especially vicious in the context of the Covid19 crisis: people living in areas affected by heavy air pollution have been found to be much more vulnerable to the effects of the virus, increasing mortality by up to 11% (Carrington 2020; Wu et al. 2020; Pozzer et al. 2020).

The unavailability of reliable data complicates matters. While it is well known, and scientifically proven, that the rise of illnesses – including cancer – is closely connected with the activity of the steel mill (Slobodan Miladinović et al. 2013), the mid-2010s are a period that is very scarcely covered by data points. As already mentioned, air pollution measurement stations were not active in the period 2015-2017 (interview with Jovanović). Data regarding the incidence of malign illnesses is equally difficult to come by. "We asked the local hospital (Dom Zdravlja) to deliver this information to us, but they declared themselves not responsible in this matter. We asked other institutions and are still waiting for an answer", Krstić explained in January 2011.

The frustration and the anger of Smederevo dwellers, therefore, is directed much more against the institutions – which allow these abuses to occur, and seem to go to great lengths to obscure and mystify pollution data – than against the new Chinese owners. In the absence of clear measurement data, it is very difficult to estimate the gravity of the problems and to assign blame. It is, however, very likely that the incessant campaigning work by Smederevo activists is a real thorn in the side of the company managers, who cannot fail to entertain considerations that are similar in nature to those expressed by the Chinese owners of the Bor copper mine.

Conclusions

In both cases examined, Bor and Smederevo, there are indications that pollution has worsened over the past few years, i.e. after the Chinese takeover. In the case of Bor, the likely over-capacity operation of the smeltery has sulphur pollution as a consequence; and there are well-founded suspicions that there are high levels of arsenic in the

concentrate. In the case of Smederevo, the pre-existent red dust and red rain were recently joined by even more worrying occurrences of black dust. While there is no denying that pollution was a significant problem in those cities in earlier years, the lived experiences of the citizens

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examined in this paper show that concern with the quality of the air that surrounded them has grown significantly.

The role of the Serbian government in allowing for dubious and intransparent practices by the new owners is front and centre. The Chinese investors were promised that they could increase production in the factories they took over: the increase in production has had deleterious effects on the environment and on the health of those living in proximity to these plants, and even further afield. As explained by the experts interviewed, given that the operations are shrouded by a thick veil of secrecy and we thus do not know almost anything about what the new owners have committed themselves to, there are worries that some of their practices are leading to very dangerous consequences. What is more, local authorities have neglected at best, and actively sabotaged at worst, the availability of reliable pollution measurement data. Both the unavailability of data and the marginalisation or firing of experts from relevant agencies are extremely troubling occurrences.

Spontaneous civic activism has arisen in response to this environmental and health hazard, especially in the period since 2018. These movements have created networks and have already organised coordinated actions in several cities at once. The perverse harmony of an investor looking to maximise its interests and a government that allows its citizens' health to suffer in return for economic gain has sparked widespread anger among the population. This helps explain why, in all the cases examined, environmental activism is joined with anti-government sentiment: the voices of the activists analysed here are not neutral, nor they could be, as the two are interlinked. The cases examined thus illustrate the issues connected with Chinese investments, but also specific modes of resistance to the dominant conception of power in Serbia.

Seen from this perspective, the stark dualism of China as a bad actor, and Western countries and companies as good actors, should be questioned and addressed with nuance. The material examined in this study indicates that the main discriminant in exploitative and environment-damaging practices occurring in such companies is the extent to which such practices are allowed by the Serbian government. This chimes with the findings of several other works focused on the Western Balkans, which point at the *demand-side*, rather than the *supply-side*, as crucial in the occurrence of malign influence from non-Western actors (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; 2019; Maliqi 2020b).

Where does 'the West' stand in all this? So far, the economy has trumped the environment in the Serbian government's calculations, to little pushback from the EU. However, a letter from a cross-party group of concerned Members of the European Parliament from January 2021 suggests that there are actors within the EU who are able and willing to eloquently articulate these issues. But will it be enough for the EU to act on it? While the EU's increasingly tight commercial ties with China leave plenty of questions, positive synergy could come from the US. If the Biden administration is serious about tackling global corruption and kleptocracy, it cannot overlook the dynamics by which fragile democracies interact with capital coming from authoritarian countries, to the clear detriment of the health of the population.

The importance of such international pressure cannot be overestimated. The most encouraging finding of the study is that, while the activists' fight might not have convinced their national authorities to change tack, it has pushed the Chinese investors to worry about reputational risks for themselves and for their country, and adopt at least palliative measures to lower pollution. New, more environmentally friendly plants are in the works. But to have real effects, pressure must continue at a sustained pace: there is still a long way to go for Serbs to be able to catch their breath again.

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9. The Sum of All Fears – Chinese AI Surveillance in Serbia

Maja Bjeloš

Executive Summary

The Serbian government, in cooperation with the Chinese technology company Huawei, has been actively working on the implementation of the surveillance "Safe City" project in Belgrade since 2019. The project involves the installation of thousands of smart surveillance cameras with object and facial recognition features. This paper aims to shed more light on the ongoing discussions about the use of the Chinese technology by Serbian authorities. It provides information about the political context in Serbia and its deepening relations with China in the security sector. It presents the official government narrative on the benefits of the smart surveillance system developed by Huawei, which rests on its purported ability to fight terrorism and reduce the crime rate. The paper then proceeds to review the main arguments against the use of cameras as developed by Serbian civil society actors. It analyses how civil society challenges the introduction of Chinese technology, and what its critical responses to its use are along three main lines: lack of transparency and accountability, risk of misuse of smart surveillance cameras for political purposes, and poor legal regulation.

This analysis shows that the biometric smart surveillance project has raised concerns about the deterioration of privacy, as well as human rights and freedoms in Serbia. The Serbian public does not share the same concerns as civic activists because it lacks basic information about the scope of the entire project. The Serbian government has classified the surveillance project as "confidential" and avoids public debate on its potential benefits and risks. There are many still-unanswered questions, such as: where the data will be stored, who will be responsible for data processing and what are the mechanisms for protection against misuse, where are cameras installed, how many are there and what is their function. The Serbian government's strong control over the information and media space makes it difficult for critical voices to be heard. Public awareness about the opaque terms of the Safe City project is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and poor regulation of artificial technology, which leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law.

Surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition software are particularly worrisome to human rights defenders and civic activists in Serbia because this system will be used in a country with weak democracy, abuse of executive power and loose checks and balances. Civil society representatives thus fear that China's cutting-edge technology will strengthen the capacities of Serbia's increasingly authoritarian leadership to control every citizen and all aspects of life and thus further endanger its weak democracy and human rights enforcement. Moreover, civic activists fear that face recognition cameras will allow Serbian authorities to track and intimidate critics of the ruling political elite.

Poor legal regulation of video surveillance in Serbia and the lack of laws regulating the facial recognition system and biometric data processing represent another line of argumentation against the introduction of smart surveillance. According to critical voices in Serbian society, if such powerful facial recognition technology is not legally regulated and handled by trained professionals under democratic civilian control, the surveillance system could be easily misused. The lack of legal regulation is one of the main reasons why Serbian civil society has called on national authorities to suspend the process of introducing smart surveillance and to engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity and implications of such a system.

The paper also shows that demands by civil society representatives to address the existing shortcomings, provide a legal basis for the use of the smart surveillance system, and conduct further assessment on all related risks remain unanswered by Serbian authorities. The Ministry of interior continued to install smart surveillance cameras across Belgrade during the coronavirus outbreak without any notice or publicly available information, and has announced even greater surveillance in the near future, as the city of Belgrade will now be covered with 8,100 cameras instead of the initial 1,000.

Introduction

Most Western analyses of Huawei facial recognition technology, including official reports, examine China's attempts to "export authoritarianism" by exporting its surveillance system, often embedded in projects aimed at increasing public safety.[1] In addition, China and Huawei are problematized at the global level as a security threat to the US and their allies ever since Washington began to scrutinize China's attempt to establish dominance in the technology sector and in the field of artificial intelligence. The global debate on the risks associated with Huawei and facial recognition technology has also entered Serbia, which introduced smart surveillance in 2019. On the local level, however, the debate gained specific contours, reflecting concerns shared by authoritarian states in Asia or Africa rather than those in other parts of Europe. Due to gradual erosion of the rule of law, human rights and media freedom in Serbia, Chinese surveillance technology is most debated in relation to democracy and human rights. In line with other discussions about misuse of artificial intelligence in authoritarian regimes (e.g. repressive policies against Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in China), some in Serbia fear the technology would enable Serbian authorities to exercise more robust political control over opponents of the regime.

Against this background, the aim of the paper is to shed more light on ongoing discussions about the use of Chinese technology by Serbian authorities. The research presents an official narrative explaining the purpose of the cameras and brings an overview of main arguments against the use of Huawei cameras with facial recognition technology shared by some civil society organizations' representatives. The main research questions to which the paper seeks answers are: According to officials, what is the main rationale for introducing Chinese surveillance technology? How does civil society challenge the introduction of Chinese technology and what are the critical responses to its use?

The answers to these questions are sought by analyzing existing literature and available sources on China and Huawei in English and Serbian. The information and data are primarily based on media articles, mostly published in the Western, but also in the Serbian press. Additional evidence is gathered through a review of political statements and legal documents, official reports compiled by independent state bodies, and several studies conducted by local organizations and experts.

The paper begins by examining the political context in Serbia and explaining the reasons for deepening and widening cooperation with China. An analysis of local narratives reveals that there are two conflicting perceptions of China and Huawei in Serbia. While the Serbian government and its officials see Huawei as a Chinese instrument for modernizing Serbia, most civil society representatives believe that the use of face recognition cameras in a country with poor governance and loose 'checks and balances', such as Serbia, constitutes a threat to democracy and human rights. Finally, the answers to the main research questions are summarized in the conclusion.

The Serbian Domestic Context – Path to a Hybrid Regime

As democratic changes in Serbia started taking place after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević's regime in the early 2000s, the security sector was gradually opened to the public thanks to political leadership that advocated for the introduction of democratic principles in security sector reform (SSR). Significant progress has been made with the adoption of the first Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance (2004), and later with

the adoption of the Law on Data Secrecy (2009), as well as the establishment of independent bodies such as the Data Protection Commissioner. After the currently ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) party came to power in 2012, the culture of secrecy and closure of security sector institutions was renewed and access to information of public importance was limited not only to citizens, civil society organizations and the media, but also to independent

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1   There are countless papers on China digital authoritarianism, dystopian dictatorship, the impact of Huawei and other CCTV cameras on human rights. For example: United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations. 2020. "The New Big Brother. China and Digital Authoritarianism." July 21, 2020. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf; CSIS. 2019. Watching Huawei's "Safe Cities." CSIS, November 4, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/watching-huaweis-safe-cities.

state bodies (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2020a). Moreover, security sector institutions played an important role in establishing the monopoly rule of the SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, current Serbian president. Under the guise of fighting corruption, Vučić first centralized power and at the same time held key positions in the security system – minister of defense, coordinator of civil and military intelligence services, member of the National Security Council, as well as Deputy Prime Minister (Petrović and Pejić Nikić, eds. 2020).

"Years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by President Aleksandar Vučić have downgraded Serbia to a 'hybrid regime'" (Fruscione 2020). By 2019, the country had entered a political crisis characterized by a lack of dialogue on any important issue, polarization in society, politically motivated violence against opponents, attacks on journalists[2] and deep public distrust of government institutions (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2020b; Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2020). The political crisis deepened when citizens took to the streets, unable to channel their accumulated dissatisfaction with government policies and actions through the parliament or media, both under strong SNS control.[3] After an attempt to find a solution to the crisis through political dialogue between some political opposition figures and MPs failed, in late 2019 a campaign began among citizens and the opposition to boycott the National Assembly, the government, as well as parliamentary elections.[4] The authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian regime[5] have become more pronounced

after the ruling SNS won the parliamentary election in June 2020 with over 60 percent of votes (188 out of 250 seats). This landslide victory resulted in the marginalization of the opposition, as only two other parties crossed the 3% representation threshold – the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the SNS coalition partner, and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS), the SNS junior ally. According to Giorgio Fruscione from ISPI, "Serbian parliamentary elections crowned an 8-year-long trend that was described by Freedom House in 2020", which stated Serbia was no longer a democracy (Freedom House 2020). During the time of the SNS rule, no real progress has been achieved in the accession negotiations with the EU or resolving the Kosovo issue. Also, the European Commission's 2020 progress report reflected Serbia's democratic backsliding, calling it a captured state without political pluralism (European Commission 2020).

In this context, the timing of the introduction of Chinese surveillance technologies and the lack of official information on its use and purpose raises fear among opponents of the government, including among citizens and parts of Serbian civil society.[6] They share concerns that Huawei cameras will enable the ruling regime – already concentrating significant power in its hands without real checks and balances – control over every citizen and all aspects of life and thus further endanger Serbia's weak democracy and human rights enforcement.

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2   For more information, see maps of attacks on journalists from Serbia: https://safejournalists.net/rs/homepage/. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) recorded 119 attacks on journalists in 2019, the most in the last 10 years. This fact was also included in the World Index of Media Freedoms of Reporters Without Borders, where Serbia was ranked at the 93rd place of 180 countries. Reporters without Borders, 2020 World Press Freedom Index, https://rsf.org/en/serbia; NUNS, http://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare.

3   The anti-government protests actually began in 2016, when the civic movement "Don't let Belgrade drown" (Ne davimo Beograd) organized its biggest protest against the unlawful night-time demolitions in Belgrade's Savamala district, demanding that the Belgrade authorities resign because they didn't respond to this incident. In 2017, Serbian protests against perceived dictatorship were ongoing mass protests organized across Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and other cities and towns in Serbia, against Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, as a result of the presidential election. Since the end of 2018, the new wave of anti-government protests known as the "1 of 5 million" protest have spread across Serbia due to the rise of political violence and against the authoritarian rule of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his governing Serbian Progressive Party. The protesters have called for greater freedom of the press, political freedom and pluralism, stronger protection of journalists and political opponents from violence, an investigation of political assassination of Kosovo-Serb leader Oliver Ivanović, electoral reform, new elections and greater government transparency and accountability, among other things. The most violent protests were those held in early July 2020 when police used excessive force against demonstrators.

4   Selected reports and articles showing the political situation in Serbia include: Key findings of the 2019 Report on Serbia, Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Serbia, europa.rs/key-findings-of-the-2019-report-on-serbia/?lang=en; Westminster Foundation for Democracy. 2019. "Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans." WDF, 2019, https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WFD-WB-Boycotts.pdf. CRTA. 2018. "Audit of political engagement in Serbia." CRTA, 2018, https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Audit-of-political-engagement-in-Serbia-2018.pdf.

5   In 2019, Serbia was classified as an "incomplete democracy" on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. "Democracy Index 2019," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2020, https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.

6   See under section 'Risks to Democracy and Civil Liberties'.

The Road to Sino–Serbian Partnership

China's engagement with Serbia was limited before 2009, when the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement (Vuksanović 2019b). Sino-Serbian relations have since flourished as a result of local politicians' demands to attract much-needed investments in infrastructure and the economy after the global financial crisis, but also as a result of China's global ambition to penetrate the European market through the Balkans. China's veto of the declaration of Kosovo's independence in the UN Security Council in 2008 gave China political leverage in Serbia and facilitated their strategic partnership. As a rising economic power and a supporter of Serbia's territorial integrity, China has become an important part of Serbia's so-called 'four pillars foreign policy'[7] alongside Russia, the EU and the US. This policy was first formulated by Boris Tadić in 2009 during his tenure as president of Serbia and went untouched by the change in power, having also been embraced by the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Vučić is pursuing a foreign policy based on balancing among great powers, while trying to strengthen his own rule (Nausbam 2020).

As Serbia become one of the major recipients of Chinese loans for the implementation of large infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative[8,] the SNS-led government promotes China as a friend and ally in creating new jobs (Bjeloš, Vuksanović and Sterić 2020). Serbian President Vučić was quoted describing the friendship with China as one "made of steel" (Tanjug 2018; The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2020) because the Chinese Hesteel Group had recently bought the Smederevo steel plant and saved jobs for 5,000 workers. In promoting Chinese investments as an important element of Serbia's progress and future, the ruling party relies on public broadcaster (RTS) and government-friendly media as well as Chinese diplomats in Serbia (Chen Bo 2020). As a result of the government control of the media narrative on bilateral relations, large segments of Serbian society hold a positive view of China. The latest public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy shows that 87 percent of Serbian citizens believe that Chinese influence in the country is positive, which is an impressive increase of 34 percent compared to the 2017 survey (Bjeloš, Vuksanović and Sterić 2020). In the narrow information and media space, it is difficult to push through a more critical and alternative narrative about Beijing and Chinese companies in Serbia (Vuksanović 2019b).

Although China is a newcomer to the Balkans, its nuanced and multifaceted strategy (Shopov 2020) enabled China to quickly diversify its portfolio from the economy to other areas, such as health care, agriculture, trade, foreign policy, and culture. Recently, Serbia and China have expanded cooperation to technology and security. The use of Huawei's face recognition cameras as an integral part of the country's surveillance system, joint police patrols and joint police trainings, as well as the purchase of military equipment and possible joint military exercises are new features of China's growing presence in Serbia's security sector (Zivanović 2019). In July 2020, the EU raised red flags after China delivered armed drones to Serbia, which has become the first European state to deploy Chinese combat drones (Roblin 2020). But unlike the EU representatives, Serbian government does not seem to be concerned about China's engagement in the domestic security field and continues to show its readiness to accept Chinese military equipment, exchange of know-how, as well as the Chinese-style surveillance system, whose introduction and declared purpose is described in the next section. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has taken Sino-Serbian relations to the next level and further strengthened China's position in Serbia vis-a-vis other global and regional powers (Ruge and Oertel 2020). It has also sharpened the interest of Serbian authorities in Chinese aid and investments, including interest in digital surveillance as a tool to control citizens. This became evident after a striking statement by Serbian President Vučić, who openly told the Serbian press on March 19, 2020, that the state used surveillance techniques to monitor the movement of Serbian citizens who returned from coronavirus-hit countries like Italy (Vuksanović 2020).

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7   According to Mr. Tadić, the principal goal of Serbian foreign policy remains joining the EU, while building "strategic partnerships" with America, Russia and China. See more at: "Tadić on Serbia's „four pillars of diplomacy"," *B92*, August 30, 2009. https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454 or at ISAC Fund, "From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integration," *ISAC Fund*, 2013. https://www.isac-fund.org/download/From_four_pillars_of_foreign_policy_to_european_integration.pdf.

8   Serbia has obtained such amounts of Chinese funding that the US-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies lately warned that the nation risked "becoming a Chinese client state". See more at: "Becoming a Chinese client state – the case of Serbia," *CSIS*, September 24, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/becoming-chinese-client-state-case-serbia; or
Matthew Karntitschning, "Beijing's Balkan backdoor," *Politico*, July 13, 2017, https://www.politico.eu/article/china-serbia-montenegro-europe-investment-trade-beijing-balkan-backdoor/.

The Beginning of the Face Recognition Saga in Serbia

The Serbian face recognition saga began with a tragic event that occurred in 2014 when a young man was killed in a hit-and-run car accident known as "The (Mini Cooper) Countryman Case".[9] The perpetrator, a Serbian citizen, fled to China where he was arrested by the Chinese police in just three days with the assistance of facial recognition cameras. Serbian authorities were impressed with their performance (Stojkovski 2019). This case triggered a series of high-level talks on the introduction of cameras with face recognition software in Serbia. These talks were held mainly on the sidelines of summits and meetings of political leaders of Serbia and China, and eventually resulted in the signing of a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Huawei in February 2017. Although the document is classified as 'confidential' and thus not known to the public in full, Huawei became a strategic partner of the Serbian government as the company was expected to help "Serbia to further accelerate its digital transformation, which has been among the key priorities of the government, and boost innovation and creativity in the Serbian economy" (China Daily Global 2020). Huawei was then also selected as a strategic partner of the Ministry of Interior for the introduction of smart surveillance in the Serbian security sector.

A greater impetus for the introduction of smart surveillance followed the visit of the Special Envoy and Secretary of the Central Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPP, Meng Jianzhu, to Belgrade in September 2017. During his visit, Meng Jianzhu said that he had agreed with the Serbian interior minister Nebojša Stefanović that Serbia and China "would take strong measures to combat organized and cross-border crime," adding that terrorism was the enemy of the whole world and they would oppose it together (RTS 2017). Stefanović announced they agreed on the exchange of information between the two countries and on the sending of Serbian police officers to China for training on artificial intelligence, as well as on the hosting of Chinese counterparts for the same purpose. According to the Serbian officials, increased cooperation with China in the security field was thus justified as part of crime prevention and the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Three months after Jianzhu's visit, 100 surveillance cameras were installed at 61 locations in Belgrade. The Serbian daily *Blic* then published news about the installation of 32 new cameras in the streets of Belgrade, which the police denied and the city authorities remained silent on (Blic 2017; Ristić 2017). Under suspicion that these were facial recognition cameras, the news provoked a huge reaction from the public, which resulted in complaints submitted to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and an independent state body, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Rodoljub Šabić. Only after pressure from the public and the media, city manager Goran Vesić made a statement that the new Traffic Safety Strategy for Belgrade for the period from 2017 to 2020 included the installation of 60 new cameras on city streets (Studio B. 2017). The interior minister denied that these were face recognition cameras, saying that the police "replaced old video surveillance cameras with those with higher resolution" as part of the first phase of the "Safe City" pilot project (The Ministry of Interior 2017).

The Commissioner conducted a surveillance procedure against the Ministry and the City Administration of the City of Belgrade in order to determine the identity of the operators of these cameras, the legal basis and purpose of their use, and the manner of processing and protection of collected personal data. At the beginning of 2018, the commissioner concluded that it was a false alarm, because the MoI replaced the technically obsolete cameras with more advanced cameras of a new generation and higher resolution, at the existing 61 camera locations. The commissioner also noted that the Ministry failed to inform the public in advance and that this omission, along with newspaper articles and contradictory statements by officials, caused unnecessary anxiety among the citizens (Blic 2018). Based on state budget spending in 2017 and 2018, it became clear that more than ten million euros were invested in the surveillance system from the national, not the city budget (Božić Krainčanić 2019).

In 2018, the Serbian Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, signed several inter-governmental agreements with China as part of long-term cooperation within the context of BRI. They also included a security-related agreement "that mandated that Huawei provides surveillance systems and auxiliary services for traffic surveillance, particularly for Chinese infrastructure projects" (Vuksanović 2019a). Based on the agreement, the reason for installing Huawei cameras was

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9   Named after the car that the perpetrator was driving during the accident.

therefore framed as the protection of Chinese investments in Serbia.

The cooperation with Huawei further developed in 2019, when a smart surveillance system was "officially" introduced. With the proclaimed aim of crime prevention and fighting terrorism, the interior minister officially announced a plan to install 1,000 new-generation Huawei cameras using facial and license plate recognition software at 800 locations in Belgrade. He added also that "there will be no significant streets, entrances or passages between buildings that will not be covered by cameras" (Danas 2019). In addition, he said that patrol vehicles as well as police officers would be gradually equipped with cameras. In that way, he added, Serbia would join modern Western European countries, whose governments act on the principle that greater surveillance equals greater security (Bojić 2019).

Manifesting little interest in the issue of data protection, then Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, Rasim Ljajić, said that Huawei was the "correct partner." He asserted there was no reason for the Serbian government to adopt a *lex specialis* to regulate Huawei's business in Serbia as Germany did or suspend cooperation with Huawei due the US-China conflict (Bogdanović 2019; Avakumović 2019). Problematic aspects of using invasive technology that encroaches on privacy and has the potential to control citizens' behavior or to leak personal data to China, described below, are not discussed by officials and seem to be disregarded.

Cooperation between Serbia and Huawei has intensified in 2020 despite the fact that Serbia signed the so-called Washington agreement in the White House on September 4, which prohibits the use of 5G equipment from "untrusted vendors" (Ruge and Vladisavljev 2020). As of December 8, 2020, Huawei is a commercial user of the State Data Center in Kragujevac, which stores data from city administrations, public companies and institutions and provides connections to national databases. Also, in September 2020, the Huawei Center for Innovation and Digital Development was opened in Belgrade (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020).

Risks to Democracy and Civil Liberties

Although foreign and local independent media often write about Huawei cameras in Serbia,[10] there has been little public-wide debate or awareness about the potential benefits or risks of expanding Chinese engagement in the Serbian security sector by using surveillance systems powered with artificial intelligence (i.e. facerecognition cameras) known as "Safe Cities". Nonetheless, the government's initiative to introduce such a system in Belgrade has met with criticism from associations of citizens and experts dealing with security, human and digital rights, and the protection of personal data. Think tank and civil society organizations, such as Share Foundation (a non-profit organization that advocates for human rights in the digital environment), Partners for Democratic Change, Belgrade Center for Security Policy and the left-wing civic movement Inicijativa Ne davimo Beograd (Initiative Don't Let Belgrade Drown – NDMBGD),[11] share common concern that Huawei facial recognition cameras will enable the ruling regime to track and suppress its opponents and will have negative a impact on freedom and human rights

– and even expose Serbian citizens to Chinese surveillance if the data is stored on Huawei's servers outside of the country. In other words, they fear that China's technology exports erode democracy and civil liberties in Serbia by strengthening the capacities of Serbia's increasingly authoritarian leadership to track and intimidate critics of the government (Conley et al. 2020).

The following sections outline three areas seen as the most problematic in terms of China's artificial surveillance system in Serbia – the lack of transparency and accountability, risk of misuse of the cameras for political purposes and poor legal regulation.

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10   Among the most influential are: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, CNN branch in Belgrade – N1 Beograd, Nova S, Balkan Investigative Network (BIRN).

11   See more at: https://nedavimobeograd.rs/.

Lack of transparency and accountability

The lack of transparency associated with the Huawei Safe City project and other Chinese investments goes hand in hand with non-transparent political decision making and the corrupt system of public administration in Serbia. Many government contracts and agreements with Asian, European and Middle Eastern countries and companies, including those with China and Huawei, are classified as "confidential." Public awareness about the opaque terms of Sino-Serbian agreements is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and poor regulation of artificial technology, which leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law. The reason for the poor performance of the parliamentary oversight role could be found in the fact that members of the Committee on Defence and Security[12] come from the ruling coalition.

The consequence of withholding information on the Safe City project is that citizens do not have access to basic information about the scope of the entire project, such as: where the data will be stored, who will be responsible for data processing and what are the mechanisms for protection against any misuse, where cameras are installed, how many and what their function is (Božić Krainčanić 2019). Concerns about the persistent refusal of the authorities to provide the public with information about the installation and functioning of the "Safe City" system were also expressed by former Data Protection Commissioner, lawyer and data protection expert, Rodoljub Šabić (Danas 2019).

While the Serbian government withheld information from the public about Chinese involvement in the "Safe City" project in Serbia, Huawei published a case study on the company's website in 2019, revealing that it has offered the MoI its smart video surveillance and intelligent transport systems, advanced 4G network, unified data centers and related command centers (Share Foundation 2019b). Furthermore, the study confirmed that during the trial period, nine test cameras originally installed at

five locations performed successfully. The successful trial resulted in the partnership agreement, while the first phase of the Safe City project included installation of 100 high-definition video cameras in more than 60 key locations, as also pointed out in Huawei's study (Archive Today 2020). The content on cooperation with the MoI was, however, swiftly removed from Huawei's website after the Share Foundation released a report citing the same information.

In addition to the questions about the scope and functioning of the project, the lack of information affects the assessment of whether this type of surveillance is really needed, proportional to security challenges and threats, and whether it is in accordance with the law. The official narrative of the benefits of the smart surveillance system developed by Huawei, voiced by Serbian authorities, rests on reducing the crime rate in Belgrade and other cities. This explanation has, however, come under public scrutiny since the reasons for the (rapid) installation of a large number of Huawei cameras to prevent crime does not find support in official data from MoI, which show that the crime rate in Serbia is declining every year.[13] For example, the crime rate in Belgrade decreased by 14.8 percent in 2019 compared to 2018 (Novosti Online 2019).[14] In 2019, the Minister stated that Belgrade had the lowest number of crimes committed among many other large European cities such as Budapest, Hamburg, Vienna or Berlin (Novosti Online 2019) while in early 2020 he said that "Serbia is the leading country in the region in reducing crime rates" (Tanjug 2020). Given that the smart surveillance wasn't yet in place in 2018, and when it was introduced in 2019, it was limited to traffic safety and offences, the decreasing crime rate in Belgrade is likely to be primarily attributable to other factors. Several newspapers, (Savković 2020), other news media (Božić Krainčanić, Toader and Milovanović 2019), web-portals (Crnjanski, 2020), activists (Hiljade Kamera 2020), experts (Kukić 2019) and CSOs representatives therefore raised the question of why Serbia actually needs Huawei FR cameras.

12 See more at: "Odbori," The official website of National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia, http://www.parlament.gov.rs/narodna-skupstina-/sastav/radna-tela/odbori.98.895.html.

13 The interior minister Serbia Nebojsa Stefanovic stated in 2016 that in the period from January to September 2016, the crime rate in Serbia was reduced by 5.4 percent. In 2017, the Minister also said that the "crime rate was significantly reduced." In 2019, 73,634 crimes were committed, which is a decrease compared to the previous year, when 77,724 crimes were committed.

14 In the first six months of 2019, 10,616 crimes were committed in Belgrade, which is 14.8 percent less compared to the same period in 2018. See at: "Stefanovic; Stopa kriminala manja za 14,8 odsto." *Novosti Online*, July 12, 2019, https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:805922-Stefanovic-Stopa-kriminala-u-Beogradu-manja-za-148-odsto.

Risk of misuse of the smart surveillance cameras for political purposes

The left-wing civic movement Ne Davimo Beograd adds in its public statements on the project's lack of transparency that "such a sensitive project must not be conducted in secrecy, but it should be open for public discussion in which the smallest details would be explained and all doubts about the possibility of its abuse could be removed" (Ne davimo Beograd 2019). The movement is convinced that the face recognition cameras are a new weapon for monitoring citizens in the hands of the ruling party members because the secret government deal with Huawei is "arranged by people who have already abused the less advanced surveillance techniques such as wiretapping and monitoring against dissidents" (Ne davimo Beograd 2019). The police have already misused (regular) surveillance cameras during the 2018/19 anti-government protests. Photos of the protesters from surveillance cameras were publicly displayed by the interior minister revealing the identity of people who protested during one of his press conferences to control damage and reassure SNS constituencies that it was not a mass protest as reported by independent media (Politika 2018). However, this act speaks volumes about the regime's intention to intimidate and deter protesters from participating in new demonstrations, because knowing they are being filmed, people would no longer feel free to take to the streets to demonstrate.

Former Data Protection Commissioner Šabić also warned that the surveillance system can be used to monitor political opponents and critics of the regime, which is contrary to existing laws in Serbia. Based on his previous work, he emphasizes that Serbia "has very bad experiences in how state bodies and security structures handled citizens' databases" (Glas Amerike 2017). This is linked to sensitive data in the field of health, social protection, party or trade union affiliation, which "have been brutally misused several times and used against critics or opponents of the regime, although this is strictly prohibited and punishable by law as a criminal offence" (Glas Amerike 2017).

The fact that Serbia is falling in its implementation of human rights and at the same time wants to introduce a thousand smart surveillance cameras that pose a risk to privacy as a basic human right, is also problematic for think tanker Danilo Krivokapić from the Share Foundation. He points out that Serbian officials "must understand that the introduction of a thousand cameras is a blow to privacy" (Ranković 2019). Former security researcher Saša Djordjević from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy has a similar view, believing that "in an environment where there are no strong institutions, where democracy is in some way declining, citizens should worry about how their data will be collected and used" (Ranković 2019). It is therefore essential to establish a system in which abuses of power can be limited.

These socio-political arguments against face recognition cameras thus warn of inauguration of a "surveillance society". According to an informal group of experts and think tankers, which launched the Hiljade.kamera.rs portal in May 2020 with the aim at pointing out possible abuses of surveillance cameras, "technology for recognizing faces and objects is based on the assumption that we are all possible criminals: our movements and encounters are recorded, our actions are analysed, our behaviour is predicted (Share Foundation 2020a). The complete loss of anonymity is a kind of deprivation of liberty – the awareness that we are under surveillance drastically changes our decisions" (Bulajić 2020). Therefore, according to critics what makes Chinese cameras more dangerous than other cameras is the level of technology (facial recognition) and data analysis.

Poor legal regulation

Another important worrisome aspect of the use of face recognition cameras is the fact that the use of video surveillance cameras in Serbia is poorly regulated. The key shortcoming of the Safe City project and the installation of cameras with safe recognition software, according to the current Commissioner for Personal Data Protection Milan Marinović, is that there is still no legal basis for its implementation (Jeremić 2020). The use of the surveillance system in Serbia is regulated by several laws, such as the Law on Police, the Law on Private Security or the Law on Road Traffic Safety. However, the problem is that there is no legal basis for the use of face recognition system and biometric data processing. Therefore, a system of supervision should not be applied before the adoption of a law that will regulate this area.

In the absence of a comprehensive systematic law on video surveillance, many experts believed that the new Personal Data Protection Law adopted in 2018 was an opportunity to improve personal data protection standards in the face of new surveillance technology. But although the Law introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), it has failed to comprehensively regulate this area as it does not regulate biometric data processing and the right

to anonymity in public space (Insajder 2018). Furthermore, due to numerous ambiguities and inconsistencies of the new law with the Serbian legal system,[15] its application has been postponed for a year, as it is expected that many authorities and companies do not have enough capacity to comply with the law.[16]

Despite not regulating all necessary areas, this Law is important and sets out some obligations that state bodies must fulfil. Most importantly, to comply with the Law, the Ministry of the Interior had to prepare a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) on the use of smart video surveillance prior to the introduction of Huawei's cameras with facial recognition technology and submit the document to the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection for an opinion. In late 2019, the Commissioner issued an opinion that the MoI's DPIA does not meet even the minimum requirements prescribed by the Law (Marinović 2019). As the ministry is not obliged to take into account the Commissioner's opinion on the assessment, no substantial progress has been made. The MoI eventually passed a by-law (rulebook) prescribing the manner of recording in a public place and the manner of announcing the intention to record that recording, as prescribed by the Law on Police (Vulović 2020). But, it refused to submit the Safe City project to the Commissioner at his request.

Simultaneously, three Belgrade-based civic organizations published a detailed analysis of the MoI's assessment requesting an immediate suspension of the process and asking the authorities to engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity, implications and conditionality of such a system (Share Foundation 2019a). These organizations believe that if such powerful facial recognition software technology is not handled by trained professionals under democratic civilian control, the surveillance system could easily turn into a mechanism that provides almost unlimited opportunities to those in power to control every citizen of the country, regardless of the initial intention.

The Ministry of Interior ignored calls from civil society to engage in public debate and address existing concerns by taking measures to ensure that personal data of Serbian citizens are handled in accordance with personal data protection and privacy laws. Instead, MoI officials announced greater surveillance. In the near future, Belgrade would be covered with 8,100 cameras instead of 1,000. In addition to 2,500 cameras that will be placed in public places, the police will have another 3,500 mobile cameras (eLTE terminals) and 1,500 cameras attached to officers' uniforms (bodycams), and another 600 that will be located on police cars (Share Foundation 2020b). The context of the pandemic suited the MoI's pursuit of its goals. Additional face recognition cameras, as well as 5G network infrastructure, were installed on the streets of Belgrade overnight during the lockdown in March and April 2020 without any previous notice or information (Pantović 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the introduction of smart surveillance in Serbia, with an aim of explaining the political motives for deepening security cooperation with China and summarizing the concerns shared by some civil society representatives about the use of cutting-edge technology by Serbian authorities. The analysis of the local debate reveals the existence of conflicting views on the introduction and use of smart surveillance. According to the official narrative, Serbia's enthusiastic embrace of Chinese surveillance system was motivated by both a desire to technologically modernize Serbia and also to prevent crime and terrorist attacks. On the other hand, part of Serbian civil society strongly believes that the use of the Chinese surveillance system in a country with poor governance and loose 'checks and balances', such as Serbia, poses a threat to democracy and human rights. There is a growing fear for some civil society representatives that face recognition cameras will allow the regime to track and intimidate critics of the government, as well as impose total control over every citizen and all aspects of

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15 Harmonization of the final version of the text took four years (2012-2016), while a record 4,000 amendments were submitted to the text of the regulation, mainly by representatives of economic interests.

16 Law on Personal Data Protection ("Official Gazette of RS" 97 / 08,104 / 09-other law, 68/12 – decision of Constitutional Court and 107/12) – ceased to be valid on August 22, 2019, when the application of the new Law began ("Official Gazette of RS" No. 87/2018).

life. Contrary to the fear present in part of Serbian society, most Serbian citizens hold a positive view of China and are unaware of the opaque terms of Sino-Serbian agreements due to strong government control of the media and its strict confidentiality policy. The Ministry of Interior, whose representatives make vague and contradictory statements about Huawei cameras, keeps the Safe City project secret and information about it unavailable to both state independent bodies and civil society. Public awareness about the project and facial recognition technology is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and public debate on the potential benefits or risks of expanding Chinese engagement in the Serbian security sector. In addition, poor regulation of artificial technology leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law, which is especially worrisome in an atmosphere of rising authoritarianism.

Serbian civil society has called for national authorities to suspend the process of introducing smart surveillance and engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity, implications and conditionality of such a system. The Ministry of Interior – which did not receive a 'green light' from an independent state body for the use of cameras with facial recognition technology, as there is still no legal basis for its implementation – ignored the calls and continued to install even more cameras across Belgrade during the coronavirus outbreak.

In order to address existing shortcomings, a legal basis for the mass use of smart video surveillance systems should be urgently created and further assessment of all risks related to the rights and freedoms of persons under surveillance should be conducted. Also, future research could examine whether and how China influence Serbia's security sector through smart surveillance.

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10. "Our Brother Erdogan" – From Official to Personal Relations of Political Leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President

Gentiola Madhi

Executive Summary

This paper focuses on the forging of personal relations between leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President and its coexistence with traditional interstate relations. In particular, it deals with President Erdoğan's approach to shifting from interstate institutional relations towards the predominance and favouring of one-to-one personal relations with country leaders, as an alternative means to blur the line between foreign and domestic affairs. Such a shift in the cases of Albania and Kosovo is deemed risky, with a negative impact on their democratization perspectives and fuelling of ad hoc practices in the state administrative procedures.

The paper analyses the two sets of friendship bonds between the leaders on the basis of three dimensions, namely: (i) manifestation of personal friendship in the public realm; (ii) Turkey's religious agenda abroad; and, (iii) Turkey's extraterritorial requests against Gülen movement supporters. The first dimension reflects on the leaders' attempts to 'idealize' their relationship and convey to the public opinion the image of 'friends' through the media, whereas the other two dimensions are strictly linked to the two main priorities of the Turkish agenda in the Balkans. The ambivalence of Turkey's religious soft power and its attempt to export its domestic conflict in Albania and Kosovo, are deemed essential for understanding the extent to which this personalisation of relations is of a strategic and transactional nature.

The research draws on a triangulation of sources in order to address the limits deriving from the personal and subjective nature of the relationship between the leaders, the unavailability of diversified sources of information as well as general lack of transparency and accountability over the leaders' shift from official to informal tete-à-tete meetings, thereby ignoring the official procedures that trace the decision-making process.

The results show that the brokered sets of friendship have been promoted on the basis of a temporary congruence of interests and calculated political benefits, missing therefore a structural basis for an institutionalisation at the state level. In the case of Albania, Prime Minister Rama has adopted an ambivalent approach vis-à-vis Turkey's agenda, and his concessions to the Turkish requests has been duly rewarded. Whereas, in the case of Kosovo, Thaçi's friendship with Erdoğan has resulted less balanced in terms of mutual empowerment. The satisfaction of Turkish requests has resulted in an exploitation of Kosovo's domestic vulnerabilities in favour of the Turkish corrosive agenda.

Introduction

Modern politics has facilitated the prominence of political personalities in the public realm. Political leaders' official and informal interactions have witnessed growing attention and visibility worldwide, especially in the field of foreign affairs.

In line with this global trend, a similar shift in the foreign policy domain has been identified by scholars in Turkey with the rising prominence of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Selçuk et. al. 2019: 542). The adoption of a new system of governance in Turkey, based on a centralized presidential system, confers a considerable amount of

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additional authority and power on the president. He can now shape Turkish foreign policy in new and even more personalised ways (Kirisi and Toygur 2019), where the preference for personal friendship bonds, or in other words, for 'personal diplomacy', can be observed. In particular, Erdoğan has shown a policy of prioritizing the Western Balkans (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019), considered "part of [Turkey's] natural sphere of influence as the former imperial power" (Weise 2018). The region is of strategic interest because of its proximity to the EU, and symbolically it represents Erdoğan's ambition for the establishment of a Neo-Ottoman space (Hopkins and Pitel 2021). Among the Balkan leaders, Erdoğan has nurtured very good relations with Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, and Hashim Thaçi, President of Kosovo, whose personal meetings have made the headlines in their respective domestic media settings in the last years. Over time, the Turkish presence in both of the predominantly ethnic Albanian countries has followed a positive trend, both in terms of strategic investments and through humanitarian and cultural/religious assistance.

Based on these insights, this paper seeks to shed light on the nature of personal relations cultivated by Erdoğan with Albania's Prime Minister and Kosovo's President, through a normative, interest-based dichotomy therein.

While Erdoğan's opting for 'personal diplomacy' in foreign affairs is justified on the basis of achieving quick solutions to international problems (Ulgul 2019, 162), this approach in turn excludes the participation of traditional state actors. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, the forging of personal relations between national leaders is motivated on the basis of an alignment of interests and/or existence of enabling conditions. In the presence of weak governing systems, the 'personal diplomacy' approach may facilitate the access to governmental affairs of other countries by means of preferential treatments, such as investment bids, blurring the line between foreign and domestic affairs.

As the analysis has an exploratory aim, it faces several limitations due to the personal and subjective nature of relationships between national leaders, the lack of diversified sources of information about this practice, along with a general lack of transparency over leaders' frequent informal meetings, as venues where state-related agendas are discussed but not traced. In order to address these limits, a triangulation of sources has been applied, where the collected materials online –such as media articles, reports, academic papers, etc. – have been confronted with verifications on institutional websites and leaders' official declarations over time, coupled with six semi-structured interviews with experts from the three countries conducted online in September 2020.

The paper is organized in five sections: Section one provides a short analysis of the concept of 'friendship' in international relations, followed by an overview of the political dynamics of recent years. The third section focuses on Erdoğan's preference for forging personalized relations in the foreign realm, as a tool to maximize Turkey's influence and role on the geopolitical chessboard. Section four and section five then respectively trace the bilateral relations of the Albanian and Kosovo leaders with Erdoğan, with a specific focus on how friendship ties are portrayed in the public sphere, the religious nexus and the extrajudicial requests against the Gülen movement. Overall, the analysis shows that the two sets of friendship relations are based on strategic calculations of the parties, who opt for mutual concessions in order to maximize personal benefits.

Friendship Ties Between Political Leaders: A Theoretical Overview

Political leaders are usually considered a 'personification' of the country they represent, on the basis of the assumption that a state 'is conceptualized as a person' (Lakoff in Giacomello, Ferrari and Amadori 2009). They directly engage in maintaining cordial relations on behalf of their respective countries, and in the exercise of their official duties, these leaders to a certain extent also develop mutual relations and connections of a personal nature that go beyond the traditional conceptualisation of official diplomatic exchanges. On certain occasions, political actors publicly declare and recognize each other as 'friends'. The frequent use of this term in international politics has primarily referred to interstate relations, but with the passing of time it has evolved also to refer to the establishment of interpersonal ties as well (Digeser 2009, 327).

Although not significantly explored by scholars of international relations, friendship is considered a multifaceted concept by those that have studied it, and

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there is no static definition available at the moment. In principle, international friendship is seen as a selective process, which tends towards bilateral relations rather than multilateral ones, and it sets the basis for an exclusive space created among the involved parties (Oelsner and Koschut 2014). Berenskoetter conceives friendship as a voluntary relationship based on choice (2007, 669), and it should be considered a continuously evolving process (2014), demanding therefore constant exercise. Friendship develops through a space where, through negotiations, parties bridge diverse positions and create common understanding, which serves to maximize their respective political ambitions, thus allowing them to think about *friendship as a political relationship* (Berenskoetter 2014, 5). In countries where leaders hold considerable power in shaping national policies, the cultivation of friendship relations can serve as a shortcut for the solution of problems (Ulgul 2019, 162), or as a mean to bypass ordinary bureaucratic procedures.

International friendship can materialize as a strategic or as a normatively-based relationship. According to Oelsner and Koschut (2014, 13-14), *strategic friendship* emerges in cases where political actors show a preference for referring to each other as 'friends' in the public realm, on the basis of their congruence of interests and not on genuine trust. This type of friendship is relatively unstable and temporary in nature. To be sure, strategic friends will certainly rely on each other for mutual support to manage uncertainty, but only under certain structural conditions, such as mutual

reassurance through transparency, information flow, and shared interests. Meanwhile *normative friendship* is most likely to develop among actors who share high levels of ideational and emotional bonds that permit mutual identification and trust. The drivers that push political leaders to establish such friendship bonds differ according to specific contexts and the interests they seek to pursue.

The paper analyses these friendship relations between the leaders on the basis of three dimensions, namely: (i) how personal friendship is manifested in the public realm; (ii) Turkey's religious agenda abroad; and, (iii) extraterritorial requests involving actions against Gülen movement supporters. The first dimension reflects the leaders' attempts to 'idealize' their relationship and convey to the public the image of 'friends' through the media, whereas the other two dimensions are strictly linked to the two main priorities of the Turkish agenda in the Balkans. The ambivalence of Turkey's religious soft power and its attempt to export its domestic conflict (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019) in Albania and Kosovo are deemed essential for understanding the extent to which this personalisation of relations is of a strategic and transactional nature. The analysis becomes even more interesting, when considering that personal friendship is established between political leaders of opposite parties, who managed to go beyond their parties' ideological differences and forge mutual friendships. The presence of these nuances provides a good basis for comparisons between empirical case-studies.

Regional Political Dynamics

"Erdoğan is our inseparable friend and brother, in celebration but also in adversity," declared Prime Minister Rama, speaking on behalf of Albania and Kosovo back in October 2013 in Prishtina, less than a month after he took office in Albania (Jacaj 2013). The event was hosted by President Thaçi and the Turkish President attended as special guest of the inaugural ceremony of the country's sole airport, given as a concession to a Turkish-led consortium. The selection of a linguistic reference to the Turkish leader using such close, personal and family related terms attracted public attention and raised concerns over the ongoing power dynamics in the bilateral relations of the two Western Balkan countries with Turkey.

In foreign policy terms, for the last two decades or so, Albania and Kosovo share a common pro-Western

orientation, with a strong political ambition to and citizens' support for EU membership, as well as strengthening of bilateral relations with the US. Whereas, during the same period, Turkey has derailed itself from EU-anchored democratization, with a progressing shift towards competitive authoritarianism, and dismantling of its internal checks and balances system (Onis 2019). Nevertheless, the differing foreign policy orientations have not affected the cultivation of personal relations between the leaders since 2013 onwards.

Traditionally, official relations between both Albania and Kosovo and Turkey have been positive, with bilateral cooperation in different spheres, from security to infrastructure, energy, telecommunication, education, health and cultural sectors. In economic terms, both

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countries are considered strategic markets for the distribution of Turkish products, and Turkish investments rank high in both of their foreign investment stocks. Turkey is the fifth largest trading partner and the sixth leading foreign investor in Albania (European Commission 2019, 53). Meanwhile in Kosovo, Turkish investments rank third, after Germany and Switzerland, with a capital stock of approximately 1.2 billion euro (Ahmeti 2020). While the positive pace of Turkish investments is seen as demand-driven, they are also considered a critical venue for the cultivation of leaders' personal relations, since they serve as a tool for the clientelistic system of governance (Maliqi 2020, 18).

In a broad perspective, Erdoğan's success at the domestic level in Turkey is attributed in part to his strong backing from the business sector, which in turn benefits from direct access to the political process, and he is defined as "a new kind of political entrepreneur" (Onus 2019, 207, 211). The application of this entrepreneurship concept in the political realm has permitted Erdoğan to shift from investments in

interstate institutional relations to one-to-one personal relations with national leaders. Such a shift in the case of Albania and Kosovo risks having a negative impact on the democratization perspective of the two countries, indirectly undermining their reform efforts by fuelling ad hoc practices in public procurement processes or facilitating corruption, for example. The political landscapes in Albania and Kosovo play an enabling role in this regard, since they both are characterized by weak democratic governance and political polarisation. Recently, both countries have experienced a backsliding of democratic standards, which has had spill over effects on the countries' rule of law systems and their fight against corruption. The exploitation of these domestic vulnerabilities through the established friendship bonds between the leaders would create room for crony capitalism (Maliqi 2020, 16). In this perspective, the analysis of the two sets of personal relations of Albanian leaders with Erdoğan allows for the identification of possible corrosive effects for the Turkish regime in the two countries.

Erdoğan's Personalised Relations: A Leaders' Affair

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been dominating Turkey's political scene for almost two decades. His political engagement started in the mid-1990s as the mayor of Istanbul and evolved through2018 when he became the country's president. Under his leadership, the right-wing Justice and Development Party, with conservative and Islamist leanings, has become the hegemonic force in Turkey's political scene (Muftuler-Baç and Keyman 2012). He is described as an influential political figure and "his leadership style remains a puzzle to understand" (Kesgin 2019, 2). Gorener and Ucal have analysed Erdoğan's political traits, arguing about his 'black and white tendency' and categorical thinking on most matters in international politics, which has a defining effect on his orientation of and decision-making on Turkish foreign policy (2011, 367-368, 376).

Over time, Erdoğan has succeeded in concentrating power in his hands, facilitated by the restructuring process of the state apparatus (Kirisci and Toygur 2019, 6), which is reflected in the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. He is following a pro-active agenda (Kesgin 2019, 3), which reflects simultaneously the assertive nationalism aimed at domestic politics, and the co-existence of soft power with increasingly coercive approaches applied outside

of national borders (Onis 2019, 208 & 211). This choice is motivated also by the current multipolarity present in international relations, the perception of the West's decline and the necessity to diversify Turkey's allies, opening up to Russia and China (Kirisci and Toygur 2019, 6). This 'new' understanding of Turkish foreign policy is followed by a greater attention in the military sector, by expanding domestic capabilities in view of playing a major role (Kirisci and Toygur 2019, 7). Turkey's increased political and military weight has led to him becoming a more independent player in world politics (Alaranta 2020, 4).

Erdoğan's preference for breaking personal distance is visible in cases such as his addressing Italy's Berlusconi as 'my friend', or when referring to Albania's and Kosovo's leaders in an even more family-related style, conveying his role as "older brother". In his political discourse, the frequent use of emotional connotations prevails, while the speeches are characterized by a "mixture of diplomatic rhetoric, religious sermons and historical folklore", and are rooted in common historical heritage (Sejdiu 2018, 111). Erdoğan's friendship approach is generally well-received by almost all Western Balkan leaders. The coupling of Erdoğan's personal diplomacy actions with these leaders with investment flows has contributed to

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the strengthening of his image as the region's credible leader. Moreover, as Turkey is considered as a regional actor, "having the attention of its president […] cuddles the ego of the local leaders".[1] The cultivation of personal bonds constitutes the backbone of Turkey's foreign policy outreach in the region, seeking to nurture Erdoğan's image as a paternal figure (Aydıntasbas 2019), which at the same time makes use of the Balkan political leaders as tools for the maximization of his diplomatic actions abroad.

Rama–Erdoğan: A Friend in Need Or a Friend Indeed?

Edi Rama, an artist-turned-politician, became Albania's Prime Minister in summer 2013, after eight years in opposition as leader of the Socialist Party. His foreign policy vision relies on Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration and reflects a realistic and dynamic positioning within the regional strategic quadrilateral, consisting of traditional partners – Italy, Austria, Greece, and the newly introduced Turkey (Qeveria e Republikes se Shqiperise n.d., 23). The preferential treatment of Turkey among the Western allies was announced by Rama as the first step towards the establishment of a 'new chapter' in bilateral relations between the two countries (Sot.com.al 2013), and it was motivated by existing traditional relations and friendship among Albanians and Turks, as well as their shared membership in NATO.

The establishment of ties with Turkey's leadership entered the public domain in May 2013, during the election campaign, when Rama travelled to Turkey to meet Erdoğan for the first time in person, calling it an "unforgettable meeting" (Partia Socialiste n.d.). Once he had become Premier-elect, Rama visited Ankara again that summer to discuss with Erdoğan an extensive bilateral cooperation plan, marking the beginning of a new season in Albania's relations with Turkey. This political choice was received in public with perplexity, suggesting a lack of clarity on the final aim of the newly established strategic partnership (Dyrmishi 2015, 10).

Since then, besides official state relations, Rama and Erdoğan also start to advance a personal friendship bond, which developed over time in bilateral phone calls, and frequent informal meetings in Ankara or Istanbul, around three times per year, as advertised on the social media accounts of Rama. These meetings have been publicly motivated on the grounds of shared interests or undertaking of joint strategic initiatives – especially in the business sector (Top Channel n.d.). The move from official to informal meetings has been characterized by untransparency, and is almost not reflected at all on the Albanian Prime Minister's official website. Instead, Rama has preferred to personally announce on his social networks the launch of joint ventures like Air Albania company, a new flag carrier where 49% is owned by Turkish Airlines, or the unsolicited request of a Turkish consortium to build an airport in Vlora (criticized by the European Commission). In principle, the risky side of this personal friendship bond stems from the lack of transparency in the agenda and decisions that the leaders have adopted during their tete-à-tete meetings, ignoring the administrative procedures that record and trace the decision-making process when dealing with the country's strategic interests and state affairs.[2]

The relinquishing of their parliamentary mandates by the Albanian opposition in February 2019 has contributed to the strengthening of Rama's decision-making power, enabling him and his party to take control of the reform processes and allowing for ad hoc practices, such as exemptions from regular public procurement rules in favour of Turkish companies. The parliament today has turned into a mere 'generator of laws', rather than a means for demanding more government accountability. Internal political tensions have also resulted in a more polarized climate with little possibility of breakthrough. In the meantime, since 2018, ongoing justice reform has paralysed the functioning of the Constitutional and High Courts, leading to an almost complete absence of a checks and balances system, and empowerment of the country's leader in defining the rules of the game. In this enabling context, the course of the relations between Rama and Erdoğan is seen as dependent on the alignment of mutual interests, which evolves through untransparent routes. As the analysis seeks to show, and as noted also by an interviewee: "We read only the messages they want to convey [to the

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1   Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.
2   Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

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media] and [there] is part of this friendship and dynamic relationship that no one has access to".[3]

A mediatized personal friendship

The Rama-Erdoğan relationship is often portrayed as a 'special friendship', where both leaders seek to communicate high mutual respect, personal esteem and appreciation for the mutual trust extended to one other. On different occasions, Rama has spoken with superlatives about Erdoğan, either from the personal perspective or about what Erdoğan has done for Turkey's transformation process. In personal terms, he has publicly stated his proudness of being Erdoğan's friend (Gazeta Shqiptare 2020), arguing that their friendship is special since it is based on a unique principle that is rare in international relations, where "'yes' means 'yes' and 'no' means 'no'" (Exit.al n.d.). In professional terms, Rama has declared that he admires Erdoğan's "extraordinary work" as Mayor of Istanbul, which served him as an inspiring example for Tirana mayorship (Idriz, Ademi and Cuka 2018). In turn, Erdoğan has been less expressive, but more practical in using different occasions to publicly honour Rama's friendship, such as hosting him as a witness at his daughter's wedding or serving as his driver in the inaugural trip on the new "Osmangaze" bridge. It is interesting to note Erdoğan's predisposition for having close political leaders as special guest at his family celebrations. The same happened in 2003 at his son's wedding where Rama's predecessor as socialist leader, Fatos Nano, acted as witness (Bekdil 2003).

Both leaders have invested significant efforts and energy into conserving the emotional aspects of their relations. Showing personal affection has become a ritual, which has served their populist agendas at home. In the case of Rama, having a charismatic leader like Erdoğan as a close ally and personal friend contributes to the spread of the image of being a well-respected leader of his own country, besides having someone to lean on in case of necessity.[4] For a small country like Albania, the declared friendship with Turkey's leader acts significantly in favour of Rama's political ambitions, especially now that he is seeking a third governing mandate. In this bilateral relationship, no reference is made to the ideology (and derivative political choices) promoted by the political parties that

the two leaders chair. Rama's centre-left Socialist Party relies on a liberal and pro-EU orientation, which is situated opposite to Erdoğan's conservative ideology, with strong populist-nationalist and anti-Western style rhetoric (Onis, 2019: 2007). Instead, the mediatization of this personal relationship is intended to go beyond these dividing points, thus serving as an instrument which is expected to spill over positive effects in other spheres, such as, for instance that of the inter-institutional relations between the countries, although it still needs to be proven whether this expectation exists in reality.

Nevertheless, this personal friendship between the leaders has recently been 'crowned' with an important symbolic gesture, namely Erdoğan offering the Turkish presidential plane as a gift to Albanian government. This gift was facilitated through unclear and non-transparent procedures (Erebara 2020), raising questions about the personal dimension of this friendship and the potential use of official channels for personal interests.[5] The same questions were raised after Erdoğan's last declaration about building a hospital near the city of Fier, with a cost of approximately 70 million Euro, and handing it to the Albanian authorities a few weeks before the forthcoming parliamentary elections on 25 April 2021 (Euronews Albania 2021). Rama denied the existence of any particular intention behind the Turkish gift, claiming it was motivated by reciprocal respect and friendship (Ora News 2021).

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3   Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

4   Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

5   Policy Researcher based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 3, 2020.

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Turkey's religious agenda in Albania

In Albania, as in other countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo, Erdoğan has tried to use any occasion to publicly promote his commitment in favour of and to maintaining influence on Muslims, as part of his wider instrumentalization of religion for power consolidation purposes (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019). The materialization of this approach has not faced any type of resistance from Rama, who has instead offered to Erdoğan an excellent occasion for practicing his rhetoric back in 2015. It refers to the construction of the Namazgah Mosque in Tirana, which has been used as a 'promised investment' during the electoral campaigns for almost two decades by the political parties, but with no follow up.

The use of the religious card by the Turkish authorities in Albania has not flourished as may have been expected, or as it occurs in other Muslim-majority countries, because of traditions of secularism and multi-religious society in Albania. Rama himself has created a dedicated section in his social networks called 'Saints' Words', frequently citing sayings from both the Qur'an and the Bible. As religion falls under the personal sphere for Albanians in general, relations with Turkey are instead mostly perceived from the economic and security standpoints. In the case of the construction of Namazgah Mosque with Turkish funds, or the reconstruction of other mosques through the same mechanisms, they have been promoted by Rama and the government in general as an initiative in favour of the protection of national cultural heritage. From this perspective, any action taken in the religious field by Erdoğan is seen as a contribution to the "restitution of mosques' splendour" (Cuka 2021), and is equated with other countries' interventions, such as the Greek or Italian funding for churches' restauration.

The main problem with the construction of the Namazgah Mosque is not the religious dimension per se, but that it has been an unkept promise of all political parties in Albania and has been instrumentalized during the electoral periods for political interests. The long wait for the construction of the mosque is a symptom of these parties' interests, corrupt affairs and ordinary irregular procedures conducted by state institutions. Back in 2011, in the capacity of Mayor of Tirana, Rama called for an international competition on the mosque's architectural design, in order to attract the best architectural proposals. However, the selection process ended with the winning project characterized by classical Ottoman style, and the entry had not even part of the actual competition (Sadiki 2015). Once in power as Prime Minister, in October 2014, Rama kept the promise by issuing a construction permit for the Namazgah Mosque in the city centre alongside Catholic and Orthodox cathedrals, thus creating the so-called 'triangle of faith'. The ground breaking ceremony took place in May 2015 in the presence of President Erdoğan.[6] Among others, Erdoğan declared that "[Namazgah] mosque will be a unique symbol of the brotherhood between our nations" (Isik 2019), and proclaimed that Turkey still accepts all brothers in Albania and the whole Balkans as their inseparable part (TIKA n.d.), thus implicitly recalling the Ottoman past with positively nuanced connotations. Namazgah Mosque's construction is entirely funded by Turkey's directorate for religious affairs, Diyanet, with a cost of approximately 40 million Euro (Halluni 2021).

Rama's acquiescence to Erdoğan's requests on the mosque's construction led to disappointments among the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), since part of this religious community would have preferred other sources of support rather than Turkey (Lapsi, 2018). By accepting the Turkish sponsorship for the mosque's construction, it was implicitly favoured by the Turkish-affiliated wing within the AMC. In fact, the AMC suffers from continuous interferences from Turkish authorities, which accused the last two chairmen of the AMC of supporting the Gülen movement. The transposition of this Turkish domestic issue to the Albanian Muslim Community has resulted in further internal divisions and fragmentation, to the detriment of the principle of non-interference. Recently, the media has insinuated that Turkey has conditioned the funds for the completion of the mosque on the replacement of the AMC's chairman (Ora News 2018). When asked, Rama refused to properly reply to the question, pointing out that the AMC is an independent institution and that the government cannot interfere in its affairs and relations with third parties (Ora News 2018). Since the mosque is built with Turkish funds, it remains de facto under Erdoğan's authority and is not expected to be inaugurated until the dispute with the AMC is resolved (Van Gerven Oei 2018).

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6   This was the second ground breaking ceremony for the Namazgah Mosque, as a previous one took place in April 2013, organized by the Albanian Muslim Community and then Democratic-led government. Following the June 2013 national elections, a dispute emerged between the Democratic Mayor of Tirana and the newly established Rama government on the construction plan of the site where the mosque was planned. The mosque construction got stalled and the work on the ground started only in January 2015.

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Albania's response to the requests against the Gülen movement

Erdoğan considers the Gülen movement a terroristic network, allegedly responsible for organizing the attempted coup in Turkey of 15 July 2016. Rama was one of the first leaders expressing his solidarity with Erdoğan on Twitter the next morning: "Happy for the brotherly Turkish people and our valuable friend, President Erdoğan, for going out with full success from a very difficult night"[7]. However, the relationship between Rama and Erdoğan later got particularly complex with regard to the coup.

Erdoğan has assertively engaged in perpetual political rhetoric against the Gülen movement, not only at the domestic level, but also beyond Turkey's borders. On various occasions, Erdoğan and other Turkish authorities have engaged in cautionary discourse against Gülen's malign intentions and their serious penetration into Albania's state system (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2018b). Moreover, he has ensured the state authorities that Turkey will always protect Albanians from those trying to divide the country (Cuka 2017), in view of the Rama government's taking action against Gülen cells operating in country. Erdoğan's requests refer to the closing down of Gülenaffiliated educational institutions – considered as shelters for alleged supporters – and the handing over to Turkey of those supporters. In return for honouring of such requests, Erdoğan has promised a considerable flow of investments to Albania, going even further by stating that he "do[es] not know how many investments have arrived from the EU, but [Turkey's] will not stop" (Top Channel 2017). Posed in this form, Erdoğan friendship with Rama takes the shape of a transactional and exchange type of relationship.

Notwithstanding the political pressure exerted on Tirana (Hopkins and Pitel 2021), Rama has followed a reluctant approach on the matter. The showing of public loyalty and understanding to Erdoğan's pleas has been accompanied with government ministers' declarations that Albania stands committed to respecting international treaties on extradition (Ministria per Evropen dhe Punet e Jashtme 2018). Recently, Rama has argued that the Gülen network is dangerous, since it organized a violent overthrow of an elected government in Turkey, and that Albanian authorities are monitoring all those persons that are allegedly connected to that network (Ora News 2018). In an interview for Turkish media, he asserted that his government is committed to protecting the country's education system from external negative influences (Idriz, Ademi and Cuka 2018), leaving open the interpretation of his viewpoint.

Rama has shown little intention of honouring Erdoğan's requests, and his resistance is interpreted in the context of Albania's strong pro-Western orientation. Any attempt to open up to Erdoğan's requests would be politically harmful for Rama, because it would be a precedent for further concessions as well as a breach of national norms on extradition. Moreover, the public opinion in Albania is strongly pro-European and any concession towards Turkey is perceived as a deviation from the country's alignment with EU foreign policy.

To date, the Albanian authorities have deported only one alleged supporter of the cleric Gülen. which took place some weeks after an earthquake hit Albania. The news became public through the Turkish media, promoting it as "a successful operation" carried out by the Turkish Secret Services on Albanian soil (Buyuk and Erebara 2020). International media has reported inside information from the Albanian government side, stating that this deportation was an 'exchange of favours', a transactional concession so that Turkey could disburse the promised millions in aid and build 500 apartments in the area of Lac, which was hardly damaged by the earthquake of November 2019 (Hopkins and Pitel 2021). The construction agreement was signed by the parties two weeks after the deportation (Halluni, 2020). In early September, a second alleged supporter saw his asylum request rejected by the Albanian authorities on procedural grounds, although his extradition has not taken place yet (Karaj 2020). This second event happened a few days before Rama travelled to Turkey to meet Erdoğan, followed afterwards by the government's decision to close three pre-university Turkish education institutions operating in Albania since the early 2000s. This is not the first time that a synchronization of actions is noticed around the days of Rama's visits to Turkey. Back in summer 2019, a few days before Rama's trip to Marmaris, a symbolic memorial stone was placed at the premises of Tirana's artificial lake commemorating the third anniversary of and resistance by Turkish people against the attempted coup (Mlloja 2020), coupled with the planting of 251 trees brought from Turkey and naming of the street 'Martyrs of

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7   https://twitter.com/ediramaal/status/754217860201848832

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15 July' (Mero 2019). The first of its kind in a foreign country, the memorial raised strong reactions and concerns about the kind of relationship with and possible interference and manipulation risks from Turkey (Mero 2019). State authorities avoided taking on responsibility for the act, trying to downplay its importance. Critical voices argued that the memorial recalled the concept of vassalage, after 500 years under the Ottoman empire (Panorama 2019). "The erection of the memorial constituted an institutional favour offered [by Rama's government] [...] [as] a genuine personal favour to satisfy the ego of the Turkish President".[8] From this perspective, "this kind of [personal] relationship does not build on an institutional relation or [can] turn it into a strong commitment between the two countries", commented an interviewee.[9] It primarily shows the contractual dimension of these personal relations, raising questions on the real motivations and calculated moves of the parties.

Thaçi–Erdoğan: From Friends to Brothers

Hashim Thaçi is a key political protagonist in Kosovo, driving major events in the country's independence process. He spent over two decades in power, acting alternatively as minister, prime minister, and, since 2016, as Kosovo's president. Thaçi is also a founder of the Democratic Party in Kosovo, which originally had a social-democratic orientation, and since 2013 shifted its position towards the centre-right. For years, he has been the "go-to-guy" for the international community dealing with state building and reconciliation processes between Kosovo and Serbia.

Under Thaçi's leadership, Kosovo's foreign policy followed a pro-Western orientation and aimed at EU and NATO membership in the future. The main policy priorities reflected the domestic conditions in which Kosovo finds itself, starting with the need to protect its national and territorial integrity, as well as to enhance the process of recognition of its independence from the international community in view of a UN membership status. At the regional level, the normalization of relations with Serbia leads Kosovo's priorities.

Turkey was considered by Thaçi as Kosovo's greatest ally (Naddaff 2018), alongside Albania, considering its contribution in the lobbying process for its recognition. Erdoğan has been personally involved in lobbying in favour of Kosovo's independence with the leaders of Pakistan, Egypt and Brunei during 2012-2013 (Kursani, Haxholli and Gjikolli 2014, 73). His involvement marked not only long-term strategic cooperation but also the beginning of a personal relationship between the two countries' leaders. Thaçi has regularly acclaimed Erdoğan's pivotal presence, calling him "one of the most powerful world leaders and biggest supporter of Kosovo's independence" (Prime Minister's Office n.d.). The relations between Thaçi and Erdoğan initially were of an institutionalized nature, with the leaders meeting in an official capacity,[10] evolving over time into what the media often describe as genuine friendship, and the leaders referring to each other metaphorically as 'brothers' (Morina 2016). This special relationship is believed to have facilitated a considerable Turkish presence in different sectors in Kosovo,[11] and Thaçi has often been criticized for such personal links. Turkish firms have purchased important economic assets in the country, among which stands the tender for the privatization of Kosovo Electricity Distribution and Supply, with a cost of 26.3 million Euro, given to the Turkish consortium led by Erdoğan's son-in-law (Olluri 2012).

A portray of leaders' personal friendship

The friendship between Erdoğan and Thaçi evolved steadily over time, and in part is characterized by public demonstration of mutual care and respect. Thaçi's narrative was based by frequent public expressions of gratitude towards Erdoğan, acknowledging his constant presence in good and difficult times, as well as his support for Kosovo's recognition and Euro-Atlantic integration. In his social media posts, Thaçi has made constant reference to Erdoğan as 'a true friend' or 'indispensable ally'. Erdoğan followed a similar approach when referring to Thaçi, recurring always

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8   Policy Researcher based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 3, 2020.

9   Researcher based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Skype interview by the author, September 7, 2020.

10   Research fellow based in USA, Skype interview by the author, September 4, 2020.

11   Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.

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to his preferred style with family-related expressions. Although both leaders are backed by conservative parties, the differences in their leadership style and values that they publicly profess differ considerably. Thaçi represented a contemporary leader with a moderate political tone, who promoted Euro-Atlantic values in public and the integration of Kosovo in the future. On the other hand, Erdoğan's approach remained rooted in the past Ottoman grandeur coupled with religious and nationalistic elements. Thaçi found in Erdoğan a politically useful ally at national and regional level[12] –considering the statehood-related vulnerability of his country – whereas Erdoğan conceived this friendship in the wider frame of the personalized foreign policy approach in the Balkans, where domestic electoral considerations remain his end goal (Toygur 2018).

Turkey is one of the few countries in the region that has offered extensive political space to Kosovo (Kursani, Haxholli and Gjikolli 2014, 76). The intensity of their bilateral relations has also developed through Thaçi's frequent informal visits to Turkey, serving as a shared informal space and venue in which to discuss tete-à-tete issues of common interests. Erdoğan's friendship has been beneficial to Thaçi in enhancing his political leverage, at least in PR terms, in some critical moments for Kosovo's political landscape. Erdoğan has visited Kosovo officially only two times since its independence, in November 2010 and in October 2013, both of which uncoincidentally happened to be during election campaigns in Kosovo. On the eve of the 2013 local elections, Erdoğan's participation in the inauguration of Pristina's airport was considered to be an endorsement to Thaçi's party (Emin 2013). That ceremony turned into a political rally and show of strength for Thaçi (Emin 2013). Furthermore, Erdoğan has frequently included Thaçi among the region's political leaders regularly personally invited to celebratory events in Turkey, such as the presidential inauguration ceremony or the opening of an Istanbul airport. Thaçi's attending of these events shows his need for affiliation, and has been trumpeted as a clear sign of the bilateral strategic relations in place with Turkey (Baykal 2018.

Turkish religious card played in Kosovo

Erdoğan has tried to present himself as a reliable political partner for Kosovo's leadership (Phillips 2015), while seeking to indirectly influence the political discourse in the country for his own political interests. Back in 2013, in Prishtina, he made a controversial declaration: "Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey!", resonating a paternalistic attitude and polarising domestic public opinion in Kosovo (Edwards and Colborne 2019)**.** Although this statement was made in his presence, President Thaçi did not spark any public reaction, giving rise to interpretations of possible 'tacit consent'.

Turkish administration has requested on several occasions that Kosovan leadership remove negative references to the country's Ottoman past from school textbooks (Fazliu 2016). The revision of the historical past takes place in the wider attempt to create a single narrative of long-lasting friendship between Turks and Albanians. It is not perceived by the Turkish administration as a "brainwashing tendency", but as a fertile initiative on the basis of the excellent bilateral relations in place.[13] Nevertheless, there is not enough evidence to show that Thaçi has been personally involved in the facilitation of the religious agenda of Turkish authorities in Kosovo.

As in the case of Albania, Turkey has allocated to Kosovo foreign aid dedicated to cultural heritage and the reconstruction of religious institutions. With an estimated contribution of 35-40 million euro, the new mosque in Prishtina follows classical Ottoman architecture. The mosque's architectural design was meant to be selected among proposals coming from renowned architects. In a case of dejà vu reminiscent of the aforementioned situation involving the Albanian mosque, in 2013 an international competition was organized in which contemporary architects like Zaha Hadid or Winny Mass participated, but at the end an already-existing project of a Turkish company was favoured, missing an opportunity to have a new and contemporary attraction in Pristina (Sadiki 2015). For part of the local population, this mosque represents a symbolic political declaration vis-à-vis Kosovo's leadership rather than a mere faith institution (Shehu 2020). Its construction started in mid-summer 2020 and, unlike in Albania, it was accompanied by some local public resistance, with the citizens demanding for more pressing services like

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12   Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.

13   Researcher no. 1 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 4, 2020.

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schools and kindergartens instead (Qenaj 2020). However, Thaçi has avoided commenting or taking any stances on the Turkish-led religious and cultural agenda in Kosovo,

shifting his discourse on the importance of interreligious and interethnic peaceful coexistence of the society (Shehu 2020).

Honouring Turkey's requests

Erdoğan places crucial value on his authority and on being honoured with loyalty among friends (Kesgin 2019:10), and Thaçi's loyalty was shown on the morning of 16 July 2016, immediately after the attempted coup, by condemning the act and declaring his "support of the democratically elected government and law and order in the country"[14]. Thaçi's message on Twitter was published 24 minutes after Rama's, and these immediate reactions from the ethnic Albanian leaders were significative for Erdoğan, also in front of the slow reaction from the major Western countries. The relation between Erdoğan and Thaçi has focused on Kosovo's national security risks deriving from the Gülen movement. Erdoğan has advised and publicly urged Thaçi and local authorities to take immediate action, as they allege that the Gülen movement has its largest organizational network in Kosovo (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2016). When referring to Gülen, Turkish senior officials have used neo-colonial attitudes, seeking to emotionally influence public perception, besides expressing Turkey's will and readiness to inform, advise and protect Kosovo citizens.

The high confidence posed in Erdoğan's personal investment in forging a personal friendship with Thaçi also posed a risk for local state institutions. In the case of Kosovo, political pressure has been boosted not only through diplomatic channels but also publicly, with the Turkish diplomatic corps' request to silence a local journalist commenting on the 2016 attempted coup (Bytyci 2016) or the clandestine deportation of six alleged Gülenists by Turkey's secret service together with Kosovo's intelligence agency in March 2018, without prior notification to Prime Minister Haradinaj. Such political developments have been perceived as patronizing by local civil society, opposing the unwelcomed influence that Turkey seeks to exert on Kosovo's institutions (Fazliu 2016). "The deportation was a sign of a return of favour to Erdoğan […] as Kosovo was the first country breaking state security protocol", said an interviewee.[15] The exploitation of Kosovo for personal interests proved the authority that Erdoğan invests in his international friendship bonds, by means of "creating

parallel structures" in a foreign country that satisfy his decisions (Hoez 2018).

Thaçi initially denied any knowledge of the operation, but then confirmed the opposite on the grounds that it "posed a threat to national security" (Naddaff 2018). The satisfaction of Erdoğan's requests by Thaçi confirmed the mere existence of a segment of state authorities responding and obeying only to PDK elites and Thaçi, highlighting Kosovo's vulnerability to external political pressure and resulting in a domestic political crisis and rule of law violation. The illegal deportation evidenced also the application of a sort of coercive diplomacy from the Turkish side on Kosovo's legitimate institutions, particularly in proving the threat of punishment addressed to Prime Minister Haradinaj for harbouring alleged Gülenists, while reminding him that Turkey was a leading country in Kosovo's recognition of independence (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2018a). Erdoğan's engagement in such coercive acts relies upon his direct calculation of relative power and partially shows his preference for a transactional type of relationship with Kosovo's leadership. By honouring Erdoğan's requests, Thaçi put into risk Kosovo's political stability for his own benefit of having more political space and showing loyalty in this bilateral friendship, besides setting a precedent in giving in to Turkish authorities' pressure. Moreover, his act shows a certain level of reliance on Turkish leadership.

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14   https://twitter.com/HashimThaçiRKS/status/754223801047678976

15   Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.

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Conclusions

Given recent EU disengagement in the Balkans and general backsliding of democratic standards in Albania and Kosovo in the past years, the fraternization of the countries' leaders with the Turkish leadership is seen as problematic, considering the potential corrosive effects that it may exert on these countries. While media outlets have focused mostly on the declaratory aspects and linguistic terms used to described the relations in place between Erdoğan and Rama and Thaçi respectively, the substance of these personal bonds still remains a mystery. The frequent visits of the Albanian leaders to Ankara and Istanbul and the closed-door meetings with the Turkish President have managed to bypass all the traditional decision-making and tracing procedures of the state administrations, in disrespect of public transparency and governmental accountability standards.

In the case of Erdoğan, the forged friendships with Rama and Thaçi are seen as part of his wider political ambition to become a regional leader, as well as a tool to influence their domestic audiences. By breaking with traditional diplomatic schemes, Erdoğan has used personal relations to get access through ad hoc investment decisions, such as the establishment of Air Albania or privatization of Kosovo's Electricity Distribution and Supply. Moreover, he has sought to promote his religious agenda by disbursing aid for cultural heritage purposes.

In the case of Albania, Rama sought to promote the strategic partnership with Turkey since the beginning of his first mandate as prime minister, which simultaneously developed into a personalized relationship with its leader. This brokered friendship has been promoted on the basis of the parties' strategic interests and calculated political benefits. It has served as a source of empowerment for both sides, with Erdoğan attempting to maximizes his image as the protector of Muslims abroad, and Rama trying to reinforce his position both at the domestic and regional level. However, the relationship has found its limit in Turkish requests to receive satisfaction from Tirana through the deportation of Gülen supporters living in the country. Beyond expressed declaratory support, Rama has followed an ambivalent approach, opting for the offering of symbolic gestures like the building of the memorial to honour the martyrs of the attempted coup. The single episode of deportation of a Gülen supporter occurred after the earthquake at the end of 2019, as a transactional concession for Turkish reconstruction investments in Albania. The synchronisation of satisfactory actions before and after their tete-à-tete meetings reflects Rama's containment strategy and his lack of will to effectively satisfy Erdoğan's requests.

In the case of Kosovo, the forged friendship between Thaçi and Erdoğan has resulted in an exploitation of the country's vulnerabilities in favour of Turkish interests. Thaçi has relied considerably on Erdoğan's support in order to advocate for the recognition of Kosovo by other Muslim countries. The country's disputed statehood demands its leader's affiliation with relevant political actors at the regional level in order to maximize diplomatic efforts. As in the case of Albania, this personal bond between Thaçi and Erdoğan is founded on the basis of strategic calculations and economic and political interests. In Kosovo, Erdoğan has not been satisfied with access to state-owned infrastructure properties that have been passed under the administration of or privatized by Turkish companies. His political pressure has resulted in Thaçi's consent to illegally deported six alleged Gülenists in 2018, in serious violation of the internal procedures and Constitutional norms. While Thaçi's returned benefit of such action is difficult to quantify, his decision has exposed Kosovo to the corrosive effects of Turkish influence in the country, undermining its domestic stability and fuelling political tensions and polarization.

Overall, the forging of these friendship bonds between the countries' leaders has resulted in a shift of attention and public discourse from national relations with Turkey to a leader-focused level, creating a certain overlap and coexistence of the leader's personal agenda with the state's foreign relations. Both Albanian leaders have shown a certain flexibility towards Erdoğan's agenda in the Balkans, offering him certain concessions in exchange for benefits in return, expressed either in terms of political support or through the influx of Turkish funds. The breaking point between Rama's behaviour vis-à-vis Erdoğan with respect to Thaci's materializes at the moment of Turkish meddling in their respective domestic affairs. The way how these friendships have evolved over time show little opportunities for an eventual transformation of the leaders' personal ties into more stable institutional relations.

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Part IV
Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Foreign Influences

11. COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans

Srećko Latal

Executive Summary

The Balkans, like the rest of the world, was shocked and humbled by the outbreak of COVID-19 crisis early this year. Yet this proved to be just the calm before the storm, as ethnic, religious, political, security, economic and social tensions increased across the region as soon as April. This escalation was mostly related to political quarrels caused by the fact that most Balkan countries were scheduled to hold general or local elections in the course of 2020.

The Coronavirus pandemic has intensified the years-long competition of key global actors for power and influence in the region. China, the EU, Gulf countries, Russia, the USA and Turkey all rushed to help Balkan countries, but also tried to use this opportunity to strengthen their positions in this region in their ongoing geopolitical games. While China and the Gulf countries focused mainly on humanitarian and economic issues, centre stage was eventually taken by Russia and Turkey's renewed aggressive attitudes in the region, as well as by the White House's attempt to broker a slap-dash agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

As a series of violent demonstrations shook Serbia and Montenegro in recent months, their officials and media complained about what they said was direct Russian involvement in the organization of protests. Russian officials denied these allegations, but several experts warned that Russia is indeed trying to use all of its resources in the Balkans to stop or even reverse the expansion of NATO and the EU in the region. Some blamed Russia for trying to prevent a Kosovo-Serbia deal in order to maintain its own influence in the Balkans. Others said Russian "pan-Slavic" ambitions were focused on using the EU and US's internal problems and divisions to unite all Slavic nations under Russian command.

The Turkish role in the Balkans has been eclipsed in recent months by Ankara's increasingly aggressive behaviour in the Mediterranean and Middle East, including in the wars in Syria and Libya. Nevertheless, recent findings reveal that Turkish nationals connected with Erdoğan's regime have been establishing a foothold for criminal and/or paramilitary networks in the Balkans since early 2020, which raises questions about Ankara's engagement in and plans for the region.

COVID-19 crisis also saw a further shift in US policy towards the region, continuing a trend which first became visible with the last US presidential elections in 2016. While on the one hand the US provided considerable and transparent financial assistance to all Balkan countries, on the other this was overshadowed and tainted by the White House attempt to push through a slap-dash deal between Kosovo and Serbia. Strong pressure from the special US envoy for Serbia-Kosovo talks, Richard Grenell, undermined the Kosovar government's ability to deal with the pandemic and eventually led to the toppling of Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti.

This rollercoaster of developments continued on an almost daily basis, threatening to push the Balkans over the edge towards further destabilization and possibly new ethnic or social conflicts. Although these dynamics prevent any reliable long-term analysis, most experts agree that in this situation only the EU has the capacity to gradually stabilize and normalize the Balkans.

Whether the EU will now succeed at what it has been failing to do for the past 15 years will be known by this fall, when the EU is expected to produce the long awaited "Marshall Plan" for the region. This plan will outline a set of reforms and other conditions under which Balkan countries will be able to use a combination of grants and loans worth 3.3 billion euro, which the EU earmarked for the Balkans back in April. Yet the EU will have to tread very carefully and wisely if it wants to make good use of this opportunity; otherwise local, regional and geopolitical quarrels in the Balkans will likely continue escalating, with potentially devastating consequences.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of COVID-19 on different external influences in the Western Balkans (WB6: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo), which have already been steadily increasing in recent years.

The briefing paper, titled **"COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans,"** represents the first part of two content-wise connected papers and documents recent American, Chinese, Gulf countries, Russian and Turkish humanitarian, economic, political and other activity in the Balkans. Outside of those connected to the initial phase of the Coronavirus pandemic, most of these activities have little or no direct connection with the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, all these foreign actors used the pandemic and its multidimensional repercussions in their attempts to further their own strategic interests in the Balkans. The paper offers insight into different forms and levels of engagement by these actors, establishing a better understanding of their agendas and strategies, and also providing data for future research on and analyses of this topic. The focus of this report is on Russian, American and Turkish political activities in the region, as they directly threatened the stability of the Balkans and weakened governments' capacities to deal with the pandemic.

The paper is interlinked with a policy paper, **"The Balkans between the EU and a Hard Place" (available here),** which identifies and analyses opportunities and challenges, which the EU is facing in the region as it tries to regain its leverage there. The policy paper starts from the oft-repeated premise that of all foreign actors, only the EU has the capacity to gradually stabilize and normalize the Balkans. It also examines the roots of the acute misunderstanding and miscommunication between EU and Balkan officials. Finally, the paper identifies possible scenarios of the future relationship between the EU and the Balkans, as well as the possible cost of "non-enlargement."

While both papers are mainly focused on foreign influences in the Balkans, this does not mean that they ignore or negate local actors' responsibility for the difficult situation in which the region finds itself today. However, given the current political impasse that is present across the Balkans, the long history of various foreign influences in the Balkans and the latest escalation in geopolitical tensions, the two papers presume that global rather than local factors will determine the direction of the region in the near future.

Balkans: Caught in Great Powers' Geopolitical Struggles

The various geopolitical alignments of the Balkan countries changed significantly during and after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued in its wake. The special relations which Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs had traditionally cherished with Istanbul, Vienna and Moscow (respectively) for the past several centuries, were, beginning in the late 1990's, replaced with American and to a lesser degree EU dominance (read more in the PSSI paper Western Balkans at the Crossroads – East vs. West).

As of the early 2000's, the US committed to withdrawing from day-to-day Balkan political affairs, with its presence intended to be replaced with the EU enlargement process. While the US did eventually reduce its regional presence, the EU failed to assert itself as a political player and continued to be perceived primarily as a "cash-cow" by local actors. This stagnation of European integration processes gradually enabled the resurrection of nationalist and populist local politics, but also opened space for other

foreign actors, such as China, the Gulf countries, Russia and Turkey to increase their regional influence (Prague Security Studies Institute, 2018).

For years, these countries have applied different combinations of soft and hard power, steadily building up their presence in the region. While China relied mainly on offering relatively cheap, condition-free, non-transparent loans to all countries in the region, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf countries used their special historic, political, business, religious and cultural links with different ethnic and political groups. Regardless of the different sets of tools these countries applied in the Balkans, their presence was always focused on using the Balkans in their larger geopolitical games.

For example, this political focus was clearly reflected in Russian investments in the regional energy sector, in the Kremlin's exploitation of political and religious links

with local leaders in Serbia and BiH's ethnic-Serb majority Republika Srpska; in Chinese loans supporting major energy and infrastructure projects across the region; or in Turkish and Gulf countries' business links with Bosniak and Serbian leaders.

While EU and US officials expressed concerns and dismay in recent years over other foreign actors' growing presence in the Balkans, their leaders nevertheless continued overlooking the region's geostrategic importance.

The US appeared to be more aware of the political and ethnic nature of Balkan problems than the EU, but was still reluctant to be dragged back into the Balkan political quicksand. American foreign policy moved even further away from its previously strong positions in the Balkans after Donald Trump enacted his "America first" foreign policy beginning in 2016.

The EU, meanwhile, mainly ignored or downplayed the intricate political and ethnic nature of Balkan power games, focusing on economic relations, the EU accession process and technical reforms. Lacking proper political will and strategic communication capacities, the EU failed to capitalize on its massive financial support to and trade turnover with the Balkan countries, even though its economic importance in the region outweighs that of all other external actors by a wide margin.[1]

Balkan Power Games Flourish Amidst the COVID–19 Crisis

A closer look in Balkan geopolitical realities in the first half of 2020 puts to shame even the best political thrillers. What started with the global COVID-19 pandemic, was followed by the EU's blockade of exports of medical equipment; the rise of Chinese and Russian "masks and respirators" diplomacy, as well as a hardening of the Turkish position in the Balkans and Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the US envoy for Kosovo-Serbia talks, Richard Grenell, contributed to the toppling of Kosovo's previous government, while the EU made a strong comeback pledging 3.3 billion euro for health, economic and social assistance for the Balkan countries.

This intensification of geopolitical competition in the Balkans was matched by similarly intense local dynamics. The initial public focus on the pandemic after only a month of seemingly functional governance gave way to ethnic, political, economic and social tensions as most of the countries in the region started preparing for their national or local elections. Violent protests erupted in Albania over the demolition of the Tirana National Theatre, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) the political impasse deepened, threatening the conduct of local elections.

Dirty political campaigns preceded parliamentary elections in Serbia, where the Serbian Progressive Party of President Aleksandar Vučić won by a land-slide, as well as in North Macedonia, where the Social Democrat-led "We Can" alliance of Zoran Zaev won by a narrow margin. Despite different results, both elections deepened concerns about the state of democracy and EU perspective of these countries.

Incidentally, a war crimes indictment against Kosovar President Hashim Thaci stopped Grenell's Kosovo-Serbia "peace plan" from proceeding just three days before Thaci and Vučić were supposed to meet in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, recent violent clashes between police and protesters in Montenegro and Serbia raised concerns about Russian involvement in the regional political scene.

Preoccupied with pre- or post-election campaigns and daily power plays, Balkan leaders have been ignoring a potentially grave danger – a looming economic and social downturn amidst the industrial slowdown and interruption of trade relations caused by the pandemic. The 2008-09 recession showed that the Balkan region is more vulnerable to the global economic downturn than the rest of Europe. This is because of the Balkan countries' high level of dependence on the EU market, as well as on remittances from hundreds of thousands of their nationals who have moved to the EU in recent years. They are usually

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1   A review of all available public resources and databases shows that the EU member states dominated trade turnover and Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) with the six West Balkan countries (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). For details, see the second paper "The Balkans between the EU and a Hard Place." The exception is Montenegro, where most investments in the last year came from Russia and then China. See more at: https://www.bankar.me/2020/07/03/za-cetiri-mjeseca-2020-u-crnu-goru-se-slilo-282-miliona-eura-stranih-investicija/.

among the first ones to suffer from personnel or salary cuts during any crisis and are often eventually forced to return to their homes. Furthermore, populist Balkan leaders, feeble governance capacities and underperforming public services are ill-prepared to deal with such challenges. In this situation, years of ethnic and political frustrations, combined with continued COVID-19-related health hazards along with deepening economic and social hardship could lead to new ethnic or social violence across the region.

It is inherently difficult to ascertain how serious or imminent this threat truly is. On the one hand, some believe that perpetual crisis has become the region's way of life and could continue without any major changes or negative consequences for the foreseeable future. Others point out that the Balkan crisis is not a continuation of the status quo, but a continuous disintegration of political, governmental and rule of law systems. According to this line of thinking, this process has already created an antagonistic environment similar to the one that existed in the 1990s, and could eventually result in a new outbreak of violence if left unchecked. Which of the two schools of thought will prove to be more accurate is impossible to foretell, but the outcome will certainly depend on the ability of the US and EU to continue acting as stabilizing agents – a condition that is becoming increasingly uncertain.

Geopolitical Toolbox: From "Mask Diplomacy" to Government Bashing

At the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, all Balkan countries struggled to obtain the most basic protective materials and equipment needed to deal with the new health threat. At that critical time, the EU's decision to block the export of medical equipment and supplies drew angry reactions from some EU member and Balkan countries alike. It also opened doors for China and then Russia to win easy PR points with their "mask diplomacy" campaigns, while Turkey and the Gulf countries quickly followed suit.

A large part of this assistance was provided in the form of materials, including masks, protective gear, COVID-19 tests and on rare occasions respirators and other medical equipment. While badly needed in the first phase of the pandemic, this aid was provided in such a way that its true value and overall effect could not be measured. Furthermore, the Balkan countries provided little concrete information about where and how these donations were used, except in a few cases concerning respirators or other more expensive equipment.

As the initial shock and panic caused the pandemic subsided, the Balkans witnessed a new surge of local, regional and geopolitical powerplays. In this situation, different foreign actors used different approaches. Most of them had little or nothing to do with COVID-19, outside of the fact that most of them used the health, political, economic and social context created by the Coronavirus pandemic in an attempt to achieve their strategic goals in the region. The following pages present a comprehensive overview of their actions and provide analytical insight into their impacts.

China, the EU and the Gulf countries focus on humanitarian and economic assistance

China: strong presence despite low profile
At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, China was the first to realize the Balkan countries' need for protective gear and basic medical equipment, as well as the great PR potential which the pandemic created for both Chinese and local leaders. While China made sure to provide basic assistance to all Balkan countries, the bulk of its assistance focused on Serbia, which is the region's largest market, the main political actor, and China's key regional business partner.[2] Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić hailed China's actions, and initially criticized and later downplayed the EU's assistance, which eventually triggered strong reactions from the EU (Popović 2020).

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2   By the end of May, Chinese donations to Serbia included "nine planeloads of equipment," equipment for two laboratories for coronavirus testing, as well as a team of Chinese experts. *See more at:* http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a585896/Pomoc-Srbiji-iz-EU-Kine-Rusije-za-onu-sa-istoka-glasnije-hvala.html, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-kina-ugovor-o-donaciji-laboratorije-korona-virus-/30541795.html.

Between early April and the end of May, China also sent protective gear and medical equipment to Albania,[3] Bosnia and Herzegovina,[4] North Macedonia[5] and Montenegro.[6] Kosovo was the only one left without Chinese assistance as Beijing officials took caution not to antagonize its main client in the region – Serbia (Loxha 2020). Nevertheless, the exact quantities and value of most of these provisions remain unknown. The overall picture is further muddied by the fact that both local governments and the EU paid for some of the supplies provided by China, or their transport (Kovačević 2020).

As the pandemic dragged on, the Chinese presence in regional media dwindled, partially because the need for basic protective and medical gear subsided, but also because of the poor quality of its products, many of which had to be returned (LO 2020) and because China faced strong global criticism for using the pandemic as a PR opportunity (Borrell 2020). By the beginning of August, China kept a relatively low media profile in the region. Nevertheless, it continued strengthening its presence through infrastructure projects, such as the start of the construction of Block 7 of the Tuzla thermal power plant in BiH (Pavlova 2020), or the delivery of the first contingent of six Cai Hong (Rainbow) military drones, accompanied with eighteen FT-8C laser-guided missiles for Serbian military forces, on July 1 (Roblin 2020).

The EU: finally taking the lead in the Balkans

Despite its poor start, the EU again came through as the region's single biggest donor by offering a 3.3 billion euro assistance package for the Western Balkan countries, aimed at helping them to deal with the challenges caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.[7] The proposal was welcomed by all local officials as one of the most concrete EU moves in the region in recent years, as well as a sign of renewed EU interest in the Balkans. In subsequent months, the EU also continued providing support to Balkan countries' overstretched health systems in dealing with the pandemic.

Following the interruption of the White House-sponsored talks between Kosovo and Serbia, the EU reengaged with this process, after EU-led talks had been frozen for more than a year and a half. The EU-led talks between Pristina and Belgrade resumed in mid-June and continued with a series of high-level and technical meetings in July. Yet officials and experts stressed that the prospect for success is limited due to heightened tensions and animosities, as well as low trust towards the EU in both countries (Hehir 2020).

Meanwhile, EU officials have been engaged in the process of matching the earmarked 3.3-billion-euro financial injection for the Balkans with reforms and other conditions that will be required in order for the countries to access the EU funds. This package will be presented in the fall and will likely determine the fate of the EU-Balkan relations, and therefore the future of all other foreign influences in the region.

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3   Albania received its Chinese donation on April 25, which included an unspecified amount of medical supplies including "testing kits, protective garments, face masks, goggles and gloves." Although none of the officials was able to provide even an estimated value for this shipment, it was nevertheless welcomed at the Tirana airport by Albanian Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection Mira Rakacolli and Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs EtjenXhafaj. Rakacolli was quoted as thanking China and stressing that "we can overcome this global challenge only through solidarity." *Information available at:* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/26/c_139007921.htm.

4   Bosnia and Herzegovina has also received Chinese donations in the form of medical supplies and equipment, which were delivered in three tranches during April, 2020. The donation included six ventilators, medical supplies, including nucleic acid testing kits, protective clothing and N95 masks. *Information available at:* https://www.fena.news/bih/first-contingent-of-chinese-donation-in-medical-equipment-arrives/.

5   The Chinese embassy in Skopje donated 30,000 euro to North Macedonia on April 16, which is one of the few cases where the Chinese government donated cash to the Western Balkan countries. In addition, the country received a Chinese donation of medical supplies of unknown quantity and value on April 18. None of the local officials greeted the donation at the Skopje airport but Deputy Prime Minister Bujar Osmani thanked China by video link, as he was in self-isolation. *See more at:* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/19/c_138990481.htm.

6   In addition to the donation of the medical equipment, which Montenegro received from the Chinese government on April 16, (*available at:* http://me.chineseembassy.org/mon/sghd_1/t1772820.htm), the country also received several private donations. They included "300,000 protective gloves, about 550,000 surgical masks and 45,000 N95-type masks, 3,000 face visors, 2,000 coronavirus test kits and about 3,500 [units of] protective clothing" from Chinese billionaire Jack Ma, as well as nine tons of medical equipment and medical supplies (protective masks, suits, tests, respirators etc.) that were delivered to the Montenegrin embassy in Beijing. The financial value of these donations is unknown. *See more at:* http://www.gov.me/en/News/223718/Valuable-medical-equipment-donated-by-Jack-Ma-and-Petros-Stathis-arrived-in-Montenegro.html.

7   The 3.3 billion euro package includes immediate support for the health sector from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) worth 38 million euro; 389 million euro earmarked for social and economic recovery needs; 455 million economic reactivation package; 750 million euro of Macro-Financial Assistance and a 1.7 billion euro assistance from the European Investment Bank. *See more at the European Commission press release, April 29, 2020. Available at:* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_777

The Gulf countries cherish Islamic ties but also business links

Among the Gulf Countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar were the most active in providing assistance to the Balkan countries, with BiH[8] being their main focus. Nevertheless, Serbia also benefited significantly from the Gulf countries' assistance – much more than Albania,[9] North Macedonia[10] or Montenegro, which all have significant Muslim populations.[11] Although Kosovo is also populated mostly by Muslims, there are no available reliable records of COVID-19 assistance provided by the Gulf States.

These figures suggest that the Gulf countries recognize Serbia's strategic importance in the region, but also cherish the good political and business relations which Serbian President Vučić has established with many Islamic countries in recent years. Nevertheless, as previous analyses have shown (see more in the final publication of the first round of the Western Balkans at the Crossroads project), Gulf countries have only limited interests in and influence on the Balkan countries, which are mainly composed of person-to-person business relationships, as well as religious links with Bosniak elites. This also explains why, besides their initial humanitarian assistance, the Gulf countries showed little interest in the Balkans in this period.

Russia blamed for trying to destabilize the Balkans amidst the COVID-19 crisis

Amidst diverse foreign actors' intense humanitarian, economic and political activities, it was eventually Russia that took centre stage in the Balkans during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Russian assistance in the Western Balkan appeared somewhat more concrete than Chinese assistance, yet it was almost exclusively limited to the two remaining non-NATO countries with significant ethnic Serb populations, Serbia[12] and BiH[13] (more specifically to its ethnic Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska).

The fact that the assistance was coordinated and carried out by the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Army has raised eyebrows among many observers (The Moscow Times 2020).

What triggered even more concern were statements from local officials and media who claimed that Russia was using the situation created by COVID-19 pandemic to orchestrate or support protests against the governments of Montenegro and Serbia, in an attempt to influence or topple them.

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8   Bosnia and Herzegovina benefited the most from the Gulf countries, confirming the close links its Bosniak leaders enjoy in the Islamic world. In another rare case of direct financial assistance, on April 15, Saudi Arabia donated 250.000 euro to the BiH ministry of security for its fight against COVID-19 pandemic (*see more at:* https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/iz-saudijske-arabije-nasoj-zemlji-uplaceno-vise-od-pola-miliona-km-pomoci/373932). On May 19, BiH received 10 tens of medical supplies worth 3 million euro from Qatar – which was one of the very few cases where the donor country declared the value of the donation (https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-sarajevo-sletio-jedan-od-najmodernijih-aviona-stiglo-10-tona-katarske-pomoci/200519088). The donation was welcomed at the Sarajevo airport by the BiH Minister of Foreign Affairs, BiseraTurković, who on that occasion stressed that "true friends are recognized when you are in trouble." A week later, on May 27, Minister Turković was also on the Sarajevo airport welcoming the assistance from the UAE, which did not declare its value. *More information at:* https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-sarajevo-sletio-boeing-747-400-s-vrijednom-donacijom-iz-ujedinjenih-arapskih-emirata/200527077.

9   Although predominately Musli, Albania received assistance only from the UAE – seven tons of medical supplies delivered to Tirana on May 18. *See more at:* https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/5/12/13-05-2020-uae-help.

10 Northern Macedonia received 600,000 masks and other personal protective equipment from Qatar on May 19. *Information available at:* http://balkans.aljazeera.net/video/pomoc-iz-katara-stigla-u-sarajevo-beograd-i-skoplje.

11 Montenegro received assistance only from the UAE – seven tons of medical supplies delivered to Podgorica on May 13. *See more at:* https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/5/12/13-05-2020-uae-help.

12 Russian assistance to Serbia amounted to 11 plane loads, which in addition to the usual masks, protective suits and other equipment brought 87 military specialists, eight teams of doctors and nurses as well as specialists for decontamination, along with 16 vehicles and other equipment. The arrival of the assistance was closely followed by Serbian and Russian media, with Serbian President Vučić repeatedly thanking Russian President Vladimir Putin and "brotherly Russian people." *Available at:* https://www.rt.com/news/484872-russia-serbia-coronavirus-aid/.

13 Russian assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina was focused exclusively on BiH's Serb-populated entity of Republika Srpska. On April 9, three Russian airplanes brought medical supplies and equipment, as well as specialized military vehicles and experts for disinfection to the RS administrative centre of Banja Luka. At the Banja Luka airport, the donation was welcomed by the Serb member of the BiH Presidency, Milorad Dodik, and Russian ambassador Peter Ivancov (*see more at:* http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/region/avion-sa-pomoci-iz-rusije-sleteo-u-banja-luku-docekali-ga-dodik-i-ivancov_1112258.html). A contingent of Russian military vehicles with experts tried to reach the southern town of Mostar on May 1, acting upon the invitation of a Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Čović – Dodik's closest political ally – who asked them to carry out disinfection of the main hospital in Croat-dominated West Mostar. Yet they were forced to turn back from the Serbia-BiH border crossing at Rača, since neither Foreign nor Defence Ministry of BiH – both led by Bosniak officials – approved their request. *Available at:* http://rs.n1info.com/Region/a595051/Covic-ih-pozvao-u-Mostar-ruskim-vojnim-strucnjacima-nije-dozvoljen-ulaz-u-BiH.html.

Post-election protests test relations between Russia and Serbia

While the start of the COVID-19 crisis seemed to mark a peak in the "historic brotherhood" of the Serbs and Russians, the situation took a different turn in early July, after Serbian government-controlled local media and officials blamed Russia for supporting – if not instigating – a series of violent protests against the Serbian government. The protests started in Belgrade on July 7, prompted by the Serbian government's decision to reintroduce tight lockdown restrictions due to a sudden rise in the number of COVID cases. Many local residents were provoked by this announcement as they believed that the huge spike in COVID-19 cases was caused by the government's previous decision to completely lift restrictions, and even downplay the number of infected people – apparently in order to enable the holding of the June 21 parliamentary elections.

As soon as the elections had further increased the political dominance of Vučić's Serb Progressive Party – which won some 63 percent of the vote and two-thirds of MPs in Serbian Parliament – Vučić announced new exceptionally strict restrictions, including a weekend-long curfew. The protests which ensued turned violent, and over the next few days spread to several other Serbian towns. After just the first night of protests, some Serbian media and experts stated that some of the protests were orchestrated by local pro-Russian politicians. They claimed that the main purpose of the protests was to destabilize Serbia and weaken its position in the EU-sponsored negotiations that were supposed to start a few days later, or to undermine the negotiations altogether (Kurir 2020a). The pro-Western Belgrade-based Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) warned that the protests in Serbia resembled *"Russia's violent undemocratic-autocratic attempts to emulate non-violent, truly pro-democratic movements (that) have already been witnessed in Ukraine, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia"* (CEAS 2020).

President Vučić also told the media that "foreign agencies" were involved in the organization of protests but declined to provide any further details (Blic 2020). Such claims were further validated by reports that several foreign citizens were involved in the demonstrations (Kurir 2020b; Kurir 2020c). The Russian ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandr

Bocan-Harcenko (@ABocanHarcenko, July 9, 2020), denied any Russian involvement in the protests but Vučić nonetheless turned down his request for a meeting on July 9 – offering no official explanation – which for many pundits was further confirmation of the deterioration of relations between him and the Kremlin.[14] Vučić's clash with Russia continued even after the protests subsided, currently mainly through media and press statements alleging 'Russian deep state' involvement in the protests (Bojić 2020), accusations which were then rebuffed by Russian officials (@ABocanHarcenko, July 27, 2020).

Some believed that the continued "anti-Russian" campaign in a the Serbian government-controlled media was a part of Vučić's tactics, which he often used in the past, as a part of which he underscored the threat of the Russian domination in Serbia to frighten the EU and the US and soften their positions towards him.[15]

Nevertheless, one of the leading Russian foreign affairs experts, Maxim Samorukov, said that relations between the Kremlin and Vučić have already taken a turn for worse after the June election, after which Vučić became even more powerful and therefore harder for Russia to manipulate. The Kremlin appeared to be made increasingly nervous by regional developments, first by US-led and later by EU-led talks between Kosovo and Serbia, and showed a determination to remain involved in this issue in the future. On several occasions Russian ambassador Harcenko publicly stated that *"a deal with Pristina is out of the question without Russia,"* and expressed Russian readiness to get involved in the talks *"if Belgrade invites us"* (FoNet 2020). The Kremlin seemed concerned by the possibility that Vučić could reach some kind of a deal with Kosovo without the Kremlin's involvement, which would seriously undermine Russia's political position in Serbia and the rest of the region.

Several local and Russian sources provided additional explanations for this sudden crisis in the relations between Belgrade and Moscow.[16] According to them, the clash intensified when Vučić, emboldened by his party's landslide victory, decided to sideline his long-time junior partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia of Ivica Dačić, who is considered a closer and more loyal partner to the Kremlin than Vučić.

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14   Online interview with a Serbian official, July 9, 2020.

15   Online interview with a Belgrade-based Serbian political analyst, July 2020.

16   Online interviews with a senior Russian expert, as well as one Serbian and one Bosnian Serb government officials, July 2020.

Despite occasional problems in relations with Dačić, Vučić was always reluctant to move against him because of his ties with Russia.

Vučić used the protests as a convenient pretext for his move against the Socialists, as a few senior members of the Socialist Party, or their family members, were found to be participating in the demonstrations. Dačić was eventually forced to intervene by removing several senior party officials from party membership as well as from their official positions.[17] Possible removal of these officials marked the beginning of a clash for control over Srbijagas – a Serbian state company managing the import of Russian natural gas. For many years the Socialist Party controlled this trade, which is believed to have brought in millions of dollars in personal profits for many Serbian and Russian officials. A Russian expert, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the clash for control of this lucrative business is most likely the main reason for Russian involvement in recent protests in Serbia. The source added that the request for this action probably did not come from the top of the Kremlin, but from lower levels of the Russian administration, which are influenced by Russian oil and gas companies.[18]

Vučić's bold response to the protests and his anti-Russian campaign has attracted too much public attention, and probably also the attention of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Serbian and Russian sources said. However, at this stage, it is unclear whether or how Putin could react, and how this episode will affect official relations between Belgrade and Moscow. According to both a Serbia expert and a Russia expert, the first concrete signal of the state of the relations between Vučič and Dačić, and therefore between Belgrade and Kremlin, will be the new government, which Vučić is expected to nominate in August or September.[19] They added that if Dačić remains in the same position in the new government it will be an indicator of Vučić trying to appease Moscow. On the other hand, Dačić's demotion or complete absence from the new government will signal a further escalation of tensions.

One way or the other, Samorukov believes that after this episode, relations between Vučić and the Kremlin *"will never be the same again."*[20]

Russia uses Dodik to control future of BiH and Kosovo

This Serb-Russian issue became even more complicated when Bosnian Serb strongman Milorad Dodik was once again thrown in the rift between Moscow and Belgrade. Dodik is the Serb member of BiH's three-person Presidency and the leader of the ruling Bosnian Serb party, and is also considered to be closely linked with Moscow. On the same day the Russian ambassador traded barbs with Serbian pro-government media, July 23, Vučić came to visit Dodik in the RS administrative centre of Banja Luka. Vučić brought hefty gifts, reportedly worth 2.7 million euro, including a 540,000 euro donation for schools and health centres, a donation of 15 ambulances worth 750,000 euro, and a 600,000 euro donation for the ongoing construction of a Russian religious and cultural centre (BNTV 2020).

Vučić also pledged future investments worth millions of euro for Republika Srpska, including construction of an airport near the south-eastern town of Trebinje, and participation in the construction of a Bijeljina-Belgrade highway. Despite Vučić's multi-million pledges, one statement that drew most of the public attention came from Dodik, who directly linked the future of Republika Srpska, as a part of BiH, with the status of Kosovo.[21]Dodik's statement was obviously timed to coincide with the restart of EU-led talks on Kosovo-Serbia relations. Most experts and commentators from the region saw Dodik's statement as proof that Dodik – and by proxy Republika Srpska and BiH – are now being used by Moscow to maintain influence in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

"The West is playing with fire: Republika Srpska is strengthening Belgrade's position in the battle for Kosovo," reported Russia's Sputnik Serbia news agency on July 24 (Ristić 2020). The article added that Republika Srpska will remain within BiH as long as Kosovo does not get full international recognition of the independence it declared

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17   Petar Skundrić, Serbia's energy minister in 2008-11 government, was already removed from the position of Dačić's adviser on energy issues following his son's arrest at a protest rally, while local and Russian sources say the next in line for the removal is the outgoing minister of environment Goran Trivan and the influential manager of Serbian gas company Srbijagas, Dusan Bajatović.

18   Online interview with a senior Russian foreign affairs expert, July 2020

19   Separate online interviews with one Serbian and one Russian expert, July 2020.

20   Interviews with Maxim Samorukov, a deputy editor of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, June-July 2020.

21   "Today we informed President Vučić that it is impossible to discuss the separation of Kosovo (from Serbia) without also talking about the status of Republika Srpska. The President (Vučić) has taken this issue seriously, but he did not respond to it," Dodik told a press conference in Banja Luka on July 23. *Available at:* https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3502387/*Vučić-danas-u-banjaluci-predsednik-urucuje-pomoc-republici-srpskoj-od-27-miliona-evra.*

in 2008. It also warned that international recognition of Kosovo's independence would enable RS to follow suit and declare its own independence.

Dodik's statement and Vučić's silence on this issue triggered new ethnic and political tensions and rebukes, especially from Bosniak officials and media in BiH. Most experts and commentators agreed that with his statement, Dodik was basically reiterating Moscow's positions and limitations for the Kosovo-Serbia talks that are expected to continue in coming weeks. However, some Serbian and Bosnian Serb officials say that this statement also helps Vučić, giving him an excuse to drag his feet on the continuation of the EU and US-led dialogues on Kosovo-Serbia relations.

While some EU officials expressed hopes that the EU could finalize Kosovo-Serbia talks with some kind of technical agreement by the end of the year,[22]Dodik's statement indicates that the EU should not be so optimistic.[23] This is especially true given that Dodik has been undermining the integrity of BiH for years and threatening to separate Republika Srpska from the rest of the country – especially in the event of definitive recognition of Kosovo. Any new attempt for a breakup of BiH could easily lead to new ethnic violence in BiH and the rest of the region.

Montenegro blames Russia for stirring religious protests

Parallel to developments in Serbia, Montenegro was also rocked by a new series of protests in June and July, which on several occasions escalated into open clashes between police and demonstrators. The focal point of these protests was the ongoing dispute over the law on the status of religious communities and their property, which was adopted at the end of 2019. The Serbian Orthodox Church sees this law as an attempt by the government to limit its influence and presence in the country. It also saw this as government meddling in its decades-long dispute with the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which split from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1993. Although it was not canonically recognized by the other Orthodox Christian Churches, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church claimed succession to the autocephalous Montenegrin Church that operated until the 1918 unification of the Kingdom of Serbia and Kingdom of Montenegro in 1918.

The adoption of the law was perceived as a typical pre-election move by Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović, ahead of the general and local elections that are currently scheduled to take place on August 30. According to local experts, Djukanović has been using his spat with the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Amfilohije Risto Radović, for the past three decades to win one election after another by repeatedly raising tensions and dividing local communities.[24]

Initially, the controversial law seemed to have backfired against Djukanović as the Serbian Orthodox Church held a series of peaceful prayer-protests since the beginning of the year, which further undermined Djukanović's already failing popularity in the country. This process was briefly interrupted by COVID-19, but then continued and soon escalated into a more violent form after Montenegrin police started arresting priests, protestors and more recently even local city officials from opposition parties. These clashes further divided Montenegrin society along ethnic, religious and political lines, raising questions about the country's future. The most recent negotiations between representatives of the government and the Serbian Orthodox Church failed to bring about a compromise (Janković 2020).

Local experts and media expressed concern that protests and clashes that have been reoccurring in Montenegro since late last year have been supported by Russia, either directly or through the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a close relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church and its leader Patriarch Irinej.

In an interview for Reuters in February this year, Djukanović openly blamed Serbia and Russia for trying to undermine and possibly even topple Montenegro's pro-EU government (Vasović 2020). More recently, Serbian opposition leader Nenad Čanak, the head of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, told the media that the Serbian Orthodox Church is the *"Kremlin's tool for destabilization of Montenegro"* (Standard 2020). Others go even further, blaming Russia for trying to reinstate the idea of "pan-Slavism", according to which all Slavic countries would be reunited under Russian patronage.

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22   Online interview with a senior EU official working on the Balkans, July 2020.

23   Online interview with one Serbian and one Bosnian Serb government official, July 24, 2020.

24   Online interviews with a leading Montenegrin political analyst, May-July 2020.

The latest developments show that NATO membership – which Montenegro gained in 2017 – is by itself unable to stabilize this Balkan country. It finds itself in a tight spot, caught between a corrupt government on the one hand, and growing Russian and Chinese and weakening EU influences on the other, a senior Montenegrin expert said.[25] Yet the expert also argued that regardless of how dangerous they may be, foreign influences in Montenegro are still overshadowed by the complex ethnic, religious and political quarrels that dominate the country.

US financial assistance overshadowed by Kosovo stumble

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the USA provided significant assistance to all countries in the region, mostly in the form of direct financial injections.[26] However, its role in this crisis, as well as its general image in the region, was eclipsed by a White House attempt to push through a Kosovo-Serbia agreement. This initiative was seen as a reversal of years of the American Balkan policy, in whichit put pressure on Kosovo to remove its reciprocal trade tariffs with Serbia in order to placate Vučić into agreeing to meet with Kosovo representatives (Kingsley et al 2020).

Although the special US envoy for Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, Richard Grenell, repeatedly denied that the US-sponsored Serbia-Kosovo deal would include any exchange of ethnic territories ((@RichardGrenell, April 20, 2020), several US and Kosovo officials confirmed that this was in fact the case (Llazae 2020). This indicated that under the current President, Donald Trump, the White House withdrew its full support for Kosovo's independence and changed its previous position, which had opposed changes of borders in the Balkans. Strong US pressure undermined and then helped topple the government of Albin Kurti, undercut Kosovo's government capacity to deal with the pandemic and eventually stained America's image in the region (Mackinnon 2020). With Kurti removed, Grenell proceeded with the preparation of a Kosovo-Serbia "peace deal." However, the initiative was interrupted following the last-minute June 24 announcement of a war crimes indictment against Kosovo President Hashim Thaci by the Office of the special Kosovo prosecutor (Kosovo Specialist Chamber 2020).

The fact that the indictment was filed in April when it was still not confirmed by the judge but got published just three days before the planned meeting in Washington, DC triggered widespread speculations. Some officials suspected the timing of the announcement was deliberately set to sabotage the peace talks. However, several Western diplomats stressed that this timing was aimed not to disrupt Grenell's initiative, but to prevent Thaci from negotiating a deal with the White House that would undermine the office of the special Kosovo prosecutor, or even lead to its closure.[27]

Following the announcement, Thaci, then Kosovar Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti and eventually Vučić all cancelled their participation, forcing Grenell to call off the meeting that was already scheduled in the White House on June 27. This initiative has agitated all regional and international actors, and has generally been perceived as a new low for US foreign policy in the region. US diplomats, academics and experts admit that under Donald Trump, US foreign policy – in the Balkans and elsewhere – has become incoherent. The White House has been pursuing its own foreign agenda, narrowly focused on providing Trump with some quick wins – such as failed "peace deals" in the Middle East and the Balkans (Pineles 2020).

A number of local, US, EU and Balkan officials and experts strongly criticized the initiative, which according to them

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25 Online interviews with a leading Montenegrin political analyst, May-July 2020.

26 Between March and June, through its embassies or USAID offices, the USA provided Balkan countries with more than 7 million USD, mostly in direct financial aid, and in a few cases with additional assistance in medical equipment. In the process, Albania received USD 700,000 (euro 630,000) (*see more at:* https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Albania.pdf). BiH got USD 2,2 million (euro 1,98 million), which among other things was aimed at boosting the country's laboratory systems, bolstering responsiveness and preparedness, as well as risk communication (*information available at:* https://seenews.com/news/usaid-donates-1-mln-to-help-bosnia-fight-covid-19-699744). The US government provided USD 1,6 million (euro 1,44 million) to Kosovo (*available at:* https://www.usaid.gov/kosovo/news-information/press-releases/usaid-commits-additional-500000-support-kosovos-response) as well as USD 315,000 (euro 278,000) for Montenegro (*available at:* https://me.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-provides-assistance-to-montenegro-to-respond-to-covid-19/) and USD 1.1 million (euro 974,000) to North Macedonia (*available at:* https://mk.usembassy.gov/u-s-provides-assistance-to-north-macedonia-to-respond-to-covid-19/). In this period, Serbia received USD 1.38 million. A part of this grant was implemented through the Red Cross of Serbia, enabling it to procure essential items for Serbia's most vulnerable families and groups (*available at:* https://rs.usembassy.gov/usaid-partners-with-serbian-red-cross-on-covid-19-response/).

27 Online interview with a Western diplomat close to the Kosovo prosecutor's office, June 25, 2020.

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was one of the lowest points for US foreign policy in recent decades.

"This [i.e. the Trump Administration's] America is no friend to Kosovo," says scholar Hana Marku in a text published in Pristina Insight on April 24 (Marku 2020). Molly Montgomery, Vice President of the Albright Stonebridge Group, called a land-swap agreement a *"Pandora's box"* which *"would almost certainly result in de facto ethnic cleansing, heightened tensions, and the potential for renewed violence"* (Montgomery 2020).

Veteran US diplomat and academic R. Bruce Hitchner argued that America's unilateral approach to the Kosovo-Serbia talks *"suggests that it is time for the US to push the re-set button on its current policy in the Western Balkans."* In a Balkan Insight article, he went even further and stressed that *"between now and the presidential election, the US should step back from high-visibility initiatives and avoid*

the prospect of conducting flawed negotiations that might do more harm than good, and only serve the interests of a President in search of foreign policy success at all costs"* (Hitchner 2020).

Despite the criticism, Grenell (@RichardGrenell) on August 14 announced that the US-led initiative was back on track and that Vučić and Hoti would meet at the White House on September 2. Several online conferences, which were held in July and August to discuss the situation in the Balkans and especially the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue,[28] stressed the need for close coordination of the US and EU – and especially of their special envoys, Richard Grenell and Miroslav Lajčák. Nevertheless, the US initiative that was continuing on September 2, still seemed to be out of sync with the EU-led Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which was scheduled to continue with a high-level meeting in Brussels on September 7, the US and EU officials said.[29]

Turkish nationals establish criminal/paramilitary foothold in the Balkans

Following the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, Turkey – just like China – made sure to provide all Balkan countries with humanitarian assistance in the form of protective and medical equipment.[30] Just like most other foreign actors, it provided no concrete information about the value of this aid.

Despite Turkish humanitarian assistance, the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic has failed to soften concerns around the increasingly radical and aggressive foreign policy which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has pursued in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Balkans since last year. Regional and international attention has so far been focused on the role of Turkey in the wars in Syria and Libya, and on new Turkish drilling for oil and natural gas in Cyprus' territorial waters (Council of the EU 2020). This Turkish

regional policy has contributed to the recent dangerous escalation of tensions between Turkey and Greece (Lindenstrauss et al. 2020), as well as to a security incident involving Turkish and French military ships (Herszenhorn et al. 2020).

Some experts assert that less visible, though not necessarily less significant or potentially dangerous, is Turkish involvement in the Balkans.[31] According to them, there is evidence that Turkish nationals and companies, known for their links with Turkish criminal and political actors, have been building criminal or paramilitary networks in the region.

One of those individuals is Sedat Peker– one of the prominent Turkish crime bosses and arms dealers known

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28   One such webinar was a webinar held on July 1 as a part of the "Balkan Dialogues", an initiative created by the EastWest Institute (EWI) and the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (BFPE), see more at: https://www.concordia.net/leadershipseries/balkan-dialogues-kosovo-serbia-dialogues-beginning-with-the-end-in-mind/.

29   Online interviews with EU diplomat and US academic engaged in the Balkans, August 2020. Both confirmed that Grenell failed to answer repeated phone calls and emails from the EU envoy, Miroslav Lajčák.

30   BiH, Kosovo and Montenegro were the first to receive Turkish assistance in the form of general medical and protective equipment on April 8. North Macedonia received similar assistance on April 10, together with Lebanon and Tunisia and then again on May 12, together with Albania (*see more at:* https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30541707.html *or* https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/korona-virus/turska-poslala-albaniji-i-sjevernoj-makedoniji-pomo%C4%87-u-medicinskoj-opremi/1837550). Serbia also received a more significant amount of assistance from Turkey – whether because of its larger number of population or because of the good relations between Turkish and Serbian leaders, or both. The first shipment of Turkish assistance landed on the Belgrade airport on April 8, with usual medical and protective equipment (*available at:* https://www.bizlife.rs/aktuelno/covid-19/stigla-pomoc-iz-turske-vulin-hvala-predsedniku-srbije-redzepu-izvinite-video/), while the second shipment, with 16 tons of unspecified aid, arrived on July 4, earmarked for the Muslim-populated Sandžak region (*available at:* https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/regija/po-instrukciji-Erdoğana-u-beograd-stigao-turski-vojni-avion-s-opremom-za-sandzak/382273).

31   Online interviews with two Turkish foreign affairs experts, May–July 2020.

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also as a Turkish ultra-nationalist and an ardent Erdoğan supporter – who moved to Montenegro at the beginning of 2020. Peker is currently residing in Montenegro, from where he is overseeing arms trade and foreign fighters' transfers to Libya via Montenegrin ports. His business and political ambitions also seem to be growing, as he held secret meetings with a number of senior Turkish officials in recent months.[32]

In a separate but likely related development, Mehmet Naci Efe, a former military officer, owner of Ekol, a Turkish security company, and a professor at the Turkish National Defence University, has also at the beginning of this year purchased a controlling package of shares of the International University of Goražde (E.A. 2020), in eastern BiH, close to the tri-border area between BiH, Montenegro and Serbia. According to BiH and Turkish sources, Efe plans to turn part of the University into a camp for the training of military, paramilitary, police and security personnel. In the

future this facility could be used for all sorts of activities in this tri-border area, from overlooking and assisting trafficking of drugs and weapons, to even participating in some covert intelligence or military operations (Gorazde.ba 2020).

These activities are believed to be part of Erdoğan's struggle to remain in power amidst his waning popularity and a deepening political and economic crisis in Turkey.[33] In Turkey, Erdoğan recently allowed Turkish "night watchmen" – considered to be his private militia – to carry weapons and investigate and arrest citizens (Rothwell 2020). Some experts go as far as to believe that Erdoğan could use his strong influence on the Bosniak political scene in the region, especially in BiH, either to remain in a position of power in Turkey, or to withdraw to BiH or some other "friendly country" in case he eventually loses power. Given the existing ethnic and political tensions in BiH, such an attempt might destabilize the country even further.

Conclusions

The outbreak of COVID-19 has heightened the security, ethnic, political, economic and social tensions across the Balkans, which have been lingering in the region for decades due to unresolved issues within and among Balkan nations. At the beginning of the pandemic, all key foreign actors present in the region for the past few decades, or even longer – China, the EU, the Gulf countries, Russia, Turkey and the USA – have answered Balkan countries' calls for help and provided them with financial or material assistance to deal with the crisis. Most of these actors, however, have also used this situation to further strengthen their positions in the Balkans and utilize them in their domestic and geostrategic power plays.

As a result, in recent months the Balkans has been witnessing a rollercoaster of developments, many of which bore the mark of one foreign actor or another. This included alleged Russian involvement in protests in Serbia and Montenegro, the US initiative for a peace deal between Kosovo and Serbia which led to the toppling of the Kosovar government, as well as reports that Turkish nationals and companies may be establishing criminal or paramilitary networks in Montenegro and BiH. Most foreign actors seem

to be focusing on the Balkans' most sensitive issues, which have been unresolved for decades, such as the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, the undermined sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or fragile ethnic and religious relations in North Macedonia and Montenegro.

This combination of deepening geopolitical competition and rising local and regional tensions, which some compare with the period preceding the beginning of World War I, have capacity to destabilize the region, and potentially even the whole world. The Balkans' short-term perspective is additionally threatened by the looming consequences of the global economic slowdown caused by COVID-19. These consequences are expected to have an even greater impact on this region than on the rest of Europe, due to the Balkan countries' weak governance, underperforming public services and high level of corruption. This, in turn, makes fertile ground for continued unchecked geopolitical competition.

In this situation, the EU remains the only foreign actor that does not seem to have its own self-serving agenda in the Balkans. This is one of the reasons why the EU's political

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32   Ibid.

33   Online interviews with two Turkish foreign affairs experts, May–July 2020.

presence in the region has been constantly trailing far behind its economic imprint, but this is also why the EU is still seen as the only player with the capacity to stabilize and normalize the region in the long run. Yet in order to do this, the EU will not only have to step up its game against other foreign actors, but will have to face its own growing internal divisions and foreign affairs mistakes, which have over the last few years weakened the EU's position in the Balkans and the rest of the world alike.

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Interviews

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12. The Western Balkans: Between the EU and a Hard Place

Srećko Latal

Executive Summary

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a context for new escalation of regional tensions and geopolitical competition in the Balkans. As recent months saw the breakdown of the Chinese "mask diplomacy," Russian-Serbian "historic brotherhood" and the interruption of the White House's Serbia-Kosovo peace initiative, the European Union re-emerged as the region's key ally and the only true stabilizing force. Nevertheless, as the policy paper shows, despite its extensive financial capacity and its enlargement perspective, the EU is still far from having secured its position in the region.

On the one hand, heightened regional and geopolitical tensions still provide numerous opportunities for new Balkan crises in the coming months. On the other hand, the EU and the Western Balkans do not see eye to eye on a number of issues related to the enlargement process, which has been the foundation of their relationship. Their divergent views and interests have in recent years caused many misunderstandings and in some cases mistrust between the EU and Balkan countries.

The EU position in the region is already being tested by the lack of cooperation and coordination between the EU and US-led initiatives for Belgrade-Priština dialogue, which is continuing in early September with separate meetings having been scheduled in the White House and Brussels. This discord within and between the EU and US spells new trouble not only for the dialogue itself, but for the entire Balkans, as it further weakens EU and US influence and creates new space for self-serving Chinese, Russian, Turkish or other interests.

If the EU wants to strengthen its position in the region and aid in its gradual stabilization and normalization, it will have to fundamentally change its perception of and approach to the Western Balkans – something that Brussels itself and EU member states have been desperately avoiding for the past decade. Such a move may go against the EU's conventional political wisdom, especially since its attention is currently focused on much more urgent and critical challenges – from the COVID-19-related internal health and economic crisis to the situation in Belarus and fragile relations with the USA, China and Russia. Yet all other global actors are already including the Western Balkans into their geopolitical games. It would be prudent for the EU to do the same, to consider the Western Balkans not only a liability, but also an asset – one which can, for better or for worse, affect the stability of the continent, as it occasionally has in the past.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess the status of the European Union in the Western Balkan Six countries[1] in light of their ongoing struggle with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the intensified geopolitical competition the region has been facing in the recent months. This paper is a continuation of the briefing paper titled **"COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans,"** (**available here**) which documents recent American, Chinese, Gulf countries, Russian and Turkish humanitarian, economic, political and other activity in the Balkans.

The paper **"The Western Balkans: Between the EU and a Hard Place"** identifies and analyses opportunities and

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1   Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo.

challenges which the EU is facing in the region as it tries to regain its leverage there. The policy paper starts from the oft-repeated premise that of all foreign actors, only the EU has the capacity to gradually stabilize and normalize the Balkans. It also examines the roots of the chronic misunderstanding and miscommunication between EU and Balkan officials. Finally, the paper identifies possible recommendations that could help the EU in tackling Balkan challenges.

While both papers are mainly focused on foreign influences in the Balkans, this does not mean that they ignore or negate local actors' responsibility for the difficult situation in which the region finds itself today. However, given the current political impasse that is evident in all Balkan countries, the long history of various foreign influences in the Balkans and the latest escalation in geopolitical competition in the region, the two papers presume that foreign influences may have a greater impact than local ones on the direction of the region in the near future.

Will COVID-19 Turn a New Page in EU-Balkan Relations?

Since the 1990s, the EU has played an unusual role in West Balkan politics as the sole foreign actor expected to stabilize and democratize the region through a process of gradually absorbing it into itself. Review of all available public resources and databases also shows that the EU leads in investments in the region, and EU member countries dominate the trade exchange with the Western Balkans Six countries. For details on EU financial assistance to the region within the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) see Annex I, showing volumes of assistance which each of the countries received within the legal framework of IPA 2007-13 (IPA I) and IPA 2014-20 (IPA II). For details on Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) see Annex II. The table clearly shows dominance of the EU and member countries in FDI's in all Balkan Six countries, with the exception of Montenegro where most investments over the last year came from Russia and then China (Bankar 2020). Nevertheless, the history of EU-Balkan relations shows that the EU's massive financial engagement in the region remained incommensurate with its limited political influence and was often eclipsed by other global actors' political, religious or cultural involvement.

In fact, it was the EU's growing internal problems and the weakening of its enlargement perspective, as well as the US' gradual withdrawal from Balkan daily politics, which "created a space for other players to fill the vacuum" (Prague Security Studies Institute 2018).

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brussels' initial poor reaction and a new escalation of geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans further undermined the EU position in the region. Nevertheless, the general slowing down of Chinese "mask diplomacy" in May, the interruption of the White House's Serbia-Kosovo peace initiative in late June, and the spat between Belgrade and the Kremlin over violent protests in July have cleared the path for the EU to restore its dented influence in the Balkans.

With its extensive financial capacity and its enlargement perspective, the EU emerged once again as the only foreign actor capable of ensuring long-term stability for the volatile region. However, while apparently recognizing the high stakes that are involved in the current local and geopolitical games played there, the EU still seems reluctant to fully engage in an energetic and assertive policy in the region.

The EU would be badly mistaken to fall into complacency and think that it has secured its position in the region. What seems like a lull in the ongoing geopolitical competition in the region is the calm before a new storm, as the conflicting interests of regional and global actors offer ample opportunity for development of new Balkan crises in coming months.

One can assume that if the EU again fails to establish the Balkans as a zone of strategic interest, other global actors will once again quickly fill this vacuum, which would likely add fuel to already heightened regional tensions. To avoid this potentially dangerous scenario, the EU and its member countries should understand the roots of the current geopolitical competition in the Balkans, as well as of the EU's repeated miscommunication and misunderstandings with the Balkans.

The EU and the Western Balkans: an unrequited love affair

Guided by their own still-fresh experiences from the Balkan conflicts in the 1990's, and encouraged by the EU's all-time-high political and economic results in the early 2000's, EU leaders of that time came to the conclusion that further enlargement of the European Union in the Western Balkans was beneficial – if not critical – for both the EU and the Balkans. EU membership offered normalization and long-term stability to Balkan countries, while further strengthening the EU's position as the emerging key geopolitical actor. This realization resulted in the "Thessaloniki agenda" – a declaration adopted by the heads of the EU and Balkan states at the session of the European Council in Thessaloniki on June 21, 2003. The document confirmed common shared values, as well as the region's EU perspective**.** *"The EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries,"* stated the declaration, a statement repeated numerous times in subsequent years (European Commission 2003). Yet this plan was derailed by what turned out to be the most serious, multi-layered crisis in the history of the EU: the 2009 global recession in 2008-9, the migrant crisis that started in 2014, the rise of right wing populism in the EU, UK's BREXIT referendum in 2016 and finally the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These developments, most of which have had a heavy impact on the Western Balkans as well, have undercut the democratization process in the Balkans and decimated popular support for the enlargement of the EU.

Some 17 years after the Thessaloniki summit, the EU and the Balkans do not see eye to eye on a number of issues related to the enlargement process, which has been the foundation of their relationship. Left unaddressed, these differences caused many misunderstandings over the last decade and gradually created an environment of mutual mistrust. Some of the key differences in their respective perceptions include:

✖ ***Enlargement goals and benefits (reforms vs. national identities):*** Directly linked to the previous point, the EU and the Balkans have always had different views on the main goals of the enlargement. The EU has been focused on the transformative power of requested reforms on political, administrative, economic and social systems of aspiring member countries. While rule of law, human rights or better living standards are also very important for many people in the Balkans, they see other important benefits of EU membership, which the EU largely fails to appreciate. Namely, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990's brought to the surface old and new nationalist ideas across the region. Even today, many Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs wish to live within the same borders as their ethnic kin. Many of them no longert feel at home in the states where they are living today, and are nostalgic for the supra-state they have lost; after Yugoslavia, the EU is the only entity that could placate and eventually put to rest these nationalist ideals.

Balkan political elites have a different problem with the EU. On the rhetorical level, they feel obliged to pay lip service to the EU accession ideas in public. Privately, however, they are aware that eventual EU membership would at best mean the end of their populist and unaccountable politics, and at worst would put them in jail for corruption or misuse of office.[2] Finally, the Western Balkans is still home to several deep disputes – such as Kosovo-Serbia relations, the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina or North Macedonia – which cannot be resolved without Western mediation. For all these reasons, an effective disappearance of the EU perspective could lead to further escalation of ethnic tensions and potentially to new ethnic violence in the region. *"[The] Balkans needs the EU at least as a context. BiH and North Macedonia can exist as states only within the EU context,"* one Balkan expert said.[3]

✖ ***EU's inconsistent standards:*** One of the main factors of the EU's waning image in the region has been its inconsistency when it comes to its own accession criteria. While EU officials often claim that EU accession criteria are always constant, academics and experts recognize that the accession criteria have been constantly getting more and more complicated from one accession cycle to the other. Furthermore, experts stress that contrary to EU official positions, the accession process is determined not by the aspiring

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2   Interviews with different Balkan politicians, 2015-2020.

3   Online interview with Remzi Lani, the executive director of the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, May 19, 2020.

countries' meeting technical criteria, but by the political situation in which the EU makes such decisions.[4] Even in recent years, the EU was found to be frequently changing the enlargement criteria outlined for Western Balkan countries.[5]

An additional problem for EU-Balkan relations is the general perception shared by many Balkan people that the EU is using double standards, both when dealing with different Balkan countries, as well as when addressing its own internal issues. For several years, Brussels was hailing Serbia and Montenegro to be the enlargement frontrunners, yet local and international experts stress that these two governments' autocratic tendencies, disrespect for rule of law and corruption create equal if not bigger problems than in the rest of the Balkans.[6] Meanwhile, the EU is struggling with the performance of its own member countries, some of which, according to EU experts, have already fallen afoul of Copenhagen criteria,[7] such as in the cases of Hungary and Poland with respect to the rule of law or human rights, or Italy with respect to its fiscal performance.[8]

While at the moment the EU seems to be lacking mechanisms to force its own members back into compliance with these principles, it is still requiring aspiring member countries to meet them before joining the club. On the one hand the examples of Hungary and Poland represent a plausible argument for the EU to be even more vigilant in observing conditionalities for future members. On the other hand, aspiring member countries see this as an example of the EU's double standards, which undermines the EU's image and the enlargement process. This conundrum was further emphasized by the difficult compromise that was achieved at the latest EU Summit in Brussels in July, after which some international media claimed that the EU has *"given up on rule of law in its member states"* (Kelemen 2020).

✖ Divergent focuses (process vs. end result): One of the probably most important differences stems from the different perception of the enlargement process itself. While the EU has been from the very beginning focused more on the process itself, Balkan leaders and people have been mostly focused on its end-result – membership in the Union. For this reason, a 30-year membership perspective is simply not considered a realistic goal in daily life or daily politics.

✖ Divergent focuses II (economy vs. rule of law): Another key controversy in the EU enlargement process has been its technical focus. While some experts and most Balkan officials called for greater attention to economic issues, lately EU officials have insisted more on rule of law reforms, hoping that this way they will stop and eventually reverse the Balkans' democratic backsliding. The new enlargement methodology, adopted in February this year, states that *"we will open the accession negotiations with the rule of law cluster and we will close them with the rule of law cluster"* to enable its monitoring throughout the process (European Commission 2020). This priority is understandable given the backsliding on the rule of law witnessed in recent years in some EU and Balkan countries alike. On the other hand, many experts stress that the prospect of these reforms is slim in a situation where the prospect of EU enlargement has been almost completely lost, while the Balkans and EU are facing new security, political, economic and social challenges.

According to the European Commission's former Western Balkans director, Pierre Mirel, the EU has made a mistake in its approach to the Balkans in recent years by focusing its activities on rule of law and other difficult reforms, rather than on the economy, which would have a much greater positive impact on the region. *"It was a big mistake, a total ignorance of history and of the geopolitical situation. We should have put the economy first at those times. Instead of*

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4   Online interview with Andras Inotai, research director at the Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and a professor at the Centre International de Formation Européenne, CIFE Institute, May 13, 2020. Between 1995 and 1998 professor Inotai also headed the Strategic Task Force at the office of the Hungarian Premier, preparing Hungary's EU accession.

5   Online interview with Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, president, Council for Inclusive Governance (CGI), May 20, 2020,

6   Online interviews with international and Balkan experts, March-August 2020.

7   The "Copenhagen criteria" is a set of political, economic and institutional rules and conditions which a country needs to meet in order to become a member of the EU. *For details, see:* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhague.html

8   Online interview with professor Andras Inotai, May 13, 2020.

doing that, we focused on rule of law and (provided) only tiny assistance. That was not what the region needed," Mirel says.[9]

Yet even the economic part of the enlargement process has so far had *"unforeseen"* negative effects, says a 2017 report authored by two leading German experts for the Balkans, Dušan Reljić, the director of the Brussels office of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and Tobias Flessenkemper, CIFE fellow and current head of the Belgrade office of the Council of Europe. The opening of the regional market to the EU has weakened local industry that was *"unable to withstand competition from the European Union",* resulting in the growth of unemployment and foreign debt (Flessenkemper and Reljić 2017). *"EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans has been a story of failure,"* the paper stated, underlining that Balkan countries now urgently need *"a development perspective and more public investment"* from the EU, yet concluding that the EU shows an interest in the region only when its crises threaten the EU itself (Flessenkemper and Reljić 2017).

In one of his more recent reports, Reljić (2020) pleaded that the EU needs a *"fundamental change of direction"* in the Balkans. He added that even the latest massive aid package offered to the Balkans in April 2020 *"will be able to do little to change the fundamental problems of the region if the EU does not treat the Western Balkans as an integral part of the EU"* (Reljić 2020). According to Reljić, most Balkan leaders do not foresee that EU involvement will bring any serious economic growth to their countries in the near future, while at the same time they are convinced that implementation of difficult rule of law and other EU reforms would cost them their positions, possibly even land them in jail.[10] As a result, they have already grown so distant from the EU that they are even ready to *"write off"* their countries' EU membership.

These two different technical focuses could be reconciled by an approach that included significant, strategically-focused EU investments paired with gradual and measured reforms aimed not so much at short-term administrative or legal changes as much as long-term behavioural change in the region. The EU could try the same approach in dealing with the same issues in its own ranks.

These and other differences have over the years seriously undermined the enlargement process, from both sides. They also led to a series of EU blunders in the Balkans. One such major blunder was the Council's 2019 decision not to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, which waited for almost two years to get dates for their start, mainly because of the whims of French President Emmanuelle Macron – what EU officials and media publicly called the EU's "historic mistake."[11] EU leaders finally agreed to give the two Balkan countries dates for the start of their respective accession talks on March 20, 2020, but by that time this "breakthrough" went almost unnoticed in a region that was already preoccupied with the Coronavirus pandemic. Another similar mistake has been the ongoing postponement of granting the long-expected visa-free regime to Kosovo, which remained blocked by several EU countries despite the fact that European Commission publicly announced that Kosovo has fulfilled all requirements already in 2016. Since then, the EU granted a visa-free regime to the citizens of countries like Colombia and Moldova, but not Kosovo.

Another senior Balkan expert from Zagreb University, Dejan Jović, also warned that more and more Balkan citizens are indifferent towards whether the region will join the EU or not. Speaking at the conference *"Bringing the Balkans back to the EU fore"12* in Belgrade in December 2019, Jović blamed this phenomenon on the EU's failure to seize the moment, its constant changes of the Copenhagen criteria, as well as bilateral disputes which Balkan countries have on the path to the EU. If this trend continues, the *"region will look to the other side, such as the US, UK, Russia, China and Turkey,"* Jović was quoted as saying (EWB 2019).

The EU presence in the region was further tested by the escalation of regional and geopolitical quarrels following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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9   Online interview with Pierre Mirel, May 26, 2020.

10   Interview with Dušan Reljić, June 16, 2020.

11   „It's a major historic mistake and I hope it will only be temporary and won't become engraved in the collective memory as a historic mistake," The Telegraph quoted European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker as saying, *read more at* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/18/europe-union-warned-historic-mistake-emmanuel-macron-blocks/.

12   Details about the conference are available at: https://www.iai.it/en/eventi/bringing-balkans-back-eu-fore.

COVID–19 pandemic tests the EU position in the Balkans

The EU's initial reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed many of its internal problems. EU institutions seemed powerless to stop the re-establishment of its internal borders and restrictions on the free movement of people which each EU member country had established within the Schengen area. While first China and later Russia started scoring PR points with their mask diplomacy, EU member countries suspended export of their medical supplies, drawing angry reactions from EU and Balkan countries alike. Serbian President Vučić's comments drew global attention when he publicly declared that *"European solidarity is dead (and) it is only a paper fairytale"* on March 15 (Tanjug 2020). Vučić added that he has asked for help from *"the only ones who can help, and that is China"* (Ibid). One of Vučić's closest political allies, Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the BiH Presidency and the leader of the ruling Bosnian Serb party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, quickly joined the Serbian president in EU-bashing. He told the media that *"the EU has failed on the test of solidarity, it showed to everyone how weak and disorganized it is"* (Mišljenović 2020).

While some point to the fact that Vučić and Dodik, as well as media under their control, hardly waited for an excuse to continue criticizing the West and sucking up to China and Russia, many people in the Balkans were truly disgusted by the EU's initial response and thought that they had drawn this criticism upon themselves. Many Balkan politicians, while avoiding Vučić or Dodik's venomous statements, shared the same views.

Growing criticism from Balkan but also some EU countries finally drew attention from the top EU brass. They blamed some of these statements on local and global disinformation campaigns, orchestrated by China and Russia and supported by some local leaders (Makszimov 2020). Yet they also admitted the EU urgently needed to change its performance in order to improve its position in the rough geopolitical game that was raging amidst the global pandemic. Josep Borell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, warned there was *"a battle of narratives within Europe"* adding *"it is vital that the EU shows it is a Union that protects and that solidarity is not an empty phrase"* (Borell 2020).

The EU eventually got its act together and returned strongly to the Balkan arena at the end of April, when it offered a 3.3 billion euro assistance package for Balkan countries aimed at helping them deal with the challenges caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.[13] The proposal was welcomed by all local officials as one of the most concrete EU moves in the region in recent years, as well as a sign of renewed EU interest in the Balkans (EWB 2020a).

By late June, Chinese and Russian mask diplomacy seemed to be in retreat, the White House initiative for a Kosovo-Serbia peace deal had been suspended, and top EU officials – including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron – initiated the first round of negotiations with Serbian and Kosovo leaders (EWB 2020b). Despite the high-level support, however, the talks did not bring any concrete result, showing how deeply entrenched disputes between Kosovo and Serbia were.

This temporary respite in foreign influences in the Balkans, as well as EU leaders' readiness to recommit themselves to the region, have provided the EU with a window of opportunity for concrete and robust action. Yet there is also a risk that the EU will become complacent and will once again drop the ball in the Balkans while focusing on other, more pressing internal or external issues.

Speaking at a high-level video conference on July 1, a senior EU official said that Russia was *"slightly on the retreat"* and that *"we may very well end up seeing less China"* in the Balkans in the coming period. The official concluded that *"the EU has been getting unnecessarily nervous about the western Balkans"* and that this was the moment for the EU to put the key reforms back on the Balkan table *"because there isn't going to be another actor that is going to step up in its place."*[14]

Yet many Balkan experts disagree with such an analysis and warn that the EU is still far away from wrestling the

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13   The 3.3 billion euro package includes immediate support for the health sector from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) worth 38 million euro; 389 million euro earmarked for social and economic recovery needs; 455 million economic reactivation package; 750 million euro of Macro-Financial Assistance and a 1.7 billion euro assistance from the European Investment Bank. European Commission press release, April 29, 2020. *Available at:* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_777.

14   A high-level online conference about the Balkans, focused on the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, July 2020.

Balkans away from China, Russia and other foreign actors and winning it over for good. This was already clearly visible during the same debate, as both Kosovo and Serbia-based experts stressed that the EU was lacking authority and trust in the region.[15]

The EU–US spat over Kosovo–Serbia deal spells trouble for Western positions in the Balkans

The EU has endeavoured to repair Kosovo-Serbia relations – one of the biggest remaining issues in the Balkans – since 2011, but with little success. The process has hit a wall and was almost completely suspended by mid-2019, at which time Kosovar Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj demanded that the EU High Representative and the mediator in the Belgrade – Priština dialogue, Federica Mogherini, be removed from the process. While Haradinaj did not elaborate on his request, it was believed to be a result of Kosovo's politicians' repeated accusations that Mogherini sided with Belgrade and allowed border changes to become a part of the dialogue agenda (N1 2019).

A paper from 2017 argued that *"there is a paradigmatic ambiguity on the very question of what the dialogue means for the EU, for Kosovo and Serbia, and altogether for the EU's relations with both countries"* (Gashi et al. 2017: 550). The paper concluded that: *"the EU makes rampant reference to the dialogue being 'historic', even though it is not clear what exactly is historic about it and for whom this would be. The dialogue and its value thereafter are downgraded to a mere symbolic representation of 'reconciliation', to the fact that leaders of both countries have sat down together and held discussions"* (Ibid).

By mid-2020, the EU grew concerned that Grenell's initiative could further complicate Kosovo-Serbia relations, but also undermine the EU's position in the region. In June, Brussels appointed its own special Balkan envoy Miroslav Lajčák, who quickly resumed the EU-led Belgrade-Priština dialogue. Several senior EU officials admitted that Lajčák's mission was as much to match or if need be parry Grenell's initiative as it was aimed at improving Kosovo-Serbia relations.[16]

This was not the first time the EU jumped into diplomatic action just to parry a similar US initiative. In November 2014, Germany and the United Kingdom surprisingly launched a new diplomatic initiative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was later even accepted as a new EU strategy for the country (Deutsche Welle 2014). Eventually it turned out that the EU made this move mainly to prevent the US from launching its own already-prepared initiative for changes to Bosnia's constitution which the EU deemed unrealistic and potentially destabilizing.[17]

Just like the EU's Bosnia initiative in 2014, the renewed EU initiative for Belgrade-Priština dialogue seems doomed to fail. Some Western officials even say that it was the EU's lacklustre approach to the renewed Belgrade-Priština talks in July and the apparent absence of any new ideas for this initiative that has enabled the resumption of the parallel US process, which was announced by Special Presidential Envoy Richard Grenell in mid-August.[18] Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo Premier Avdullah Hoti have already confirmed their participation in the meeting, which will be hosted by the White House on September 4, only three days before a high-level meeting which the EU has previously scheduled in Brussels (Grenell 2020).

According to EU and US officials acquainted with these two initiatives, there is little or no cooperation and/or coordination between the two initiatives.[19] The Special EU Envoy for the Balkans, Miroslav Lajčák, has on several occasions complained that he repeatedly tried to call or email to Grenell, to no avail.[20] On the other hand, some US diplomats blamed the lack of cooperation on the EU.

"[The] problem was not between the US and the EU, but within the EU due to different positions of different member countries," one US diplomat said during an online debate

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15   Ibid.

16   Online interviews, two senior EU officials, June-July 2020.

17   Interviews with US and EU officials, Brussels, Berlin and Sarajevo, 2014-2015.

18   Online interview with a Western expert based in Priština, August 2020.

19   Online interviews with a senior EU official and a US expert acquainted with the two initiatives, August 2020.

20   Online interview with another US expert, August 2020.

about the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which took place in July. He added that *"the EU is not a single entity; it speaks with multiple voices and these voices need to be reconciled."*[21]

This discord between the EU and the US spells new trouble for the Balkans, a challenge for EU and US' respective positions in the region, as well as a new opportunity for other foreign influences already present there. At the same time, the prospect of a positive outcome for either EU or US-sponsored talks seems slim. Most pundits agree that the escalation of internal political tensions which both Kosovo and Serbia experienced in recent years has fuelled nationalist sentiments in both local societies, making any kind of comprehensive agreement unlikely.[22] According to one Belgrade-based expert *"there is no political will for a real dialogue, neither in Serbia nor in Kosovo."*[23]

The main obstacle in the relations between Belgrade and Priština remains the status of Kosovo, since the general public in Serbia still strongly rejects to accept Kosovo's independence. Even if the EU and the US would set to jointly resolve the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, it would require a completely new, comprehensive approach, and significant efforts from both of them that would probably take several years. Yet it remains highly questionable whether either the EU or the US are ready for such an investment at a time when both face many other internal and external problems and challenges. Working separately or even against each other further reduces US and EU chances of success.

The US may still have sufficient muscle to persuade Belgrade and Priština to accept some pro-forma agreement, yet the White House is widely believed to lack proper understanding of this complex matter, as well as the willingness and capacity to put any more comprehensive document on the table.[24] The continuation of Grenell's initiative is in fact still perceived to be motivated mainly by Donald Trump's re-election campaign and Grenell's ambition for his further career advancement if Trump wins a second mandate in the US elections in November 2020.[25]

The EU lacks sufficient authority in both Belgrade and Priština to push through any concrete deal between the two. Furthermore, given the heightened nationalist sentiments, both Serbia and Kosovo would need serious "carrots" to consider accepting a compromise. Years ago, in an exchange for a deal Brussels promised both Belgrade and Priština significant advancements on their path to the EU membership, yet that option is clearly not on the table since most – if not all – EU member countries have backtracked on continued enlargement, at least for the time being.[26] The best carrot that the EU can offer at this stage is its new financial package for the Balkans, which will be presented this fall. Yet that by itself is far from being enough to resolve decades of Belgrade-Priština disputes, especially in a situation in which Serbia already has access to Chinese cheap loans, while Kosovars mistrust the EU after they have repeatedly failed to grant them visa-free regime (European Commission 2018).

The Western Balkans Face New Ethnic, Political and Security Challenges

Despite poor chances for quick success, the EU should not stop its efforts in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, yet it should shift gears and do what the EU does best – build a comprehensive, long-term process that should first aim to cool down tensions and establish communication and some basic cooperation between the two communities. In this effort the EU would certainly need support from the

US, which is still considered the top foreign actor by people in Kosovo, yet this option remains uncertain, at least until the US presidential elections in November.

In the meantime, the EU should expand the scope of its attention to the rest of the region, in which all countries – even without the looming economic and social downturn

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21 An online debate about Kosovo-Serbia dialogue organized in July, which included a number of regional experts as well as EU and US diplomats and officials.

22 Online interviews with senior political analysts and EU and US diplomats and officials in Kosovo and Serbia, May-August 2020.

23 Online interview with Dušan Janjić, Belgrade based political analyst, politician and publicist, June 2020.

24 Online interviews with two separate senior US experts, August 2020.

25 Ibid.

26 Online interview with a senior EU diplomat involved in Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, July 2020.

caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – are facing new ethnic, political and security challenges in the coming weeks and months.

In what follows, the paper provides a short overview of the current political situation and main challenges ahead in each of the six Western Balkan countries.

Albania: deep political disputes threaten country's EU path

For the past few months, the situation seemed to be most stable in Albania, where the government of Edi Rama has used the COVID-19 situation to temporarily cement its power in the country. Yet Albania remains deeply polarized between pro-government and pro-opposition forces and this dispute is triggering quick and frequent escalations, as was the case when police clashed with protestors over the demolition of the National Theatre in Tirana in May (Erebara 2020). Deep political disputes in Albania threaten the country's EU path, even after it received the green light for the eventual announcement of the date for the start of its accession negotiations. This is especially so after Albania's ruling coalition in the parliament on July 30 voted for changes to election regulations in the constitution, to allow open and a new formula for the coalitions. The EU did not seem to be overly pleased with this vote. The head of the EU delegation in Tirana, Luigi Soreca, said in a Twitter post that it was unfortunate *"that no more time was dedicated in the preparatory phase to finding a compromise with all parties"* and called for these issues to be "*properly discussed with all political actors in the Political Council*" before the final vote in the Parliament (Soreca 2020). These and similar

political clashes are expected to continue in the near future in relation to a number of open and unresolved issues, such as the ongoing judicial reform, upcoming economic and social measures, etc. According to local experts, Albania is probably the least affected of the Balkan countries by turbulent geopolitical developments. Yet it is also suffering from the deteriorating foreign policy of its main foreign ally – the USA, the still-weak presence of the EU, and the deepening rift between these two key allies. *"Albania is very much in favour of Euro-Atlantic integration, but we do not want to be between the EU and the US,"* says Remzi Lani, the executive director of the Albanian Media Institute, adding that *"in the past Brussels and Washington DC were at the same page, but now there is a difference."*[27] According to Lani, China, Russia or Turkey have little chance to increase their influence in Albania in the coming period. Yet if US foreign policy continues fumbling, and if the EU fails to take a stronger stand in the region soon, Albania may turn more towards Italy and Germany. While some do not see this as a problem, others note that even the growing influences of individual EU member countries also contribute to the weakening of the EU's collective presence in the region.

BiH: political system on the board of a collapse

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the governance and political system almost completely collapsed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months. The country's politicians have not been even trying to establish a new government in the BiH Federation entity, some year and a half after its 2018 general elections. Furthermore, the deepening mistrust and personal dislike among Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb leaders have delayed adoption of the 2020 state budget, thus threatening the holding of local elections. Local US and EU ambassadors have played a key role in gradually negotiating a compromise, which led to the adoption of the state budget in July – just in time to enable organization of local elections in November. By the end of August, all local parties had escalated their populist and/or nationalist statements as part of their respective pre-election campaigns. Bosnia is facing an uncertain future as a radicalized political and media scene has brought the country back into the chaos that existed just before, or right after the 1992-5 war. More serious crises have

been so far avoided thanks to the interventions of local EU and US officials. Some experts say that BiH's Dayton agreement is effectively dead, which has pushed the country towards state failure and reopened key questions about the country's status, integrity and sovereignty. With this situation, BiH seems to have much greater and more immediate potential for serious trouble then Kosovo-Serbia relations, and as such requires even greater and more immediate EU attention.

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27   Interview with Remzi Lani, May 19, 2020.

Kosovo: inching towards a failed state

Feeling abandoned by its key ally, the USA, and still suspicious towards an equivocal and ineffective EU, Kosovo is hurt and confused, which is reflected in its deeply divided and corrupt political scene. While waiting to see what will come out of the renewed EU-led Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, as well as the indictment against its president Hashim Thaci, Kosovo seems oblivious to the looming economic and social crisis caused by the global slow-down due to COVID-19. On the other hand, Kosovo's deeply divided, confrontational and populist political scene hinders any serious negotiations, whether they are led by the EU, the US, or both. Together with BiH and to a certain degree North Macedonia, Kosovo remains one of the remaining pieces of "unfinished businesses" in the Balkans, and as such requires special EU attention. Otherwise, Kosovo could further give way to the influence of local organized crime rings, as well as various external actors.

Montenegro: deepening religious, ethnic rifts threaten stability

Experts warn that Montenegro has been succumbing to ethno-nationalism and radicalism in recent months as the country prepared for new general elections that were held on August 30. With growing ethnic, religious and political tensions fuelled by the government's oppression of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its followers and supporters, as well as by recent forceful arrests of mayor and city councillors in the town of Budva (Kajosević 2020), the country seems to be almost on the verge of a civil war, some pundits say (Beta 2020). Radicalization of the local society has been evident since 2012 and intensified even more with the beginning of the anti-NATO protests of the opposition Democratic Front (Koprivnica 2020). The tight election results, in which the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, and the main opposition coalition both claimed victories and pledged to form their government, indicate that the country's political and ethnic crisis will continue escalating in the subsequent months. While the EU has been praising Montenegro – together with Serbia – as the regional leader in EU reforms, this has only been hurting the EU's image in the Balkans, where most see the regimes in Montenegro and Serbia as regional leaders in corruption and misuse of office. Frequent protests, disputes over the fate of religious objects, and increased police brutality have made the situation in the country extremely volatile and uncertain, both before and after the elections. Adding to already-present concerns, US diplomats and some Montenegrin officials are directly blaming Serbia and Russia for orchestrating disinformation campaigns and trying to destabilize the country (RSE 2020, Novosti 2020). EU influence in Montenegro is almost non-existent, and the country is increasingly under Chinese and Russian political and economic pressure, showing that even NATO membership – which was granted to Montenegro in 2017 – cannot save a Balkan country from internal destabilization and external influences.[28]

North Macedonia: from a sign of hope to hopelessness

Until a year ago, North Macedonia was considered the most positive example in the region, after its Prime Minister Zoran Zaev struck a deal with his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras, resolving the years-long name dispute between the two counties. That optimism, however, is now mostly gone, as the country spiralled back into political crisis and apathy caused by poor local politics, as well as by the sense of EU betrayal after the Union failed to publicly recognize and reward its historic achievement and grant it a date for the start of EU negotiations. The latest elections in North Macedonia do not offer much sign for optimism, as the ruling and opposition parties competed again using empty promises and/or radical statements. After a narrow victory, the Social Democrats led by Zaev and the Democratic Union for Integration led by Ali Ahmeti on August 18 reached a deal on forming a new cabinet that will see Zaev return to the North Macedonian premiership. Yet experts stress that the positive momentum from a year ago is completely gone and that the formation and especially functioning of a new government will be very difficult. This, in turn, also means that the country's path to the EU will remain blocked without special attention and some hand-holding by Brussels.

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28   Interviews with Montenegro experts, May-June 2020.

Serbia: geopolitical competition's main pray in the Balkans

Together with Montenegro, Serbia was until recently considered one of the two regional frontrunners in EU reforms. Following his landslide election victory at the end of June, Vučić faced strong criticism from many EU officials, who saw his victory as a suspension of democracy and a new slide towards even greater authoritarianism. At the same time, Vučić is facing even greater domestic challenges, with violent protests rocking the capital and several other Serbian cities at the beginning of July. Many Serbian citizens face a desperate situation, between a drastic increase in the number of infected cases and a growing number of unemployed – all believed to be directly linked with the government's decision to ease up restrictions to enable holding of elections. There are also signals that Russia may have been supporting, if not instigating some of the recent protests, in an apparent fight for dominance over Serbia's political scene. For details see the paper **"COVID-19 Raises Geopolitical Stakes in the Balkans," (available here)**.

Conclusions

Since early 2000, the EU was perceived the only foreign actor able to stabilize and democratize the Western Balkans through its gradual accession. Still, the history of EU-Balkan relations shows that EU's political influence in the region remained far below its massive financial engagement, is often tainted by mutual misunderstandings and mistrust, as well as overshadowed by other global actors' political, religious or cultural involvement.

Furthermore, the most difficult multi-layered crisis, which the EU has faced over the past decade – from the 2008/9 recession to the latest COVID-19 pandemic – has effectively neutralized Balkan's EU perspective, creating space for renewed regional tensions as well as an escalation of geopolitical competition for control over the Balkans.

EU's divided and self-centred initial reaction to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as strong populist activities of other global actors have further jeopardized EU's positions in the region at the beginning of 2020. Yet the EU managed to stage a strong comeback at the end of April, pledging 3.3 billion euro in grants and loans for the reconstruction and development of the Western Balkans.

The EU has also renewed Belgrade-Priština dialogue, but it already seems troubled by the apparent lack of new ideas and stronger and more concrete political support, as well as by a parallel initiative led by the White House-appointed Special Envoy Richard Grenell. The two parallel initiatives are expected to continue in early September, and the lack of cooperation and coordination between EU and US officials threaten not only their respective initiatives, but also their respective positions in the Western Balkans.

In the meantime, the EU is working on the action plan for the realization of this assistance package, linking concrete funds with specific criteria, which Balkan countries will have to implement in order to get the money. The new package is expected to be presented this fall and EU leaders hope it will pave the wave for new enlargement momentum in the Balkans.

While this plan indeed represents a major opportunity for EU-Balkan relations, it also carries many risks, especially if the EU fails to change its attitudes. On the one hand, most experts agree that that if/when the EU enlargement finally takes hold in the region, no foreign actor stands a chance to truly influence any Balkan country. Many pundits also fear that EU's continued failure in the Balkans would likely endanger security of the region and of the entire Europe. Asked about possible consequences of the "non-enlargement" (effective disappearance of the enlargement perspective for the Balkans), European Commission's former Western Balkans director, Pierre Mirel said: *"That would be an absolute disaster* (...) *the EU cannot afford the price of non-enlargement."*[29]

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29   Online interview with Pierre Mirel, May 26, 2020.

Recommendations

EU-Balkan relations could have better chance if the EU would take into account the following issues:

✖ The EU has never had a stand-alone strategy for the Balkans, besides the enlargement process, which for almost two decades served as both the strategy and technical tool for the EU's relationship with the region. The EU needs to differentiate between the two and create a new Balkan strategy in which enlargement will be only one of the tools for building a better and more honest relationship with the Balkans. Other tools should include a stronger political presence, strategic communications, etc.

✖ The EU's strategy for the Balkans should take into account the reality of the situation and the fact that the enlargement option is currently "unavailable," but also the need for continued enlargement as a key stabilizing factor for the region. This conundrum can be reconciled by splitting the process into two: an immediate one that would focus more on concrete strategic investments, including those into infrastructure, clean energy and job-creating projects, which would feed into the second, long-term process that would gradually build local capacity and willingness for deeper changes of socio-political practices and behaviour, such as rule of law, etc.

✖ The recent attention the EU has been paying to the Balkans is welcome. Yet it is obvious that this attention has been so far motivated not so much by the EU's true interest in the region, but mainly by its fears that China or Russia could use COVID-19 to strengthen their positions there.[30] This is a poor basis for the EU's future engagement in the Balkans because it still ignores this region's own importance for the EU and the continent itself, but also because foreign influences in the region are hard to ascertain, as they often either underestimated, or overestimated, and are frequently changing. Instead of treating it as a foreign affairs issue, the EU should accept the Balkans as a part of its internal security, political and economic space and deal with its issues as a part of its own future reforms. For example,

the "Europe of different speeds"[31] or any similar idea would be a good opportunity to integrate the Balkans into the EU as part of its new "circle." This way, for example, the Balkans could gain earlier access to EU funds, but would get voting rights only in line with closed chapters in the accession process. The EU should also observe the Balkans, as well as its neighbourhood as a part of its geopolitical position, and try to regulate and resolve its relations, especially with Russia and Turkey.

✖ The new EU enlargement methodology ignores the reality on the ground, as it was prepared not to address the realistic needs of the Balkans, but to appease the French President Emmanuel Macron. For this reason, the new approach opens doors for further complications. One such controversial issue is the proposal that member states be more involved in monitoring of progress, which undermines the very concept of EU enlargement. The potential for confusion and complications is even greater given the fact that the new enlargement methodology at this stage formally applies only to Albania and North Macedonia. Serbia and Montenegro can choose whether to continue their accession process in line with the old or new methodology, while the starting point for the accession process for BiH and Kosovo is still very much uncertain. Any new EU methodology for the Balkans should take into consideration the lack of political will and technical capacity for reforms in the region. From that standpoint, future enlargement strategy could be more successful if the Commission would simplify the process, and create a set of country-specific step-by-step action plans to avoid a "Balkan regatta" competition, which only adds fuel to already tense relations among different Balkan actors. Due to the fact that politics is the main if not the only game in the Balkans, the EU should also become much more politically savvy in its dealings with local politicians. This should also include much greater attention to mainstream as well as alternative communication channels, directly addressing Balkan citizens.

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30 Interviews with Balkan experts, May-June 2020.

31 The idea was launched by the previous EU commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, in his "white paper" presented on March 1, 2017. *Available at:* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf.

✖ The EU's recent political efforts in the region have been focused primarily on Kosovo-Serbia negotiations, mainly as an EU reaction to the previous US initiative. However, the EU should broaden its perspective and pay more attention to the rest of the region. Relations in and between Priština and Belgrade are unlikely to lead to any comprehensive agreement or any serious new conflict anytime soon, as local societies in both Kosovo and Serbia have been radicalized on this issue for too long and now need a cool-down period. On the other hand, the EU seems to be ignoring increasingly worrisome developments caused by the deepening ethnic and political divisions in Montenegro and BiH.

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Annex I.

EU financial assistance to the region within the framework of the Instrument for Pre–Accession Assistance (IPA)32*

All values are expressed in millions of euro.

IPA I**

Country	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Albania	61,0	70,7	81,2	94,1	94,4	94,5	95,3	**591,2**
BiH	62,1	74,8	89,1	105,3	107,4	107,8	63,6	**610,1**
Kosovo	68,3	184,7	106,1	67,3	68,7	68,8	71,4	**635,3**
Montenegro	31,4	32,6	34,5	33,5	34,1	35,0	34,5	**235,6**
Northern Macedonia	58,5	70,2	81,8	91,6	98,0	101,8	113,2	**615,1**
Serbia	189,7	190,9	194,8	197,9	201,8	202,0	208,3	**1.385,4**
Multi-country	129,5	137,7	188,8	141,7	186,2	176,2	177,2	**1.137,3**
Total	**600,5**	**761,6**	**776,3**	**731,4**	**790,6**	**786,1**	**763,5**	**5.210,0**

**IPA I also included Croatia, Iceland and Turkey

IPA II***

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019–2020	Total
Albania	68,7	91,9	82,7	80,2	115,6	200,7	**639,8**
BiH	75,7	39,7	47,0	74,8	102,5	212,4	**552,1**
Kosovo	66,8	82,1	73,9	78,2	100,7	200,6	**602,2**
Montenegro	39,5	36,4	35,4	41,3	46,8	79,7	**279,1**
Northern Macedonia	81,7	67,2	64,6	82,2	121,4	191,7	**608,8**
Serbia	179,0	223,1	202,8	212,2	255,9	466,3	**1.539,3**
Multi-country	242,3	346,7	435,3	403,4	389,6	1.162,9	**2.980,2**
Total	**753,7**	**887,1**	**941,7**	**972,3**	**1.132,5**	**2.514,3**	**7.201,5**

***IPA II also includes Turkey.

Country	IPA I	IPA II	Total
Albania	591,20	639,80	**1.231,00**
BiH	610,10	552,10	**1.162,20**
Kosovo	635,30	602,17	**1.237,47**
Montenegro	235,60	279,10	**514,70**
Northern Macedonia	615,10	608,80	**1.223,90**
Serbia	1.385,40	1.539,30	**2.924,70**
Multi-country	1.137,30	2.980,20	**4.117,50**
Total	**5.210,00**	**7.201,47**	**12.411,47**

* Source of data: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en

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32   *See more about IPA at:* https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/ipa/

Annex II.

Most recent FDIs to the West Balkan Six countries*

ALBANIA (first quarter of 2020)	mil. EUR
EU Total	681
Switzerland	254
Other for confidential purposes**	204
Turkey	70
USA	24
Gulf Total	15
Cayman Islands	3

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (first quarter of 2020)	mil. EUR
EU	232
Russia	142
Gulf countries	10
Turkey	0
USA	-3

SERBIA (first quarter of 2020)	mil. EUR
EU-28	1.976,10
Russian Federation	685,6
China	210,1
USA	187
Gulf countries	51,9
Turkey	14,5

NORTH MACEDONIA (first quarter of 2020)	mil. EUR
EU	37
Turkey	7
USA	3
China	1
Gulf	0,34
Russia	0,12

* The table includes the latest available data from central Banks of Albania, BiH, North Macedonia and Serbia. It shows FDI originating in foreign countries that this paper covers (i.e. not regional one). Official data for Kosovo and Montenegro could not be found. The only available information that could be found about Montenegrin FDIs comes from a report from Montenegrin business news portal, bankar.me (Bankar 2020). According to this report, in all of 2019 plus the first quarter of 2020 the list of FDI's is led by Russia with 95 million of euro, China 70 million euro (all invested in the first quarter of 2020). The first EU country on the list is Hungary with 54.5 million euro.

** The Central Bank of Albania, like Eurostat and many countries, occasionally withhold names of its investors either by the request of the investor or the recipient country.

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
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TOWARDS CHINA DURING THE COVID–19 PANDEMIC

ANASTAS VANGELI

13. Western Balkan Discourses on and Positioning Towards China During the COVID–19 Pandemic

Anastas Vangeli

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed China in the spotlight in global news, intensifying the already vibrant discussion on its rise around the world – and in the Western Balkans as well. For the Western Balkan countries, China has overall been far from the main concern as COVID-19 swept through the region. However, the association of COVID-19 with the outbreak in Hubei Province was too strong for China to be disregarded. Later on, China itself was proactive, and over time positioned itself as a significant external actor in the region during the pandemic, while attracting the attention of concerned observers in the West, who have also had an impact on how regional actors have seen and positioned themselves in relation to China.

The discourses on China in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic went through three stages. In the early stage (roughly January – March 2020), the central topic was the onset of the outbreak in China; later on, as the outbreak in China dwindled and outbreaks elsewhere spiked (roughly April – September 2020), including in the Western Balkans, the debates centered on so-called "mask diplomacy" and geopolitical competition with regards to the response to the pandemic; and finally, the debate entered the "vaccine diplomacy" stage once COVID-19 vaccines became yet another subject of geopolitical competition, with ripple effects also felt in the Western

Balkans (since October 2020, and escalating in early 2021). Initially, China was seen through the prism of the chaos in Wuhan and the global skepticism about its handling of the crisis; in the "mask diplomacy" stage, it was seen as an external actor that could be a source of assistance or source of trouble (or both); and in the "vaccine diplomacy" stage, it has become seen as a partner in efforts to immunize the population of the region against COVID-19. The attitudes of regional actors have not been uniform. Serbia's approach of active opportunity-seeking has stood out, as opposed to the under-the-radar approach of other governments, which altered between opportunism and cautiousness. There have been vigilant alarmists about China's role in the region too, but not among ruling elites.

Developments during the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed that as a highly asymmetrical relationship, Western Balkans-China relations depend greatly on the standing and actions of Beijing at the world stage. Currently, China is the sole external actor in the Western Balkans that is not facing deep uncertainty on the domestic front, and has the luxury to plan the future on the external one. In some ways, this is an instance of history repeating itself, as what facilitated China's arrival as an actor in the region in the past decade to begin with was its emergence in better shape than the West in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

Introduction

The global debates on China, and by extension, the debates on China in the Balkans have arrived at a new critical juncture with the COVID-19 pandemic. China was the first country to experience a major COVID-19 outbreak and to undergo lockdowns in the first months of 2020, and it was the first to come out of emergency mode, ending its lockdown measures by the middle of 2020. Its

early outbreak and the handling of the situation became a contentious topic in the global debates. Subsequently, China has attempted to position itself as a leading player in the global response to the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. China was, moreover, the only major economy that noted positive economic growth in 2020, and is now set to overtake the US as the largest

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economy in the world a few years earlier than previously expected (BBC 2020). All of this has put China in the spotlight in global news, intensifying the already vibrant discussion on its rise around the world – and in the Western Balkans as well.

This paper explores how the discourses on China in the Western Balkans have been (re)shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this has affected the positions of Western Balkan countries vis-a-vis China. The Western Balkans is a region in which China in the period 2009-2019 has emerged as one of the external actors, and has been perceived as a "Plan B" partner by the locals (Vangeli 2019). It has been also increasingly perceived as a potentially disruptive actor by traditional stakeholders (in the first place, the EU and the US). The paper considers the discourse and positioning of policymakers, media, knowledge elites in the Western Balkans, as well as, to the extent that is backed by credible data, the popular discourse. It looks for points of continuity and change in how Western Balkan actors have

perceived and talked about China in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also examining how China's agenda has fared in the region, and to what extent developments in the Western Balkans have mirrored and/or contrasted those in the West. To do so, the paper uses secondary sources and evidence from traditional and social media.

In the following section, the paper provides background on the discourses on China in the Western Balkans prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and develops an analytical framework centered on the "opportunity/threat" dichotomy originally developed by Pavlićević (2018), while also taking into account the degree of pro-activity with which different actors have approached China. It then turns to analyzing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing three elements in particular, or rather three stages that were central to the development of the discourse on China in the period between February 2020 and February 2021: the Wuhan stage; the "mask diplomacy" stage; and the "vaccine diplomacy" stage.

Background and Analytical Framework

After three decades of post-socialist transition, the Western Balkan countries today are still considered to be a zone of instability and potential crisis. However, despite the tumultuous transition, Western Balkan elites have not turned their backs on Western-led, liberal globalization. The protracted transition, nevertheless, made them primarily inward-looking; while the superior positions of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) as external actors in the region led to the emergence of an undisputed Western-centric understanding of the world, in which both the Western Balkan countries' agencies at the global stage and events and developments beyond the West were rarely discussed. Throughout this period, Western Balkan nations have embraced an identity as Europeans-in-the-making, treating their European future as their destiny and a condition for their survival, but at the same time, a goal that needs to be earned, and which requires total devotion of time and resources – and most importantly, which is still not within reach. China, in this sense, has been welcomed as a partner in the economic renewal of the region, but not embraced as a force that can transform the global order nor that can confer a new identity on the Western Balkans (Vangeli 2021).

China became relevant in the region in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008-09. During the 1990s, previous ties with China were divested and China was not high on

the agenda up until 2009. It was China's pro-activity that led to new momentum. Here, the Balkans was not alone: in the past decade, China became an actor with a worldwide presence, becoming an important topic of discussion even in the most remote parts of the world, and all countries and territories irrespective of size. Along with a dozen other countries in the broader region of Central-East and Southeast Europe (CESEE), the Western Balkan countries have been socialized in the 17+1 format convened by China; and moreover, they have been involved, along with dozens of other countries around the world, in the flagship Belt and Road Initiative. What was obvious now was that throughout the Western Balkans, there was a big knowledge gap on China, marking the "[transition] from 'not knowing about China' to 'not knowing what to do about China'" (Pavlićević 2018, 689).

China itself came with an agenda of desecuritizing the relationship between the two sides (Jakimów 2019). Yet, as China has been promoting its discourse in the region, the 2010s were a period characterized by increased discussion of the global shift in power and scrutinization of the role of Global China in the West. This also affected how Sino-Balkan relations have been discussed in the region and beyond. As Balkan actors have been seeking alignment with external stakeholders on strategic issues, the inputs from the West

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– usually critical of China's role in the region – have been particularly authoritative in shaping the debate on China (Vangeli 2021). However, in reality, the Western Balkan thinking on China is not solely an externally-driven process. The dispositions, context and interests of local actors also determine the (re)positioning towards China. The discourses on and positions towards China are therefore a result of a complex dialogical process, which is informed through interactions between the various inputs – from China, from the West, and local ones.

What is equally striking about how the thinking on China develops in the region, is the tendency to portray China in categorical terms. The different perspectives on China in the Western Balkans are clustered in broader sets of binaries, of which the most significant ones include, for instance, the discourse on China's strategic genius, as opposed to the one of its strategic incompetence; the discourse on China as a game-changer in the region and China bringing nothing

but empty promises; the one on win-win partnership as opposed to the one of neocolonialism. All of these boil to the way of seeing China being an opportunity, and China being a threat (Pavlićević 2018). Importantly, these binaries are often based on exaggerations and embellishments, and are often more emotional than rational in nature. Finally, not always have the opportunity and threat approaches to China been mutually exclusive – actors may alternate between the two, or even develop a discourse that rests simultaneously on both the opportunity and threat narratives.[1]

At the same time, in addition to the opportunity-threat binary, the level of pro-activity is another factor that determines the way Western Balkan actors positioned themselves towards China. Some actors have voiced their position on China much more visibly than others. Combining the two criteria, we can come up with a more complex model, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Ideal-type model showing different discourses on China pre-COVID-19

	Opportunity	Threat
Visible	**Active opportunity seeking** Pro-active participation in China-led initiatives, platitudes to Chinese leadership, advertising of cooperation	**Active alarmism** Voice criticism on China, link domestic with global debates
Under the radar	**Cautious opportunity utilization** Some participation in China-led initiatives, some cooperation, but without attracting too much attention	**Threat avoidance** Reduction of contact/interaction with China, but without making too much noise

In sum, there have been four general ideal types of attitudes towards China in the pre-COVID-19 world: (1) active opportunity seeking; (2) cautious opportunity utilization; (3) active alarmism; and (4) threat avoidance. In practice, of course, there have been blurred lines between the different positions. Moreover, while some actors like Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić can be easily classified as active opportunity seekers, others, like Montenegro's President Milo Đukanović have transitioned from active opportunity seekers to active alarmism. However, with the exceptions of China-convened summits where all guests usually voice their appreciation for China, and with the exception of the

announcements of joint projects, most of the Western Balkan actors have not been too vocal about cooperation with China. Likewise, even when they have had a more critical stance towards China, they have usually not confronted it openly, but rather tried to reduce contact behind closed doors. In fact, the loudest alarmist voices about China in the Western Balkans have come from outside of the policy elite, but rather from the media and civil society.

Having clarified the conceptual foundations, we now turn to the analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the discourses and positioning towards China in the region.

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1   The contemporary binaries on China in the Balkans and beyond are nothing new. Harold Isaacs (1954, 12–13) called these binary images of China "jostling pairs [...] jumbled all together," which include: "the good heathen and the ungrateful wretch, the wise sage and the sadistic executioner, the famine victim and the eater of wondrously good food, the opera bouffe warrior and the heroic or dangerous fighter, the traditional friend and the contemporary foe, the thrifty and honorable man and the sly and treacherous criminal." Other authors ever since have written on the "bifocal lenses" with which outsiders see China (Pan 2012).

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The Impact of COVID-19

Until the moment of writing this paper (mid-February 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic induced a number of overlapping, mutually reinforcing crises: (1) global public healthcare crisis of immense proportions; (2) collective mental health crisis as fears and uncertainties associated with both the pandemic and the restrictive measures taken in response to it took their toll; (3) socio-political crisis as polarization in societies deepened, and conspiracy theories have proliferated; and (4) unprecedented economic crisis, with economic activity being interrupted and consumption hampered. As most of the world sees new waves, peaks and emergence of mutant strains a year after the onset of the pandemic, all of the aforementioned crises are still ongoing, and will be changing the world in ways that are difficult to imagine.

Events, or rather historical episodes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impact both material reality (including the daily life of people in all walks of life) and public debates on virtually any topic. The COVID-19 pandemic, in that sense, has prompted the reconceptualization of a number of core debates in societies, from philosophical issues such as life and death, to public policies and economic models, to global politics, and in particular, the role of China. To some extent, China's experience as the first-exposed nation to the deadly virus is used to better understand the spread of the disease and to devise response strategies (WHO 2020). However, to a much more significant extent, COVID-19 is taken as a critical historical juncture that affects how actors in the West and beyond understand and position themselves towards China.[2]

In both the US (Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020) and the EU (Leonard and Krastev 2020), right from the onset of the pandemic, the image of China significantly worsened, as Beijing has been subjected to an unprecedented level of suspicion and criticism in global debates, on issues ranging from transparency and disclosing information from the early Wuhan outbreak, to the handling of the contagion once it became clear that it had spread to tens of thousands of people, to its alleged influence in the World Health Organization (WHO), to its attempt to lead the global response to the pandemic. Western voices fear that the pandemic is precipitating the power shift from West to East, calling China an "unpopular winner" of 2020 (Spross 2020). However, this victory, in addition to being unpopular, has been also deemed unfair: feeling biologically violated by China, a number of actors in the West have been seeking responsibility and accountability from China for the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have even called for China to pay reparations (Moffett 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with a number of other global developments, and therefore the geopolitically charged discourses on China could not be seen in isolation from them. The trade and tech war initiated by the Trump administration of the US continued throughout the pandemic; and American debates heated further as China emerged as one of the central issues in the 2020 US presidential elections. The incoming EU Commission aimed to flex its geopolitical muscles, especially in the context of its relations with China.

On the other side, unlike any other occasion in recent history, Chinese diplomats during the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated a pro-active, highly self-confident approach, promoting their methods in containing COVID-19 as the best way of tackling the pandemic, at times criticizing the Western response, and promoting an alternative narrative on the origin of the pandemic (Feng 2020). Being the world's leading producer of respiratory masks and protective equipment, China's so called "mask diplomacy" has been challenged in the West, prompting a whole new discourse on on-shoring and near-shoring medical supply chains, and reducing dependency on China in other critical sectors as well (Fuchs et al. 2020). The situation got a new dynamic once vaccines against COVID-19 were developed. With the global distribution of vaccines experiencing major shortcomings, China has seized the moment by offering its significantly cheaper vaccines to countries around the world, which has become another contentious issue in Western debates (AFP 2020).

For the Western Balkan countries, China has overall been far from the main concern as COVID-19 swept through

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2 In the understanding of Global China in the West, COVID-19 as a critical juncture has been preceded by: (i) the global financial crisis (GFC) 2008, with China emerging as relatively better off than the West; (ii) the strengthening of the Communist Party under Xi Jinping and China's change of posture post-2012; (iii) the shift in US foreign policy and ensuing tensions in the US-China relationship, which started under the Trump administration (2017-2021). All of these points in time have shaped how actors in the West have interpreted China and how they have positioned themselves with regards to it; the COVID-19 pandemic follows up on these preceding episodes (Vangeli, n.d.).

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the region. Domestic woes, related to the handling of the disease (i.e. hospitalization, testing and tracing, quarantining, restricting socio-economic activities and providing state stimulus) have been the central challenge, as in the rest of the world. Moreover, for a few of the Balkan countries, 2020 and early 2021 were election years (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo had parliamentary elections; Bosnia and Herzegovina had municipal elections, and Albania is gearing for its own parliamentary elections), which made them particularly focused on domestic affairs. Externally, Albania and Macedonia focused on their respective EU bids and the overdue start of their accession talks. Serbia has been focused on solving the Kosovo conundrum. For Montenegro, domestic political uncertainty has been interlinked with its relations with Serbia. Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced serious political instabilities.

However, China was far from disregarded. For one, developments in China in January and February 2020 themselves were quite dramatic and the association of COVID-19 with the outbreak in Hubei Province was too strong. Moreover, Western Balkans-China relations have been a hot topic in international debates, and increasingly the US and the EU have expressed their concern with the development of the relationship. On the other hand, China itself was proactive and over time positioned itself as a significant external actor in the region during the pandemic.

The Balkans and China in Times of COVID-19

When discussing discourses on and positions towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic, one can note three different stages of development. In the early stages (roughly January – March 2020), the central topic was the onset of the outbreak in China, and in particular in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province; later on, as the outbreak in China dwindled and outbreaks elsewhere spiked (roughly April – September 2020), including in the Western Balkans, the debates centered on so-called "mask diplomacy" and geopolitical competition with regards to the response to the pandemic; and finally, the debate entered the "vaccine diplomacy" stage once vaccines against COVID-19 became yet another subject of geopolitical competition, with its ripple effects being felt in the Western Balkans, too (since October 2020, and escalating in early 2021).

First stage: Chaos in Wuhan and global Sino-skepticism

The first major outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan had a significant impact on how the discourse on China developed in the Western Balkans. At least temporarily, the discourse on China took a full swing towards the "threat" perspective. The fear of the novel coronavirus, but also a certain racialization of the outbreak in China, prompted many in the Western Balkans to look at Chinese authorities, but also Chinese people as major culprits for the contagion. This has given fuel to conspiracy theories about the origin and spread of COVID-19, which have not subsided even months after the onset of the pandemic. According to a survey by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advocacy Group (BiEPAG) conducted in October 2020:

"Among the conspiracy theories [in the Western Balkans], the least implausible is the theory that the virus escaped a lab in Wuhan, i.e. that it had existed for longer than publicly known and its origins had been obscured by China. Already less plausible is the theory that claims the Chinese government engineered the coronavirus in a lab"(Bieber et al. 2020).

According to the report, beliefs in these and other conspiracy theories (e.g. that the virus has something to do with the pharmaceutical industry, Bill Gates or the US government) often intersect with attitudes towards foreign policy and global politics (e.g. this is why in Serbia, where the population is most friendly towards China, conspiracy theories that concern China are less popular than in other countries in the region and vice versa). If the proliferation of China-focused conspiracy theories is an indicator, then, COVID-19 has significantly affected geopolitical sentiments on China among the Western Balkan populations.

In the early stage of the pandemic, one could also notice a rise in xenophobic sentiments towards Chinese people, and more broadly, people of Asian descent, who have been profiled as potential carries and spreaders of the virus; some of them were subject to harassment (Hodžić 2020; Makfax 2020). Much of this was based on racist tropes and prejudices, including ones on the eating habits and lifestyle of Chinese people and their portrayal as pathological and backwards (BNN 2020), even in countries with more

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favorable views towards China such as Serbia. Permutations of the trope "it's China's fault" became widespread on social media. Chinese migrants in Serbia were also targeted and harassed, and Chinese migrant-owned shops lost customers due to the belief that they were spreading COVID-19 (Mondo.rs 2020). However, there are two caveats to this: first, xenophobic sentiments in the Western Balkans were perhaps less widespread and less conducive to harassment and violence as the discourse in some Western European countries or the US with more sizeable Chinese communities (HRW 2020); and second, prejudices have been primarily manifested on the level of the popular discourse, but not among elites. In the early stages of the outbreak in Wuhan, while the topic dominated the world news, aside from reports from international news agencies, there was limited original discussion of China in the Western Balkan media. Likewise, policymakers and experts in the region were largely silent.

However, authoritative voices were also silent with regards to the expression of support for China. On a societal level there were some expressions of solidarity (i.e. the "I stand with Wuhan" campaign), primarily organized through some of the Confucius Institutes in the region, however, this was not a widely-shared sentiment. Moreover, initially, there were no discussions on the effect of the pandemic on cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and China, and in particular the fate of the joint megaprojects constructed in the region. There was some concern about the loss of Chinese tourists (although later on, there was news about the rising interest in the Balkans among Chinese tourists, Bi 2020). Major concerns were voiced in relation to the expected delays of the shipments of goods purchased through AliExpress, the Chinese online retail giant that has amassed a sizable consumer base in the region (Saveska 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the voice of healthcare professionals was amplified, and some of the Balkan epidemiologists talked often about China. Unlike the broader public, and unlike the critical voices among civil society activists and some of the media, healthcare professionals positively assessed China's early response and dealing with the outbreak in Wuhan (Avaz.ba 2020). Later on, a contingent of Chinese medical workers helped set up a COVID-19 center in Serbia (Tanjug 2020),

while the undertaking of harsh Chinese-style anti-contagion measures including lockdowns and curfews were labeled a successful model of quarantining, and its implementation in Serbia was enthusiastically greeted (Govoruša 2020).

Yet, the overall picture was that the early stages of the pandemic did more damage than help China's standing in the region. Unhappy with the initial negative publicity, Chinese ambassadors in the region, as in a number of other places around the world, embarked on a charm offensive to present the Chinese point of view. In the months of February and March, their activity was focused on narrating the Chinese version of the story of the outbreak in Wuhan and China's contagion efforts (Embassy of the PRC in Albania 2020), while their message in subsequent weeks was expanded to address the shared challenges and the need for cooperation to tackle COVID-19, and to discuss Chinese assistance to the Western Balkan countries (Kosović 2020; Dan/CDM 2020; SRNA 2020). Even if tamer compared to the activity of Chinese ambassadors in other countries, such pro-activity of Chinese diplomats in the Western Balkans has been in many ways unprecedented. Altogether, however, what these publicity endeavors achieved remains to be seen. While there is a solid trace of how Chinese ambassadors projected their message, there is little data that can help in measuring their impact. Even more so, their messages were contested by some of the media in the region, who echoed the criticism of China in the Western media (RTCG 2020).

Second stage: "Mask diplomacy" and political calculations

Once COVID-19 hit Europe, China attempted to position itself as a key international actor that could help in mitigating the effects of the pandemic and helping countries around the world cope with it. China's global diplomacy, including the landmark Belt and Road Initiative, were now re-purposed as drivers of healthcare cooperation (Moritz 2021). The Western Balkans was one of the regions where China was actively offering assistance, utilizing previously established mechanisms for regional coordination in CESEE. The multilateral forums convened and led by China (under the 17+1 framework) have played a key role in promoting China during the COVID-19 pandemic as well, with a number of video-conferences taking place since March 2020, which have involved policymakers and experts from China and the broader region, including the Western Balkan countries (Huaxia 2020; Xinhua 2020; Liu 2020). Linkages, coordination and cooperation in healthcare were pursued by Chinese actors with their

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Western Balkan counterparts even at the municipal level (Municipality of Štip 2020).

China also profiled itself as the largest (and at some point the only) provider of protective and other medical equipment (i.e. respiratory masks, protective gear, testing kits), and pharmaceuticals. Part of the shipments from China came in the form of aid, while part of them were procured via commercial routes (the exact ratio remains unknown, but the estimate is that the majority of the equipment was bought commercially). In some cases, however, there were doubts about the quality of the supplies arriving from China. The problem with Chinese supplies got particular negative publicity in Bosnia, where Prime Minister Fadil Novalić has been mired in a corruption scandal regarding the purchase of ventilators from a Chinese company (Sito-Sucic 2020).

The overall assessment of China's role as assistance provider in mitigating the pandemic during this stage had both elements of "opportunity" and "threat." A popular trope in the West was that China was taking advantage of the pandemic to advance its foreign policy agenda. Liberal media and civil society organizations in the Western Balkans echoed Western narratives about alleged Chinese disinformation campaigns and alleged ulterior motives behind the "mask diplomacy" (Dukovska 2020), reinforcing a "threat" perspective of China in the region. However, the threat narrative did not catch on in the Western Balkans as it did in other parts of Europe. China's help arrived as the Western Balkan countries struggled to overcome their shortages, at a time when there were no alternative suppliers and the EU had introduced a ban on medical equipment exports (Bayer et al. 2020). At the official level, therefore, Balkan policymakers expressed their appreciation and gratitude to China for the assistance. The responses, of course varied – with the dramatic and

by now widely known "Brother Xi" speech by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić in which he also shamed the EU for the lack of solidarity (Chrzová and Čermák 2020) getting the widest coverage and provoking reactions in the world press. In the other countries, however, gratitude towards China was accompanied with much more caution. Leaders have seemed to avoid following in the footsteps of Vučić and instead opted for keeping the relationship with China outside of the spotlight, thanking China in a formal, unspectacular manner (Kabinet Potpretsednika Vlade 2020; Vlada na SRM 2020). In North Macedonia, there was less emphasis on inter-governmental relations. Media also talked about bottom-up initiatives led by citizens who secured donations of masks through their Chinese networks (Republika 2020).

The key point here is that a number of actors in Western Balkan societies were willing to cooperate with China, but, with the exception of Vučić, they were unwilling to legitimize China as a game-changer in dealing with COVID-19. Interactions with insiders suggest that such an approach very much fits the spirit of the time: as both the US and the EU have sharpened their stance on China, by taking a "low profile" approach Western Balkan elites could avoid being targeted for selling out to China. Thus, for them, dealing with China during the COVID-19 pandemic posed the challenge of not weakening their own positions vis-a-vis Washington, Brussels and other European capitals. And even Vučić, who initially tried to at least rhetorically play China against the West, had to eventually give in both to the pressure coming from the EU (including a public reaffirmation of the role of the EU as by far the largest provider of investment and capital to the region, Tatalović 2020), and from the US (by signing the Kosovo deal which, among other issues, had a clause on 5G and other areas pertinent to cooperation with China, Hopkins 2020).

Third stage: "Vaccine diplomacy" and pragmatism

The development of vaccines was the key milestone in the global struggle against COVID-19. The speed and agility with which pharmaceutical companies around the world developed several vaccines has been unparalleled. However, despite the achievement on the research end, the distribution of vaccines turned out to be a major stumbling block all over the world, throwing a large shadow on the otherwise monumental success.

The Western Balkan countries have noted diverse success in obtaining vaccines and carrying out the vaccination process. Serbia has been an exceptionally successful case,

standing out not only in the region, but also within Europe as a whole. Serbia's early success with the vaccination campaign has owed to the fact that it quickly approved and procured a significant amount of Sinopharm's vaccine (1 million doses arrived in mid-January). The Chinese vaccines were welcomed with a pompous ceremony organized by President Vučić himself, reinforcing the already familiar tropes about China's influence in the region, but also the shortcoming of the EU in its enlargement area (Vuksanović 2021). In addition to Sinopharm, Serbia procured American, British and Russian vaccines, too, and provided its citizens with the right to choose which vaccine they

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would take; symbolically, different political leaders took different vaccines. Notably, liberal voices in the country who are critical of Serbo-Chinese cooperation, such as the opposition leader Dragan Đilas, have voiced their opposition to the procurement of Chinese vaccines (SSP 2020); Đilas has recently also called Serbia the first Chinese colony in Europe (RSE 2021).

Other than Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (in particular, Republika Srpska) and Albania have been the two other countries in the region to start vaccination by mid-February 2021, although the scope of their vaccination campaigns have so far been minuscule compared to that of Serbia. In general, with the exception of Serbia, other Western Balkan countries have been struggling to secure sufficient vaccine supplies. They have relied on the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) mechanism initiated by the WHO, and on promised assistance by the EU, both in terms of financing and access to vaccines (EC 2020). Both of these options have so far been inefficient.

Initially, most Western Balkan leaders had either rejected or avoided making decisions on vaccines coming from China. However, faced with limited opportunities, by mid-February, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have all made pre-orders with Sinopharm, making the region a particularly important one for China's

healthcare diplomacy in general. The online 17+1 summit that took place in early February 2021 gave an additional impetus to "vaccine diplomacy" (EURACTIV Network 2021); while the occasional favorable coverage of the Chinese vaccines in Western media (Prabhala and Ling 2021) helped diffuse the tension surrounding the issue.

The case of Serbia has been the most widely discussed (and is a good illustration of active opportunity-seeking with regards to China). However, the case of North Macedonia is perhaps most illustrative of the shift in thinking on China, from more of a "threat" to more of an "opportunity." The Macedonian government led by Zoran Zaev has a devout pro-Western orientation. Initially, the government and its supporters have dismissed the idea of obtaining vaccines from China (and Russia), not least by citing geopolitical rationale for such a decision. As the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev had put it, North Macedonia as a NATO member state does not have the maneuvering space that Serbia has; moreover, he noted that North Macedonia is now obliged to adhere to the policies and regulations of its partners (Libertas 2021). However, once the alternatives were exhausted by February 2021, Zaev has changed his position, arguing that "the procurement of Chinese vaccines is not a geopolitical issue but rather the sovereign right of every country" (Georgievski 2021).

Concluding Remarks

Although China has not emerged as a central topic during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans, and even though theirs have been uneventful in comparison to the China debates elsewhere, this paper shows that the importance of China increased over time. With a degree of generalization, we can conclude the following: initially, China was seen through the lens of the Wuhan mayhem and the global skepticism towards the government's handling of the situation; in the second stage, it was seen as an external actor that may be a source of assistance or source of trouble (or both); and finally, in the "vaccine diplomacy" stage it is increasingly becoming seen as a significant partner in the attempt to immunize the population of the region against COVID-19.

One important feature of how this process has developed in the region, is that there has been a significant difference between the approach of Vučić's Serbia and everyone else. First, Serbia has been consistent in seeking out

and utilizing opportunities for cooperation with China (despite the occasional acts of balancing). In the rest of the countries, the attitude has varied in between opportunism and cautiousness. Second, Serbia's leaders, and in the first place Vučić, have sought out opportunities in a quite visible, proactive manner. In the other cases, cooperation has been almost formalistic, and as much under-the-radar as possible. In fact, based on the official rhetoric, one can often get an impression that the elites from Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, even when pursuing cooperation, have avoided giving out the impression of getting too involved with China. On the other hand, among the ruling political elites, the region has not seen vocal vigilance towards China. This position was reserved primarily for certain liberal voices in the region. At the level of ruling elites, skepticism or criticism towards China took a passive, low-profile form. A summary of how these different perspectives on China played out in practice is displayed in Figure 2.

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Figure 2. Western Balkan discourses on and positioning towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic

	Opportunity	Threat
Visible	**Active opportunity seeking** Laud China's handling of the pandemic and be proactive about health care cooperation and assistance *example: Serbia's government throughout the duration of the pandemic*	**Active alarmism** Call out China on early COVID-19 mishandling, alleged disinformation; object to healthcare cooperation and assistance on geopolitical grounds *example: Liberal voices throughout the duration of the pandemic*
Under the radar	**Cautious opportunity utilization** Take the masks and vaccines, participate in China-led initiatives and see what happens, while not making too much noise *example: North Macedonia's government in the later part of the "vaccine diplomacy" stage*	**Threat avoidance** Avoid collaboration with China without escalation *example: North Macedonia's government in the earlier part of the "vaccine diplomacy" stage*

From an analytical standpoint, the pairing of the opportunity/threat dichotomy with the degree of visibility and vocality of the different discourses seems to be particularly useful in capturing the dynamics of how Western Balkan actors position themselves towards China, and moreover, to capture the differences between them. In that sense, the COVID-19 pandemic did not bring significant qualitative change to how Western Balkan actors approach China, but only reinforced existing tendencies. Serbia has remained a vocal opportunity-seeker, while the rest of the region has shifted between silent avoidance and cautious opportunism. In other words, accepting the masks and the vaccines was done not so much out of ideological convictions, but rather out of necessity, and even more so, in spite of the awareness that cooperation with China is becoming an increasingly sensitive topic.

Finally, when discussing China and the Western Balkans in the context of COVID-19, we must always keep the big picture and the long-term perspective in mind. As a highly asymmetrical one, the Western Balkans-China relationship depends greatly on the standing and actions of Beijing at the world stage. What enables China to remain such a significant actor in the region even at times of geopolitical polarization, is that it is already bracing itself for the post-COVID-19 era, while the rest of the world is still struggling with the virus. In other words, China is the sole external actor in the Western Balkans that is not in facing deep uncertainty on the domestic front, and has the luxury to plan the future on the external one. This may sound somewhat familiar. One must not forget that what facilitated China's emergence as a global player, and its arrival in the Western Balkans in the past decade, was the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-08 and the emergence of China in its aftermath as an actor in a position that allowed it to establish all its various linkages abroad, at a time when the West was trying to regroup itself. With an ever more dramatic crisis taking place in 2020-21, history may well be on track to repeat itself. And one lesson that has been well learned in the past decade, is that semi peripheral countries such as those of the Balkans can only adapt to it.

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Reflection
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WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
REFLECTION PAPER
DOMESTIC DEMAND FOR NON–WESTERN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Reflection Paper
Domestic Demand for Non–Western Influence in the Western Balkans

Senada Šelo Šabić

The topic of external influence in the Western Balkans is an emerging area of policy and scholarly interest. A common shared assumption is that the declining presence of the EU and the US from the region left a void which is being filled by actors such as Russia, China and Turkey, who do not necessarily support the region's ambition to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions. While it does not take much imagination to conclude why any of these actors would try to exploit Western weaknesses whenever and wherever possible, it is a different question whether these three countries, or for that matter any other non-Western actor in the Western Balkans, have the capacity to undermine the region's Euro-Atlantic perspective. If they do, then it probably has more to do with the weakness of the West than the strength of these actors.

To understand this interplay better, this project posits Western Balkan actors themselves at the center of the research, trying to analyze them as active participants and not just passive subjects of powerful actors' activities in the Western Balkans. It seeks answers to the following two questions: what goals do Western Balkan countries pursue, and how do they interact with both Western and non-Western powers in realizing these goals?

The authors of the studies included in this project address these questions from different perspectives, shedding light on specific topics from social media to environmental degradation, presenting the complex social and political issues at play within individual countries, and focusing their research on the role of domestic actors in the context of foreign influence. Earlier, similar studies usually looked at the activities and interests of external actors, not paying attention to interests of the actual Western Balkan countries.

Thus, the dominant approach has been to analyze tools that non-Western powers use to strengthen their presence in the Balkans, usually through a mixture of economic deals, political ties, cultural endearment, media penetration, and in some cases clandestine activities, which allow them to win out over the more normative, unimposing approach used by Western actors, primarily the EU.

The alternative approach, mostly pursued by the studies in this project, says that it is not the stronger power of Russia, China and Turkey to tie themselves to Western Balkan countries itself that matters most, but rather the fact that the EU has generally failed to create strong ties in the region. In a sophisticated analysis, Martin Naunov illustrates this point by describing how the EU is failing its partners in the Balkans by taking them for granted, missing an opportunity to support progressive and reform-oriented leaders. In letting down progressives, the EU is, in effect, undermining its own reform potential in the Balkans.

The retreat of the EU has left greater space for these countries to pursue their own interests. Non-Western actors are taking what could be called "easy prey" in a relatively uncompetitive environment, not one that they had to fight tenaciously over. Of course, the responsibility to implement demanding reforms lies with the Balkan countries, but the EU would help further its own goals if it would identify and support pro-reform forces and thus its true partners in the Balkans.

Economy as the main motivator for cooperation

This project also asks whether the Western Balkan countries are helpless actors that let themselves be won over by external actors, or whether they also engage with external actors to maximize gains on their own terms.

Tena Prelec poignantly gives an answer to this question in explaining the drivers of Serbia's seemingly-erratic foreign policy. She asserts that Serbia's multitrack foreign policy is largely driven by the pursuit of economic benefits, and thus by pragmatic relations with different actors, be they Western or non-Western, in order to maximize its

economic gains and thus expand its sense of security. This opportunistic or pragmatic approach to foreign policy is not a novel phenomenon, as every country tries to expand its security and power, with economic wellbeing at the core. However, this instrumental economic approach begs another question – at what price is economic development being achieved?

Although the liberal economic model is being questioned across the globe, it remains the dominant economic paradigm. Poor countries cannot be expected to question this paradigm if it was a successful model for enrichment of other countries in the past. The imperative for the Western Balkans is, therefore, economic development at almost any cost, despite concerns about corruption and environmental pollution, which several studies in this series also reflect on. Yet the EU could press its advantage in the area of economic development given its vast resources, and intervene to help Western Balkan countries develop more sustainably.

Historical ties and emotional links

Other studies in this project show that economic benefits are not the only reason why Western Balkan countries seek partnerships with non-Western powers. Historical ties and emotional links also play an important role in portraying external actors as partners for domestic elites. Stefan Jojić's analysis of the Bosniak political leaders in the Sandžak region in Serbia shows that they favor relations with Turkey despite a lack of economic benefits for the region, because they draw benefits from it among their voters. If the overwhelming majority of Bosniaks in Sandžak see Turkey positively, specifically as a power one could rely upon in dire times (despite a lack of empirical evidence for this belief), then Bosniak politicians cannot risk jeopardizing relations with Turkey, even when they see that this relationship has limited direct economic benefits.

Critics of the Turkish role in Sandžak (or perhaps more generally among Muslims in the Western Balkans) argue that when Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan makes declarations about the Balkans being close to the Turkish heart, these should be understood primarily as a message to his own voters in Turkey, in particular those of Balkan descent and who are thus emotionally connected to this region. At the same time, Bosniak political leaders in Sandžak (and some other parts of the Balkans) cannot risk alienating their voters, who see Turkey favorably, by criticizing Turkey. In line with these findings, in her paper scrutinising the relations between regional Albanian leaders and Turkish president Erdogan, Gentiola Madhi shows that the publicly proclaimed 'friendship' between the leaders is in fact based on their own domestic interests.

Support for Russia among the Orthodox Christian population similarly relies on pan-Slavic sentiments and historical ties. Outside the Orthodox camp, Russia also draws sympathy among citizens who favor traditional vs. liberal social values and value strong leaders, seeing Russian president Vladimir Putin as an able opponent of the West. Even China, as a relative newcomer to the Western Balkans, has emotional capital to invest, primarily with Serbia. The 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade in which the Chinese embassy was damaged carries with it the memory of mutual suffering and comradeship against a common enemy. The Chinese non-recognition of Kosovo is another asset that Serbia uses to bolster relations with China. In his paper, Stefan Vladisavljev documents how these important historical moments contributed to the enduring consensus on maintaining partnership with China as one of the foreign policy priorities even among opponents of Aleksandar Vučić's regime.

Non-Western soft-power in the Balkans relies on common memories, a valuable asset in forging ties with prospective partners, but the Chinese, Turkish or Russian drive to secure hard and soft power is not founded on emotional kinship alone. China understands this particularly well and makes economic cooperation the cornerstone of its presence in the Balkans. Russia strengthens its position vis-à-vis Western actors through energy cooperation, political support to authoritarian leaders, and military assistance. Turkey has also come to understand that restoring Ottoman cultural heritage has limited potential for strengthening its presence. It builds economic ties where possible, but has also expanded into other areas. The combined activities of non-Western actors, in particular in the field of economic links and FDI, however, do not come close to matching the local involvement of the EU. The EU is by far the strongest local economic actor. It also can tap a reservoir of values which it shares with political and civic actors in each Western Balkan country. This makes one wonder whether, by ascribing disproportionate power to non-Western actors to influence political and economic processes in the Balkans, the EU is in effect seeking justification for its own retreat from this region.

In this volume, Martin Naunov explores the concept of party cueing, the idea that political parties do not only reflect preferences of their voters, but also shape them, in the context of North Macedonian politics. For example, VMRO-DPMNE voters in North Macedonia, although their party nominally still supports Euro-Atlantic integration, have considerably reduced support for this goal as a reflection, of course, of the hurdles experienced in these integrations, but also as a result of internal party preferences advancing nationalistic discourse and non-Western traditional values as their main political inspiration. This cognitive dissonance can also be observed in other Western Balkan countries where some other nationalistic parties nominally subscribe to values of liberal democracy and the rule of law principles,

while in effect they make policy decisions which undermine officially proclaimed values and principles.

There is something unequivocally attractive to Western Balkan citizens in seeing their leaders play two or more sides to maximize the benefits they gain from each. This is of course not unique to the Western Balkans as all political actors utilize the instruments at their disposal to achieve their preferred goals. Yet as long as the EU does not appreciate these power dynamics and come to understand that political leaders in the Western Balkans stay in power by playing off different sides, they will continue to be surprised by discord between official rhetoric and policy practice.

Emulation as a policy model

Papers in this volume analyze dynamic relations between the Western Balkans, Western and non-Western actors as they unfold and interact with each other. These relationships are not static and they do not take place in isolated environments. There is ample potential for the EU to assert its presence vis-à-vis non-Western actors in the Western Balkans, but it can do so only if it also critically assesses its own role. This means that the EU should recognize the dissonance between its own normative discourse and policy actions of individual EU member states.

The Western Balkan countries see Germany criticizing Russia over Crimea and Ukraine, while resisting pressure to halt construction of Nord Stream II, which will allow Germany to purchase   Russian gas at favorable prices. A host of European countries criticize the Chinese human rights record, but then the EU adopts a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China that only includes weak references to limited, non-binding obligations on China's part to improve conditions for civil society and labor rights in its implementation conditions. EU member states such as Hungary benefit from EU membership status while effectively undermining EU norms and values, for which the EU has not developed effective counter measures. The Western Balkans countries see EU member states hampering the EU enlargement process by imposing

bilateral issues upon candidate states at the expense of a common EU enlargement policy. They see an EU migration policy in which protection of human rights takes second place to European countries' demands that borders remain closed against a larger influx of migrants. The migration crisis creates formidable pressure on the Western Balkan countries to both assist migrants and prevent their further irregular movement. However, most Western Balkan countries have not yet developed the necessary institutional structure to provide effective aid, and are confronted with a situation where a majority of migrants do not want to stay in their countries. The result is frustration, because the Western Balkans feel they are expected to do a 'dirty' job for the EU in preventing migration flows, for which they have neither desire nor capacity.

If the Western Balkan states see EU member states speaking about norms while individually catering to their own interests, they will do the same. If they see that the EU officially supports enlargement while in reality it shows little desire to actively and decisively engage with these countries, appreciate their internal challenges, understand their historical and contemporary foreign relations, but instead continues a nominal accession process without much enthusiasm, then Western Balkan leaders will continue to seek and rely partnerships beyond and, sometimes, against the EU.

What can the EU do?

A series of recent studies on the topic of the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, also supported by the findings of the authors in this project, indicate that the EU should reconsider its approach to this region and seek to establish new partnerships with domestic actors,

beyond those built with officials. Partners of the EU in the Western Balkans should be first and foremost its citizens. Authoritarian leaders have no incentive to reform, but citizens do. The EU has to grasp the power it has in the region. Its economic strength is not matched by any of

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the non-Western actors, nor its capacity and leadership in the security and environment sectors, education and science, transport and energy infrastructure. If the EU fails to maximize gains from this favorable position, it is not because of the strength of non-Western actors, or the ability of Western Balkan local actors to play different sides; it will be because of the EU's lack of ability.

The findings of the authors of this series point in the same direction. They show that the EU and the West have a strong position in the Balkans, yet this position has been challenged by other actors. They also make manifest that local politicians try to maximize gains they can get from different sides, because in this way they present themselves as able leaders to their people. In this context, as Martin Naunov pointedly asserts, the EU needs to make a decision – either it invests in building genuine partnerships with reform forces in the Balkans, or it accepts that other powers will build their own partnerships.

Conclusion
Foreign actors' Influence in the Western Balkans: Openings, Closures and Inside-Out Perspectives

Ioannis Armakolas

Introduction

The study of the Western Balkans has generated a great number of studies that focus on the role of external actors, not any more only the EU, the US and other Western countries, but increasingly also of other countries (Bechev 2017; Bieber and Tzifakis 2020; Öztürk 2021). Non-Western actors' involvement in the Balkans is not of course a new story, and it could not have been, since some of them, such as Turkey and Russia, have centuries' old history and tradition of presence and role in the region. But in recent years, a number of developments have attracted scholarly attention anew. Firstly, it is the onset of China for the first time in the role of a global power that may potentially question the Western policies and narrative about the region. Secondly, it is the weakening of the European perspective of the region and at the same time the persistent political, economic and security problems in the Western Balkans that stimulates the demand for new ideas, new policies and, no less, new actors. And thirdly, it is also the proliferation of actors of interest beyond the well-known Russia, China and Turkey that generates more research attention. Even though they do not yet attract as much research interest as the prominent trio, new studies have focused on Iran (Bishku 2016; Koppa 2020), the United Arab Emirates (Bartlett and Prelec 2020; Bartlett et.al. 2017; Prelec 2020), Saudi Arabia (Koppa 2020; Lilyanova 2017) and the Gulf States in general (Ejdus 2017; Mandaci 2017).

The Balkan Crossroads project has produced a number of interesting new perspectives focusing on the engagement of non-Western actors with the Western Balkans. These studies are compiled in this volume that has the ambition to make an insightful new contribution to the general scholarship on the Western Balkans. The studies included in this volume have three important advantages, compared to many other works. Firstly, unlike most generic scholarly

and policy-oriented studies, the chapters in this volume delve deeper into the substance of external powers' involvement in the Balkans. Surely, there are numerous studies that recount the, by now, well-known iconic Chinese investments or the attempts by Turkey to increase its footprint in the region. But most existing studies do not elaborate in detail the various dimensions of these countries' engagement with the region. The present volume includes a number of case studies that flesh out the details and explicate the precise mechanism of the broader policy influence of non-Western actors in the region. Secondly, the studies included in this volume are preoccupied with the actual and empirical content and side effects of the external powers' involvement in policy settings and socio-economic circumstances, rather than recounting the oft-repeated generic mantra about their 'malign' influence. The present studies do not of course exonerate non-Western policies from their negative impact, but wish to show to what extent and how these actually come about in reality. Thirdly, the present volume presents studies that are based on a wealth of empirical data, often collected under challenging circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, and are not simply reusing well-known developments and data found in other relevant studies.

In this concluding chapter, we attempt to offer insights into how the chapters of this volume may advance our understanding of the pragmatic impact of external actors' policies and interventions. To do this, we classify the studies into three thematic categories, which I believe offer valuable new angles. The first category, which we call here 'Openings', invite us to rethink the state of geopolitical play in the Western Balkans by highlighting alternatives to the Western vision for the full inclusion into Western institutions. These alternatives may be intended or even

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planned by non-Western powers, or they could derive from developments that are not of states' own making. The point of convergence though is that all these intended or unintended dynamics contribute to the weakening of the Western influence in the region and to the strengthening of the role of others.

The second category, which we call here 'Closures', point to the opposite direction. These are cases and developments that show the limitations, failure or quite simply negative dimensions of the activities and policies of non-Western powers. The 'closures' inevitably make many rethink whether non-Western influence should be welcome and reinstate the Western political vision and geopolitical thinking about the Western Balkans in their original pre-eminent place.

The third category, called here 'Inside-out', shifts the focus, from the geopolitical opportunities and failures of non-Western actors to the manner in which at domestic, national and sub-national level, stakeholders negotiate external influences. This perspective, thus, turns our attention from the role and policies of outside actors to the perspectives, perceptions, interests and policy preferences of the actors in the region. At its more standard understanding, this dimension has been referred to in the literature as 'demand side' explanations for foreign influence. This 'demand side' is the original inspiration for the 'inside-out' perspective proposed in this chapter. But the actual content here is somewhat deeper and broader, in the sense that it takes 'more seriously' the ability and desire of domestic actors to actively shape the relationship with external actors and effects of their footprint in the region. How and why this 'deepening' is preferable for analysis will be elaborated on in the relevant sections. It suffices here to mention that the 'inside-out' perspective will be split into two different sub-categories: a) one pertaining to 'political strategies and actorness' of domestic stakeholders, and b) one focusing on 'narratives and tools' used by domestic stakeholders when they negotiate the role and influence of external powers for their own objectives and agendas.

Openings

A number of studies and examples from the Balkan Crossroads project have sought to explicate the developments that signify a fundamental international change in the Western Balkan policy environment as a result of new foreign powers' engagements. They have also attempted to showcase the mechanisms through which such entanglements between old and new foreign influences occur. In this section, named 'Openings', we outline these examples and cases. For the purposes of our study, we view these ideas and developments as potential levers that could offer foreign actors options and opportunities for the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans, in the direction of weakening the West's role and influence and strengthening those of non-Western powers.

To begin with, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated geopolitical wrangling in the region, aggravating the pre-existing security, ethnic, political, economic and social problems (Latal, this volume, Chapter 11, 180). The opportune moment for non-Western powers was enabled or facilitated by the EU's lethargic and inadequate early response to the crisis and the unpredictable and counter-productive policies of the previous American President. As Srećko Latal notes, the developments and great power competition sparked by the pandemic could "put to shame even the best political thrillers" (Latal, this volume, Chapter 11, 171). China, Turkey, the Gulf states, Russia, the US and of course the EU have engaged in a tug of war to gain or maintain geopolitical advantages by offering assistance to the ailing governments and healthcare systems of the Western Balkans. Even though the EU is the only international actor able to offer a comprehensive and all-encompassing vision of inclusion for the region in its fold, its delays and failures, once more visible during the pandemic, opened up possibilities for other actors (Latal, this volume, Chapter 12). The cracks in the EU's vision and performance are of course a story foretold. As Latal notes (this volume, Chapter 12, 185), "the history of EU-Balkan relations shows that the EU's political influence in the region remained far below its massive financial engagement, is often tainted by mutual misunderstandings and mistrust, as well as overshadowed by other global actors' political, religious or cultural involvement".

Probably the one global actor that appeared to gain the most in the Western Balkans from this crisis has been China. Anastas Vangeli (this volume, Chapter 13) shows that the perception of China's role and the desire for engagement with China has evolved since the start of the COVID-19

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crisis. The initial phase, during which the pandemic was internationally mostly associated with China and the alleged pitfalls in Beijing's management of the crisis, the Western Balkan states followed the rest of the world in their scepticism towards the Chinese role. During the second phase ('mask diplomacy'), the Western Balkan states were more willing to engage with China due to potential benefits in stemming the pandemic's effects and given the sluggishness of EU assistance, but still most retained quite an ambivalent stance towards Beijing. During the third phase ('vaccine diplomacy'), most Western Balkan states started to even reluctantly recognise that cooperation with China could prove crucial.

Clearly though, in contrast to most Western Balkan states that adopted the cautious and reluctant approach, Serbia stood out for investing political capital and energy in intense engagement and cooperation with China. It was a bet that was criticised heavily by the EU and even politicians in the Western Balkans. But it was a bet that appears, at least at the time of writing of this piece, to be winning. Given the slow vaccine roll-out in the EU itself and even slower in the Western Balkans, Serbia established itself as one of the vaccination model countries in Europe. President Vučić's strategy of not relying on the EU system and instead agreeing on deliveries from Russia and China as well – a COVID-19 echo of Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy – struck a major PR victory when Serbia made her vaccines available to Western Balkan neighbours. When thousands of people from neighbouring countries crossed Serbia's borders to get vaccinated, many recognised a shaming of the EU and its ineffective policies in the region (Hopkins 2021).

Vangeli's study (this volume, Chapter 13) was published before this momentous Serbian victory. But his analysis had already showcased Serbia's different strategy. Vangeli called Serbia's approach an "active opportunity-seeking" one, "as opposed to the under-the radar approach of other governments, which altered between opportunism and cautiousness" (this volume, Chapter 13, 200). Vangeli's analysis outlines four different ideal types of attitudes towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) active opportunity seeking; (2) cautious opportunity utilization; (3) active alarmism; and (4) threat avoidance. His interesting conclusion is that few actors adopted 'extreme' and vocal/visible engagement or opposition to China (Vangeli this volume, Chapter 13, 13-14). The Serbian government was the only one in the region to adopt the 'active opportunity seeking' strategy that praised China and invested heavily

in Beijing's cooperation and assistance. It was also the only one to openly antagonise and belittle the EU for its COVID-19 policy in the Balkans (Simic 2020), an outlook that was reflected also in the Serbian media, which was heavily biased against the EU and in favour of China (Burazer et.al. 2021). At the other end of the spectrum, only pro-Western and pro-European civil society in the region was 'active alarmist', i.e vocal in its opposition to China and objecting to cooperation and assistance on geopolitical grounds.

The rest of the region's governments adopted a more pragmatic approach that sought not to alienate China, irrespective of their stance on the cooperation and assistance question. Vangeli classifies this approach in the 'under the radar' category and identifies two types of approaches: the 'cautious opportunity utilization', which engages with China without being very vocal about it, and the 'threat avoidance', which avoids collaboration with China, but again without 'much noise'. Vangeli's classification is useful in that it allows us to view the evolution of government policies in the region. Evidently, unlike Serbia, most Western Balkan countries probably preferred to rely on the EU, the prime actor in their foreign policy orientations. But the inability of the EU to secure timely deliveries in sufficient quantities, as well as Serbia's successful vaccine diplomacy, led some governments to revisit their earlier preferences and opt for a more balanced approach in hopes of quick recovery from the worst effects of the pandemic (e.g. Reuters 2021). Still, whether a government stood on the acceptance or rejection of collaboration side of the argument, pragmatism led to keeping a low profile about it.

And yet, critics would argue that by overly focusing on the role of the COVID-19 pandemic, one would lose sight of the broader macro-historical developments surrounding China's involvement in the Western Balkans. Vangeli instead would argue that "China already has a significant ideational impact on how elites in various regions think not only of the global political economy, but also their role in it" (2021b, 3), and that this is also the case with the Western Balkans. Vangeli understands the ideational impact of China as "context-shaping", in the sense that it redefines "the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others" (in Vangeli, this volume, Chapter 3, 6). And he analyses the question of that ideational impact at two different levels: by focusing on the question of intentionality and on the degree of mediation (direct or indirect impact). In this way, the analysis encompasses both influences that pertain to Western Balkan states' direct

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relationship to China and its flagship platforms, and more broadly the same states' understandings of global affairs and the place and influence of China in them.

The four different pathways identified by the analysis of Vangeli offer multiple dimensions for analysing the intricate relationship between China and the Western Balkans. They show, for example, that Chinese influence was challenged by pre-existing and enduring knowledge and stereotypes, while the new relations developed were sometimes initiated by political elites, but not necessarily accepted by people in the Western Balkans. Similarly, the question of the Chinese role became a hotly contested issue in domestic politics, which limited the potential for China's influence, while inadvertently implicating the Chinese in domestic political antagonisms and competition, which was not of course of their making or under their control.

Moreover, political elites held an instrumental outlook on the Chinese role, which meant that they welcomed the practical benefits of the relationship with the Asian giant without typically questioning their broader geopolitical preferences or accepting China's more holistic global transformational mindset. The fact that it becomes

progressively clearer that in relations with China, or more broadly in geopolitical arrangements, "you can't have your cake and eat it too", likely makes the greater influence of China less palatable. Thus, this element also largely shows the limitations of the ideational impact of China, in that it questions the transformational outcomes that were apparently intended or hoped for by Beijing. This contradiction between intended outcomes and Balkan actors' realities "stems from the belief (or rather desire) that growing Sino-Balkan economic cooperation can be achieved without causing any significant disturbances in the geopolitical status quo. Conversely, the most significant ideational non-impact among Western Balkan elites has been the misrecognition of the point that the rise of China and its ability to become an economic actor in the region is a result of a disturbance of the status quo to begin with." (Vangeli, this volume, Chapter 3, 51) With the realisation that deeper engagement with China does have geopolitical implications, both intended by China and inadvertent, and may prove a risky strategy, comes also a reluctance by many Balkan political elites. As Vangeli notes, "some are ready to embrace the risk, while others look for ways to avoid it" (Vangeli, this volume, Chapter 3, 52).

Closures

This section in a sense adopt the opposite outlook. If the previous section presented 'openings' or opportunities for greater non-Western influence, the present section will show the negative side of the same story. By 'Closures' we consider manifestations of non-Western influence that illustrate these actors' limitations, their failures or point to negative influence. The same manifestations recall or restore a more benign, and at the end of the day preferable, role by Western partners. By 'closures' in other words we outline developments that limit the scope for alternatives and reinstate the Western Balkans back to the geopolitical and policy vision that was established after the end of the Yugoslav wars and aims to place the region in a solid path towards liberal democracy and integration in the Western institutions.

We will avoid here the label 'malign influence', which is not uncommon in Western policy circles and think tank analyses (e.g. Pyatt 2021). As will become clearer in this section, this 'black knight versus white knight' approach helps little our understanding of the complex processes involved in non-Western foreign powers' involvement in the region. Instead,

by 'closure' we point to a narrowing of scope for foreign non-Western actors' influence, which is however based on real world deficiencies of the systems that promote these interventions and the sometimes inherent gear to sub-optimal or potentially harmful outcomes.

For starters, one example examined by the Balkan Crossroads project has been the cooperation of the Serbian government with China's Huawei in the framework of the project 'Safe City', a project that could represent for some the "sum of all fears" (Bjeloš, this volume, Chapter 9). What raises eyebrows is the confluence of the introduction of advanced surveillance technology, which includes facial recognition software, originating from an authoritarian country well-known for its use of technology for social surveillance purposes, in a European country that is backsliding in its process of democratic consolidation (European Commission 2020; Bieber 2020; Pavlovic 2020). Maja Bjeloš (this volume, Chapter 9) shows the dangers of introducing such technologies in a country with inadequate checks and balances. More importantly, it shows the widening gap in perspectives between the

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Serbian government and the vibrant Serbian civil society. The former confidently pushes the 'Safe City' agenda by portraying it as a modernising project for the country that will help fight crime and terrorism. At the same time, the government has kept the project outside democratic supervision and civic oversight by keeping it under 'classified status'. The civil society is highly critical of the manner in which such technologies are introduced and points to the dangers of their misuse by the state and the government of the day. It also emphasises the lack of adequate legislation to guarantee freedoms and rights. And finally, it also calls for a national debate on the legal, political and social implications of the adoption of smart surveillance technologies.

In this regard, the Serbian civil society is spot on. As in many countries, public opinion is inadequately informed and has difficulties in comprehending the implications that such advanced technologies may have for ordinary citizens' lives as well as for the health of democratic institutions. Instead, ordinary citizens, poorly informed and no-doubt influenced by pro-China reporting in government-controlled media, seem to allow their general positive attitudes towards China (Bjeloš, Vuksanović and Sterić 2020) to overshadow the dangers of the 'Safe City' project.

The fact that the project continued unabated, and even intensified, during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the Serbian government would not be restrained from civil society criticism. At the same time, the issue raises the question of the extent to which the EU can influence a country negotiating accession in the direction of democratic consolidation (Dzankic et.al. 2019). Mainstream European studies literature (Grabbe 2006; Vachudova 2005) posits that such EU influence is high at exactly the phase where Serbia finds itself at present, i.e. when the country is negotiating the opening and closing of various chapters. It appears though that such influence has been waning in the case of Serbia, while European Commission monitoring itself has done little to highlight the need that Serbia conforms with European practice on the issue (e.g. European Commission 2020), or to dissuade the Serbian government from rapid introduction of smart surveillance systems.

In another study published by the Balkan Crossroads project, Tena Prelec (this volume, Chapter 8) shows how some of the most iconic Chinese investments in the Balkans have been implicated in prominent or lesser-known examples of adverse environmental impact, a topic that, as the author notes, has not received scholarly attention equal to the more geopolitical dimensions of China's presence in the region (but see also Tsimonis et al. 2020). For Prelec, the standard 'Chinese-bad vs. Western-good' investments narrative is too simplistic to capture the nuances inherent in the process. Environmental problems in the towns investigated existed even before the Chinese takeovers of the local heavy industries. Past Western investors could also not be exonerated from any responsibility for the dire situation, while the negative side effects of "improperly designed or implemented neoliberal reform programmes" should also be factored in (Prelec, this volume, Chapter 8, 130). Moreover, the EU itself still does not place high on the agenda of relations with Serbia the question of negative environmental effects from Chinese investments. And this is despite the fact that, overall, the Serbian government's energy legislation and policies appear to clearly diverge from the standards set by the EU's energy transition objectives, as well as those of the Energy Community, to which Serbia is a signatory.

And yet, Prelec clearly shows how the situation has deteriorated in recent years under Chinese ownership of these key industries, while local communities and civic activists have also mobilised in response to the Chinese-led aggravation of the environmental conditions. Prelec's analysis is possibly at its best when showing nuances in China-Serbian government relations and the balance of responsibility. As in the case of the 'Safe City' project, the picture of intentions and interests is more complicated than the 'black and white' conceptions of Chinese undue 'outside-in influence' on 'weak' domestic political actors. Instead, Prelec shows that the negative policy outcomes are a confluence of actions and interests by both foreign and domestic actors, or as she calls it, following Tsimonis et.al. (2020), a 'synergy of failures'. At the end of the day, it is the intentions, interests, weaknesses and failures of domestic elites and institutions that enable potential negative consequences of foreign economic activity, no matter what the intentions of the foreign actors could have originally been. And conversely, it is the "quality of the governance of the recipient country [that] matters more than the foreign actor's practices in ensuring that investments are transparent and beneficial for the whole population" (Prelec, this volume, Chapter 8, 130).

Interestingly, recent trends in foreign influence in the region have curiously even produced counter-intuitive closures, which risk undermining relations that had previously been on a good footing. Turkey's relations with Western Balkan

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states have traditionally been based on mutual benefit, and are surely legitimate and historically-grounded. But Turkey's illiberal turn (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2019) and the increasing centrality of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkish foreign policy (Görener and Ucal 2011; Kesgin 2020) have altered relations with Western Balkan states. Gentiola Madhi's paper (this volume, Chapter 10) analyses the recent evolution of relations between Turkey and the two Albanian majority states in the region, Albania and Kosovo, a relationship that had previously been very positive and multifaceted. In recent years though, bilateral relations have taken a 'personal diplomacy' turn, with the leaders of Albania and Kosovo, PM Edi Rama and previous President Hashim Thaci respectively, and President Erdoğan cultivating special personal relations that go above and beyond the normal and typical friendly relations of their respective countries.

Madhi shows how the such personal relations make sense in the context of the personal political strategies of the three leaders, but could prove counter-productive for the national interest of the weaker side in this relationship, which is of course the two Western Balkan countries. As Madhi notes, [i]n the presence of weak governing systems, the 'personal diplomacy' approach may facilitate access to the governmental affairs of other countries by means of preferential treatments, such as investment bids, blurring the line between foreign and domestic affairs (this volume, Chapter 10, 154). The author focuses on two particular issues, which have become central policy considerations for Erdoğan's Turkey, but which when exported as policy problems and demands to Western Balkan states may endanger their fragile social balance or risk weak democratic and state institutions; the two questions are Turkey's religious agenda and the quashing of Gulenist circles and institutions abroad. The two Western Balkan countries' responses to these policy priorities of Turkey have not been identical: "In the case of Albania, Prime Minister Rama has adopted an ambivalent approach vis-à-vis Turkey's agenda, and his concessions to the Turkish requests have been duly rewarded. Whereas, in the case of Kosovo, Thaçi's friendship with Erdoğan has resulted less balanced in terms of mutual empowerment. The satisfaction of Turkish requests has resulted in an exploitation of Kosovo's domestic vulnerabilities in favour of the Turkish corrosive agenda." (Madhi, this volume, Chapter 10, 153)

And while Edi Rama has been more resistant to Turkey's attempt to meddle in the domestic politics of the two Western Balkan states, on balance both leaders have extended concessions to Turkey in return for political support by Erdoğan or the inflow of Turkish funds (Madhi this volume, Chapter 10, 164). The recent support provided by the Turkish leader to the Albanian Prime Minister ahead of the critical parliamentary elections of April 2021 is a case of point. The support included the construction by Turkey of a brand-new hospital in Albania in under three-months-time and just in time for its inauguration a few days before the critical April 2021 elections (Daily Sabah 2021). Overall, as Madhi explains, both special friendships "have been promoted on the basis of a temporary congruence of interests and calculated political benefits, missing therefore a structural basis for an institutionalisation at the state level" (this volume, Chapter 10, 153), while even the evolution of these relations show that little can be expected for turning "leaders' personal ties into more stable institutional relations" (this volume, Chapter 10, 164).

At the end of the day, given Turkey's authoritarian turn and the weakening of EU leverage and influence in the Western Balkans, the "fraternization of the countries' leaders" can have corrosive effects on Albania's and Kosovo's still-ailing democracies. "The frequent visits of the Albanian leaders to Ankara and Istanbul and the closed-door meetings with the Turkish President have managed to bypass all the traditional decision-making and tracing procedures of the state administrations, in disrespect of public transparency and governmental accountability standards" (Madhi, this volume, Chapter 10, 164). What this study shows is that the negative side effects of external influence, or 'closures' as they have been termed in this paper, can even work against past positive influence or policy engagement of the same actors. Turkey's past record of assisting the countries of the Western Balkans in their lengthy post-Communist and post-conflict transition can nowadays be seen as more ambiguous development. Given Turkey's authoritarian turn, even positive past associations can potentially turn against the Western Balkans' process of democratic consolidation and efforts to join the European Union.

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Inside–Out: Dimension I – Political Strategies and Actorness

The discussion in the previous section has highlighted that for fully understanding the mechanism of negative foreign influence in the Western Balkans, more scholarly attention should be paid to the 'demand side' explanations. The perspective of highlighting the responsibility of domestic elites and political forces and their central role in reaching decisions that facilitate the growing role and influence of foreign powers has attracted considerable interest. In recent years, an increasing number of analysts have aspired to understand that demand side in order to assess, for example, the leverage and influence of China more accurately (e.g. Brautigam and Rithmire 2021; Jones and Hameiri 2020). But demand side explanations are of course not new in the Western Balkans and are not isolated to the case of China. As Bechev notes, when highlighting the role of Balkan actors aiding the influence of Russia in the region, there have always been "willing associates and accomplices", "fellow travellers" or "political chancers" ready to do the job in order to advance their political and economic interests (Bechev 2017, 247-248).

In this chapter, rather than simply focusing on the demand side we propose to focus more broadly on dynamics that emanate from the domestic and have an outward orientation or a so-called 'inside-out' perspective. The preference for the 'inside-out' is because it highlights that the analysis should not only focus on domestic actors and their policies, but also on the fact these actors project their visions, ideas and interests onto the foreign agency or the perception of it and its influence. The outcome is not simply an interaction of foreign ('outside-in') and domestic perspectives and policies, but a condition whereby the foreign agency is stripped of its 'objective' attributes and increasingly is being portrayed, imagined, perceived through the lenses of domestic actors and their competing interests, preferences and agendas. In this section the focus is on domestic actors' political strategies and actorness, while the next section will focus on their narratives and tools.

To begin with, a case in point is the intricacies of ethnic Macedonians' relationship with the West. In his study, Naunov (this volume, Chapter 6) argues convincingly that there is more than meets the eye when it comes to ethnic Macedonian attitudes on their country's geopolitical orientation. Naunov is using an abundance of public opinion polls to show that the North Macedonia's pro-Western orientation is not as well-anchored in public

attitudes as is often assumed. More specifically, it is not only differentiated with regards to the national background of respondents in North Macedonia, with ethnic Albanians being more pro-Western in their orientation, a fact that is already well-known from the literature. It is also that there is a noticeably strong and widening division in the ethnic Macedonian public opinion body between those who are distinctly pro-EU and pro-NATO and those who are uncertain about their sympathies and are receptive to anti-Western political messages.

Naunov shows that this division has a lot to do with party preferences and alignment with either of the two main pillars of the Macedonian party spectrum (Hislope 2013). Anti-Western attitudes are much more pronounced and increasingly popular among voters of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE, while the voters of the presently ruling centre-left SDSM tend to move towards the opposite direction, being much more and increasingly pro-Western. VMRO-DPMNE supporters are much more sceptical of or divided over the country's Western geopolitical orientation; they are overwhelmingly ready to see approvingly the cultivation of stronger political relations with Russia; and more likely to recognise affinity with Russia when it comes to morality and values, as well as culture and intellectual life, compared to affinities with the West in the same spheres.

A fascinating feature is that, for all the famed anti-Western attitudes of many Serbs in the region, Naunov shows that Macedonian conservative party supporters seem to outdo their Serbian counterparts in anti-Western sentiment. As he notes, "54% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters and 51% of Vučić's SNS supporters believe that the EU is pushing their country to jettison its traditional values, as opposed to helping them embrace a more liberating conception of values and rights. In comparison, 41% of supporters… [of the] … Serb [Member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Presidency] Milorad Dodik's SNSD party…—a pro-Russia party that espouses Serb nationalism—are similarly wary of the EU's influence in the human rights sphere." (Naunov, this volume, Chapter 6, 93) Similarly, the supporters of Serbian President Vučić's party are much more willing to accept stronger ties with the EU, compared to supporters of Hristijan Mickocki's VMRO-DPMNE.

Thus, the 'demand side' explanation is important for understanding the complex geopolitics of North Macedonia. Naunov's analysis shows clearly that a

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significant 'appetite' for non-Western influence, in this case Russian, but prospectively not only that, is there at both the level of political elites – here one of the two main pillars of the party system, VMRO-DPMNE – and with a notable portion of the society, which is receptive to an anti-Western message, whether tacit or explicit. Naunov's main innovation is that he proposes an explanation for this not-always-plainly observable phenomenon and a VMRO-DPMNE-led mechanism through which it seems to function. And this functioning is in a convoluted manner, because declaratively the former ruling party remains true to its country's pro-Western foreign policy (Koneska 2014), as this stance brings with it international political and economic rewards. Using party cueing theory, Naunov shows that VMRO-DPMNE has "found a way to play it both ways", and effectively its elites "have not only consistently ignored key Euro-Atlantic principles, but they have also openly defied expressed EU demands concerning corruption, ethnic intolerance, and democratic erosion." (Naunov, this volume, Chapter 6, 94; also Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020) Ordinary voters and party supporters have decoded the dual strategy of the VMRO-DPMNE elites, recognising that the party's "commitment to the EU and NATO is disingenuous and almost solely pragmatic" (Naunov, this volume, Chapter 6, 94). Party supporters, thus, have tended to align with what they recognise as the genuine political ideas and values, rejecting the pro-Western orientation, an option increasingly associated primarily with the centre-left SDSM, and increasingly espousing anti-Western preferences.

Similarly, for Vladisavljev (this volume, Chapter 2), China was a cornerstone of the political agenda developed by Serbian political elites in the last decade. The so-called 'steel friendship' between China and Serbia rested on economic, political, technological and infrastructure components, all of which were crucial for President Vučić's and his government's evolving politics and gradual domination of SNS in the Serbian political landscape. Vladisavljev argues that the popularity of China among Serbian citizens provided new opportunities to Vučić and his political option, offering them the legitimacy to pursue a political agenda, that could not but be seen as highly controversial, and eventually consolidate political power like no other party since the 1990s. In that context, the ruling elites of Serbia both used the China factor to further centralise political power and achieve control over the state apparatus, and utilised such a stranglehold on the state and politics to further deepen the partnership with China

(Prelec, this volume, Chapter 1; Vladisavljev, this volume, Chapter 2).

The way in which domestic actors implicate or utilise foreign powers in their political competition and disputes is also nicely illustrated in the paper by Stefan Jojić (this volume, Chapter 5), which takes us to Serbia's sub-national level. The foreign power in question is Turkey and the various domestic stakeholders of the Bosniak community in Serbia. Analyses of Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans typically focus on the foreign policy of Turkey per se, the various levels in which Turkish presence in the region unfolds (political-diplomatic, economic, cultural etc.), the activity of Turkish organisations and agencies or the top level bilateral interactions between Ankara and Western Balkan states.

Jojić's study reverses the usual focus of analysis to turn our attention to the reception of the Turkish presence, either as actual policies, prospective involvement or merely image and reputation of Turkey, by domestic actors, and more specifically those of the Bosniak community localities in the Sandžak region of Serbia. Jojić's analysis makes plain the multiplicity of realities on the ground: the lived experience of being a Bosniak minority in Serbia; the reality of a collapsed local economy that never revitalised since the end of Communism; the fierce competition of the main Bosniak parties, SDA, SDP, SPP, and their clientelist networks, access to power holders in Belgrade or their participation in the ruling structures; even the complexity of Serbia having two different and conflicting Islamic Community official structures both claiming authority over the country's Muslim populations.

Thus, Turkey enters the picture, not simply as an important regional actor that diplomatically engages with the official government in Belgrade; nor merely as a foreign country with which the Bosniak nation traditionally has an emotional attachment and affinity (Huskic 2020). Instead, Turkey is negotiated by local stakeholders as a political imaginary, on the basis of the experience of its policies, and as a prospective influential actor. Thus, far from constituting a monolithic whole receptive of unilateral influence from Turkey, these local Bosniak actors negotiate the power and influence of Ankara on the basis of their own intricate and interlocking perceptions, preferences and interests, as well as in the context of the power relations and competition among the various local stakeholders.

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Inside–Out: Dimension II – Narratives and Tools

The previous section focused on the political strategies and agency of domestic actors, who actively negotiate the role and agency of foreign powers in an effort to make the most of their political agenda. But, while this could be seen as the 'hard' component of the inside-out perspective, the seeming 'soft' dimension is also crucial. Inextricably linked to domestic actors' strategies that utilise foreign influence to advance their political agendas are political narratives that provide meaning and vision to the association with foreign powers. A case in point is again Serbia. Prelec (this volume, Chapter 1) illustrates how non-Western foreign investment, less transparent, less scrutinised and potentially more environmentally harmful, has been part and parcel of the narrative about Serbia's 'economic rebound' promoted by Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS after 2012. As political need and opportunity for the ruling party changed, so did their narrative about who was the main non-Western power coming to the rescue of Serbia. And accordingly, the changing dominant narrative was inextricably linked to the conception of Serbian foreign policy as closely associated with powerful non-Western actors.

Similarly, two studies by Ognjan Denkovski (this volume, Chapter 7) are engaging with the same broader question of domestic demand for foreign influence or the inside-out dimension as we have put it in this paper, but direct their focus rather to the tools available for such influence. The rationale and perspective remain the same: inside-out projections of domestic interests and agenda. But here, instead of strategies and narratives, the focus is on instruments and levers that facilitate the utilisation of foreign influences for domestic purposes. Using innovative methodological techniques, Denkovski investigates the strange world of North Macedonia's computational propaganda and disinformation campaigns in social media, and how they relate to foreign actors (in this case primarily Russia) interests and policies in the region; the topic is relatively fresh, but it has lately started attracting noteworthy media and scholarly attention (Metodieva 2019). Denkovski convincingly shows that, not-incidentally, the computational tools and platforms that were mobilised to influence public discourse in milestone political moments during the last couple of years benefited the main two parties – namely, VMRO-DPMNE and the hard-left 'Levica' – that fiercely attacked the decisions that the Skopje government reached in order to secure its pro-Western geopolitical orientation.

Likewise, computational propaganda tools challenged ideas, values and policy preferences associated with this pro-Western policy path. In addition, the fact that the same platforms tend to spread global right-wing conspiratorial content makes them facilitators par excellence of Russian propaganda or prime users of anti-Western content generated by dubious Russian outlets (Denkovski, this volume, Chapter 7 – Study II). Denkovski found strong alignment between the content and political message generated through computational disinformation methods and the "geo-political goals of foreign actors opposed to the country's progress on its Euro-Atlantic integration path" (Denkovski, this volume, Chapter 7 – Study II, 115).

In both his studies, Denkovski concedes that there is no conclusive evidence in his analysis confirming that foreign actors have indeed been implicated in the setting up, guidance or orchestration of these computational propaganda campaigns. But what is clearly concluded from the studies is that the 'demand' for anti-Western influence is clearly there in the actors and audiences sympathetic to this message, as are the tools for well-organized anti-Western propaganda. As the author notes, "…the conditions for easy entry by actors interested in developing disinformation campaigns in the country are present, both in terms of technical know-how and existing networks of (automated) accounts which promote anti-Western sentiments." (Denkovski, this volume, Chapter 7 – Study I, 100) Foreign actors wishing to derail the anyway turbulent process of North Macedonia's accession to Western institutions "… need only to tap into the already robust resources available, and some may have already done so" (Denkovski, this volume, Chapter 7 – Study II, 124).

Conclusions

In this chapter we proposed three categories to assist us in conceptualizing external influence from a different perspective. By the category 'Openings' we referred to the ways in which external actors' policies open up new possibilities and potentially offer opportunities for new geopolitical arrangements and hierarchies that are not fully in line with the Western vision for the region, which has been hegemonic since the end of the Yugoslav wars. By the category 'Closures' we referred to the failures and limitations of these alternatives that, as a result, reinforce the Western political vision about the Western Balkans and point to its inevitability or superiority compared to alternatives. By the category 'Inside-out' we referred to processes that shift our analytical attention from the outside-in policies and influences by external powers to the way that domestic actors perceive these influences and integrate them in their political agendas, and how in turn they repackage and redirect them to 'external' audiences, whether domestic or international, so as to achieve their objectives. For the third category we identified two sub-categories: political agendas and actorness, and narratives and tools.

For the category of 'Openings', we identified the opportunities that were offered by the COVID-19 pandemic to non-Western actors to increase their footprint and capitalize of the failures of the EU policies in response to the pandemic. We also included in this category the discussion about the ideational impact of China in the Western Balkans. Under the category 'Closures' we included the negative consequences of the Serbian government's introduction of Chinese technology in the context of the 'Safe City' project and also the environmental effects of the Chinese investments in Serbia's heavy industry. We also included in this category the establishment and consolidation of personal relations between the leaders of Turkey on the one hand and Albania and Kosovo on the other, which have brought with them some negative impact on the latter two countries' democratic institutions.

Then, under the category 'Inside-out', and more specifically the sub-category of political strategies and actorness, we included the leadership cues of the VMRO-DPMNE officials in North Macedonia, who navigated between the official support for the country's pro-Western foreign policy orientation and the indirect approval of policies and values that are at odds with the Western partners, but speak more to the heart of their party's base and voters. We also

included in this sub-category the Serbian leadership's uses of the 'steel friendship' with China and the intricate ways in which Turkey's image and influence is used and adapted by Bosniak political and religious actors in the Sandžak region of Serbia in accordance with their different agendas and for use in their local competition for power and influence. Last but not least, we have discussed the sub-category of narratives and tools and included in it the Serbian government's narrative of economic rebound with the help of non-Western powers, but also the multiple opportunities that computational propaganda tools in North Macedonia offer for non-Western foreign influence.

What became clear from the various analyses in this volume is that the situation in the Western Balkans is far from the simplistic view of 'malign versus benign' foreign influences. The simplistic view may be suitable for certain Western policy makers in their effort to generate popular support in the Western Balkans and for demanding alignment of policies by the region's governments. But it is not adequate for analysis and for understanding the complex reality of influences and agendas in the region. For one thing, not every Western policy is necessary good for the region, while non-Western powers do bring some advantages to the countries that decide to engage with them. Having said that, it is also a misrepresentation of reality to argue that 'anything goes' in the region and that the policies and intentions of non-Western actors are as good or as bad as the ones of the EU or the US. There is certainly merit to the good intentions of Western actors, especially the EU which has invested substantial financial means and political capital in the democratization and development of the Western Balkans, and has offered an inclusive vision to the entire region.

As Srećko Latal notes in his study, the EU remains both "the only actor that does not seem to have its own self-serving agenda in the Balkans" and "the only player with the capacity to stabilize and normalize the region in the long run" (this volume, Chapter 11, 181). But because of that, one is left wondering why the EU's political impact fails to match its economic input into the region, and also why some peoples in the Western Balkans even underestimate this economic contribution. Part of the story is the bad publicity and 'bad mouthing' that the EU receives from 'unfriendly' leaderships in the region. But, as the contributions in this volume have shown, the EU is also responsible for either repeatedly failing to act in timely and effective manner in

response to the region's problems or for doing a poor job in taking full advantage of its superior position in relation to other foreign players (Latal, this volume, Chapters 4, 11, 12; Vangeli, this volume, Chapter 13). In addition, as the case of the recent complications that have stalled Skopje's EU accession process anew show, the EU policy can fall victim to the national interests of its own member states and their blocking power. This then can have highly detrimental effects for the EU's role in the region. Naunov in his study cautions against the EU taking for granted friendly states like North Macedonia: "… asking North Macedonia for a rain check again and again could irreparably endanger Macedonian citizens' trust in the EU and in the credibility of EU commitment to the country which … is already more precarious than is often assumed" (Naunov, this volume, Chapter 6, 97).

Another conclusion from the studies in this volume is that the idea that domestic actors are simply weak recipients of external influences could not be farther from the truth. The discussion of the demand side or inside-out perspectives in our chapter has shown that domestic elites and their strategies are crucial enabling factors in the environment for foreign influence. No matter the real intentions of countries like China, Russia, Turkey or others, the scene is already set and the opportunities for foreign influence replete. Both elites and societies that do not anymore find solace in or are not convinced by the necessity or inevitability of the macro-political objective of integration in the West can be sympathetic to influence by non-Western actors. Moreover, as it became evident in our volume, domestic political forces are not even compliant receivers of such influence and instead they actively shape the image and message of foreign actors in view of making them serve their broader political agenda and interests.

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