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THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AS A 'PILLAR' IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC¹

ABSTRACT In the opinion of many researchers, Sino-Serbian bilateral relations during the COVID-19 pandemic have hit an all-time high. The People's Republic of China was the first country to aid Serbia in the face of internal problems within the European Union. The EU's inconsistent policy during the global health crisis has enabled political and economic rapprochement of Belgrade with Beijing and Moscow. In addition, it seems that the political influence of the United States and the European Union on the domestic and foreign policy of Serbia is weakening. Due to the specificity of Serbian media, the Chinese republic is also gaining many supporters among Serb citizens. The pro-government media coverage is supplemented by the government's praise of the Chinese leadership. Regarding the Four Pillar Foreign Policy strategy introduced by the then President Boris Tadić, it appears that despite Serbia's ongoing EU accession process, the People's Republic of China appears to be the most significant 'pillar' in Serbia's foreign policy during COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: China, Russia, European Union, United States, COVID-19, Four Pillar Policy, vaccine diplomacy, mask diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China, according to the "four-pillar policy" introduced by the then president of the Republic of Serbia Boris Tadić in 2009, is one of the core elements of the Balkan state foreign policy strategy.² The above-mentioned "four pillars" consist of the European Union (EU), the United States (US), Russia (RF), and China (PRC). The analysis of European Parliament shows that each power has their own preferences when dealing with Serbia. The EU focuses primarily on rule of law, aid and investment policy, the US on security, Russian on energy and foreign policy support, and lastly, China on infrastructure and markets.³ Bilateral cooperation gained its momentum before the COVID-19 pandemic. Sino-Serbian relations are a part of China-led multilateral initiatives such as 16+1 cooperation mechanism (2012) and Belt and Road Initiative (2013).⁴ Serbia and China have declared that the two countries share a close and long-standing friendship. As argued, the above narrative seems to have emerged or at least significantly intensified only after the start of a closer economic cooperation under BRI and 16+1.⁵ Despite the considerable trade deficit in bilateral relations in 2020 (Serbia exports 377.03 million USD; imports 3.29 billion USD), both sides maintain high level of investment activities.⁶ The most significant investment projects undertaken in Serbia by the Chinese companies are: Pupin Bridge in Belgrade (China Road and Bridge Corporation); High-Speed Railway linking Belgrade and Budapest (China Communications Construction Company); two sections of Corridor 11, highway E-736: Obrenovac-Ub and Lajkovac-Ljig (China Shandong International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group); highway from Surčin-Obrenovac (China Communication Construction Company); Kostolac B Power Plant (China National Machinery and Equipment Import & Export Corporation); Block 3 of Nikola Tesla B Thermal Power Plant in Obrenovac (China Environmental Energy Holdings, Shenzhen Energy Group); steel mill Zelezara in Smederevo (HBIS Group).⁷

² *Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America*, Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament, p. 11, at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/133504/Serbia%20cooperation%20with%20China,%20the%20EU,%20Russia%20and%20the%20USA.pdf>, November 2017, 20 May 2021.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ K. Zakić, "The Results and Risks of China's Belt and Road Investment Projects in Serbia", *The Review of International Affairs, The Institute of International Politics and Economics*, vol. LXXI, no. 1180, X-XII (2020), p. 46.

⁵ J. Gledić, "The Development of Sino-Serbian Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative: Forging the 'Iron Friendship'", *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2019), p. 22.

⁶ Trade data retrieved from United Nations Comtrade Database, accessible at <https://comtrade.un.org/>, 10 June 2021.

⁷ D. Dimitrijević, "Chinese Investments in Serbia – A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road", *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1(22) (2017), pp. 71-76.

The aim of this article is to identify the tools of the Chinese People's Republic's foreign policy in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia. Latest developments in Serbia – especially in the eve of global health crisis – have slightly changed the scope of cooperation, considering Sino-Serbian multifaceted partnership. Serbia is a non-EU or NATO member; thus, it can undertake a broader set of cooperation with China. The Balkan country claims to have become one of China's best friends in Europe.⁸ First, in 2009 China signed agreement on strategic partnership with Serbia.⁹ In 2016, bilateral relations between the two countries have been lifted to “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2016.¹⁰ This article attempts to answer the following questions: Is the growing position of China in Serbian media leading to the negative perception of other great powers, namely Russia, the EU, and the US? What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's position in Serbia? What is the general perception of China by the Serbian population, and what are the consequences of a particular approach to China's activities? The media coverage, medical aid, as well as the issue of Foreign Direct Investments will be the main indicators for impact comparison.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the concept of *encoding and decoding in the television discourse* introduced by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall in 1973. This theoretical approach explains how the media coverage is produced, disseminated, and later interpreted. As Hall argues, it is essential to study *the whole mass communication process*, starting from the structure of the production, finishing on the audience perception and use of the information.¹¹ There are two main models of communication. The first model presented in Hall's work consists of three main components, which are sender, message, and receiver. As it is the most basic communication model, it has been widely criticized for its linearity and briefness of structured interpretation of numerous moments as a combined composition of relations. Therefore, the second model of communication has been divided into four stages: production, circulation, use, and re-production. As regards to production, it is crucial to understand that the sender has encoded the message in the process of creation. It means that the “producer” of a message is rooted in a specific set of society's beliefs and values and is trying to deliver them to the ‘receiver.’ Regarding circulation, much importance is being put on the distribution

⁸ P. Le Corre, *China's Rise as a Geoeconomic Influencer: Four European Case Studies*, Asia Focus #93, Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 36, at <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Asia-Focus-93.pdf>, November 2018, 20 May 2021.

⁹ D. Mitrović, “China in the Western East – and Beyond: Politics and Economics of the China Plus Sixteen Cooperation Framework”, *Serbian Political Thought*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2014), p. 43.

¹⁰ *Sino-Serbia Ties Lifted to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, 20 June 2016, CCTV, at <http://english.cctv.com/2016/06/20/VIDEgNcmAiO84PRCOgAziWVy160620.shtml>, 21 May 2021.

¹¹ S. Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”, *Council of Europe Colloquy*, September 1973, p. 1.

of the message (visual, audio, audio-video or written form) because it influences how the audience will receive it and put it to use.¹² Third, the use, often called “consumption”, is a crucial element for the meaningful decoding process. The message must be adopted in a meaningful discourse, and this process requires an active recipient. Finally, reproduction occurs directly when the audience interpreted the message based on their own beliefs and experiences. The producer (sender) should observe if the message caused the receiver (audience) to take a specific action.¹³ As Hall further elaborates, due to certain levels of asymmetry between the encoder-producer and decoder-receiver, the message can be distorted, thus leading to misunderstanding or misuse.¹⁴

As for the methodology, a case study method has been applied. Qualitative case study methodology provides tools to study complex phenomena within their contexts. As Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack argue, this method ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses, which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.¹⁵ The method benefits from a prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection and analysis, and as another result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion.¹⁶

Case study samples of China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States has been drawn from the Serbia’s “Four Pillar Policy” strategy. Application of the above method within the presented theoretical framework can help with understanding processes and events affecting bilateral relations between the countries and organizations.

BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS. CREATING A CHINA’S POSITIVE IMAGE IN SERBIA

Considering China’s economic growth and its increasing international potential, Beijing expects international public opinion to have a favorable and affirmative image of the People’s Republic of China. China’s efforts to lift its population out of poverty, numerous contributions to international peace missions, and the Chinese aids to the less developed regions in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia are aimed at the world’s stability. However, they are also serving to build a favorable image of the country. It is worth noting that those efforts do not automatically translate into advantageous perception by the global audience.¹⁷ Nowadays, the general public opinion is mainly in-

¹² H. Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, London 2004.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ P.E. Baxter, S.M. Jack, “Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers”, *Qualitative Report*, January 2010, pp. 544-545.

¹⁶ R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications. Design and Methods*, London 2018, p. 46.

¹⁷ T. Xie, B.I. Page, “What Affects China’s National Image? Across-national Study of Public Opinion”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 22, no. 83 (2013), p. 854.

fluenced by countless media outlets. As Tao Xie and Benjamin I. Page pointed out in their work *What Affects China's National Image?*, numerous studies in China show that foreign media are highly selective about the coverage of China. They primarily highlight issues connected with human rights, environmental degradation, authoritarian rule, corruption, or threats to the regional and international stability posed by China's growing economic, political, and military power.¹⁸ China's diplomats also raised this issue on several occasions. During his visit to Moscow in 2003, Minister Zhao Qizheng of China's State Council Information Office, said that Western media "[are] using their dominance, they are stressing the negatives in China without pointing out recent positive developments."¹⁹ The above shows Beijing's sensitivity to foreign opinion as well as the importance of its diplomatic performance.

The situation is quite different in Serbia, where the image of China created by the national media appears predominantly in a positive context. Supporting and promoting bilateral relations through the media coverage on a global scale is nothing exceptional. Still, the government's high level of media control in Belgrade allows it to gain national support to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals.²⁰ The governments in both Belgrade and Beijing are aware of the increasing driving power of Serbia's imperfect but growing civil society. The "battle for hearts and minds," mainly created by the "narrative competition" (*huayu quan*), has begun.

Regarding China's presence in Serbian mass media, it is essential to understand the current characteristics of Serbia's media market situation. According to Stefan Vladislavljev, editor of the *Balkan Insight*, the main focus of Serbian media coverage of the cooperation with China is on personal connections, contacts, and friendship mentioned at every possible opportunity.²¹ As Vladislavljev points out, there are currently two main channels that create a positive image of China and Sino-Serbian cooperation in the country. The first is the pro-government and state media under the direct influence of politicians and political parties. The second channel, more common in Serbia and Europe in general, is the presence of Chinese media or media supported by Chinese entities in the host country. An example of the latter in Serbia is the trendy radio station Welcome to Fun Radio (WTF), whose broadcasts are supplemented by materials prepared by China Radio International.²²

In both cases, the nature of the Chinese-Serbian media cooperation does not allow negative opinions. It resembles a publication of a series of paid articles and

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 855.

¹⁹ "Beijing Lashes Out at Western Media Coverage of China", *Agence France Presse*, 22 August 2003.

²⁰ D. Bajić, W. Zweers, "Declining Media Freedom and Biased Reporting on Foreign Actors in Serbia. Prospects for an Enhanced EU Approach", Clingendael Report, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, p. 10, at <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/declining-media-freedom-and-biased-reporting-on-foreign-actors-in-serbia.pdf>, July 2020, 21 May 2021.

²¹ S. Vladislavljev, "Big Brother: Serbia's Media Are Creating Nation of China Lovers", *Balkan Insight*, 26 March 2021, at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/26/big-brother-serbias-media-are-creating-nation-of-china-lovers/>, 21 May 2021.

²² Ibid.

advertisements rather than reliable source of information. We encounter a similar situation in other countries of the region and beyond. Lately, Chinese diplomats are increasingly interested in paid columns in the most popular media to promote Chinese economic and social solutions and present their position on disputes.²³ In Estonia, one of the leading newspapers, *Õhtuleht*, has recently apologized for publishing a sponsored article authored by the Chinese embassy.²⁴ The Xinjiang issue was called by Ambassador Li Chao *the most absurd lie and rumor of the century*.

In April 2021, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, media reported that Zorana Mihajlović, deputy prime minister and minister of mining and energy, stopped the work of a Chinese company in the Bor mine due to a violation of environmental standards. The reason for the suspension was related to the problematic noise levels reported by the inhabitants to the local authorities. A statement by Zijin Mining reads that the work was suspended as ordered by the authorities and at the request of the deputy prime minister. In addition, at the explicit request of the ministry, Zijin is obliged to build a sewage treatment plant to prevent water contamination in the Pek River, which is a tributary of the Danube.²⁵

The above case shows the other side of the functioning of the leading Serbian media. Sources cited by the *Global Times* suggested that the mine shutdown did not occur, and Western media ‘picked up the story’ by implying that the Chinese plant was shut down for environmental reasons.²⁶ Indeed, work has been suspended at two new copper mining sites which have become cumbersome for the residents, but – as stated in *Global Times* – the main work remains uninterrupted.

It seems that the some part of the society in Serbia performs the role of a ‘watchdog’, increasingly exerting pressure and forcing the central government and local officials to take specific actions. Due to the deteriorating state of the environment in the region, caused mainly by the steady development of the mining industry, anti-government protests took place in Belgrade on April 10, 2021, demanding real involvement to improve the situation. The protesters’ slogan was *Cut corruption and crime, not forests*.²⁷ Addi-

²³ One of the examples of such activity can be found at the PRC’s MFA webpage, “Estonian Newspaper *Õhtuleht* Publishes a Signed Article by Ambassador Li Chao Entitled Xinjiang: The Truth will Outrun the Lie”, 16 April 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1869333.shtml, 21 May 2021.

²⁴ “Chinese Embassy Advert in Estonian Paper Denounces Uighur Genocide Claims”, *ERR News*, 15 April 2021, at <https://news.err.ee/1608178030/chinese-embassy-advert-in-estonian-paper-denounces-uighur-genocide-claims>, 21 May 2021.

²⁵ “Serbia Halts China-owned Mine over Environmental Breaches”, *Reuters*, 14 April 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/serbia-halts-china-owned-mine-over-environmental-breaches-2021-04-14/>, 22 May 2021.

²⁶ “Chinese-invested Copper Mine in Serbia Still ‘in Operation’, Contrary to Reports”, *Global Times*, 15 April 2021, at www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1221204.shtml, 22 May 2021.

²⁷ J. Gec, “Thousands Rally in Serbia to Protect the Environment”, *ABC News*, 10 April 2021, at <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/thousands-rally-serbia-protect-environment-76994262>, 22 May 2021.

tionally, picketers in the Serbian capital have begun what they call an “ecological uprising.” Zorana Mihajlović blamed the demonstrators for looking for “quick political gains” instead of actual action, nevertheless the demonstrations resulted in a limitation of activities in the Bor mine. The protesters themselves declare that this may be a coincidence, but on the other hand, it is also a sign that the administration has begun to listen to voice of the citizens. The environmental movement in Serbia will be gaining strength, as the 2019 Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP) report recognized the country as the most polluted in Europe.²⁸ The environmental issues can cause a dissonance in the media coverage of China within Serbian society, but they do not seem to have a major impact for the time being. However, if China wants to maintain the high level of trust amid Serbs, it must adjust its investments portfolio to a more environmentally friendly format.

In a broader context, Belgrade protests took place nearly two weeks before the Climate Summit, hosted by US President Joe Biden at the White House in late April 2021.²⁹ Drawing attention to a severe environmental problem on the eve of the summit strongly reinforced its message. During the virtual summit on April 22-23, 2021 forty world leaders took certain actions and commitments to combat the climate crisis. The United States committed to a record reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 50-52% by 2030.³⁰ China did not take any commitments at the April Summit but is expected to do so at the UN Climate Change Conference COP26, to be held in Glasgow in November 2021. The particular emphasis is being put on a move away from building new coal-fired power plants. It is a particular blow to the PRC's energy investment portfolio in the CEE region, as it is based primarily on contracts using coal combustion technology these.³¹

The PRC is using favorable relations with Serbia to change public opinion on the internal policy issues as well. One of such activities is the case of Xinjiang's Uyghur minority. In an interview with the Chinese government news agency Xinhua, a Serbian parliamentarian Zarko Obradović and the mayor of Novi Sad Milos Vučević negate the critical voices of international opinion about the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. Obradović said that *the China's economic figures show steady growth, improved infrastructure, and improved people's living standards*. He also emphasized that future cooperation should pay particular attention to the progress in education, social and health care, which directly contributes to the increase in the standard of living of its inhabitants. On the other hand, Vučević stressed that Serbia rightly perceives China as

²⁸ *Pollution and Health Metrics*, Global, Regional, and Country Analysis, Global Alliance on Health and Pollution, p. 28-29, at https://gahp.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PollutionandHealthMetrics-final-12_18_2019.pdf, December 2019, 22 May 2021.

²⁹ “Leaders Summit on Climate”, The US Department of State, 22 April 2021, at <https://www.state.gov/leaders-summit-on-climate/>, 22 May 2021.

³⁰ O. Milman, “US Urged to Cut 50% of Emissions by 2030 to Spur Other Countries to Action”, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/09/us-climate-crisis-cut-emissions-environment>, 21 May 2021.

³¹ K. Zakić, N. Šekarić, “China's Energy Cooperation within the 17+1”, *Medjunarodni problemi*, vol. 73, no. 1 (2021), p. 11.

a friendly country, as China is making great economic progress *for the benefit of all its citizens, regardless of their national identity*. Vučević also referred to President Xi Jinping's slogan *a community with a shared future for humanity*, referring to China as *the leader of global economic growth serving not only the people of Xinjiang, China but also all mankind*.³² Referring directly to the criticism of the West, both politicians emphasized that it was based on unfounded claims aimed at slowing down China's economic growth. They also stressed that *such things are an obvious interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country*. The correct situation in Xinjiang is allegedly confirmed by many foreign tourists, who *can testify to the real situation in the region*.³³

The correctness of political and economic relations between Belgrade and Beijing prompts the Serb elites to try and influence international public opinion on issues where China and Serbia have a common ground. It concerns the issues of ethnic minorities, territorial disputes, and *interference of third countries* in their own internal situation. Moreover, the narrative favoring Beijing in Serbia serves the Serbian elite's particular interests to consolidate power. Thanks to his personal ties with the leadership of the PRC, the Serbian president is currently the beneficiary of the most extensive Chinese aid in the context of fighting the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Both activities of Chinese diplomacy have already managed to be recognized with their own terminology and are referred to as *mask diplomacy* and *vaccine diplomacy*. It seems that Aleksandar Vučić, with the support of chairman Xi Jinping, negotiated an exceptionally advantageous offer for Serbia to buy Chinese vaccines; in an interview, he said, *When you see the price [of a vaccine], you'll erect a monument in my honor one day*.³⁴

THE OTHER "THREE PILLARS". THE EU, US, AND RUSSIA'S POSITION IN SERBIA

Regarding the other "three pillars" of Serbian foreign policy, it is worth noting that Serbia became an object rather than subject of the two-way communication.³⁵ The lack of strategic vision of Serbia's investment projects is considered a real opportunity for global powers. The country is considered one of the most capacious and profitable markets in the region.³⁶

³² "Interview: Criticism of Xinjiang Cannot Survive Fact Check, Serbian Officials Say", *Xinhua*, 16 February 2021, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/17/c_139748057.htm, 24 May 2021.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "With China's Help, Serbia Overtakes EU in Vaccine Rollout", *Euractiv*, 5 February 2021, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/with-chinas-help-serbia-overtakes-eu-in-vaccine-rollout/>, 24 May 2021.

³⁵ E. Entina, "On All Four Sides: Shock of Serbian Diplomacy's Five Years Plan?", *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, vol. 80, no. 4(320) (2013), p. 545, at www.jstor.org/stable/42741289, 21 May 2021.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 550.

The European Union

One of the official foreign policy priorities of the Republic of Serbia is to become a member of the European Union. During an interview in April 2021, President Aleksandar Vučić confirmed that Belgrade is still interested in joining the EU.³⁷ In the eyes of many experts, Serbia's efforts to join the EU have stalled amid concerns about corruption, organized crime, media freedom, and the general abuse of democracy. However, one of the most serious obstacles in relations with Belgrade and Brussels is the issue of Kosovo. The dialogue between Belgrade and Kosovo's Pristina was initiated with the mediation of the European Union in 2010. This was possible after the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/64/298, concluded on the 9th of September 2010. Following numerous rounds of negotiations, an agreement on the normalization of the relations between Belgrade and Pristina was signed. Serbia and Kosovo signed a fifteen-point accord that opened the way to the EU membership in April 2013, yet very little has happened since then. Chapter 35, which covers the normalization of relations with Kosovo, was opened in December 2015 as one of the first two chapters to be opened within Serbia's EU accession process. As pointed out, Serbia and Kosovo have shown a lack of genuine will for normalization of bilateral relations,³⁸ President Vučić said that the US and Germany exert pressure on Serbia to recognize Kosovo's independence without offering Belgrade anything tangible in return – not even guaranteed membership status in the EU.³⁹

Serbian political leadership often refers to the “four pillar policy” when being asked about strengthening ties with China and Russia by the European officials. The same happened during the meeting of President Aleksandar Vučić with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell in January 2020.⁴⁰ Serbian president emphasized that Serbia would continue good relations with the EU while maintaining high-level cooperation with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. Vučić then used rhetoric that Serbia will follow Germany, France and Austria when it comes to fruitful cooperation with Russia and China.⁴¹ When questioned about close ties with Russia and China during an interview for Euronews in Davos, 2020, the Serbian president expressed his discontent stating that he

³⁷ L. Luxner, “Serbian President Pursues EU Membership, Better US Ties, and a Bigger Role in the Balkans”, *Atlantic Council*, 28 April 2021, at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/serbian-president-pursues-eu-membership-better-us-ties-and-a-bigger-role-in-the-balkans/>, 23 May 2021.

³⁸ N. Burazer, *Democracy and Human Rights. Assessing Serbia's Progress on the EU Accession Agenda 2016-2020*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 13, at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/16283.pdf>, 2 June 2021.

³⁹ L. Luxner, “Serbian President...”, 23 May 2021.

⁴⁰ *Meeting with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, The President of the Republic of Serbia, 31 January 2020, at <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/news/meeting-with-the-eu-high-representative-for-foreign-affairs-and-security-policy>, 23 May 2021.

⁴¹ P. Ciborek, *FocusOSA #136: Działania Chin na Bałkanach*, Ośrodek Spraw Azjatyckich UE, 21 February 2020, at <http://osa.uni.lodz.pl/?p=10819>, 23 May 2021.

is *fed up of being lectured* by European leaders about cooperation with Moscow and Beijing.⁴² He also admitted there was no alternative to integration with European Union for Serbia while expressing dissatisfaction with the pace of the accession process.⁴³

Most Serbian citizens believe that China is the “biggest donor” to Serbia, which is not true according to the official data. In fact, China’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Serbia has risen from €2.5 million in 2010 to €318 million in 2019, but it is barely comparable to the EU’s levels, reaching €1.87 billion in 2019.⁴⁴ It is also safe to say that Serbia benefits from a much better investment climate due to its EU candidate status and the reforms undertaken along the way. The European Union’s contribution to its economic and social development is higher than China’s.

When considering possible distortions between the sender and the receiver of media coverage, we should keep in mind that the case of the European Union is also one of the most frustrating proceedings in Serbia over the past decades amid Serbian citizens. It has been caused primarily by the ongoing accession process and conditionality mechanism.⁴⁵ In this context, China has frequently made high-profile media acquisitions of indebted state-owned companies in Serbia, saving threatened jobs along the way. Such facts are seen by the public opinion as an unconditional help from a global superpower, thus gaining more positive reception. Substantial as they are, the economic activities of the EU are not that spectacular. The conditionality and the time-consuming accession process has raised the level of distrust towards the effectiveness of the Western Balkans EU enlargement process. The EU is also exerting pressure on Belgrade on the issue of Kosovo independence.⁴⁶ Hence, Serbia’s uncertain accession to the European Union diminishes the level of positive media perception of the EU. The government in Belgrade has also been very vocal about the EU’s ineffectiveness and lack of solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to declining trust in the EU among Serbian citizens.

The United States of America

The bilateral cooperation between Belgrade and Washington is strongly emotionally charged, both because of memories of the NATO’s China’s embassy bombing in 1999 and the US position on the issue of Kosovo.⁴⁷ NATO Bombing killed three Chinese

⁴² A. Jamieson, “Serbia President Vučić ‘Fed up of Being Lectured’ over Ties with Russia and China”, *Euronews*, 21 January 2020, at <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/21/serbia-president-Vučić-fed-up-of-being-lectured-over-ties-with-russia-and-china>, 23 May 2021.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ L. Hartwell, S. Vladislavljev, *Serbia’s Delicate Dance with the EU and China*, Just Security, 22 December 2020, at <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>, 24 May 2021.

⁴⁵ M. Lemstra, *The Destructive Effects of State Capture in the Western Balkans EU Enlargement Undermined*, Clingendael Institute, September 2020.

⁴⁶ M. Petrović, “EU Integration Process of Serbia: A Vicious Circle of High Politics?”, *The Review of International Affairs, The Institute of International Politics and Economics*, vol. 70, no. 1175 (2019), p. 38.

⁴⁷ E. Entina, “On All Four...”, p. 545.

journalists, which brought China and Serbia closer together and continues to serve as a symbol of their bond.⁴⁸

The US in Serbia is mostly interested in supporting stability, economic development, democratic transition, and re-empowering integration with the EU.⁴⁹ The previous US administration under President Donald Trump was strongly engaged in the process of rapprochement between Pristina and Belgrade. Richard Grenell, the former US ambassador to Germany, was appointed a special presidential envoy for Serbia and Kosovo peace negotiations. Mediation between the sides led to the re-establishment of the direct air connection between Pristina and Belgrade, which was halted in 1998. In addition, Kosovo lifted 100% of customs duties on products from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2020.⁵⁰ In addition, a trilateral Washington meeting between Kosovo's Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and US President Donald Trump took place in September 2020.⁵¹

Although US diplomacy called the meeting a breakthrough, the US did not fully succeed in terms of its foreign policy goals in the region. Serbia failed to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state, and the agreements on the 5G network with Belgrade did not take any practical dimension. Just over a week after the tripartite meeting in Washington, on September 11, 2020, President Aleksandar Vučić met with the Chinese ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo.⁵² President Vučić emphasized that China is a reliable partner for cooperation in the country, especially in telecommunications. Couple of days after the meeting in Washington, Huawei announced the opening of the Innovation and Development Center in Belgrade, attended by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić.⁵³ The head of the Serbian government said that cooperation with Huawei on implementing the 5G network in Serbia does not violate the agreement concluded in Washington.⁵⁴ After the failure of the tripartite security arrangements for the Serbian 5G network in September 2020, the US administration seems to realize that the intergovernmental

⁴⁸ W. Zweers, V. Shopov, F.P. van der Putten, M. Petkova, M. Lemstra, *China's Approach to the Western Balkans*, Clingendael Institute 2020.

⁴⁹ V. Pavičić, "Serbia's Orientation Challenge and Ways to Overcome It", *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1/2 (2019), p. 126.

⁵⁰ P. Ciborek, "Driving Out Huawei: Sino-American Engagements in Southeast Europe", *Policy Brief*, Ośrodek Spraw Azjatyckich UE, pp. 1-2, at http://osa.uni.lodz.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CAA_Policy_Brief_PC_October_2020.pdf, October 2020, 24 May 2021.

⁵¹ J. Mason, A. Shalal, J. Landay, "Trump Lauds Economic Steps between Serbia and Kosovo", *Reuters*, 15 September 2020, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-serbia-kosovo-int-idUSKBN25V2LX>, 24 May 2021.

⁵² *Meeting with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China*, The President of The Republic of Serbia, 11 September 2020, at <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/press-releases/meeting-with-the-ambassador-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-29114>, 24 May 2021.

⁵³ "Huawei's New Innovations and Development Center will Accelerate Serbia's Digital Transformation: PM", *Xinhua*, 14 September 2020, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/15/c_139368070.htm, 24 May 2021.

⁵⁴ P. Ciborek, "Driving Out...", p. 3.

arrangements between the state leaders cannot provide sufficient guarantees to limit the use of Chinese technology in Serbia.

Regarding the US (and the EU) agenda presence in the country's mainstream media, the United Group (UG) should be mentioned. Its television services are commonly considered a pro-Western medium; thus, it should be treated as one of the main tools of influence on Serbian citizens. The N1 regional cable is available in approximately half of the country and is broadly perceived as the only independent channel in Serbia.⁵⁵ The N1 TV channel and Serbia Broadband (SBB), both owned by the United Group, are under constant pressure from pro-government media outlets, attempting to limit public access to the UG's media coverage.⁵⁶

Returning to the theoretical framework, we should ask why the coverage from the pro-Western media does not favorably affect general public opinion on the US (and the EU) as much as the Chinese or Russian media coverage does. For this, we should again seek for the distortions in media coverage, in this particular case translating into experiences and beliefs of Serbian society. Regarding the US presence in Serbia, cooperation is mainly focusing on security issues. Past experiences of the Kosovo War with leading American role under NATO troops seem to be the decisive factor. The Serbs, in line with the government position, are unwilling to recognize the independence of Kosovo. Relatively recent military conflict seems to undermine trust in the American foreign policy in the region, effectively blocking the creation of a positive perception of the US in Serbia, which leads to the limited influence of the United States on Serbia's foreign policy. It has been made even more visible with the recent energy deal concluded with Russia. Despite the calls from Washington to reduce Serbia's dependency on energy supplies from Moscow, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić attended a ceremony to open the 400-kilometre section of the Turkish Stream pipeline in January 2021.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the US is still striving for better reception in the country. The US Embassy launched a campaign called *You are the World; Vi ste Svet* in Serbian TV, which was intended to revive the dormant pro-Western sentiment among Serbian citizens. In one of the campaign's episodes, the US Embassy in Belgrade mentioned one of the most famous literary figures of the 20th century, Borislav Pekić. The video was based on the quotes *We should be looking ahead. Because if we wanted to look back, we would have eyes in the back of the head* as well as *Honor will not depend on where we come from, but where we are going*. The reaction of the Serbian society was that the US was trying to convey the message that *Kosovo's independence should be recognized, and the country*

⁵⁵ *Presidential Election. 2 April 2017. OSCE/ODHIR Election Assessment Mission Final Report*, Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights, June 2017, p. 10.

⁵⁶ "Independent Media in Serbia Must Be Protected from Ongoing Government Attacks", *United Media*, 1 February 2021, at <http://www.unitedmedia.net/independent-media-in-serbia-must-be-protected-from-ongoing-government-attacks/>, 13 June 2021.

⁵⁷ D. Stojanovic, "Serbia Opens Pipeline for Russian Gas, Ignores US Opposition", *Associated Press*, 1 January 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-moscow-serbia-aleksandar-vucic-russia-2adfba38701d5b277e8d8d4064f5511d>, 22 May 2021.

should move on and do not look back. The message was again been distorted by past experiences from the end of the 20th century.⁵⁸

Russian Federation

For years, Moscow has remained Serbia's natural and traditional partner supporting most of its international demands. However, Serbian officials realized that it was necessary to diversify partnership agreements in the face of Russia's weakening economic position and its internal problems, and also considering the state's economic and regional aspirations. It seems to be a somewhat frustrating for Moscow, since Russian Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Serbia reached €658.7 million in 2019, doubling China's FDI (€318 million).⁵⁹

Both countries are thought to be longstanding allies and partners, the main reason being the adoption of Orthodox Christianity. After the conquest of Serbia by the Ottoman Turks in 15th century, Russia became the dominant political and cultural force in the country. In Serbian historical literature and political discourse, Serbs are often described as *little Russians*.⁶⁰ Currently, the Russian soft power is manifested mainly on the religious level and media presence. In 2015, the Voice of Russia and Russian Information Agency (RIA) discontinued their activities in favor of a new Russian state-owned media outlet Sputnik. In 2020, during ceremony of Sputnik's fifth anniversary of presence in Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić said, *Sputnik has become one of the most influential media outlets in Serbia.* Nevertheless, as Djokic points out, it is also fair to say that *Russian investments in the media market are minuscule compared to the western and state-owned media in Serbia.* From the standpoint of our theoretical framework, the distortion – positive for Russia – is still visible in the media coverage. The praise of the Serbian leadership for Sputnik amplifies the Russian political agenda and rhetoric they implement. Given the Russia's internal economic problems and FDI levels in the country, Russia maintains high level of support within the Serbian society at a relatively low cost.

Nevertheless, the above components of Russia's soft power are supplemented with Beijing's more tangible economic alternative in military, technological, medical, infrastructure, and business cooperation. In addition, Russian and Chinese activities in Serbia are not dependent on adopting pro-democratic norms – as is the case of the EU. Respecting democratic principles or human rights standards is not considered

⁵⁸ D. Luković, "Bura zbog spota 'Vi ste Svet' posle ocene predsednika SANU da je spot o Pekiću 'medijska dresuda', oglasila se ambasada SAD! Evo šta su nam rekli", *Blic*, 14 January 2021, at <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/bura-zbog-spota-vi-ste-svet-posle-ocene-predsednika-sanu-da-je-spot-o-pekicu-medijska/7tzd36v>, 15 June 2021.

⁵⁹ L. Hartwell, S. Vladislavjev, "Serbia's Delicate Dance with the EU and China", *Just Security*, 22 December 2020, at <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>, 24 May 2021.

⁶⁰ A. Djokic, "The Perspectives of Russia's Soft Power in the Western Balkans Region", *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2020), p. 235.

a *conditio sine qua non* for practical bilateral cooperation between Belgrade and Moscow or Beijing.⁶¹

According to London School of Economics expert Vuk Vuksanović, Chinese overall influence in Serbia is currently more significant than the Russian one. The author describes the current actions of Belgrade as a calculated attempt to replace Russia and Vladimir Putin by the PRC and Xi Jinping as the leading Serbian partner outside the Western hemisphere.⁶² Moreover, Serbian energy sector is entirely dependent on Russian oil and gas supplies.⁶³ Nevertheless, in the past few decades, Russia has not been able to live up to the level of the Belgrade-Beijing economic partnership.⁶⁴ In addition, Serbia is an important place on the world's map for China, considering chairman Xi's flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Within a 16 + 1 cooperation mechanism, which seems to be complementary to BRI, Serbia is the largest recipient of Chinese investments in the CEE region (over USD 4 billion).⁶⁵

Vuksanović also emphasizes the collapse of Serbia's Russian soft power myth, based mainly on Slavic and Orthodox ties.⁶⁶ In this context, the researcher refers more to the resentments accompanying Serbs in the 1990s related to Kosovo's independence than to any manifestation of Russophiles. Public opinion has also made a critical reevaluation of the Kremlin's influence in the Western Balkans region, especially concerning the extension of NATO structures to include Serbia's closest neighbors: Montenegro⁶⁷ and North Macedonia.⁶⁸ It seems that the vision of becoming "China's gateway to Europe" is more convincing than the continuation of the partnership with the Russian Federation, which seems to be struggling with internal problems for some time now. However, this is not to say that Serbia will completely abandon cooperation with Russia, not only because of the energy dependence. The case of Kosovo is also an essential issue in bilateral relations, while Russia is still supporting Belgrade's position in United

⁶¹ P. Ciborek, *Monitor Chiny-Balkany*, Ośrodek Spraw Azjatyckich UŁ, January 2021, p. 5, at http://osa.uni.lodz.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/OSA_MONITOR_BALKANY_STYCZEN_2021.pdf, 24 May 2021.

⁶² V. Vuksanović, "Belgrade is Embracing China as it Ditches its Russian Alliance", *Reaction*, 10 July 2020, at <https://reaction.life/belgrade-is-embracing-china-as-it-ditches-its-russian-alliance/>, 23 May 2021.

⁶³ P. Stanojević, Z. Jeftić, Ž. Obradović, "The Western Balkan Countries Accession to the European Union from the Energy Perspective", *The Review of International Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 1178 (2020), p. 29.

⁶⁴ S. Bjelotomic, "Serbia Now 100% Dependent on Russian Gas", *Serbian Monitor*, 5 January 2021, at <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/serbia-now-100-dependent-on-russian-gas/>, 22 May 2021.

⁶⁵ S. Shukla, O. Liebermann, "China's Clout Is Growing on the Edge of the EU, and the US Is Worried", *CNN*, 14 September 2019, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/14/europe/serbia-china-investment-intl/index.html>, 22 May 2021.

⁶⁶ V. Vuksanović, "Belgrade Is Embracing..."

⁶⁷ *Montenegro Joins NATO as 29th Ally*, NATO, 5 June 2017, at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.htm, 22 May 2021.

⁶⁸ R. Emmott, "Macedonia Signs Accord to Join NATO Despite Russian Misgivings", *Reuters*, 6 February 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-macedonia-idUSKCN1PV1KB>, 22 May 2021.

Nations Security Council.⁶⁹ This has been reflected in the result of independent survey in Serbia in 2019. The majority of Serbs (60,7%) were in favor of an alliance with Russia, leaving the EU (47,1%) and NATO (8,9%) far behind.⁷⁰

CHINA'S VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN SERBIA

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia was increasingly aware of the consequences of pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy that sought to reconcile the interests of the EU, China, Russia, and the USA. Despite numerous research results that the Chinese vaccine produced by Sinopharm is only 75–80% effective, it remains the most used vaccine in Serbia.⁷¹ The fact of the dominance of the Chinese vaccine in Serbia is not only a matter of preference but, above all, its availability. Serbia was completely ignored in the early stages of contracting mRNA vaccines developed by Western companies BioNTech-Pfizer, and Moderna. This created a unique handicap for Beijing in Serbia. As a result, the “vaccine diplomacy” impact has been reflected in Belgrade's political attitudes towards the People's Republic of China.

From a press release published on the website of the Serbian government on March 16, 2020, we learn that the first foreign aid in combating the SARS-CoV-2 virus reached Serbia from the People's Republic of China.⁷² The aid was provided by the Mammoth Foundation (MF), a Chinese non-profit humanitarian organization headquartered in Shenzhen. The press release also mentions that the MF is involved in genetic research and is committed to combating COVID-19 disease in China, providing the necessary support to hospitals and laboratories, and offering its services to third countries. In addition, an official press release concludes that the Mammoth Foundation is funded by one of the world's leading genetic engineering companies BGI (*Huada*) based in Shenzhen. One of the executive directors, Mu Feng, is member of the SARS research team affiliated with the PRC's Ministry of Science and Technology.⁷³ The biography on the corporate BGI website shows that Mu was one of the sixth 16 + 1 summit guests in Budapest in 2017. It seems that MF might have been predestined to cooperate with the Central and Eastern European countries much earlier.

However, the most important event that followed the PRC's aid to the Balkan country is President Aleksandar Vučić's public conference on the COVID-19 situation. The

⁶⁹ A. Konitzer, “Serbia between East and West”, *Russian History*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2011), p. 105.

⁷⁰ A. Djokic, *The Perspectives...*, p. 235.

⁷¹ Sinpharm vaccine efficacy rate provided by the World Health Organization stands for 79%. Report available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/the-sinopharm-Covid-19-vaccine-what-you-need-to-know>, 24 May 2021.

⁷² “First Assistance for Serbia from People's Republic of China”, The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 16 March 2020, at <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/151479/first-assistance-for-serbia-from-peoples-republic-of-china.php>, 24 May 2021.

⁷³ Mu Feng's bio is available at corporate website of BGI, vide <https://en.genomics.cn/team/info.aspx?itemid=1925>, 24 May 2021.

head of the Serbian state openly criticized the EU's ability to coordinate actions during the global health crisis. He said, *by now you all understood that great international solidarity actually does not exist; European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale.*⁷⁴ Then he added: *I have dispatched a special letter, because we have a high expectation and much hope, and the only country that can help [Serbia] in this difficult situation is the People's Republic of China.* The letter was sent to Chairman Xi Jinping. Aleksandar Vučić called the Chinese leader *not only a friend, but a brother who is not only my brother in personal terms, but a friend and brother to the entire Serbian nation.*⁷⁵ President Vučić also referred to the EU resolution, which prohibits exporting goods to Serbia, directly saying, *Ursula von der Leyen has just announced that Serbia cannot import medical equipment and accessories from the EU, because [the EU] needs it itself.* Vučić then blamed EU decision-makers for recommending the Serbian government to limit contacts and imports of goods from the People's Republic of China and, at the same time, refused to help Serbia in a health crisis.⁷⁶

The head of the ministry of public and local administration in Serbia, Marija Obradović, said that “the best vaccine is the one we have at our disposal.” According to the ministry's data, about 35,000 vaccine doses are administered in Serbia every day.⁷⁷ Implementation of Serbia's “four-pillar” foreign policy strategy was even reflected in the vaccination process of Serbian leaders. In January 2021, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić was vaccinated with BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine, while President Aleksandar Vučić was waiting for Sputnik V or Sinopharm vaccine, and eventually got vaccinated with the Chinese product in April 2021.⁷⁸ Up to date, Serbia received well over 3 million of Sinopharm vaccines in seven tranches (16.01; 11.02; 05.03; 05.04; 26.04, 19.05, 22.05). Serbian PM confirmed that by the end of April 2021, Serbia has vaccinated 1,95 million of its citizens, achieving a national vaccination rate of 37%.⁷⁹

When the first batch of medical equipment research Nicola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, the Serbian President expressed his gratitude towards the Chinese nation by kissing the Chinese flag⁸⁰. In the interview with China's Ambassador to Serbia, Chen

⁷⁴ M. Karnitschnig, “China is Winning the Coronavirus Propaganda War”, *Politico*, 18 March 2020, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-china-winning-propaganda-war/>, 24 May 2021.

⁷⁵ Speech of the president Aleksandar Vučić is available at <https://twitter.com/RushDoshi/status/1239645067066978311>, 24 May 2021.

⁷⁶ M. Stojanovic, “Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China's Help”, *Balkan Insight*, 16 March 2020, at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help/>, 24 May 2021.

⁷⁷ M. Soric, “Covid: Serbia turns to China for vaccine relief, Deutsche Welle”, 25 January 2021, at <https://www.dw.com/en/Covid-serbia-turns-to-china-for-vaccine-relief/a-56335668>, 24 May 2021.

⁷⁸ “Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić gets Chinese-made Covid-19 jab”, *Euronews*, 6 April 2021, at <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/06/serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-gets-chinese-made-covid-19-jab>, 24 May 2021.

⁷⁹ “Xin yi pi Zhongguo xinguan yimiao yun di Saierweiya”, *Xinhua*, 27 April 2021, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-04/27/c_1127380738.htm, 24 May 2021.

⁸⁰ “Serbian President Kisses Chinese Flag as Support Team Arrives”, *CGTN*, 22 March 2020, at <https://>

Bo, this unusual gesture was interpreted as an expression of the gratitude of the entire Serbian nation to China and a sign of excellent personal relationship between Aleksandar Vučić and Xi Jinping.⁸¹ The propaganda campaign in Serbia escalated very quickly. Most of the important government buildings in Belgrade were highlighted in red. Large banners appeared in Belgrade with the picture of Xi Jinping captioned in Serbian and Chinese, *Thank you, Brother Xi* [*Ganxie Nin, Xi Dage; Спасибо, брате Cu*]).⁸² In April, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell expressed disappointment that the Serbian government only appreciated the aid coming from the People's Republic of China by placing the image of President Xi Jinping on billboards in the center of Belgrade. European diplomat emphasized that the EU had provided approximately \$490 million in grants and loans to the Serbian healthcare system for the purchase of more than 250 ambulances over the past two decades.⁸³

CONCLUSIONS

In a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Serbia is openly referred to as China's "customer-state." According to this study, 93% of China-funded projects in the Western Balkans were carried out by Chinese subcontractors and suppliers. In addition, out of the 18 projects implemented by Chinese IT companies in the Western Balkans region, 14 took place in Serbia and 40% of them were launched in 2019-2020.⁸⁴ There is no doubt that Serbia has become the European advocate of the Belt and Road initiative and 16+1 cooperation mechanism, deepening cooperation with China in infrastructure, tourism, and – especially recently – health protection and digital economy. Perhaps Beijing wants to treat relations with Belgrade as a "showroom" of its own investment opportunities in Europe, encouraging other countries to cooperate more closely. During the Belgrade Security Forum organized in October 2020, the representative of the University of Maribor, Sasa Dordević, characterized five main "weaknesses" of Serbia, which the PRC is diligently exploiting

news.cgtv.com/news/2020-03-22/Serbian-president-kisses-Chinese-flag-as-support-team-arrives--P3FlpiEMBa/index.html, 24 May 2021.

⁸¹ "Gangtie ban de youyi! Saierweiya zongtong qin wang jichang Yingjie Zhongguo zhuanjia yiliao dui", *China News*, 29 March 2020, at <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/gj/2020/03-29/9141012.shtml>, 24 May 2021.

⁸² M. Savic, "'Comrade Xi' Statue? Serbia Wants to Thank Its Friends in China", *Bloomberg*, 26 May 2020, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-26/-comrade-xi-statue-serbia-wants-to-thank-its-friends-in-china>, 24 May 2021.

⁸³ "Borrell: It Is Funny How Only China Receives Billboards of Gratitude in Serbia", *European Western Balkans*, 21 April 2020, at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/21/borrell-it-is-funny-how-only-china-receives-billboards-of-gratitude-in-serbia/>, 24 May 2021.

⁸⁴ H.A. Conley, J.E. Hillman, M. McCalpin, D. Ruy, "Becoming a Chinese Client State: The Case of Serbia", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 24 September 2020, pp. 10-11, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/becoming-chinese-client-state-case-serbia>, 24 May 2021.

in conducting its bilateral policy: lack of political pluralism; a weakened judicial system; unbalanced power; creating an environment of impunity for the elite; as well as non-compliance with the principles of the rule of law.⁸⁵

Regarding the mass media situation in Serbia, the impact of Zijin Mining and the Serbian ministry publication concerning the issue were possibly targeted at improving Zijin Mining publicity. The Chinese company would be presented as one that complies with the government's demands. In return, the government will be praised because of its effectiveness towards the Chinese partner. In the face of social protests, the actions undertaken by the Serbian government – considering their efficiency – should be described as populist and aimed at temporarily de-escalating the tense social situation. The above comes in line with the general situation of the media market in Serbia. In the Press Media Freedom Index report for 2020, the state of media freedom in Serbia was described as 'disturbing,' as Serbian media were ranked 93rd out of 180.⁸⁶ The main complaint was the government's participation in the ownership structure and the influence of political parties on both state and private media.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Moscow did not remain passive towards Beijing's actions in Serbia. President Vučić promised to set up factories to produce Sputnik V vaccines in the country supported by the government in Moscow. The production began as early as April 2021 at Belgrade's Torlak Institute.⁸⁷ Moreover, Moscow committed to provide hundreds of thousands of vaccines to Serbian citizens in the first half of 2021.⁸⁸ During the unprecedented public health crisis, the EU's attention was focused mainly on the EU member states; thus, the marginalization of the EU's assistance and aid to third countries created an excellent opportunity to regain position for Russia and China. The negative narrative in Serbian media directed against the EU and the US was further strengthening China's and Russia's positive public image in Serbia. As a result, the rivalry between the West (EU, US) and the East (PRC, FR) in Balkans is now visible more than ever.

When it comes to the cooperation with the European Union, the new-old Serbian government elected in June 2020, continues its strategy of political and economic rapprochement with China. Observing the internal situation in the European Union, Belgrade concluded that the enlargement of membership to new states is no longer a priority for the EU in the short term. In view of this, the Serbian government and President

⁸⁵ "Prelec and Dordević: Serbian-Chinese Ties Will Remain Strong, Prosecution Necessary to "Uncaptured" The State", *European Western Balkans*, 20 October 2021, at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/20/prelec-and-dordevic-serbian-chinese-ties-will-remain-strong-prosecution-necessary-to-uncapture-the-state/>, 24 May 2021.

⁸⁶ Report results can be retrieved at: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>, 24 May 2021.

⁸⁷ S. Dragojlo, "Vučić Says Serbia Will Produce Sputnik Vaccines by June", *Balkan Insight*, 15 April 2021, at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/15/Vučić-says-serbia-will-produce-sputnik-vaccines-by-june/>, 22 May 2021.

⁸⁸ "Serbia Starts Inoculations with Russia's Sputnik-V Vaccine", *Radio Free Europe*, 6 January 2021, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-starts-covid-vaccinations-russian-sputnik/31036822.html>, 22 May 2021.

Aleksandar Vučić continue political rapprochement with China. The growing disappointment over the EU vaccine policy in Serbia has led to many unexpected scenarios. In the context of the growing vaccine demand of the Balkan states, Serbia mobilized its resources to launch a regional vaccination program against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Serbia, a WHO's COVAX member, concluded bilateral agreements for the supply of vaccines outside the WHO system, mainly from China and Russia. Because of the size of China's and Russia's medical aid, Serbia currently became a redistributor of the vaccines throughout the Western Balkans and CEE region. Belgrade donated the Sputnik V vaccine for Montenegro.⁸⁹ Serbia has also started a vaccination program (Sputnik V) for the medical staff of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹⁰ In addition, Aleksandar Vučić, during an official meeting with the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, at the border crossing in Tabanovka in February 2021, donated a total of 4,680 doses of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine.⁹¹ Serbia's government has also donated 100,000 BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines to the Czech Republic in May 2021.⁹²

In regard to the bilateral relations with the US, besides the NATO defense capabilities, the activities of the American diplomacy regarding Serbia and the Balkan Peninsula should be now seen in the context of the Three Seas Initiative. On the eve of Chinese expansive infrastructure investment policy, securing the US interest in the Southern Europe is one of the priorities of the US administration. Therefore, we should assume that one of the West's main interests will be to limit Russian and Chinese influence in the region significantly. It may occur once the domestic and internal crises related to the coronavirus pandemic in the US and the EU are resolved. However, it should be noted that limiting Chinese interests may be a lengthy and costly process from the American perspective. It should be remembered that since 2011, Huawei has been involved in so-called Safe and Smart City projects, the expansion of ICT infrastructure, and has recently opened its own Innovation Center in Belgrade and Office for Information Technologies and e-Government in Kragujevac.⁹³ It would take some effort to drive the Chinese giant out of the country's market. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, China took advantage of the EU's and the US hesitation over the region to develop military cooperation as well. Joint military maneuvers and unprecedented purchase of three Chinese combat drones (Wing Loong I, CH-92A, and Cai Hong) undoubtedly proves the

⁸⁹ V. Vuksanović, "In the Balkans, Serbia Has Its Own Vaccine Diplomacy", *CEPA*, 16 April 2021, at <https://cepa.org/in-the-balkans-serbia-has-its-own-vaccine-diplomacy/>, 24 May 2021.

⁹⁰ "Serbia Secures 5,000 Vaccines for Republika Srpska, Postpones Donation to North Macedonia", *Euractiv*, 12 February 2021, at https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbia-secures-5000-vaccines-for-republika-srpska-postpones-donation-to-north-macedonia/, 24 May 2021.

⁹¹ "Serbia Donates Pfizer Covid-19 Vaccines to North Macedonia", *Associated Press*, 14 February 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/europe-serbia-coronavirus-pandemic-northmacedonia-aleksandar-vucic-92093d27112edad3cc7e7faa427e11ad>, 24 May 2021.

⁹² "Serbia Donates 100,000 Pfizer Vaccines to the Czech Republic", *NI*, 20 May 2021, at <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/serbia-donates-10000-pfizer-vaccines-to-the-czech-republic/>, 24 May 2021.

⁹³ "Huawei Signed an Agreement with Serbia's Office for Information Technologies and eGovernment", *Huawei*, 11 December 2020, at <https://e.huawei.com/en/news/ebg/2020/serbia-office-egovernment-agreement>, 24 December 2021.

closeness of bilateral relations between Belgrade and Beijing.⁹⁴ Considering the absence of any real political opposition, the SNS party led by President Aleksandar Vučić also boasts a unique relationship in terms of personal ties with the Chinese diplomatic elite in Europe. The numerous visits of the PRC top diplomats including Xi Jinping, Wang Yi, and Yang Jiechi to Serbia – a relatively small country in Europe – created comfortable conditions for implementing China’s strategic goals in Europe.

Lastly, Serbia’s ability to redistribute some vaccines has also been used to pursue domestic policy goals. President Vučić announced a vaccination program for Serbian citizens in Kosovo. Thus, this escalated already fierce ethnic conflict, as Albanians and other ethnic groups in Kosovo could not benefit from the program. Moreover, Vučić failed to inform the Pristina leaders about the intentions of organizing a vaccination center. Pristina openly spoke of *a violation of the sovereignty of an independent state recognized by most EU countries*.⁹⁵ Therefore, it seems that the rapprochement between Belgrade and Pristina sought after by the previous US administration – at least in economic terms – has no political impact, and Belgrade’s decision to vaccinate Kosovo indicates that Vučić does not really think about rapprochement with Kosovo.

In most cases, the Serbian government emphasizes the country’s genuine efforts to integrate it into the structures of the European Union. On the other hand, international practice shows that Serbian foreign policy based on the so-called four pillars introduces confusion and precludes predicting the actions of Serbian diplomacy, which results in the lack of trust from other partners. However, it should undoubtedly be emphasized that the multi-vector foreign policy during the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 brought tangible benefits to Belgrade.

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⁹⁴ S. Roblin, “Missile-Armed Chinese Drones Arrive In Europe As Serbia Seeks Airpower Edge”, *Forbes*, 9 July 2020, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2020/07/09/missile-armed-chinese-drones-arrive-in-europe-for-serbian-military/?sh=9f2d88679d24>, 24 May 2021.

⁹⁵ “Coronavirus: Serbia Provokes Kosovo with Vaccination Scheme”, *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2021, at <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-serbia-provokes-kosovo-with-vaccination-scheme/a-56375928>, 24 May 2021.

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