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Western Balkans during COVID-19 pandemic: how a waltz between Brussels and Beijing is turning into a Dragon dance

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In 2017, China launched a digital public diplomacy campaign in which Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister [boasted](#) about China establishing “different forms of partnership with 97 countries and international organizations. It is fair to say our circle of friends is getting bigger and bigger.” Yet, as a Chinese proverb “[Guǎ ng jiāoyǒ u, wú shēnjiāo](#)” cautions, one cannot cultivate deep friendships by maintaining a huge social circle. In Chinese foreign policy understanding, the European Union and its Southern neighbourhood is divided into several distinct zones of influence. Its principal aim is to gain knowledge about China’s counterparts, improve the image of China globally and advance economic and diplomatic interests of the world’s most populous country. Many governments in the Western Balkans are currently dancing a delicate political “waltz”, balancing between Brussels and Beijing. While analysts are debating [whether](#) or [not](#) Russia’s influence in this region remains strong, China managed to overcome debilitating intra-regional rivalries and offer strong economic incentives for engagement – at the displeasure of both [Brussels](#) and Washington. Evaluating China’s relationships in this geopolitical space is necessary in order to better understand how Western Balkans is currently positioned between Brussels and Beijing. COVID-19 pandemic provides an insight into this complex relationship and has a potential to increase China’s presence there.

The first zone of influence focuses on China’s trade and political ties with financially and/or industrially most advanced European countries (Tier-1). This principally

includes three Benelux states, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France, Austria, the Scandinavian region and Switzerland. China's efforts are also amassed on promoting institutional links with and gathering intelligence about international and European organisations situated within these countries, EU institutions, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Interpol and UN agencies. The so-called Tier-2 countries are differently positioned within a summit arrangement entitled "17+1". It includes cooperation between China and Europe's former Communist states as well as Greece which most recently joined. China launched this summitry platform in 2012, one year before announcing its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (in 2013) worth a trillion dollars in loans and infrastructure investment. Countries in the Western Balkans fall within the "17+1" initiative, subdivided further into EU (Croatia) and non-EU members (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) – all of which are current or potential accession candidates. The European Parliament members specifically singled out China as a possible threat to the EU's long-term interests in the Western Balkans. On 13 March 2020 China organised a video-conference with all 17 countries on the COVID-19 pandemic, which was unprecedented.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, China gained popularity in broader Southern European region as a partner which provides concessional loans for major infrastructural projects. The most notable example is a Chinese state-backed company acquiring Piraeus port, an important part of China's maritime component of BRI. Greece's Development and Investments Minister, Adonis Georgiadis recently stated (on 9 June 2020) that:

Greece is one of China's real friends ... In this global crisis of the novel coronavirus, we choose as our common response the further strengthening of Greek-Chinese relations and bilateral cooperation, especially in economy and investments.

Further North, Serbia has been the primary beneficiary of Chinese economic drive in the Western Balkans. Like other countries from this region, Serbia has taken out low-interest Chinese concessional loans to improve its infrastructure, with projects ranging from hydroelectric plants to building new bridges and roads and upgrading railways. Chinese state-linked company Zijin acquired Serbia's largest copper mine Bor in 2018, while other companies provided the Serbian military with new defence systems, built factories (some for exports to African countries), invested in cultural centres and even promoted Serbia as a new tourist destination to Chinese tourists (which have arrived in tens of thousands). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China was the first to send medical teams and supplies to Serbia, with billboards thanking "Brother Xi" adorning the streets of Belgrade. This prompted EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell to question the public invisibility of large and long-term EU aid funding vis-à-vis the more symbolic Chinese aid in the Western Balkans.

In Croatia, an EU member since mid-2013, a Chinese company is constructing Peljesac bridge, a large infrastructure project of which three-quarters are, ironically, being financed with EU money. China offered support to Croatia during the COVID-19 pandemic as Zagreb was also presiding over the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2020. According to officials from both countries, their relations have

entered a “diamond period” in cooperation. China’s exports and growing economic presence can be also observed in Albania (a close Cold War ally), parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro, with Kosovo probably most firmly remaining outside Beijing’s influence orbit due to its unresolved dispute with Serbia and strong Washington pivot. US-based expert Valbona Zeneli noted that “due to their geographical position, these countries ...are an important piece of the Silk Road puzzle.”

While the pandemic is likely to have long-reaching consequences for the EU members, both individually and collectively, it has strengthened the EU’s resolve to counter China’s influence in the accession states in particular, which remain particularly fragile (including in terms of democratic consolidation) and vulnerable to increased migration flows and decreased investments from the EU. Their health systems have been over-stretched to the limit and China has offered its aid, medical teams and equipment as well as promises of further investments after the pandemic. While the EU has reasserted its willingness to continue with accession negotiations with all remaining (real and prospective) candidates in 2020, Russia’s influence has not faltered significantly while China’s presence, soft power and strategic investments are diversifying and growing in the eyes of contemporary analysts such as Vuk Vuksanovic from the London School of Economics. The waltz between Brussels and Beijing is slowly turning into a Dragon dance, with democracy likely to come out as the most tragic casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans. While Western Balkan leaders may not be the ‘real’ friends of China, but economic opportunists, they have provided Beijing with a regional strategic footprint, intelligence and new historical legacy which can be applied and replicated in other parts of Europe.

Bio: Dr Nina Markovic Khaze holds a PhD in Political Science and Masters in International Relations/Diplomacy from the ANU and BA(Hons) from UWA. She is currently working at the Department of Security Studies and Criminology, Macquarie University. Previously, she was lecturing in International Relations at UNSW, and working as Senior Researcher for Europe and Middle East at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Research Service in Canberra. She speaks Italian, German and Serbian and provides weekly political commentary for SBS Radio.

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