

DFC STUDY

China in the Global Power Transition: Geopolitical Ambitions and the Transformation of the International Order





CHINA IN THE GLOBAL POWER TRANSITION: Geopolitical Ambitions and the Transformation of the International Order

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Summary & Recommendations

01

The international system is expected to undergo profound transformations in the coming period, driven by shifts in the balance of power and redefined global leadership concepts. Through the lens of rising multipolarity, the previously Western-dominated international order is increasingly losing its homogeneity, while China is assertively laying the foundations for its own political, economic, technological, and military model of global power.

The People's Republic of China's central goal is to achieve the so-called *great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation* by the year 2049, positioning itself as a key actor in shaping a new global equilibrium. This strategy is reflected in intensified efforts in artificial intelligence, strengthening of cyber capabilities and strategic military assets, and creating dependencies among other states through dominance in supply chains, especially in critical raw materials.

Europe, within this new geopolitical configuration, is facing a crisis of identity and leadership, burdened by internal divisions and a loss of strategic cohesion. The United States will aim to maintain its influence by reinforcing alliances and defending the existing order, while the China-U.S. rivalry and complex confrontation are set to dominate global security and economic discourse.

The Western Balkans remain susceptible to the subtle expansion of Chinese influence. China's interest in infrastructure projects and investments will open the door for influence operations in the fields of culture and education. China will continue to strengthen its presence in the Western Balkans to facilitate access to the EU single market. A potential distancing of Montenegro from the EU would allow both China and Russia to consolidate the socio-political positions they have established over the past decade.

China's strategy is based on state-directed development, digital and military modernization, and increasingly sophisticated methods of hybrid influence. The success of this model could gradually replace American global leadership, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, where China aims for absolute dominance by 2030.

Recommendations

– Development of a Comprehensive National Strategy to Counter Hybrid Threats and Foreign Malign Influence

- Montenegro should establish a comprehensive and long-term strategy for identifying, preventing, and countering hybrid threats and malign influences, including those originating from the People's Republic of China. It is necessary to create a specialized body or institution with a clear mandate and authority in this domain, which would enable a coordinated response to challenges related to security, informational resilience, and national sovereignty.

– Enhancing Institutional Transparency in the Area of Chinese Investments and Bilateral Arrangements

- Strict standards of public disclosure, oversight, and auditing should be implemented regarding Chinese investment projects and bilateral agreements. This would reduce the space for clientelism, non-transparent management of public resources, and potential corrupt practices, while simultaneously strengthening democratic control and accountability.

– Support for Independent and Professional Journalism and Adequate Media Monitoring of the Chinese Narrative

- It is crucial to provide systemic support to independent media to strengthen pluralism, critically examine foreign influence, and counter one-sided, often propagandistic narratives. Mechanisms should be established for the continuous monitoring of Chinese media presence, particularly in local and regional outlets, along with analysis of discursive patterns and influence strategies.

– Introduction of a Legal Framework for Official Visits to Chinese Institutions

- The public administration should develop formal guidelines and regulations governing official visits by state employees to Chinese institutions. Such visits are often used as soft power tools to shape positive perceptions and establish long-term ties, making institutional oversight essential to prevent political instrumentalization.

– More Active Involvement of Civil Society and the Academic Community in Monitoring Chinese Presence in Montenegro

- Research, analytical, and monitoring activities related to Chinese initiatives in education, higher education, technological cooperation, and cultural diplomacy should be encouraged. Emphasis should be placed on assessing influence through scholarship programs, joint university projects, and academic exchanges, bearing in mind the potential for political indoctrination.

– Establishing Clear Security Standards for Chinese Technologies

- It is necessary to develop security protocols and regulatory mechanisms for the assessment and use of Chinese technological solutions, particularly in the context of 5G infrastructure and cybersecurity. These standards should align with the security priorities and obligations of NATO and the European Union.

– Recalibrating Western Presence and Competitiveness in the Balkans

- The European Union and the United States should redefine their strategic approach to the Western Balkans by intensifying political and economic engagement, while increasing the visibility and transparency of their development and investment initiatives. This approach aims to affirm democratic values, strengthen resilience to authoritarian models, and preserve the region's European integration path.

It is important to recognize that China's presence in the country is not solely economic, but multifaceted, impacting democratic governance, security priorities, and information flows. Only through joint action by state institutions, civil society, academia, and international partners can sustainable resilience be built, and a vision based on transparency, the rule of law, and alignment with the European integration process be affirmed.

By strengthening domestic capacities—through improved legislation, institutional transparency, media literacy, academic analysis, and the proactive role of civil society—Montenegro can develop sustainable resilience to foreign malign influences.

Introduction

02

China's rise in international relations over the past two decades has evolved from being solely an economic phenomenon into a comprehensive geopolitical process. In light of increasingly intense global confrontations, especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, China is emerging as a key rival to the West—not only in terms of military and economic power but also as an ideological challenger to the Western democratic order. While developed Western democracies strive to preserve the existing architecture of the international system, Beijing is working to build a new, multipolar structure that reflects its vision of sovereignty, non-selective partnerships, and redefined values of international cooperation.

China's ambition to become a dominant center of power is no longer based solely on economic expansion, but on a wide range of influence tools, including security, technological, cultural, and informational domains.

Through initiatives such as the *Belt and Road Initiative*, the *Global Security Initiative*, and the Global Civilization Initiative, as well as by strengthening its role in the intergovernmental BRICS organization, China no longer acts as a perceived economic partner operating from the shadows, but as a creator of an alternative system of international relations. Its activities in the Western Balkans, the Global South, and even in war-affected parts of Europe—such as the occupied regions of Ukraine—indicate that Chinese policy is no longer reliant solely on passive investment, but increasingly on comprehensive political and security influence.

Although China's strategy was for years masked by rhetoric of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, Beijing now uses sophisticated methods of so-called structural influence through which it gradually shapes the institutional, regulatory, security, and cultural patterns of the countries with which it cooperates. Beijing does not impose its influence through force, but through long-term, often invisible processes whose results are reflected in changes in political orientations, media narratives, technological dependency, and the foreign policy positioning of certain countries.

The Western Balkans represent one of Europe's most vulnerable points to external influence, due to a combination of institutional instability, slow progress toward the EU, weak political elites, and infrastructural deficits. China does not view this region as a whole but as a collection of distinct national interests that can be adapted to suit its own geopolitical priorities. Beijing uses selective engagement, tailored to the specifics of each country, combining economic pragmatism with political flexibility and intelligence discretion.

In such a context, an analysis of China's presence in Europe and its activities in the Western Balkans is essential for understanding changes in the international system, as well as for formulating strategic responses by states that strive to uphold democratic values and institutional resilience.

Methodology of China's Activities

03

The modalities of Chinese and Russian influence in the Western Balkans differ in motives but show methodological similarities. Russia, both in Europe and in the Western Balkans, uses Pan-Slavism as the central point of its strategy for expanding influence, linking it with a narrative about preserving traditional values. The foundation for spreading this narrative is found in local intermediaries, primarily the Serbian Orthodox Church. Additionally, political actors and the media further exploit this narrative by associating it with NATO and American imperialism. On the other hand, Beijing, due to pronounced ideological and cultural differences between China and the countries of the Western Balkans, applies different motives in promoting soft power. The key modality of Chinese engagement lies in creating and promoting a positive image of China. Through cooperation with local media, TV shows and travel documentaries are promoted that exclusively portray affirmative aspects of Chinese culture, education, and technological progress. The Communist Party of China has defined two strategic principles for projecting soft power. The first principle is implemented through the information sphere and involves creating a perception of China as a benevolent and globally responsible superpower. The second principle relies on economic instruments, whereby economic cooperation, trade, and credit arrangements are not conditioned by the political nature of partner countries' regimes but are aimed at expanding Chinese influence through strategic investments and infrastructure projects.

China's *modus operandi* in Europe and the Western Balkans is based on a multilayered approach aimed at expanding economic, technological, and cultural influence, with the goal of strengthening a multipolar world order. China uses a combination of hard and soft power, adapting strategies to local socio-political contexts through consistent mechanisms of action.

Economic investments, intelligence influence over elites, media manipulation, and cultural diplomacy form the backbone of these activities. The main tool is the *Belt and Road Initiative*, through which China offers loans and infrastructure projects. The lack of transparency in these projects is often concealed by highlighting their benefits. Political and economic elites are targeted through study and work visits, scholarships, and bilateral agreements. Visits to China by public administration employees are carried out with a well-designed agenda that exclusively showcases the country's economic and technological advancement. The entire agenda deliberately portrays China as a modern and progressive country, ignoring the repressive nature of its state apparatus. Moreover, the goal of such cooperation is to establish deeper ties and contacts with the management structure of the public administration. This approach is consistent with Chinese intelligence operations in Europe, which target academia and mid-level managerial staff in state institutions.

Media and social networks are used to spread pro-Chinese narratives, often with the help of bots and disinformation (such as the bot network in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic), while Confucius Institutes and educational programs promote a positive perception of Chinese culture.

Unlike the EU, China exploits institutional weaknesses by offering infrastructure projects and political support without conditioning them on reforms. Media cooperation (e.g., with RTS and RTCG) and cultural programs strengthen the public's positive perception of China (88% of Serbian citizens and 63.2% of Montenegrins view China positively). This holistic approach—encompassing politics, economy, technology, culture, and security—enables China to position itself as a long-term global leader, but also encounters resistance due to risks of debt traps and erosion of host countries' sovereignty.

Visits to China
by civil
servants

Institutional Cooperation

Media
partnerships

Narrative control

Social media
manipulation

Media and Propaganda

5G dominance

Huawei projects

Cyber espionage

Technology and Cyber

Academic recruitment

Elite infiltration

Hybrid operations

Intelligence Operations

EU divisions

Promotion of multipolarism

Nominal neutrality
on the war in Ukraine

Diplomacy

Scholarships

Strengthening cooperation
with European Universities

Culture and Education

Chinese Modus Operandi in Europe and the Western Balkans

Economy

Infrastructure projects

Potential debt
bondage

Targeted investments

China's Strategy

04

China's Positions and War in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a fundamental turning point in contemporary international relations, deepening existing tensions between the West and the East, or rather, between democratic and authoritarian regimes. China has positioned itself as a counterbalance to Western dominance in the newly emerging power configuration, using the crisis to strengthen and advance its vision of a multipolar world order. For Beijing, the war in Ukraine represents both a challenge and an opportunity to deepen its global influence, bolster its military and economic positions, and solidify a long-term strategy based on the principles of multipolarity.

In line with this strategy, China's response to the conflict in Ukraine is characterized by an ambiguous stance toward both Russia and the West. Although China officially claims a neutral position, Beijing has avoided explicitly condemning Russia's actions, instead focusing its narrative on NATO's eastward expansion as the key cause of the conflict. This interpretation of the war aligns with China's broader critique of the unipolar order, where the United States and its allies hold dominant roles, and indirectly legitimizes the idea that a multipolar system allows for a more equitable distribution of global power. The China-Russia partnership was further strengthened by the *No Limits* Cooperation Declaration,¹ signed just weeks before the invasion of Ukraine. This document played a significant role in shaping a stronger economic partnership between the two countries. After the European Union and the United States imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia, the agreement with China helped ease economic pressure on Moscow. At the same time, it provided Beijing with favorable conditions for purchasing Russian energy resources. As a result, China has partial-

ly established Russia's dependence on the Chinese market—as evidenced by the fact that, in 2023, Russia became China's largest supplier of crude oil, the second-largest supplier of coal, and the third-largest supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG).²

China's socio-political interests in Europe rest on multiple complementary dimensions. On the one hand, Beijing's economic objectives are manifested through the global infrastructure *Belt and Road Initiative*, through which China seeks to expand its investment and trade influence, particularly in countries with limited access to capital. On the other hand, its political and diplomatic interests are evident in taking advantage of existing divisions within the European Union—especially between Western and Central-Eastern member states—through which Beijing aims to build a network of partnerships tailored to its long-term geopolitical ambitions. In this context, the war in Ukraine clears the way for China to present itself as a pragmatic actor, free from the ideological controversies of the transatlantic alliance, occasionally including initiatives for mediating peaceful negotiations. This selective diplomatic engagement aims to enhance China's image as a responsible global player capable of contributing to the stabilization of the international system.

However, China's vision of a multipolar world goes beyond short-term reactions to the war in Ukraine. It reflects Beijing's fundamental aspiration to participate in shaping global rules, rather than merely accepting them passively. In this regard, the ongoing conflict has accelerated China's efforts to challenge the legitimacy and reach of Western institutions by promoting cooperation through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and advocating for the expansion of BRICS. This seeks to build an alternative global governance network with declared priorities of stability, sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

In the European context, China pursues a strategy of so-called selective engagement, offering economic incentives to weaken transatlantic cooperation and to encourage the emergence of a European pole increasingly autonomous from Washington. For Beijing, Europe is not a unified actor, but a complex mosaic of national interests that, with appropriate investments and diplomatic initiatives, can be shaped in alignment with China's geopolitical priorities.

Ultimately, the war in Ukraine represents a significant test of China's multipolar doctrine, while simultaneously creating an opportunity to strengthen its global position. While Beijing has spent recent decades building economic and political relationships aimed at reforming the existing international order, the conflict in Ukraine has further accelerated this process. The war has enabled China to continue promoting alternative institutional frameworks and to demonstrate its capacity for managing crises. Therefore, the outcome of the war goes beyond regional implications and becomes crucial for assessing China's long-term position as an indispensable actor in a gradually redefining global system.

Strategies and Strategic Documents

The development and consolidation of China's strategic documents and initiatives represent a key element in the transformation of the global order toward potential multipolarity, with China increasingly positioning itself as a leading actor in international relations. China aims to build a comprehensive economic, political, and security architecture that supports its long-term interests. On this path, it relies on the *Belt and Road Initiative*, a comprehensive national vision of rejuvenation by 2049, accelerated technological advancement in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), and its military doctrine outlined in the *National Defense in the New Era* white

paper from 2019. The latest *Global Security Initiative*, launched in 2023, completes this strategy by emphasizing China's role as a stabilizer and mediator amid rising geopolitical tensions, especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The Belt and Road Initiative: Economic Foundation of a Multipolar Order

Launched in 2013, the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) is a key instrument for achieving China's vision of a multipolar international system. Its primary goal is to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through major infrastructure investments and the construction of logistical corridors, thereby facilitating international trade and the flow of investments.

Between 2013 and 2022, a total of 148 countries signed memoranda of understanding with China under the BRI framework. During that same period, China invested approximately \$679 billion in global infrastructure projects.³ According to World Bank estimates, the initiative has contributed to the creation of 500,000 jobs globally.

These figures confirm that the *Belt and Road Initiative* goes beyond traditional economic diplomacy, serving as a lever for strengthening the strategic influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In doing so, it also enhances other key components of state power, such as military-diplomatic ties and technological cooperation. In this way, China is gradually establishing a broader platform to assert and further develop its global position. China's role as an investment and infrastructure partner, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, may strengthen Beijing's influence within international frameworks, with an emphasis on redefining relations with countries seeking alternatives to Western capital.

Comprehensive National Strategy: National Rejuvenation by 2049

At the core of China's strategic planning lies the concept of national rejuvenation, which, according to the comprehensive National Strategy of the People's Republic of China, is to be realized by 2049. This time-bound rejuvenation is considered a fundamental prerequisite for achieving China's political, economic, technological, and military superiority on the global stage. The strategy is aligned with China's foreign policy, which states that national rejuvenation would create a favorable strategic environment for the PRC's national interests. There is a clear connection between internal consolidation and the global expansion of Chinese influence, with the year 2049—marking the centenary of the founding of the PRC—promoted as a symbolic horizon for the realization of the *Chinese Dream*. Notably, the rejuvenation plan by 2049 coincides with the political leadership's ambition to bring Taiwan and Hong Kong fully under the jurisdiction of the PRC by that same year.⁴

Technological Dimension: Leadership in Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Beijing envisions the field of artificial intelligence (AI) as a key area of geopolitical competition. China's strategy, based on the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan from 2017, has been supplemented by an action plan for the development of computing infrastructure. This plan includes the establishment of a globally influential AI center. The goal is for Beijing to become a global leader in AI development by 2025, with an AI industry valued at \$42 billion. It also aims to promote AI applications across all areas of social importance, a part of the program known as AI Plus.⁵ The Chinese government's increased activity in the AI sector aligns with U.S. sanctions on microchips

imposed on Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, as well as the growing dominance of American companies in the AI field. This technological leap is inseparable from geopolitical tensions, especially considering the sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies on Russia, and the intensifying competition in the microchip market. The Chinese leadership aims to reduce its dependence on American companies by heavily investing in the domestic development of semiconductors and quantum technologies. This reduces risks associated with the global supply and demand chain and represents Beijing's direct response to constraints imposed by international high-tech trade. China's investments in this area clearly signal that the leadership in Beijing does not intend to rely on the current global supply chain for high-tech equipment, which remains largely dependent on the United States.⁶

National Defense in the New Era

The military strategy of the People's Republic of China was clearly defined in 2019 through the document *National Defense in the New Era*, which emphasizes the adaptation of the traditional *People's War doctrine* (initially based on Mao Zedong's teachings) to the new security challenges of the 21st century.⁷ This document represents a key strategic text outlining China's military approach in the context of modern global challenges. It states that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will adapt Mao's traditional concept of People's War to meet the demands of 21st-century warfare. Primarily, this strategy is a response to the technological superiority of the United States and is based on asymmetric warfare, in which China would leverage advantages in areas such as cyber, space, and information warfare. A significant portion of the document focuses on technological innovation, especially in the fields of artificial intelligence and unmanned aerial vehicles (drones).⁸ China emerged from

the Cold War era as a regional power with technologically underdeveloped military capabilities. However, its modern capacities in space and quantum technology now surpass those of many of its competitors. In line with the 2019 *National Defense* strategy, China is developing military capabilities aimed at challenging U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The People's Liberation Army comprises two million active-duty personnel and 510,000 reservists.⁹

Diplomatic Initiatives and the Projection of Soft Power

A key aspect of China's global presence lies in its diplomatic initiatives that promote its role in global security. The *Global Security Initiative*, introduced in February 2023, represents China's attempt to position itself as a force for peace and stability considering tensions between Russia and the political West. Although the initiative does not offer concrete proposals for resolving the Ukraine crisis, it promotes universal principles of security cooperation, positioning China as an alternative to the NATO-led security architecture. The *Global Security Initiative* reflects China's vision of redefining global security cooperation, emphasizing sovereignty and dialogue. Fundamentally, the holistic approach embodied in the initiative aims to garner broader international support and goodwill for China's current global policies.¹⁰ In this context, China's efforts to portray itself as an exporter of peace and stability are particularly important, contributing to the expansion of its soft power. According to the 2024 *Global Soft Power Index* compiled by Brand Finance, China ranks 3rd among 193 countries.

Instruments of Multipolarism

Following the end of the Cold War in the late 20th century, China was quick to begin articulating its own vision of an international system in which no single power would monopolize global decision-making. As early as the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, then-President Jiang Zemin introduced the concept of *duoji shijie*—a policy of multipolarity—marking China's open departure from U.S.-led unipolarity.¹¹

Modern China envisions a world order where power is distributed among various centers of influence, with the ultimate aim of reducing the overall dominance of the United States. Through various initiatives, such as the *Global Civilization Initiative* introduced in 2023, China projects a vision of a world based on *peace, development, justice, and equality*. However, this initiative is also part of Beijing's broader agenda to replace universal principles of democracy and human rights with a value system more aligned with authoritarian governance.¹² The expansion of economic influence, the strengthening of military capabilities, and the shaping of global leadership are the three core areas through which China seeks to project its global influence.

BRICS and Monetary Sovereignty

One of the key instruments for projecting China's political and economic power is BRICS. Founded in 2009 as an economic forum of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, BRICS serves as a counterweight to the G7. Through its membership, China extends its mechanisms of power projection toward the Global South, especially Africa. At the 16th BRICS Summit in 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China's agenda for the Global South, as defined

in its 2030 strategy, includes eradicating poverty, improving living standards, and achieving dominance in electric vehicle and lithium battery production.¹³ Given that today's global economic order is based on the U.S. dollar, China, through BRICS, aims to implement a process of *de-dollarization* by replacing part of the world's financial and debt flows with transactions in the Chinese yuan. BRICS countries have announced the creation of a shared currency to reduce reliance on the dollar. Since 2018, China has promoted the position that BRICS countries should conduct mutual trade in national currencies. At the 2024 BRICS Summit in Russia, China also set the goal of creating an alternative to the SWIFT payment system.¹⁴

By offering a political and value-based alternative through BRICS, and an economic one via the *Belt and Road Initiative*, China is focusing on underdeveloped Global South countries, particularly in Africa. It actively utilizes multilateral platforms to advance its interests on the continent, relying on the support of African nations to reform global institutions and norms. China's strategy includes cooperation with African states within the United Nations, where Africa constitutes the largest voting bloc, accounting for 28% of the General Assembly. In 2016, China sponsored the creation of a \$200 million UN Peace and Development Fund, through which

Chinese peacekeepers are deployed across Africa.¹⁵ Chinese multilateralism plays a significant role in preventing Taiwan from taking steps toward independence. Beijing uses its diplomatic and economic influence to isolate Taiwan internationally. Through bilateral agreements, China insists on the One China Principle, which requires states not to recognize Taiwan as a sovereign entity. As of 2025, the only African country that formally recognized Taiwan was Eswatini; all others, in line with the One China Principle, have pledged to avoid any activities that could lead to recognition of Taiwan's independence.¹⁶

Africa – The New Horizon

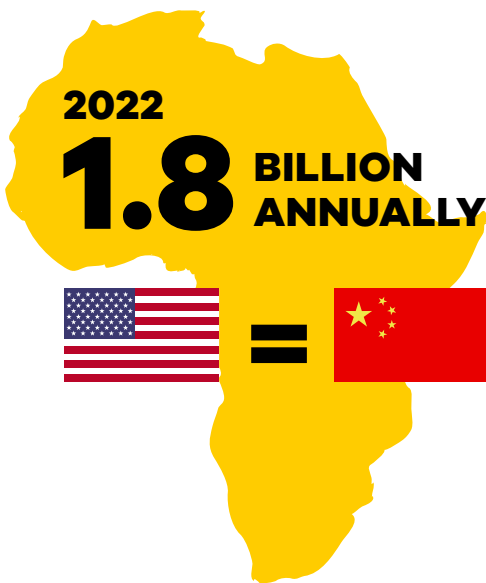
The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) in 2014 by BRICS countries, including South Africa, reflects China's efforts to create parallel financial mechanisms that enable countries, especially from the Global South, to access loans and financial instruments outside of traditional Western sources. Additionally, the participation of 10 African nations (with 9 more as potential members) in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), founded by China in 2015, further supports this strategy. Through such initiatives, China not only ensures financial flows independent of Western institutions but also strengthens political and economic ties with African partners, using loan



The Chinese in Liberia as part of the UN mission / Source: UN

arrangements as a means of deepening its influence.¹⁷

By 2022, China had matched the United States in terms of investment volume in Africa, averaging \$1.8 billion annually. At the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China pledged \$51 billion (360 billion yuan) over three years, including credit lines, grants, and private investments, along with a promise to create one million new jobs in Africa.¹⁸



Chinese investments in Africa are comprehensive, targeting infrastructure, energy, and natural resources. Notable projects include the Mombasa–Nairobi railway in Kenya (completed in 2017) and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway (2016). The investment of over \$6 billion in these two projects indicates China's intention to secure strategic positions in East Africa and to deepen trade and economic routes aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative. However, these investments also raise concerns about foreign malign influence. In August 2018, the directors of the Kenyan agency responsible for selling state land to the Chinese were arrested, along with the

director of the state railway, on suspicion of corruption. The company in charge of constructing the railway was CRBC, the same company that was involved in building the first section of the highway in Montenegro.¹⁹

Moreover, Chinese infrastructure loans across Africa raise the risk of economic dependence. Zambia notably increased its debt to China, especially for projects like the Kafue Gorge Lower hydroelectric plant. By 2020, Zambia owed about \$6 billion to China, roughly a third of its total external debt of \$16.8 billion. When COVID-19 hit, Zambia became the first African country to default, missing a \$42.5 million Eurobond payment in November 2020. In 2022, Zambia canceled a \$1.6 billion loan from the Chinese EXIM Bank and ICBC. By June 2023, Zambia had restructured \$6.3 billion in debt, with China still being its largest creditor with \$4.1 billion.²⁰

Djibouti, strategically located on the Red Sea, owed China around \$1.4 billion, or 45% of its GDP, mostly for financing the Ethiopia–Djibouti railway. In January 2023, Djibouti suspended debt repayments to China, becoming the second African country after Zambia to do so. High-interest commercial loans worsened the country's financial burden, leading to debt restructuring. China's establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 also illustrates how hard power complements China's future geopolitical positioning.²¹

Geopolitical Pragmatism: Russia, Ukraine, and Counter- balancing the U.S.

China applies a pragmatic approach in its foreign policy, based on geostrategic flexibility. Although it maintains close cooperation with certain strategic partners, Beijing does not rule out the possibility of economic and political collaboration even with countries that are in direct conflict or

rivalry with those partners. This policy enables China to maximize its interests while avoiding direct alignment or involvement in conflicts. This approach became evident following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Amid comprehensive sanctions from the EU and the U.S., China became an essential partner for Russia in circumventing these measures. According to a 2024 U.S. intelligence report, Chinese companies have been supplying Russia with navigation equipment, parts for combat aircraft, and civilian technology that Moscow repurposes to maintain its *war machinery* in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, China has provided Russia with a total of 12 million drones, which have become an indispensable component of the modern battlefield.²²

Equally telling are Chinese investments in the war-affected areas of Luhansk and Donetsk. China's objectives in the occupied territories of Ukraine include economic gain through resource exploitation and infrastructure development, as well as expanding its geopolitical influence by accessing natural resources. In this way, China is laying the foundation for a long-term economic presence in that part of Europe. The most significant project is the Karan quarry in the town of Myrne, Donetsk region. In 2024, the Chinese company Zhongxin opened a quarry and a factory for concrete and crushed stone in Myrne. Materials from the factory are being used for road construction, including the Donetsk–Mariupol highway, as well as for the reconstruction of Mariupol. Ukraine has accused Chinese investors of using these projects to conceal mass graves in Mariupol.²³

The Chinese state-owned company Gentrak International is involved in the construction of the Rostov-on-Don–Mariupol–Melitopol–Simferopol highway. This route is of strategic importance to Russia, as it provides an alternative to the Crimean Bridge, currently the only transport link between Russia and the occupied

Crimean Peninsula. China has also shown a noticeable interest in the natural resources of the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. Between October 2022 and March 2023, the Chinese company Quzhou Nova purchased copper worth \$7.4 million from the Debaltseve plant, which is located in Russian-occupied territory.²⁴ A key figure connecting these business ventures is Zhang Jingwei, the director of the Russia-China Center for Humanitarian Cooperation.

In contrast to its strategic partnership with Russia, China has also been deepening its cooperation with Ukraine. Trade between China and Ukraine has increased since the onset of Russian aggression in 2022. In 2023 alone, China exported goods worth \$10.1 billion to Ukraine, primarily digital and radio transmission equipment, as well as computers.²⁵ On March 6, 2025, China and Ukraine signed two agreements allowing the export of Ukrainian peas, fish, and fish products to the Chinese market. The agreements were signed by Chinese Ambassador to Ukraine Ma Shengkun and Serhii Tkachuk, head of Ukraine's State Service for Food Safety and Consumer Protection. According to the Ukrainian side, the agreements are of strategic importance, as the Chinese market is considered crucial for Ukrainian exports.²⁶



Zhang Jingwei at a meeting in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR)
Source: Realna Gazeta

In light of the recent political developments between the United States and Ukraine, and the potential for a peace agreement, the behavior of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become increasingly telling. On February 21, 2025, Phoenix TV—a broadcaster widely recognized as a media-propaganda outlet of the CCP—aired a report from the Ukrainian side of the frontline. A special correspondent provided a detailed segment on the conditions faced by Ukrainian soldiers in a combat unit stationed along the contact line with Russian forces.

China is swiftly and effectively capitalizing on the geopolitical vacuum created by ongoing peace negotiations surrounding the war in Ukraine. Beyond its political balancing act between Russia and Ukraine, China is also asserting itself in the Indo-Pacific region. In February 2025, for the first time in history and without prior announcement, Chinese naval vessels conducted live-fire exercises near the coasts of Australia and Vietnam. This marked a bold demonstration of military confidence, reflecting a tactic reminiscent of Russia's assertive behavior in its near abroad. The timing of these exercises—occurring in quick succession throughout February—suggests a coordinated effort to signal China's readiness to operate on multiple geopolitical fronts simultaneously.²⁷²⁸



Screenshot from the Phoenix TV report
Source: X

Intelligence Activities

Chinese intelligence operations are conducted through multiple state agencies, including the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, the United Front Work Department, and the People's Liberation Army via its Intelligence Bureau. These activities are part of a broader strategy to advance China's national interests, particularly under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, amid growing tensions with Western democracies. The United States has specifically identified Chinese counterintelligence and economic espionage as a top priority. In 2020, the FBI was opening a new China-related case every 10 hours. Out of nearly 5,000 active cases, almost half were related to China.²⁹

By linking Chinese intelligence and disinformation activities in Taiwan with similar phenomena in Europe, a pattern emerges that reveals a global model of China's approach to hybrid influence. Although contextually different, many elements of the methodology and objectives remain consistent: infiltration into key sectors, targeting vulnerable individuals, using the civil sector and digital platforms, and manipulating narratives through disinformation and psychological operations.

In recent years, Europe has seen a growing number of espionage cases tied to Chinese intelligence services, particularly the Ministry of State Security (MSS). The most notable examples include the recruitment of individuals within European political and academic institutions, such as the case in Germany, where an assistant to a Member of the European Parliament, Maximilian Krah (from the far-right political spectrum), was arrested on suspicion of transmitting information to China.³⁰ In Belgium, former senator Frank Creyelman, a member of the far-right Belgian party Vlaams Belang, was accused of spreading Chinese narratives and influencing Eu-

ropean policy in exchange for money.³¹ A branch of the Chinese intelligence service, the United Front, was designated in 2024 as a channel for conducting influence operations in the United Kingdom. According to security services, Chinese businessman Yang Tengbo was tasked with developing close ties to Prince Andrew, the brother of King Charles, in order to secure better intelligence positioning for the Chinese service.³² Authorities in Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands discovered in 2022 Chinese overseas police stations operating under the guise of *service centers* for Chinese nationals. These were used to monitor and intimidate Chinese dissidents abroad, as well as to conduct espionage activities.³³ Cyber activities linked to Chinese intelligence services target corporations, governments, and IT companies. The most prominent groups include APT31, Mustang Panda, and Salt Typhoon. Salt Typhoon was responsible for the attack on U.S. internet providers in 2023. APT31 was behind the hacking of the Finnish Parliament in 2021.³⁴ Members of the same group hacked the UK Electoral Commission in 2023, gaining access to voter data going back eight years.³⁵ The *Digital Eye* operation, attributed to China, was responsible for a cyber-espionage campaign targeting IT service providers in Europe. The main goal of this hacker group was to infiltrate the supply chain operated by European IT companies.³⁶

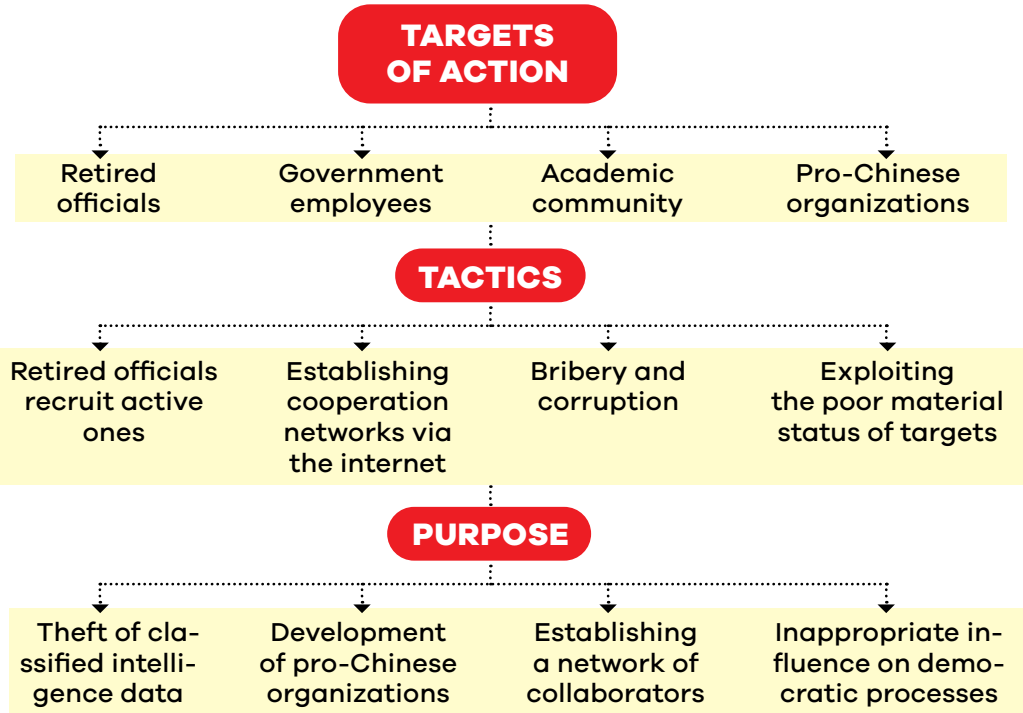
Identical methods are visible in Taiwan, where China targets individuals from the political, military, and academic establishment, using personal vulnerabilities or ideological closeness as entry points for recruitment. Following a similar pattern to that seen in Taiwan, China employs social media and proxy media outlets to spread narratives that undermine trust in EU, NATO, and U.S. institutions, while promoting pro-Chinese sentiment. Key narratives used by China in the information space include denying Western official claims about the existence of labor

camps for Uyghurs—a religious and ethnic minority living in western China. These claims are labeled by Chinese disinformation campaigns as Western propaganda.³⁷ An important segment of Chinese propaganda involves the dissemination of narratives that create a positive image of China and its economic initiatives.³⁸ Especially during political elections, the European Union has documented a rise in disinformation originating from Chinese sources, including fake polls, video manipulation, and the use of bot accounts. Methodologically, both in Europe and Taiwan, China uses a layer-by-layer approach: initially establishing contacts and collecting open-source data, then isolating and assessing targeted individuals (profiling), followed by attempts at recruitment, all while simultaneously spreading narratives in the public sphere that align with China's geopolitical objectives. The aim is not only traditional espionage, but the long-term shaping of the political landscape and public opinion in alignment with Beijing's interests. The operational patterns of Chinese intelligence services in Taiwan and Europe demonstrate a high degree of strategic consistency, with adaptation to local conditions. China's strategy is not limited to data collection but represents a comprehensive model of infiltration, influence, and narrative control, leveraging the synergy of physical infiltration and digital manipulation.³⁹

Influence Through Technology

Over the past twenty years, China has established itself as a global technological rival to the West, investing significant resources into the development of artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and surveillance systems. Through initiatives such as *Made in China 2025*⁴⁰ and the *Digital Silk Road*, the Chinese government aims not only to be a manufacturer but also a leader in high technology. By investing in sophis-

**Schematic Overview of Chinese Intelligence Operations
Including the United Front**



ticated surveillance systems and artificial intelligence, China is not only enhancing its own security capacities but also exporting this technology worldwide, especially to developing countries seeking alternatives to Western democratic and technological models. Beijing uses technology as a tool of soft power, positioning itself as both a strategic partner and a competitor in the global race for digital dominance. A significant development in China's technological influence is the emergence of the Deep Seek AI language model. This model was developed by the Chinese company Hangzhou Deep Seek Artificial Intelligence Basic Technology Research Co. In January 2025, the company introduced the *Deep Seek R1* model along with its chatbot. This was followed by *Deep Seek V3* in March 2025. *Deep Seek V3* was trained in 2024 at a cost of only 6 million USD, compared to the 100 million USD

that American company OpenAI spent on GPT-4 in 2023. Unlike OpenAI's state-of-the-art model, the Chinese version is free to use and offers the same level of response quality. In a very short time, *R1* became the number one artificial intelligence app on Apple's App Store. The Deep Seek model was created through a process technically known as distillation—a method where a pre-trained model is used to teach a new language model. Specifically, Deep Seek used OpenAI's ChatGPT to train its own language model.⁴¹ This approach shows how Chinese companies adapt to existing solutions in the field by applying a different methodology, exploiting the weaknesses of current Western AI technology.

In this context, it is particularly significant that Deep Seek does not prioritize hiring IT specialists or experts in artificial intelligence. On the contrary, the focus is on

recent graduates from the social sciences, tasked with training the Deep Seek model in a way that aligns output results with the ideological and political priorities of official Beijing.⁴²

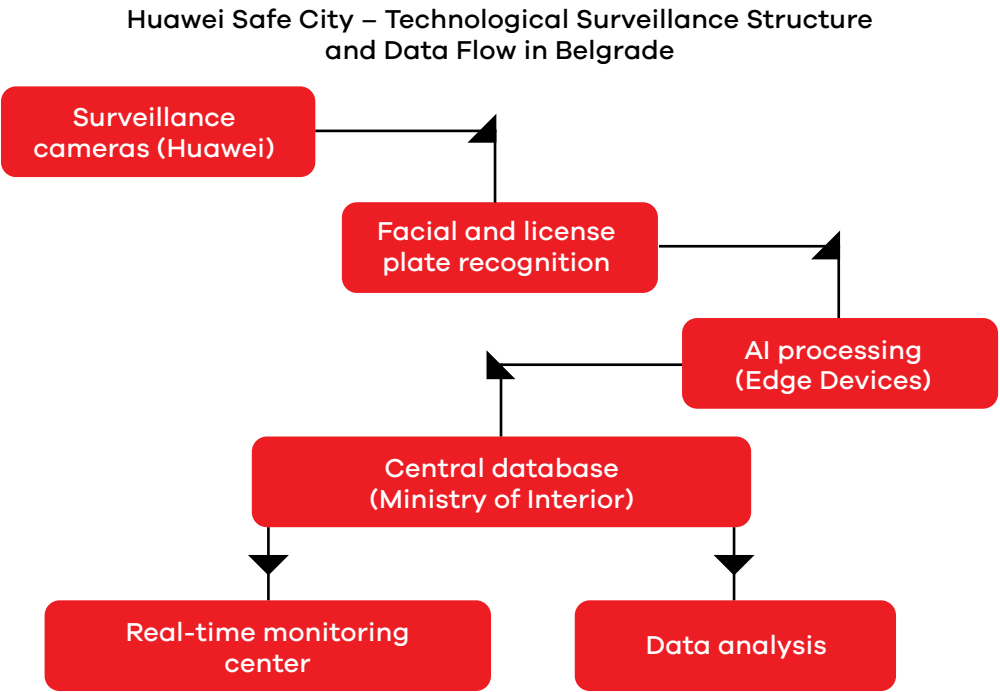
Surveillance in Serbia

China is expanding its global soft power by exporting and installing Huawei surveillance technology as part of smart city development projects. Additionally, 70% of the IT infrastructure in Africa has been built by Huawei.⁴³ In Zambia and Uganda, Chinese surveillance technology was misused to intercept communications and track the locations of political opponents of the regimes in those countries. In Uganda, in 2018, Huawei technicians used spyware to hack the WhatsApp account of Bobi Wine, an opposition leader and popular musician-turned-political figure.⁴⁴ In Zambia, Huawei technicians officially stationed in the telecommunications regulator’s office helped the government gain

access to the phones and Facebook pages of a group of bloggers running a pro-opposition news site. In both cases, access to phones and social networks indicated the use of advanced cyber tools integrated into Huawei’s digital surveillance systems, which had been sold to African governments.⁴⁵

Serbia is increasingly relying on Chinese technology in developing its own IT infrastructure, with the most notable example being the implementation of Huawei’s Safe City technology in Belgrade. In 2019, Huawei and a Serbian delegation signed a Memorandum of Understanding, formally initiating cooperation in digital security. The *Safe City* project was launched in 2019, and in 2020, the installation of 1,000 smart cameras in Belgrade began.⁴⁶ *Safe City* is a concept that uses Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to improve city management, ranging from traffic and energy systems to public security.

Diagram of data collection from the surveillance system in Belgrade



However, in the Chinese interpretation, that concept includes mass video surveillance, algorithmic facial and behavior recognition, and centralized databases that enable real-time tracking of citizens. The installation of Huawei's surveillance system in Serbia is problematic due to the lack of legal regulation in this area, but more importantly, due to the issue of control over the use of that technology.

Serbia has adopted the Law on Personal Data Protection, which is only partially aligned with EU standards, and does not provide instruments and mechanisms for implementation. Huawei, in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) of Serbia, has installed technology for facial recognition, license plate reading, and real-time monitoring. The real-time surveillance system is directly linked to the MUP Serbia database.⁴⁷ Key surveillance points include pedestrian zones, bus and railway stations, government and ministry buildings, the vicinity of residential buildings and schools, as well as border crossings and highways.

Even though the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, signed the Washington Agreement on September 4,

2020, on the normalization of economic relations with Kosovo (under which Serbia committed to banning the use of 5G network equipment purchased from untrusted vendors), cooperation with Huawei has intensified.⁴⁸ Given the authoritarian tendencies of the regime in Belgrade, this cooperation gains significance in the context of anti-government protests in Serbia. Since 2023, the Serbian authorities have labeled the protests as an attempt to *provoke a Maidan scenario*.⁴⁹ In light of the student protests in Serbia in 2025, it is noteworthy that the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, held a meeting with Zhu Weikang, the head of state security of Shanghai. The topic of the discussion was counterintelligence cooperation and countering coloured revolution.⁵⁰

Chinese Use of Media as an Instrument of Soft Power

China uses media as a tool in its global propaganda strategy to reshape international reporting. The primary objective of this tactic is to counter Western publicity by portraying China in a positive context and limiting critical narratives. At the same time, while expanding its global me-



Meeting between the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, and the Head of State Security of Shanghai, Zhu Weikang, in Beijing on December 14, 2024. / Source: RFE

dia reach, the Chinese regime restricts foreign reporting within the country, strictly controlling the information accessible to the domestic public. Beijing is significantly expanding its media influence using various tactics and tools. This includes providing free access to Chinese state media content, funding inserts in prestigious magazines, forming direct partnerships with foreign media organizations, and implementing journalist exchange programs. Chinese media establish cooperation with outlets around the world, ensuring that content aligned with the narratives of the Chinese Communist Party becomes a regular part of the broader information landscape. Through the subtle dissemination of narratives in foreign media, China shapes public opinion and global discourse in its favor.

Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized as early as 2013 that China must expand its discourse power on the international level by *telling China's story well*, which means redirecting global narratives to align with the goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). This includes reporting on official CCP policies and promoting China, particularly through coverage of the *Belt and Road Initiative* and Chinese diplomatic efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese media at home and abroad praised the state's response to the global health crisis, emphasizing donations and aid to other countries, while simultaneously spreading propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.

The CPC consistently enforces the principle of party control over the media, which means that the media serve the Party and do not operate independently from it. Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that *the principle and system of party control over the media remain unchanged, regardless of the passage of time or changes in the media environment*.⁵¹ This principle aims to censor and control information and actively shape narratives that exclusively support and legitimize the

rule of the CPC while suppressing negative and critical voices.

A Freedom House study covering the period from January 2019 to December 2021 showed that China exerted significant efforts to influence media in 16 out of 30 countries. The ability of these countries to resist Chinese media influence varied, and half of the analyzed countries were deemed vulnerable to such influence.⁵² This indicates the need for a coordinated and consistent response to China's sophisticated tactics, involving governments, media, media experts, academia, civil society, and technology companies.

With the establishment of the China Media Group (CMG) in 2018, the Chinese Communist Party centralized its most important media outlets to strengthen its control over them and reinforce its narratives both domestically and internationally.⁵³ This group brought together China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio (CNR), and China Radio International (CRI), creating a state media conglomerate that enabled Beijing to coordinate content and messaging across various platforms in China and abroad. The China Media Group is used to disseminate the policies and narratives of the Chinese Communist Party, promote the Chinese model of development, and suppress critical reporting on sensitive issues such as human rights violations, Taiwan, and the rights of the Uyghurs. CMG serves as a strategic tool of the Chinese regime for shaping the global information environment and stifling independent journalism, enhancing Beijing's capacity to influence public opinion worldwide.

The CPC has focused its media strategy on developing countries, especially in Africa, through a range of strategic investments and partnerships aimed at shaping the information ecosystem. The presence of Chinese media in Africa dates back to the post-World War II period, when the

Chinese Media Influence



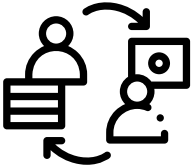
Free Content from Chinese Media

State media offer free articles to foreign media



Partnerships with Foreign Media

Direct partnerships with foreign media organizations



Journalist Exchange Programs

Journalists participate in paid visits to China



Financing additional content in Prestigious Magazines

China pays for inserts in high-profile publications

Goals of These Tactics



Promote a positive image



Legitimizing Chinese narratives



Weakening critical voices

Xinhua news agency opened offices in Ghana and Guinea in 1959. However, the expansion of Chinese media in Africa has intensified significantly in the 21st century.

China uses various mechanisms to establish a presence in the African media space. Young African journalists are trained in China and work for Chinese media outlets, while Chinese media organizations provide financial support to African media struggling with budget constraints in exchange for positive reporting on China. Chinese media entities promote Chinese investments regardless of associated criticisms and controversies, while also pressuring African media that engage in critical reporting. In this way, public perception is shaped in favor of Chinese interests, even when those interests conflict with those of African citizens. The involvement of the Chinese Communist Party in the African media space contributes to the distortion of Africa's information environment, limiting access to independent content.⁵⁴

Chinese media are also present in the Western Balkans region, particularly in Serbia, where cooperation is at its highest level. CGTN and CCTV are available through regional cable operators, while Xinhua and CRI distribute content in local languages. The main channel for Chinese media activity in Serbia is CRI Serbian, which operates regionally and delivers content via a website, radio, and social media platforms. Although the CRI Serbian Facebook page has a large number of followers, the level of interaction is very low, which may suggest the use of fake or bot accounts for propaganda purposes. Chinese media influence in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is evident through partnerships with local media outlets, paid content, and the distribution of Chinese news.⁵⁵ As part of China's strategic media engagement in the Western Balkans, paid print and online media spaces are used for features about China, as well as for analyses and statements from Chinese ambassadors.⁵⁶

Social Media

In addition to traditional media channels, China uses social media and digital platforms to disseminate its messages and narratives both domestically and internationally. The Chinese government recognizes the power of social media and employs a sophisticated approach, balancing censorship with engagement to steer public opinion. The Chinese Communist Party makes significant use of Chinese social media networks to shape the domestic political context and influence global perceptions of China. Beyond promoting its views and interests, Chinese influence operations often aim to provoke polarization in Western societies. This is achieved by manipulating specific and controversial topics to deepen divisions and reduce cohesion within those societies.

Although many Western social media platforms are banned in China, certain Chinese media outlets maintain accounts on those platforms to spread China's viewpoints beyond its borders. The focus of these efforts is to portray China as a technological and economic leader through narratives centered on major international projects and innovations.

In the realm of social media, fake bot and troll accounts are often employed to boost the reach of preferred narratives while discrediting critical voices. The Chinese government uses this tactic to shape online discussions in line with the narratives that benefit the CPC. This form of influence is not limited to specific topics or a single social media platform—it spans multiple platforms globally.

In 2023, Meta—the company that owns Facebook and Instagram—removed thousands of fake accounts originating from China. The network involved 4,700 accounts that posed as Americans, using profile pictures taken from users around the world. These accounts frequently copied content from American politicians

or reposted media articles, not with the intent to inform or promote legitimate debate, but to disseminate polarizing content related to U.S. politics and U.S.-China relations. The aim was to create the illusion that certain issues were more widely supported or controversial than they actually were. The key topics targeted by these accounts included abortion, culture wars, and aid to Ukraine.⁵⁷

China also uses its own social media platforms as tools for propaganda campaigns targeted against specific political figures around the world. One notable example is a coordinated, malicious campaign against Chrystia Freeland, a candidate for the leadership of Canada's Liberal Party, which took place on the Chinese platform WeChat. According to the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force, the operation was linked to the most popular account on WeChat—an anonymous blog associated with the People's Republic of China. Over 30 WeChat accounts were identified as part of this smear and discrediting campaign, which generated a very high level of engagement and visibility, resulting in more than 140,000 interactions. It is estimated that the content reached between two and three million users on the platform.⁵⁸

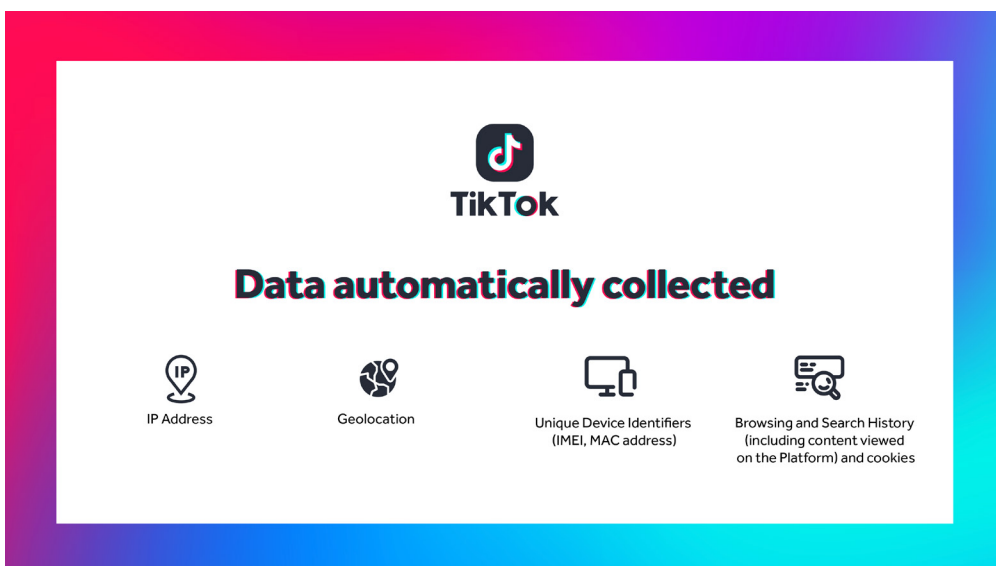
Chinese influence operations on social media are increasingly becoming a central point in the global discussion about disinformation narratives, censorship, and transparency in international relations. The tactics China employs raise critical debates about online influence and the potential consequences for political systems around the world. Manipulating public opinion and shaping discussions on important political and social issues through fake accounts, bots, and trolls poses significant challenges for transparency, freedom of speech, and privacy on social media platforms.

TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to create and share short video content ranging from 15 seconds to three minutes. The platform was launched in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance under the name Douyin for the Chinese market, where it is subject to strict censorship rules. In 2018, an international version was released under the name TikTok. In a short time, the platform gained global popularity, especially among young people, thanks to its features for creative expression, participation in viral challenges, and the ability to consume large amounts of content in a short period.

TikTok uses an algorithm that analyzes user behavior, such as views, likes, and comments, to personalize the content shown to each individual. The main feature of the app is the *For You* page, where videos are displayed based on what the algorithm deems relevant to each user. This approach allows users to discover new content easily and helps creators reach wider audiences and gain more followers. However, the company faces ongoing concerns about data security and its ties to the Chinese government. TikTok's data collection methods allow the app to access extensive information stored on users' devices. The company gathers sensitive user data even when users do not save or share content. Another issue of concern is the lack of transparency around data retention policies—there are often no clear timeframes for how long data is stored, raising uncertainties about whether user information might be retained indefinitely.

Although there is no publicly available evidence that TikTok directly shares user data with the Chinese government, concerns stem from China's 2017 National Security Law, which requires companies, including TikTok's parent company ByteDance, to hand over data upon government request. While TikTok asserts



that user data is stored on servers located outside of China, specifically in the United States and Singapore, the parent company's servers are based in China, and the app itself contains references to China-based infrastructure.

In April 2024, the United States passed a law as part of a broader foreign policy package that calls for a ban on TikTok unless its ownership severs ties with China. However, the legal battle over this issue is still ongoing. In court filings related to TikTok, the U.S. government stated that China could exploit the app's algorithm to unlawfully interfere in the political system and political discourse, including elections. The European Parliament, European Commission, and the Council of the European Union have all banned TikTok from devices used by their employees and have advised them to remove the app from personal devices as well. Although TikTok was already incompatible with NATO devices due to internal technological restrictions, NATO formally notified its staff in March 2023 that downloading the app on official devices is prohibited.⁵⁹

Like other social media platforms, TikTok serves as a rapid channel for spreading

propaganda, misleading content, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and various political or ideological narratives. Its algorithm-driven recommendation system enables messages to spread quickly, reaching wide audiences in a short time. The platform encourages engagement through user interaction and the creation of personalized versions of viral videos, which can trigger a chain reaction of narrative amplification. This dynamic makes manipulation easier, and the lack of robust content authenticity controls further facilitates disinformation campaigns.

One of the most serious cases of political misuse of TikTok occurred in Romania during the presidential elections in December 2024. The far-right, pro-Russian candidate, Călin Gheorghescu, achieved a surprising success in the first round of voting, which was partly attributed to his aggressive TikTok campaign. Due to suspicions of manipulation and foreign interference—particularly from Russia—the Romanian Constitutional Court made the controversial decision to annul the results of the first round. Gheorghescu's promotion on TikTok relied on a variety of tactics, including coordinated account activity, algorithmic manipulation to in-

crease his visibility, and paid promotions. The campaign featured paid influencers, members of far-right extremist groups, and individuals linked to organized crime, all of whom actively supported his candidacy online. Romania's intelligence service concluded that a *highly competent digital marketing firm* orchestrated the campaign, adeptly circumventing TikTok's rules and content moderation systems.⁶⁰

TikTok is also used to disseminate propaganda content from Chinese state media, including news about lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and promotional videos encouraging tourism in the Xinjiang region—a region where China has been accused of persecution and human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslim minority. Millions of users around the world are exposed to thousands of ads produced by Chinese media, promoting China's culture, economy, and technological achievements. Alongside cultural content, more politically charged materials are often pushed as well, such as critiques of European and U.S. resistance to China's *Belt and Road Initiative*, or accusations that Western media spread falsehoods about China's human rights record.⁶¹ These kinds of posts are frequently distributed across Europe without clear labeling that indicates their affiliation with the CPC, raising concerns about whether users are truly aware of the source and intent behind the content they consume.

While the platform showcases China's advancements and cultural richness, it simultaneously censors content that contradicts the interests of the Chinese government. Moderators are instructed to remove posts on sensitive topics such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, Tibetan independence, or the Hong Kong protests.⁶²

Chinese Propaganda Campaigns

Chinese propaganda campaigns represent a sophisticated tool through which the au-

thorities in Beijing shape the global narrative in line with their geopolitical interests. Through carefully crafted information operations, Beijing attempts to present itself as an alternative and desirable model to the West using various influence techniques—traditional state media, social networks, and other modern digital platforms. Through precisely structured information-operational activities, the Chinese government targets states, industries, companies, or individuals it considers strategically relevant. Chinese disinformation campaigns most frequently target countries with which the Chinese authorities are in confrontation, primarily the United States. Beijing also seeks to spread geopolitical narratives aligned with Chinese interests through coordinated influence campaigns, including the discrediting of political opponents and strengthening the image of the CPC.

The effectiveness of China's propaganda campaigns is best illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic period, during which China spread conspiracy theories and disinformation. It used the spread of the coronavirus to carry out disinformation campaigns aimed at creating panic and mistrust in the West. During this strong and precisely coordinated campaign, China, through state institutions, officials, politicians, state media, and social networks, spread two key narratives. One was that the United States was responsible for the creation of the coronavirus, and the other that the Communist Party of China was successfully fighting the pandemic, emphasizing the superiority of the Chinese system. Chinese diplomats and officials, known for their sharp rhetoric, were also involved in the propaganda campaign. They were dubbed *Wolf Warriors* for their aggressive defense of Chinese interests and attacks on Western measures, spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. China also used visual content such as memes and caricatures, which were spread by influencers on TikTok and other social media.⁶³

These campaigns frequently target public figures, scientists, and politicians. One such example is the campaign against German anthropologist Adrian Zenz, known for studying China's persecution of the Uyghurs. Narratives were spread against Zenz, claiming that he was funded by American politicians.⁶⁴

Mandiant's research revealed the scope and strategy of a Chinese campaign targeting scientists and researchers studying the genocide of the Uyghurs. The investigation covered 72 fake informational websites and social media posts connected to the Chinese PR company Shanghai Haixun Technology Co. The content promoted during this campaign aimed to reconstruct the international image of Xinjiang, dispute the criticism of the United States and its allies, and discredit individuals who criticized the Chinese government.⁶⁵

In 2024, an extensive Chinese influence operation called Paperwall was discovered, involving a network of fake media portals spreading Chinese narratives and disinformation. The investigation showed that pro-Beijing narratives were targeted and carefully crafted, disseminated through portals that appeared to be local media outlets. At least 123 websites were identified in multiple languages, connected to locations in at least 30 countries across four continents. Although the graphic design and content of these sites slightly differ, the portals operate under the same principle—publishing targeted content mainly taken from professional portals, while also coordinating in spreading Chinese disinformation and discrediting foreign dissidents.⁶⁶ Interestingly, these portals use a strategy to gradually gain credibility, so that their content may potentially be shared by legitimate media outlets. This is one of the indicators of the success of propaganda campaigns, which the DFC highlighted⁶⁷ when discussing the effectiveness of Russian disinformation

campaigns. Thus, similarities between China and Russia in terms of spreading disinformation and narratives can be observed. The repetition and modification of narratives through media not directly controlled by Beijing and Moscow is a clear indicator of influence, as disinformation narratives thus become legitimate, credible, and accessible to a broader audience.

Coordinated inauthentic influence campaigns by China have also been recorded on the digital platform YouTube, aimed at promoting pro-Chinese and anti-Western narratives. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute identified one such campaign that sought to shape the views of English-speaking audiences on the roles of China and the United States in international politics, the global economy, and strategic technological competition. This campaign attracted a significant audience and utilized AI-generated entities and narration voices to achieve greater reach and scope. The focus of the network, which included 30 YouTube channels, was on narratives suggesting that China is winning the tech war against the U.S. despite American sanctions, favoring the Chinese company Huawei while simultaneously criticizing the American company Apple. After the campaign was reported, YouTube removed some of the channels.⁶⁸

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the Western Balkan states were also under the influence of manipulations and narratives disseminated by Chinese structures. However, that was not the only period when Chinese attempts to influence events and processes in the region through propaganda campaigns were observed. In North Macedonia, during the pre-election period in 2024, a Chinese disinformation campaign was active that encouraged Euroscepticism and promoted an alternative path through potential membership in BRICS and the Eurasian Union. According to the Intelligence Agency of North Macedonia,

pro-Chinese narratives were identified in the political party “The Left,” which advocates for a strategic partnership with China and for leaving NATO and abandoning European integration. Although China’s economic influence in North Macedonia is not as significant compared to other countries in the region, it attempts to strengthen its presence there through media activities and the dissemination of Chinese messages and vision.⁶⁹

5G technology

The fifth generation of mobile networks, or 5G, represents a significant technological advancement in wireless communication. Chinese companies, particularly Huawei and ZTE, play a key role in the development and implementation of 5G networks around the world. China’s 5G network is widespread across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while Europe is increasingly reducing its reliance on Chinese suppliers. A key difference between Chinese and European 5G technology lies in the approach to security, development standards, and financing models. The debate over the use of Chinese 5G technology revolves around balancing technological progress with national security. While Chinese companies offer competitive and often more affordable solutions for 5G infrastructure, there is concern that the Chinese Communist Party could potentially use them for surveillance and control, prompting many countries to reconsider their use.

The United States leads a global campaign against the use of Chinese 5G equipment, claiming that it may pose a threat due to potential access to military, government, and corporate communications—essentially espionage and intellectual property theft. Skepticism toward Chinese technology in the United States has long existed, but with the development of China’s 5G network and the decisions of companies worldwide to adopt it, these concerns have intensified. Therefore, the U.S. urg-

es its allies and partners to ban the use of telecommunications equipment from Chinese manufacturers, arguing that the economic benefits are outweighed by security threats and potential consequences.⁷⁰

The European Union also takes a cautious stance toward the introduction of Chinese 5G technology, primarily due to concerns about potential security risks associated with Chinese equipment. The European Commission has recommended that member states block Chinese 5G suppliers, stating that Huawei and ZTE pose higher risks compared to other providers. The goal of these recommendations is to reduce the exposure of European networks to potential security threats.

The Chinese government has provided Huawei with substantial state subsidies, enabling the company to offer network equipment at significantly lower prices compared to foreign competitors. The European Commission found that Huawei underbid its rivals by as much as 70 percent. In addition, Chinese state banks offer low-interest loans to countries to encourage the use of Huawei equipment. Although the company claims that its pricing is due to technological expertise, experts argue that without government subsidies, Huawei would not be able to cover the production costs of its components.⁷¹ Despite these financial incentives and the technological advantages of Chinese companies in the 5G sector, they face serious criticism for their close ties to Beijing’s security services. A key concern for Western countries is the possibility that, through the installation of equipment, Chinese spies and saboteurs could gain unauthorized access to critical infrastructure and sensitive data, thereby threatening national security and the vital communication systems of governments and corporations. A 2022 investigation by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed that Huawei equipment could be used to disrupt U.S. military communications,

including those related to the American nuclear arsenal. Officials in the United States and Australia have pointed to vague Chinese intelligence laws that could compel Huawei to hand over certain data to the Chinese government. These concerns have been further heightened by China's 2017 National Security Law, which obligates Chinese companies to cooperate with state intelligence agencies.⁷²

For precisely these reasons, several Western countries have taken measures to restrict or entirely ban Chinese companies in the 5G technology sector. The United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Australia have prohibited Huawei and ZTE from serving as 5G network equipment providers. In September 2023, Germany launched a review of its 5G mobile telecommunications networks with the aim of banning the use of Chinese 5G technology and potentially requiring domestic companies to remove installed Chinese components. In July 2024, German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser announced that Germany aims to remove components from Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE by the end of 2026, followed by a full ban.⁷³

While EU countries are taking action to counter Chinese 5G technology, it is simultaneously becoming a key element in the strategic relationship between China and Russia. This is evidenced by agreements signed between the Chinese company Huawei and Russian telecommunications firms MTS and Beeline, deepening technological cooperation between the two nations. This cooperation takes on added significance in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as 5G technology can have extensive applications in military and intelligence operations.⁷⁴ The ability of 5G technology to enable rapid data collection, transmission, and processing, enhance surveillance and control of military facilities, and improve communication capabilities can play a crucial role

in modern warfare. Satellite technology is already a focal point of China-Russia cooperation, and the future development of 5G networks in Russia not only strengthens their strategic ties but may also impact global security.

The technological dimension of China-Russia cooperation gains additional significance when considered within the broader context of 5G technology development for military purposes. China is not only deepening its collaboration with Russia in the field of 5G technology but is also simultaneously investing in the enhancement of its own military capabilities through advanced 5G systems.

Regarding the application of 5G technology in the military industry, it is important to highlight that in early January 2025, China unveiled its first mobile 5G base station designed for military operations—an important technological advancement in military capability development. The system, developed jointly by China Mobile and the People's Liberation Army, enables secure and high-speed data transmission for over 10,000 users within a three-kilometer radius. The technology ensures stable connectivity even as military units move at speeds of up to 80 km/h through complex terrains and under conditions of electromagnetic interference. Additionally, the system supports the deployment of unmanned military forces, including drones and autonomous combat platforms.⁷⁵

The implementation and use of 5G networks will shape the future of digital communication but will also significantly impact strategic relations between major powers. This confirms that the technology goes far beyond data transmission speed and is becoming a key factor in global security, economic dominance, and political power. As a global leader in this field, China uses 5G technology not only for economic growth but also as a tool for expanding its influence, raising concerns

among Western countries about potential challenges and consequences. In many ways, 5G technology, alongside artificial intelligence, is becoming a central element of global technological competition and the establishment of power on the international stage.

Education and Culture as Instruments of Influence

China uses education and culture as significant tools of soft power to strengthen its global influence, implementing this strategy through mechanisms such as Confucius Institutes, Chinese language centers, cooperation with universities, academic staff and students, scholarships, and educational programs. The establishment of Confucius Institutes and other cultural initiatives contributes to a better understanding of Chinese traditions, while China further promotes its language and culture through various linguistic and artistic performances.

The Global Soft Power Index, which uses education and science to identify the main narratives of soft power by measuring levels of influence on public opinion, showed in 2024 that China ranked third in the world, behind the United States and the United Kingdom.⁷⁶ By early 2025, the index indicated that China had climbed one more spot, placing it second.⁷⁷ China's consistent progress reflects its efforts to enhance its economic appeal, showcase its culture, education, and science, and strengthen its reputation as a secure state. For the Chinese government, education is an important instrument in building the country's global position and status. This is evident from the action plan for educational institutions, which outlines China's ambition to become a major global educational hub by 2035. In this process, universities play a strategic role. China is increasingly becoming a competitor in the fields of science and research. It is commit-

ted to opening up to the world by continuously creating new models of academic engagement and enhancing international cooperation and exchanges in education. In Xi Jinping's strategic plans for education, higher education is seen as a key driver of development. Special attention must be directed toward improving innovation capacity, creating scientific and technological innovations, strengthening interdisciplinary academic fields, and developing top-level professionals. Xi envisions an educational system characterized by strong ideological and political leadership, talent competitiveness, scientific and technological support, social coordination, and international influence.⁷⁸

China is intensively working toward achieving its plan to become a *powerful nation in education*, with a special focus on training a workforce for the digital era. To that end, leading Chinese universities are increasing undergraduate enrollment quotas in fields such as artificial intelligence, information sciences, engineering, and clinical medicine. Additionally, universities are organizing courses on artificial intelligence based on the new Chinese AI model developed by the startup DeepSeek, which rivals those offered by companies like OpenAI and Meta.⁷⁹

In many countries around the world, including the Western Balkans, China's influence in the educational sphere is primarily focused on cooperation with universities through student and academic staff exchanges, signing agreements and memoranda of understanding, and promoting the learning of the Chinese language. The Chinese government's plan involves implementing high-level educational programs from Chinese universities in collaboration with other global institutions, particularly in science and engineering. Through this proactive approach on the global stage, China's international influence in education has grown significantly over the past decade.

However, such collaborations raise questions about academic freedom and the potential influence of the Chinese government on educational programs. Concerns exist that China might use these programs to promote its political viewpoints and censor topics it deems sensitive.

China also uses scholarships for students and academic staff as a means of influence, aiming to shape public opinion and limit academic freedom. This is evidenced by the fact that recipients of scholarships from the China Scholarship Council (CSC) are contractually obligated to pledge loyalty to the Chinese state, with legal consequences for non-compliance. The contracts explicitly require recipients to develop a sense of responsibility and mission to return to China and serve the homeland, not engage in activities harmful to Chinese national security, and maintain regular contact with the Chinese embassy. Furthermore, the contracts include a guarantor clause related to the scholarship recipients' families and friends. Each recipient must name two personal guarantors residing in China, who are not allowed to leave the country for more than three months during the duration of the scholarship. If the recipient breaches the contract, the guarantors may be held accountable.⁸⁰ Due to Such Restrictions, Friedrich-Alexander University (FAU) in Germany has decided not to accept CSC-funded scholars. The decision was justified by concerns that these scholars cannot freely express their academic opinions, as well as the potential risk of scientific espionage, both of which have intensified existing concerns about Chinese academic programs in Europe. This case highlights a broader issue of China's influence on the European educational system. While scholarships may appear to be valuable opportunities for the academic community, in practice, they can become tools for political control and mechanisms for disseminating Chinese narratives within European academic circles.

Through Confucius Institutes, which also serve as mechanisms for spreading soft power, China promotes an image of itself as a non-interventionist global actor. Confucius Institutes are institutions that promote the Chinese language, culture, and history, and they play a significant role in China's diplomatic efforts. The Confucius Institute project was launched in 2004 under the auspices of Hanban, the central Chinese organization responsible for overseeing the Institutes' activities. Hanban acted as the executive body of the Chinese Language Council International, which was affiliated with China's Ministry of Education. It was tasked with approving funding, providing teaching staff, and supplying textbooks.

These institutes organize Mandarin language classes, exhibitions dedicated to Chinese art, music lessons, and martial arts workshops. Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated that Confucius Institutes *symbolize China's ongoing efforts for international peace and cooperation and represent a bridge between the Chinese people and the peoples of other nations*.⁸¹ As of early 2025, there are approximately 120 Confucius Institutes and classrooms operating within the European Union, with the highest numbers located in Germany and France. Unlike other institutes and similar cultural centers, Confucius Institutes are typically integrated into the host country's university structures and often operate through a dual-directorship model.

In recent years, Confucius Institutes have become the subject of numerous controversies. Critics argue that they are not educational institutions but rather tools for spreading propaganda and exerting the influence of the Chinese government on academic and political circles abroad. Concerns have been raised about the procedures for establishing the institutes in host countries, the lack of transparency regarding university agreements, employ-

ment policies, financial aspects, and reports of censorship of Chinese instructors and local university professors regarding sensitive political and historical topics related to academic freedoms.⁸² For example, instructors are pressured to avoid sensitive topics such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, the Cultural Revolution, and human rights violations in China, Tibet, and Taiwan.

Under public pressure and criticism, many countries have decided to close Confucius Institutes. The United States was one of the first to take concrete actions and close several institutes due to concerns that they posed a threat to the independence and integrity of academic communities and national security.⁸³ The U.S. State Department, in its August 2020 report, labeled them as foreign missions due to their lack of transparency.⁸⁴ Similar decisions have been made in Europe, where Confucius Institutes have been closed at some European universities due to suspicions that they serve as *instruments of China's propaganda machine*. European Union spokesperson Peter Stano announced in November 2024 that several concerns had been expressed regarding the role and activities of Confucius Institutes in EU member states.⁸⁵

Vrije University in Brussels decided in 2019 not to renew its cooperation with the Confucius Institute after the Belgian State Security Service refused to extend the work visa for the Institute's director due to accusations that he was using his academic network for the benefit of Chinese intelligence services.⁸⁶ Deteriorating relations between Sweden and China led to the closure of Confucius Institutes and classrooms in Sweden in 2020. The key reason for these decisions was Sweden's concern over China's acquisition of local companies, security issues, human rights violations, and repression in China.⁸⁷

Repressive measures by the Chinese government in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as the decision by China to replace its

long-time academic partner, Beijing Sport University, with the China University of Political Science and Law, were key factors in Norway's decision in 2021 to close the Confucius Institute at the University of Bergen. It is particularly notable that this university was one of the main academic centers for ideological training and had very close ties with the Communist Party of China.⁸⁸ Helsinki University also decided to close its Confucius Institute in 2022 due to concerns that it served as an extension of China's propaganda machine.⁸⁹ Germany's domestic intelligence service has been warning for years that Confucius Institutes are tools of political influence, emphasizing in reports that Chinese activities and forms of cooperation in education and research pose a threat to academic freedom.⁹⁰

The Chinese government and Hanban reject these criticisms, insisting that the Institutes are purely educational, with no political agenda. Beijing has accused Western countries of spreading ideological biases and attempting to limit cultural cooperation. However, due to these criticisms, in mid-2020, Hanban was rebranded as the new Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation (CLEC). Additionally, the Chinese non-governmental organization, the China International Education Foundation (CIEF), was established to oversee and finance the Confucius Institutes. The rebranding included the opening of new centers under the CLEC or CIEF labels, as well as replacing the former Confucius Institutes with other Chinese universities. In this way, Beijing sought to obscure the connection between the institutes and the Chinese government, while maintaining its influence over educational institutions. However, the Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation (CLEC) operates under the Chinese Ministry of Education and receives funding from the Chinese government.⁹¹

In addition to education, China also uses cultural diplomacy as a tool for expanding

Chinese Soft Power Through Education and Culture

- 
- Confucius Institutes**
 - Centers for Chinese Language**
 - Scholarships and Educational Programs**
 - Cultural Initiatives and Artistic Performances**
 - Cooperation with Universities and Academic Staff**

its influence and building a positive image on the global stage. The Chinese government actively finances and organizes various cultural events worldwide, such as festivals, exhibitions, and film screenings, to promote Chinese culture and values, as well as strengthen cultural ties with other countries. Chinese media, with offices around the world, play a significant role in promoting culture and traditions by broadcasting various programs and films. Historical narratives are often employed to justify current political decisions and strategies, influencing how China is perceived in the international community.

Chinese state media collaborate with foreign media on content co-productions, using documentaries and other long-form formats *to tell the Chinese story effectively*. For instance, China Global Television Network (CGTN) partnered with the Discovery Channel to create a documentary titled *World's Ultimate Frontier*, which showcases the *unique culture* of the Uyghur region and the happy lives of its people. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the China International Communications Center (CICC) and Discovery Channel produced a film that highlighted China's response to the crisis, attributing the success to the institutional strengths of Chinese socialism.⁹² Through such ap-

proaches, the Communist Party aims to influence the international public by promoting positive narratives and shaping perceptions on issues it faces criticism for. Wang Gengnian, the director of China Radio International, advocated in 2011 that *China should quietly plant the seed of its ideology in foreign countries by using its traditional culture to promote socialist ideology*.⁹³ This suggestion uncovers several key aspects of China's foreign policy strategy. Wang's advice suggests that cultural diplomacy is not only used to promote culture but also as a tool to expand political influence. In essence, he advocates for the integration of ideology into cultural activities in a subtle manner, allowing China to influence other countries without direct political pressure. The use of traditional Chinese culture as a means of promoting communist ideology is effective because cultural elements such as exhibitions and festivals often have universal appeal and can be used to form a positive image of China. This subtle and strategically thought-out approach allows China to expand its influence while maintaining an image of neutrality.

China & EU

05

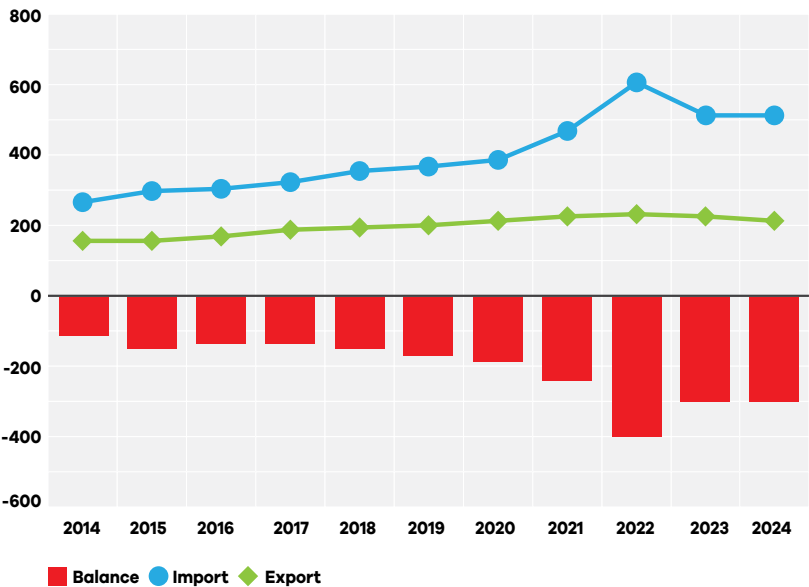
**Dynamics of Partnership,
Rivalry, and Strategic
Uncertainty**

The relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the European Union, initially dominated by economic interests, has become increasingly complex due to contemporary geopolitical shifts. Although China and the EU are significant trade partners, their bilateral interactions are burdened by a series of challenges. These include human rights violations, the issue of Taiwan’s status, non-transparent investment practices, and strategic disagreements on global security.

As a result, the European Union is increasingly distancing itself from dependence on China in key sectors, particularly in trade and strategic raw materials. The policy of de-risking is becoming a key strategy for redefining economic relations. However, within the EU, there is no consensus on the approach to China, which Beijing is seeking to exploit to expand its political and economic influence through bilateral initiatives with individual member states.

In order to balance trade relations, the European Union insists on reciprocity and greater openness of the Chinese market to European companies. In contrast, Chinese officials reject⁹⁴ criticisms of their industrial policies and even accuse the EU of discriminatory regulations, such as the Foreign Subsidies Regulation from January 2023, which aims to eliminate market distortions caused by external subsidies.⁹⁵ Despite tensions, trade exchange between the EU and China remains intensive. The EU exports machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals to China, while importing electronics, machinery, textiles, and consumer goods from China. The EU is particularly vulnerable in the sector of green technologies, where China holds a dominant position due to its control over supply chains for key raw materials and products, such as solar panels, lithium-ion batteries, and electric vehicles.

The European Union is navigating a delicate balance between maintaining economic partnership with China and upholding political principles, especially in areas such as human rights and fundamen-



Trade Exchange Between the European Union and China / Source: Eurostat

tal freedoms. Notably, issues surrounding the treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang and the erosion of political rights and freedom of expression in Hong Kong have sparked significant concern. These issues led to the suspension of the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in 2021, followed by mutual sanctions.⁹⁶

As part of its de-risking strategy, Germany—China’s largest trading partner in Europe—is seeking to mitigate its dependence on China in strategic sectors while trying to maintain stable economic ties. On the other hand, China views the *de-risking* strategy as protectionism that threatens globalism.⁹⁷ Berlin openly criticizes Chinese human rights practices but continues cooperation in areas such as innovation and industrial modernization. Meanwhile, France has recently intensified its bilateral relations with Beijing, focusing on joint projects in the energy sector and the green transition.⁹⁸

China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) continues to be a divisive issue within the EU. While Italy was the only G7 member and one of the 18 EU countries to join the initiative in 2019, it withdrew from the project in 2023, calling it a *serious mistake*.⁹⁹ The EU has increasingly expressed concerns about the misalignment of the initiative with market rules and international standards, and as an alternative, it is developing the Global Gateway infrastructure program, emphasizing transparency, sustainability, and strategic autonomy.

The EU’s adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 aims to expand its presence in the region, build political and security mechanisms, and counterbalance China’s influence. China’s reluctance to condemn Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has further strained relations with the EU, with European leaders consistently raising the issue in discussions with Chinese officials. Although Beijing

maintains a neutral official stance, its reluctance to criticize Moscow raises doubts about its true geopolitical orientation.

The return of Donald Trump to the leadership of the United States in 2025 has introduced a new dynamic into transatlantic relations, which China seeks to leverage to strengthen its ties with the EU. The failed attempt by Trump and Zelensky to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine, along with the worsening of relations between the US and European allies, creates space for Chinese diplomacy. In this context, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has called on the EU to redefine its relationship with China, highlighting Beijing’s readiness to cooperate with the European side to deepen strategic communication and mutually beneficial cooperation.¹⁰⁰

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reiterated the EU’s commitment to its de-risking strategy in February 2025, while simultaneously opening space for deeper trade and investment relations with China. Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič emphasized the importance of engagement with Beijing, as well as stronger coordination with the United States on economic security issues.¹⁰¹

Chinese Electric Vehicle Industry: Opportunity and Threat for the EU

The electric vehicle industry represents one of the most contentious issues in the economic dynamics between China and the European Union. China’s strategy, based on substantial state subsidies and investments in battery technology, has allowed its companies to gain a dominant position in the automotive market. In October 2024, China held 76% of the global electric vehicle market.¹⁰²

Market Share of Cars Produced in China in Battery Electric Vehicle Sales in the

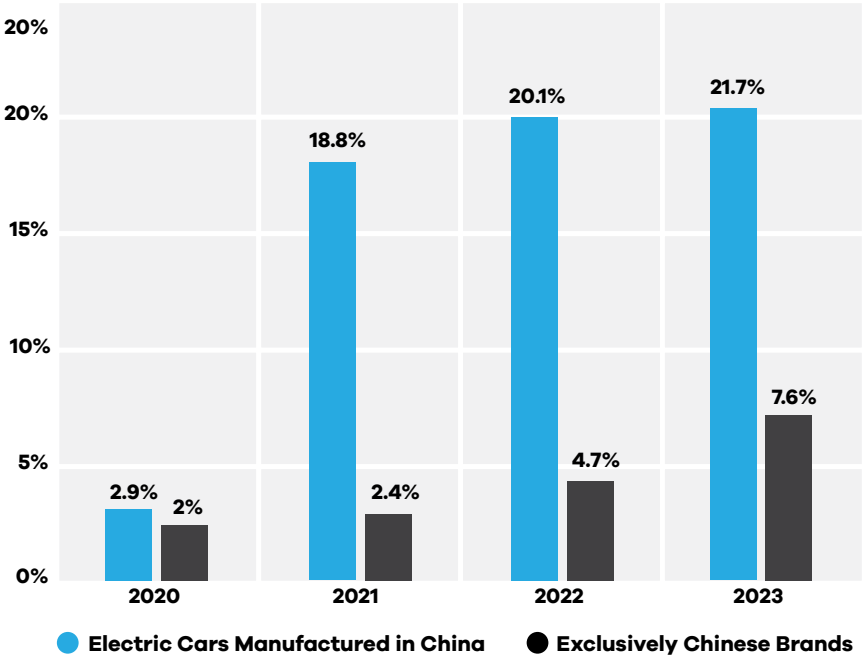
EU; Source: Driving Mobility for Europe

The European Union, positioned as a leader in promoting the green transition, faces increasing pressure from the rapid expansion of Chinese electric vehicles (EVs). The European Commission has argued that the low prices of Chinese EVs are the result of unfair state subsidies. As a response, in October 2024, it introduced five-year tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. In retaliation, Beijing has tried to exert both diplomatic and economic pressure on EU member states to prevent these measures, offering investments in the automotive industries and threatening critical export sectors of the EU.¹⁰³

Despite growing concerns about dependency on Chinese electric vehicle manufacturers, opinions within the EU are divided. Hungary, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, openly supports Chinese investments. Chinese giant BYD announced plans to build its first European factory in Hungary, which would grant it direct access to the EU market without

additional tariff burdens.¹⁰⁴ The European Commission has launched an investigation into this investment to determine whether BYD has received unfair state support, which would violate competition principles.

The relationship between China and the European Union is at a crossroads. Balancing economic cooperation with strategic security interests is becoming increasingly difficult amid global challenges. Fragmentation within the EU, disagreements among member states, intensifying technological competition, and geopolitical uncertainty are pushing the need for a coherent, long-term strategy towards China. On the other hand, Beijing uses every opportunity to assert its global position and strengthen bilateral ties with European countries, especially when transatlantic relations are under pressure. The future of EU-China relations will depend on their ability to overcome differences and establish sustainable cooperation mechanisms in a multipolar world.



Market Share of China-Manufactured Cars in Battery Electric Vehicle Sales in the EU
Source: Driving Mobility for Europe

China in the Western Balkans

06

For years, China has skillfully exploited the political vacuum, lack of democratic capacities, weaker infrastructure, and the latent skepticism towards the West present in the Balkans. In this way, it has strengthened its presence in the region, especially through initiatives like the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) cooperation platform. China's modus operandi is clearly defined primarily through collaboration on infrastructure projects, offering services at a lower cost compared to American or European competitors, thus securing cooperation with the countries of the region. In this context, the Balkans serve as a springboard and a bridge for the expansion of Chinese investments and the establishment of a more significant economic presence in Europe.

Serbia

Serbia is one of the key pillars of Chinese influence on the continent. Serbia's foreign policy is based on the concept of four pillars (EU, Russia, USA, and China), with closer relations between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China established in 2009. These relations are primarily characterized by intense political dialogue, high-level visits, and economic cooperation.¹⁰⁵

China's political, economic, and technological influence is growing significantly on a global scale, and Serbia sees this as an opportunity to strengthen its own economy and international position. Thanks to this strategic partnership, Serbia and China have established multi-layered cooperation, covering areas such as infrastructure, industry, trade, healthcare, security, media, culture, education, and digital technologies. At the same time, political cooperation is reflected in mutual support on issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Since the rise to power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Alek-

sandar Vučić, the relationship between the two countries has continuously improved. Agreements first elevated these relations *to the level of strategic friendship in 2016, and then to steel friendship in 2023*. During the visit of President Xi Jinping to Belgrade in May 2024, the relationship was raised to the level of a *community with a shared future*.¹⁰⁶

The current geopolitical moment is crucial in analyzing and projecting the future cooperation between China and Serbia. The Russian aggression in Ukraine has placed the Belgrade regime under pressure, particularly in the context of European integration. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has given Serbia a new impetus to deepen its ties with China. Belgrade and Beijing agree on key political issues: China does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, while Serbia supports the *One China* policy.¹⁰⁷

Political cooperation is accompanied by a strong propaganda campaign in media controlled by the regime of Aleksandar Vučić, and the narratives promoted have contributed to 88% of Serbian citizens having a positive perception of China.¹⁰⁸

In public discourse, China promotes the narrative of *win-win* cooperation, emphasizing the importance of equality and mutual respect for sovereignty, which the Serbian government views as an attractive alternative to the standards and values imposed by the West. Serbian-Chinese relations are often presented as an example of a successful partnership that does not come with political conditionalities. At the same time, Serbia's orientation towards the concept of a multipolar world is becoming more apparent, where Western powers would not exclusively dominate the global stage.

Serbia, on one hand, ostensibly advocates for EU membership and alignment with European standards, while on the other, it actively seeks to intensify cooperation with China and Russia. Serbia's participation in global forums such as the BRICS sum-

mit further emphasizes its orientation towards multipolarity. This strengthens the argument that there are other centers of power capable of providing investments, political support, and a better position on the world stage.

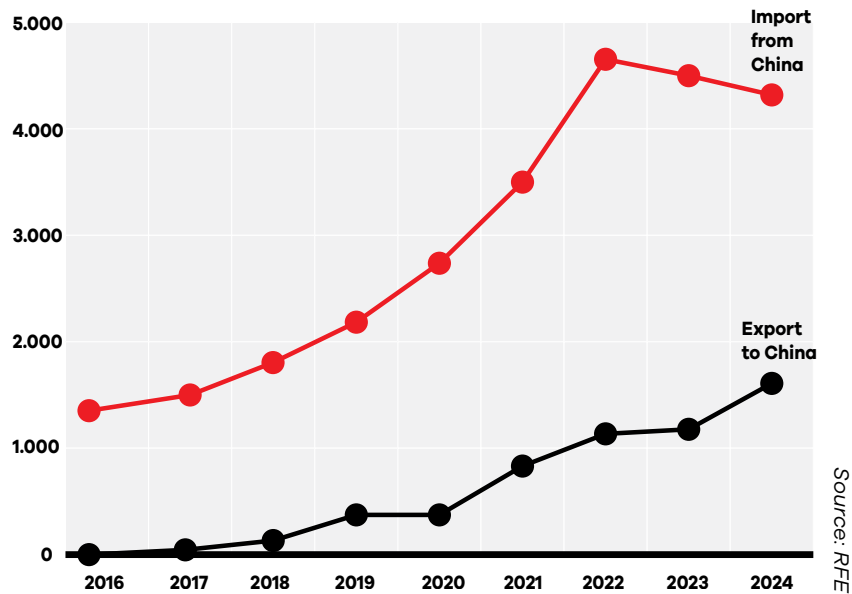
The actions of Aleksandar Vučić’s regime continuously amplify the anti-Western sentiment in the country, creating the narrative that Serbia has an alternative to the European path and that it is unnecessary to accept all the conditions imposed by the European Union. It is clear that, although a candidate for membership, Serbia does not align its foreign and security policy with the EU. Furthermore, the pragmatic approach promoted by China, which is not concerned with internal developments in Serbia, contrasts with the EU, which insists on issues like human rights and the rule of law. This is why Vučić seeks to strengthen ties with China, as this partnership does not threaten the authoritarian system of governance currently in place in Serbia.

A concrete example of the synergy between China and Serbia in spreading anti-EU narratives is the bot network discovered by the Digital Forensics Center during the COVID-19 pandemic. A large network of bot profiles from Serbia on then-Twitter glorified Chinese aid during the pandemic, as well as the friendship between the two countries, while simultaneously spreading a false narrative about the lack of aid from the EU. The bot accounts were directly connected to the Serbian Progressive Party, and their posts tagged the accounts of President Aleksandar Vučić, then Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.¹⁰⁹

Economy and Investments

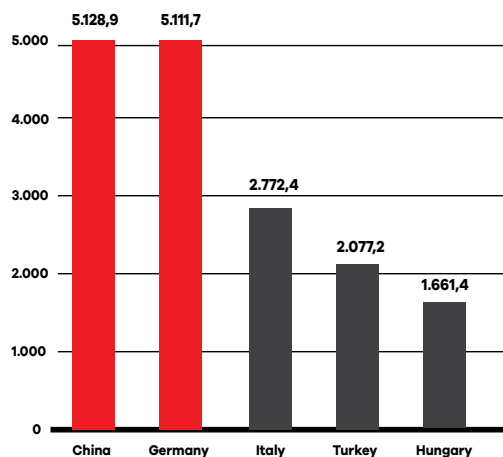
The total foreign trade exchange between China and Serbia in 2024 amounted to 5.7 billion euros, with Serbian exports to China being almost three times lower than imports from China. China became Serbia’s largest foreign trade partner in terms

**Foreign Trade Exchange Between Serbia and China
2016–2024, in Millions of Euros**



of imports, which amounted to 5.13 billion euros in 2024. In December, China overtook Germany to take the top spot.¹¹⁰

The Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and China, signed a year earlier in Beijing in the presence of Presidents Aleksandar Vučić and Xi Jinping, came into force on July 1, 2024.¹¹¹ The agreement covers more than 20,000 products, 90% of which will be exempt from customs duties. It is important to emphasize that Serbia, as a candidate for EU membership, has committed to withdrawing from all bilateral free trade agreements on the day of accession to the Union.¹¹²



Source: RFE

Circumventing EU Tariffs

In October 2024, the European Commission concluded its anti-subsidy investigation by introducing definitive countervailing duties on imports of battery electric vehicles (BEVs) from China, lasting for five years. As previously reported, the investigation showed that the BEV value chain in China benefits from unfair subsidization, which poses a threat of economic harm to BEV manufacturers in the EU.¹¹³ In addition to the standard 10%, tariffs of 17% to 35% were introduced for Chinese vehicles, while the tariff is 7.8% for Tesla cars produced in China.

The Chinese company Jiangling Group Electric Vehicle (JMEV) will build an electric vehicle factory in Sremska Mitrovica (in northwestern Serbia), with plans to export cars to the EU.¹¹⁴ Since, under the agreement with the EU, Serbia can under certain conditions export cars to the European Union without tariffs, this will enable Chinese manufacturers to place products on the EU market under more favorable conditions.

The political commitment of Belgrade to China has enabled the strengthening of China's economic influence in Serbia as the main tool of Chinese engagement. China's influence is most clearly reflected through infrastructure projects. In Serbia, from 2012 to 2021, at least 61 projects in various stages of completion were identified, worth at least 18.7 billion euros, which are implemented by Chinese entities or in cooperation with Chinese actors. During the same period, Chinese companies invested or allocated as much as two billion euros for 16 projects in Serbia, and the Chinese Exim Bank approved loans for projects worth at least 5.7 billion euros.¹¹⁵

According to data from the National Bank of Serbia, in the first half of 2024, China was the second largest investor in Serbia by the value of direct investments, after the European Union (EU). Investments from the EU make up nearly half of the total foreign direct investments, while investments from China account for almost a third. In Serbia, 1,560 business entities with majority Chinese capital are operating, employing around 20,600 workers.

The strength of Chinese influence is demonstrated by the willingness of Serbian authorities to change legislation in favor of Chinese companies. Serbia has

Top Investors in Serbia in 2024, in Millions of Euros

Investor	Amount
EU	1.007
China	698
UK	285
USA	60
Russia	48

Source: RFE

therefore amended the Law on Special Procedures and the Labor Law. All Chinese projects are based on intergovernmental agreements, through which Serbia has agreed that Chinese laws will apply on its territory to workers brought in by the Chinese side.¹¹⁶

Additionally, Chinese investments and loans are often accompanied by non-transparent procedures, which in countries with weak and politicized institutions creates room for corruption. This mode of operation can slow down the fulfillment of EU standards and jeopardize European integration.

In addition to non-transparency, Chinese investments are also accompanied by issues such as environmental degradation, construction without permits, and violations of labor rights.¹¹⁷ In Serbia, 52 criminal charges, complaints, or protests have been filed regarding Chinese projects. In 2021, it was discovered that 500 workers from Vietnam were living in an abandoned industrial complex outside Zrenjanin. They were found in barracks without heating, with insufficient food and money. They stated that a representative of their employer, the Chinese tire manufacturing company Linglong, had confiscated their travel documents.¹¹⁸

Defense

Military cooperation between China and Serbia has also significantly improved in recent years. Serbia has purchased unmanned aerial vehicles and the FK-3 anti-aircraft missile system from China.¹¹⁹ Although the presence of Chinese weapons and military equipment in the combat structure of the Serbian Armed Forces is small compared to Russia and Western countries, China's goal was to sell its weapons to countries outside the circle of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Media, Culture, and Education

China skillfully uses all possibilities of so-called soft power. In addition to political and economic cooperation, important channels for expanding influence are culture, media, and education.

In the Western Balkans, CGTN and CCTV are part of the offerings of regional cable operators. Regional media regularly relay content created by the Xinhua news agency. China Radio International has localized media portals in Albanian and Serbian.¹²⁰

However, the key factor for the promotion of China in Serbia is domestic media. Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) has signed multiple memoranda of cooperation with Chinese media houses since 2013. The main topics of these agreements are content exchange and co-productions. Since 2017, there have been regular time slots on RTS channels for broadcasting Chinese documentary films.¹²¹

During Xi Jinping's two-day visit to Serbia in May 2024, around 30 bilateral agreements and commercial contracts were signed, including four in the field of media and information. Cooperation documents were signed by three Serbian media outlets: the public service broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the publishing house *Politika*, which is partially state-owned, and the private news agency *Tanjug*. On the online portal of the daily newspaper *Politika*, a dedicated section is intended for reproducing content created by the China Media Group under the title *Story About China*. Radio Television of Serbia has reserved a regular Tuesday 8 PM slot for broadcasting Chinese-produced documentary films.¹²²

The exchange of content related to culture and other areas is a common occurrence and by itself is not negative. However, it is evident that media in Serbia (which have close cooperation with China Media Group) do not discuss the media situation in China or the negative aspects of the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Monitoring of the most-read Serbian portals shows that the media in Serbia report exclusively positively about China, unlike the USA, NATO, and EU countries, which are generally placed in a negative context. The narratives promoted emphasize the friendship between Serbia and China, while also presenting China as a protector against Western imperialism. When analyzing the coverage of global leaders by Serbian portals, Xi Jinping is

the leader with the highest number of positive mentions.¹²³

In the area of cultural cooperation, Culture Ministers Nikola Selaković and Shen Haisijung exchanged a Letter of Intent between the Ministry of Culture of Serbia and China Media Group. On that occasion, a Program of Cooperation in the field of culture for the period from 2025 to 2028 was signed, as well as a Joint Statement on the official establishment of the Chinese Cultural Center in Belgrade.¹²⁴ In the field of digital economy and communications, the Minister of Information and Telecommunications Dejan Ristić signed a Memorandum to strengthen cooperation in digital economy, a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in information and communication technologies, as well as an Agreement on radio-television and online audiovisual cooperation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina - Diplomacy Under the Guise of Neutrality

China's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in the Republic of Srpska entity, has seen significant growth in the areas of trade, media, education, and diplomatic relations. While these relationships seemingly contribute to strengthening economic and cultural cooperation, they could also lead to excessive dependence and influence over internal political and institutional processes.

Diplomatic activity between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the rise, indicating Beijing's strategic interest in the Western Balkans region. In July 2023, China's Special Representative for European Affairs, Vu Hongbo, visited Bosnia and Herzegovina to discuss bilateral cooperation, the *Belt and Road Initiative*, and European security architecture. During this visit, both sides expressed willingness to enhance personnel exchanges and improve

practical cooperation. However, the visit could be a potential indicator of China's strategic positioning in politically sensitive regions and the use of bilateral cooperation to strengthen Chinese influence.

In November of the same year, the President of Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, met with the Chinese Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ji Ping. During the conversation, they highlighted the intensive cooperation in several areas, with the main topic being the political situation in the country and the importance of respecting the Dayton Peace Agreement. This points to China's direct involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal political matters.

Consequently, such an approach may undermine the reform processes and Bosnia's European path, as it supports a political framework that obstructs the functionality of state institutions. If Dayton is used as a means to maintain divisions rather than to foster integration, China aligns itself with policies advocating decentralization and supporting separatist discourse.

Furthermore, the focus is placed on the Republic of Srpska and the entity level, rather than the state level. In 2015, China also supported the Republic of Srpska on the international stage by abstaining from voting in the UN Security Council on a resolution condemning the genocide against Bosniaks in Srebrenica in 1995. While the EU and the US are trying to convince the political leadership of Bosnian Serbs to end the blockade of institutions, Moscow and Beijing support the accelerated removal of international administration in Bosnia, which holds special powers.

In 2021, Russia and China made efforts through the UN Security Council to lift the powers and close the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Their draft resolution, which proposed the closure of OHR by July 31, 2022, was not adopted as it did not receive the necessary support. Both countries declared they would not recognize a new High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a sign of gratitude, President Milorad Dodik openly expressed support for China in its efforts to maintain peace and stability in Hong Kong.¹²⁵ China's activities are intensifying, and in collaboration with Russia, there is growing pressure on Western partners amid the escalating crisis surrounding Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Trade relations between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina are characterized by a significant imbalance. In 2023, Bosnia and Herzegovina's exports to China amounted to around \$58.8 million, while Chinese exports to Bosnia and Herzegovina totaled approximately \$1.45 billion.¹²⁶ According to the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA), Chinese investments and loans in Bosnia and Herzegovina have significantly increased since 2019. From 2010 to 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina borrowed over \$2.44 billion from China for highway construction projects, hydroelectric power plants, and energy sector investments. Chinese interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina are focused on two major energy projects.¹²⁷ The first is the Stanari coal-fired power plant, which was financed by the China Development Bank in 2013 with a loan of \$400 million.

The second project is the Tuzla lignite power plant, which was financed by the Exim Bank with an initial loan of \$800 million in 2017, and the contractor was China Gezhouba Group, a part of China Energy Engineering Corporation.

Both projects have resulted in debt exceeding \$1.2 billion, accounting for 13% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's external debt, and they represent a clear example of the conflict between Chinese investments and European environmental standards. Four

Actor	No. of articles
Russia	364
Serbia	244
Republic of Srpska	198
China	194
B&H	58
MENA countries	48
Turkey	25
NATO	10
Kosovo	7
Federation B&H	5
Croatia	4
UK	3
USA	3
EU	2
UN	1
Montenegro	1
Albania	1

* Number of Articles with Positively Portrayed Actors

Actor	No. of articles
USA	419
EU	236
NATO	159
Kosovo	132
UK	112
B&H	103
UN	68
Croatia	65
China	65
MENA countries	62
Rest	58
Montenegro	31
Albania	26
Federation B&H	22
Republic of Srpska	13
Turkey	9
Serbia	3

*Number of Articles Targeting Actors

Source: Research by the NGO 'Why Not' Titled 'International Politics Through the Lens of Disinformation'¹⁶⁸

years after the approval of the state guarantee for the *Tuzla 7* project, Bosnia and Herzegovina's State Aid Council withdrew its consent for the loan. This marked the end of the process initiated by the Energy Community Secretariat in 2019. The reason was the threat to the interests of all citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as air pollution caused severe health and environmental consequences. Preliminary agreements were also signed for several other thermal power plants, but few of them have been realized.

In 2020, the government of the Republic of Srpska signed an agreement with the Chinese company China Gezhouba Group for a \$216 million investment to build the Dabar hydroelectric power plant in the southern part of the country. With a \$782 million loan from the Chinese company China Electric and the Polish-Chinese firm Sunningwell International, a new investment for the construction of the Ugljevik 3 thermal power plant was announced. However, this project has not been realized. Chinese construction companies are also involved in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the construction of a 12-kilometer section of the Počitelj-Zvirovići highway, worth \$75 million, which is financed by the European Investment Bank.

The media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina is sensitive to external influences, including Chinese ones. An analysis from 2019 indicates that political disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often viewed solely through the lens of media professionalism, or lack thereof, without a broader understanding of it as part of hybrid warfare. This approach to propaganda and disinformation campaigns leaves space for the dissemination of narratives that can shape public opinion and political decisions. The organization dedicated to uncovering disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Raskrinkavanje*, analyzed disinformation in international politics in 2020 and found that China was the target

of disinformation in 65 articles. This is much less compared to the United States, which was targeted in as many as 419 posts. Additionally, the analysis revealed that China was portrayed in a positive light in 194 articles.

China is heavily investing in educational projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Beijing established Confucius Institutes at the University of Sarajevo in 2015 and the University of Banja Luka in 2018. In July 2024, the University of Banja Luka signed an agreement with the Tianjin University of Technology and Education. The agreement aims to strengthen academic cooperation, including the establishment of a Confucius Institute and an Innovation Center for Engineering Practice. Friendly relations and partnership agreements have been established between cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and China to enhance cooperation in areas such as industry, agriculture, trade, tourism, education, culture, and sports. Sarajevo and Tianjin established friendly relations in 1981. In November 2023, East Sarajevo and the Chinese city of Changzhou signed a sister city agreement, as did Prijedor with the Chinese city of Ningbo, and Mostar with Jinchuan.

Albania

China's presence in Albania is relatively limited compared to other countries in the Western Balkans. Albania has adopted a selective approach to cooperation with China, focusing on specific areas while maintaining close ties with Western partners. While Chinese influence in Albania is less pronounced compared to other countries in the region, Beijing has made efforts to maintain and enhance its influence through selective investments, trade, and cultural cooperation. On the other hand, Albania is balancing between opening up to Chinese initiatives and preserving its strategic relationships with

Western partners, especially in the context of its EU membership aspirations. China aims for closer relations with Albania as part of the Chinese Communist Party's mega-project to expand Beijing's influence abroad, with the goal of becoming a key player in the Western Balkans and eventually across Europe. In this regard, Beijing is pursuing a long-term strategy in Albania, which is being implemented through four interconnected phases.¹²⁸

In the first phase, the Communist Party of China seeks to strengthen its growing presence in the local economy by encouraging Chinese exports and investments. The goal is for the Albanian economy to become increasingly dependent on China, especially in sensitive industries, which would ultimately allow Beijing to influence Albanian politics.

In the second phase, Chinese state actors focus on building the necessary foundations that would enable China to politically influence Albanian party and business leaders, thereby making Beijing a significant political factor in the country. Although China's initial approach to Albania was focused on economics, Beijing's efforts to move toward a higher level of engagement with Tirana have revealed the political dimension of China's business model and its aim to align Albanian politics with Beijing's interests.

The third phase of China's strategy involves expanding its influence within Albanian society from the bottom up and top down. The primary task is to create a positive image of China in Albanian communities, promote Beijing's political and economic model, and, above all, shape local narratives about the relationship between Tirana and Beijing. The fourth and final phase focuses on Chinese authorities' efforts to establish broader public and media influence, change the concept of reporting and content, and significantly impact local perception.

On the diplomatic front, relations between Albania and China have remained active. At the end of October 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Albania, indicating China's continued interest in strengthening bilateral ties. As part of a multilayered approach, China has partly redirected its focus toward central government structures, targeting subnational administrative institutions. In doing so, it utilizes both bilateral and multilateral formats, primarily through cooperation within the framework of the *I7+I* initiative.

In 2016, Tirana and Beijing established a partnership, and several Albanian cities (Fier-Wuxi, Durrës-Shantou, Vlorë-Yangzhou) have since developed similar ties. It is important to note that the cooperation is not limited to symbolic gestures but includes concrete investment projects. China's steps toward strengthening relations with central and local authorities complement its efforts to establish connections with high-level institutions as well as smaller social, cultural, and media entities. Such a comprehensive engagement strategy has the potential to create wide networks of loyalty and influence within state institutions, as well as among non-state social and economic actors.

While other countries in the region (e.g., Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) have a significant presence of Chinese investments, Albania has recorded the lowest volume of such investments. According to a report by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Albania is the only country in the region that recorded a decline in Chinese investments by 2024, with the number of *greenfield* investment projects drastically decreasing by 88%.¹²⁹

The peak of Chinese investments in Albania occurred in 2016, when the China Everbright Group secured a concession for Tirana's main airport, Mother Teresa International Airport. The concession was supposed to last until 2027, but the

Chinese company sold 100% of its stake in 2020. Also in 2016, the Chinese company Geo-Jade Petroleum acquired all shares of the Canadian-American company Bankers Petroleum, which operated the Patos-Marinza oil field, the largest onshore oil field in Europe. The results of the *I6+I* initiative have also been modest, with its economic impact in Albania being almost non-existent. The limited impact of Chinese investments is linked to the failure to implement several major projects. Examples include the Blue Corridor — a coastal highway project connecting eight countries from Slovenia to Greece via Albania — and the withdrawal of the Chinese company from the concession for the Arbër Highway, which connects Albania with North Macedonia. An additional factor is the Albanian government's reluctance to incur large debts to China, as was the case with the Arbër Highway, along with Albania's orientation toward American economic and political investments.

In terms of trade, Albania is the third-largest importer from China, after Italy and Turkey. In 2022, Albanian exports to China increased by 67%, with the main export products being ores and concentrates of chromium and copper.¹³⁰ Following the 2008 financial crisis, China gained some influence over the maritime infrastructure of Southeast Europe by taking control of Greece's Port of Piraeus. The public debate that followed mainly focused on the land corridor connecting the port with Central and Western Europe, leaving Chinese activities in the Balkans somewhat in the background. Nevertheless, China's efforts to take control of regional ports and establish adjacent industrial zones have been ongoing for nearly two decades. In Albania, for example, the initiative initially focused on the port of Durrës.¹³¹ Since then, China has shifted its attention to the port of Vlorë, despite various political obstacles, many of which stem from Albania's accession to NATO.

China uses cultural diplomacy to strengthen its geopolitical influence. In Albania, the Confucius Institute has been operating at the University of Tirana since 2013. The institute offers Chinese language courses, seminars on Chinese culture, and scholarships for students who wish to continue their education in China.

Since 2015, Confucius classrooms have been established in several high schools in Tirana, giving students the opportunity to learn the Chinese language and culture. According to data from the Confucius Institute, the number of participants in Chinese language courses in Albania has increased by 40% over the past five years. Education is one of the key pillars of Chinese influence in Albania, with Beijing relying on scholarships, exchange programs, and language courses to build bridges between Albanian and Chinese academic communities. Each year, China awards over 100 scholarships to Albanian students, covering tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses in China.

Chinese universities have established partnerships with Albanian higher education institutions, enabling academic exchanges. The University of Tirana and several other academic institutions have signed agreements with Chinese universities to implement joint study programs. Chinese culture is gaining increasing public recognition throughout the region.

The Chinese Embassy in Albania frequently organizes cultural events such as Chinese art exhibitions, film screenings, and festivals aimed at popularizing Chinese culture. The year 2019 was declared the Year of Chinese Culture in Albania, during which numerous concerts, performances, and gastronomic events were held. The celebration of Chinese New Year was traditionally held at the embassy premises, gathering the local elite. However, in 2019, the embassy organized the celebration in the Albanian capital, Tirana, on

the main city square, with festivals and exhibitions lasting two weeks. On that occasion, the Chinese ambassador announced that China would finance the construction of a new city bus station in Tirana.¹³² In this way, China is successfully implementing a soft power strategy through educational and cultural initiatives in Albania, although its influence remains smaller compared to other countries in the region.

The increased presence of Chinese media in Albania, achieved through cooperation agreements with local media outlets and the establishment of branches of Chinese media institutions, may influence the shaping of public perception and discourse about China in the country. Chinese state media outlets, such as CGTN and Xinhua, are increasingly broadcasting news in the Albanian language to influence local perceptions of China. Some Albanian media have signed cooperation agreements with Chinese media agencies, enabling greater distribution of Chinese news within the country.

Between 2016 and 2019, the number of published articles in Albania related to the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) increased from 42 to 194.¹³³ These reports are mostly factual, neutral in tone, and focused on economic issues, but there is generally a noticeable lack of critical assessment of Chinese activities. Despite this, China's economic and media presence in Albania remains limited due to the country's strong pro-Western sentiment.

North Macedonia

China's engagement in North Macedonia spans various sectors, including trade, media, education, and diplomatic relations. Although these mutual ties may initially appear to be mutually beneficial, patterns are emerging that may indicate malign influence and the potential erosion of sovereignty and democratic processes in the

country. China operates in North Macedonia with three main goals: strategic, economic, and ideological. Strategically, China seeks to build partnerships that will support its positions in international institutions. Economically, North Macedonia's geographic location is crucial for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, as it serves as a corridor to Central and Eastern Europe. Ideologically, China aims to present its authoritarian model as an alternative to the West's liberal democracy.¹³⁴

Diplomatic activities between the two countries have intensified in recent years. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev participated in the China-CEEC (17+1) summit in February 2021, while President Stevo Pendarovski exchanged greetings with President Xi Jinping in October 2023 to mark 30 years of diplomatic relations. Although such exchanges are standard in international relations, their frequency and depth suggest China's targeted strategy to deepen its influence in North Macedonia's political environment. In July 2024, the Chinese Embassy in North Macedonia issued a statement condemning the visit of two Macedonian MPs to Taiwan, calling it a violation of the One China principle and the political foundation of relations between the two countries.¹³⁵

The Chinese approach to development projects in North Macedonia is often highlighted as *unconditional support*, unlike Western aid, which involves demands for reforms. This builds goodwill while simultaneously criticizing the approach of Western donors. However, Chinese aid is not without hidden conditions. One loan agreement for the construction of a highway includes a clause that grants China the right to demand immediate repayment if it determines that North Macedonia's policies are against its interests. Such provisions can serve as a means of pressure, limiting sovereignty in decision-making. Additionally, some reports warn that China's economic presence in the Western

Balkans poses a risk to the EU, particularly through debt mechanisms. North Macedonia owes a significant portion of its external debt to China, opening opportunities for so-called *debt diplomacy*. Loans were taken from Chinese banks for the construction of two infrastructure projects: the Kozjak hydroelectric power plant and the Miladinovci - Štip and Kičevo - Ohrid highways. As of the end of 2022, North Macedonia's external debt to the People's Republic of China amounted to \$479 million. This accounts for 8.7% of the total external public debt and 3% of Macedonia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to data from the non-governmental organization Estima.¹³⁶

In 2024, bilateral trade between China and North Macedonia reached approximately \$490 million, a 3% increase compared to the previous year. However, the trade balance heavily favors China, creating a large trade deficit for North Macedonia. This imbalance not only affects the local economy but also increases economic dependence on China, potentially limiting the country's political autonomy.

China uses various strategies to shape the media narrative in North Macedonia. The Chinese ambassador regularly publishes opinion pieces and participates in interviews in both traditional and digital media, promoting Chinese policies and viewpoints.

The Chinese embassy's Facebook page shares content that reflects Beijing's official stance, including sensitive topics such as Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the origins of COVID-19. During the early stages of the pandemic, the embassy shared content that was critical of Western responses, subtly undermining trust in Western institutions. Its media strategy aims to build a positive image of China while simultaneously discrediting Western narratives. The Director of the Intelligence Agency of North Macedonia, Erolld Musliu, warned

that the country is the target of sophisticated hybrid attacks carried out by foreign powers, including China. According to him, the goal of these campaigns is to manipulate public opinion, create confusion, and exploit sensitive issues, especially ahead of elections. Musliu highlights that disinformation is being used to increase Euroscepticism and promote alternative geopolitical paths outside of Western integration.¹³⁷

The Confucius Institute at the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Skopje represents the main channel of Chinese cultural and educational influence. Since its establishment in 2013, with an initial 60 students, the number of enrolled students had risen to 562 by 2021. The curriculum and teaching materials used by the Institute are developed by the Chinese government and mostly reflect the views of the Communist Party of China. In this way, the space for critical thinking is potentially limited, exercising soft power through free courses in the Chinese language and culture for various ages and levels of proficiency, including HSK (levels 1-6) and YCT (levels 1-6). There are also courses in calligraphy, tai chi, qi gong, origami, and singing Chinese songs.

Additionally, the number of Chinese books translated into Macedonian has significantly increased 50 out of a total of 90 translations made since 2018. Half of these publications are children's books, indicating an attempt to influence younger generations. Furthermore, in the past five years, North Macedonia has conducted more bilateral research projects with China than with any other country, totaling 40. While this fosters academic cooperation, there is a risk of an overemphasis on aligning with Chinese interests.

Kosovo

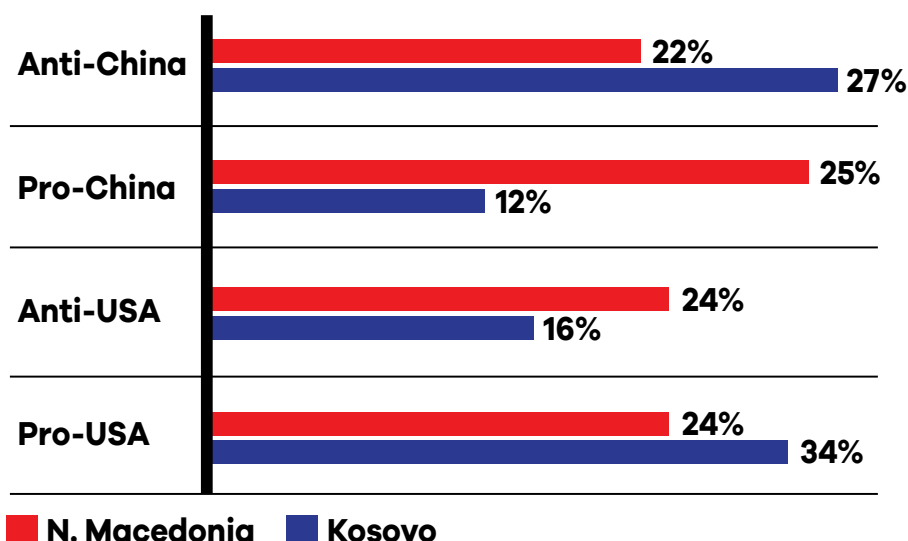
China's influence in Kosovo is characterized by the absence of formal diplomatic relations and limited economic cooperation. China does not recognize Kosovo's independence, declared in 2008, which has affected the level of bilateral relations. After the unilateral declaration of independence, China expressed serious concerns, emphasizing that the resolution of the Kosovo issue should be carried out within the framework of international law and with respect for Serbia's territorial integrity.

This stance aligns with China's policy of not recognizing unilateral secessions, considering its own internal challenges with regions such as Taiwan and Tibet. China views Kosovo as a European issue and, unlike Russia, rarely uses its veto power in the United Nations Security Council on this matter. However, it supports Serbia's efforts to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity, as demonstrated by the joint declaration on the establishment of strategic partnership relations signed in 2009¹³⁸. In this context, China supports resolving Kosovo's status through dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

China also actively uses its influence to prevent Kosovo from joining international organizations. Examples of this include China's vote against Kosovo's membership in UNESCO in 2015 and the withdrawal of Kosovo's membership request from In-

69%

of Kosovo's citizens do not believe that maintaining strong relations with China advances their country's interests



Source: National survey of Kosovo, IRI¹³⁹

terpol in 2017 when the General Assembly of that organization was held in China.¹³⁹

Kosovo and China do not officially have diplomatic relations, but China has maintained a Liaison Office in Kosovo for years, operating under the auspices of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. On the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo, the Chinese Liaison Office is listed among the foreign missions operating in the country. However, the government of Kosovo claims not to maintain communication with the office due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Similarly, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has not provided concrete information about its contacts with the office, although it is known that UNMIK's head, Caroline Ziaide, met with Chinese representative Cheng Lei in February 2024.¹⁴⁰

Kosovo's Prime Minister at the time, Albin Kurti, has repeatedly stated that his country will reject relations with China at all costs and that China is an enemy of Kosovo. This was evident when he refused Chinese vaccines that Albania offered as a gift during the outbreak of the COVID-19

pandemic. At the time, he stated that Kosovo does not recognize a number of countries, *including two major powers (China and Russia), which are permanent members of the UN Security Council, and that Kosovo cannot allow itself to receive vaccines from them.*¹⁴¹

Despite the political distance, trade exchange between China and Kosovo has been growing. According to data from Kosovo Customs, imports from China reached a value of 650 million euros in 2023, nearly double the amount from 2019. On the other hand, Kosovo's exports to China remain symbolic, totaling 442,000 euros in the same period. These figures indicate a significant trade imbalance in favor of China.¹⁴² Notably, the import of technological equipment has been substantial, including 57,444 recording devices in 2023.

Products from Chinese companies Dahua and Hikvision have been installed at public locations in Pristina. Both companies are on the U.S., U.K., and Australian blacklists due to security risks and privacy concerns. The relationship between China and Kosovo is also marked by the absence of Chinese investments, in contrast

to other countries in the region that are significantly influenced economically by China.

Reporting on China in Kosovo is generally framed through a pro-Western lens – strongly pro-American and pro-European – with China either presented neutrally or in a negative light. This means that Kosovo's media often mention China in contexts that emphasize alignment with Western partners. When discussing infrastructure, EU or U.S. support is highlighted positively, while Chinese offers are questioned. In reporting on international politics, the media typically convey Western concerns regarding human rights issues or security risks associated with Chinese technology. As a result, pro-China narratives are rare in Kosovo's media, and any Chinese initiative is met with a certain degree of skepticism. Even when Chinese engagement is reported, it is often contextualized by reminding readers of Kosovo's Western alliances, preventing the significant strengthening of pro-China narratives.¹⁴³

Chinese influence through media and the dissemination of disinformation represents a significant challenge for the information space in Kosovo. China employs various methods to spread propaganda and shape public opinion in Kosovo, including sponsored content on social media platforms and infiltration into local media outlets. Chinese state-run media outlets, such as CGTN, actively utilize social media to promote content that portrays China in a positive light. These media sources sponsor posts on platforms like Facebook, targeting users in Kosovo. The content ranges from cultural pieces, such as videos of pandas and tigers, to political content promoting Chinese views on global issues. This is where Chinese anti-American propaganda comes into play, portraying the U.S. in a way that supports their narrative that the U.S. is irresponsible toward the rest of the world and that European countries should not follow American pol-

icies. Often, it is not immediately apparent that these contents have been prepared by Chinese state media, which could lead the public in Kosovo to unknowingly accept their propagandistic messages.

However, a survey published in May 2024 by the International Republican Institute (IRI) revealed that 69% of Kosovo's citizens do not believe that maintaining strong relations with China advances their country's interests.¹⁴⁴

According to research by the National Democratic Institute (NDI)¹⁴⁵, some Kosovo media outlets receive financial support from China. This suggests coordinated efforts to integrate Chinese narratives into the local information space, potentially influencing the perception of Kosovo's citizens regarding China and its global role. Research¹⁴⁶ by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) titled *In the Whirlpool of Lies* points to the presence of misinformation and propagandistic narratives in Kosovo originating from both Russia and China. Their goal is to incite inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions and hatred between communities in Kosovo, criminalize NATO, and reduce trust in Euro-Atlantic integration.

Montenegro

07

Political Relations and Institutional Cooperation

Montenegro and China maintain good relations that are continuously strengthened both bilaterally and through the mechanism of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, as well as the *Belt and Road Initiative*. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Montenegro in 2006, the two countries have signed a total of 17 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding. Areas of formalized cooperation include diplomacy, culture, education, infrastructure, healthcare, and agriculture.

Montenegro, like other countries in the Western Balkans, is characterized by chronically weak state institutions that are often politicized and personalized, with a deficit of the rule of law. China's expansive approach in the region, including in Montenegro, focuses on developing relations at various levels. This includes areas such as infrastructure, culture, media, and politics, intending to promote Chinese narratives and interests.

Beijing has exploited the geopolitical vacuum in the Western Balkans that arose due to the shifting priorities of Western partners preoccupied with their own problems. The Chinese have rationally assessed opportunities for investment in strategically important sectors, whose development is a necessary step toward reducing the gap between the region and the developed EU member states.

Unlike Russian interests, Chinese interests in Montenegro are not solely motivated by political aspirations, at least not in the sense of direct interference in the country's internal affairs or foreign policy orientation. This is also reflected in China's support for Montenegro's EU membership.¹⁴⁷

Traditionally, while the EU has aimed at the legal and institutional harmonization of Montenegro in relation to the accession process, China has focused on practical cooperation with ministries, state agencies, and companies involved in infrastructure, energy, and finance. This Chinese engagement includes exchanges of state visits, signing memoranda of understanding, study trips, and initiatives by Chinese companies in the region.¹⁴⁸

China is still not the largest investor in Montenegro, as it is in the surrounding area, but it is a lender and contractor that significantly participates in the foreign trade balance. As in the region, Chinese projects in Montenegro are non-transparent and have often had detrimental effects on the environment.

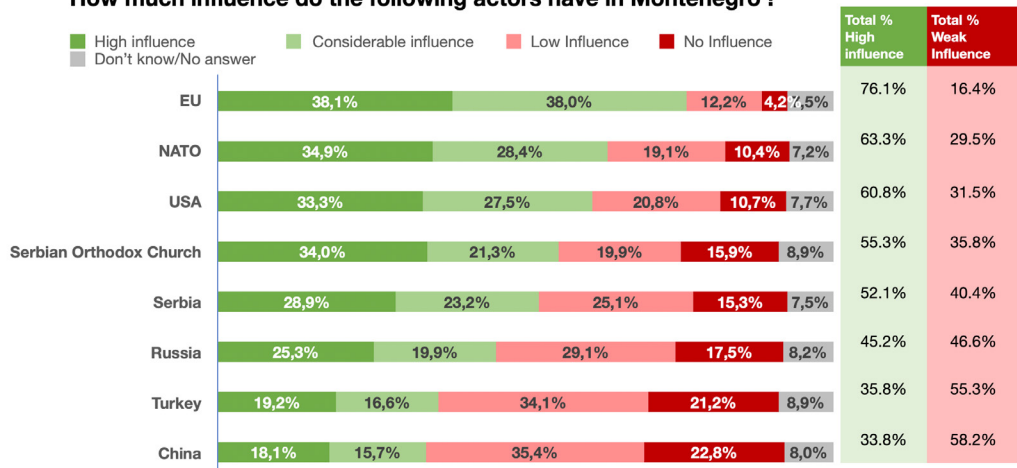
From November 30, 2024, to December 31, 2025, Montenegrin citizens will be able to travel to China without a visa.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, Montenegro is becoming an increasingly attractive destination for Chinese tourists, whose numbers have increased by 42.4 percent compared to 2019.

Geopolitical Narratives and Political Structures

A regional public opinion survey conducted in 2024 by the International Republican Institute (IRI) showed that 66% of citizens in Montenegro view China in a positive light.¹⁵⁰ A survey by the Digital Forensic Center (DFC) from May 2024 revealed that 33.8% of citizens believe China has a significant influence in Montenegro, while 63.2% think that influence is positive.¹⁵¹

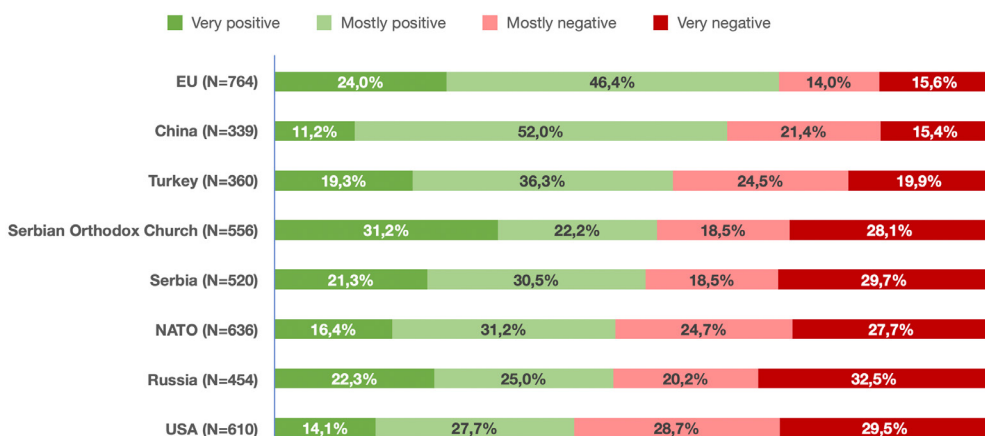
The positive perception of citizens is not surprising, given that all political structures in Montenegro view China's influence positively, as well as its role in the international order.

How much influence do the following actors have in Montenegro ?



Source: DFC Public Opinion Poll

Would you say this influence is positive or negative?



The Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) has maintained regular contact with Chinese officials since Montenegro gained independence, through various multilateral and bilateral meetings. Former Presidents Milo Đukanović and Filip Vujanović, as well as other high-ranking DPS officials, have commented positively on the relations between the two countries and China's role on the international stage.

A new development is the foreign-policy positioning of certain current constituents of the ruling majority in Montene-

gro, formerly from the Democratic Front (DF), towards the People's Republic of China. Although the political rhetoric of these political entities is based on rigid anti-communism and strong pro-Russian sentiment, they view China as a country that could oppose the dominance of the West on the global stage. The Democratic Front in an anti-Western toned congratulatory message for the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized its role and humanitarian approach in the Russia-Ukraine military conflict.

DF's Congratulatory Message on the 20th Congress of the CPC

In its congratulatory message, the DF emphasizes: *The immeasurable influence of the People's Republic of China in achieving a political balance in world politics, where there should be no diktat from one side, namely, the aggressive policies of the West, but rather the creation of a bipolar world that will finally lead to the much-needed political balance in global frameworks, as a guarantee of lasting peace and the mitigation of Western imperialist dreams of further igniting conflicts at numerous critical points in Europe and the world.*

Their stance on China is not surprising, given that the coalition For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) aligns its political priorities to a significant extent with the official position of Belgrade. Narrative of the leaders of pro-serbian parties about joining the EU *with our heads held high, not on our knees*, essentially reflects the same political approach that characterizes Aleksandar Vučić's regime—a superficial pro-European stance while rejecting the core values and reforms required by the EU.¹⁵² Their attempts to portray European integration as a negotiation between equal partners, while avoiding the implementation of substantive changes. The message that not all EU conditions must be accepted is used to mobilize domestic audiences and maintain an authoritarian grip on power. This approach does not lead to genuine integration but rather simulates it for the sake of political survival.

Leaders of the coalition For the Future

of Montenegro, during the pre-election campaign for the parliamentary elections held in 2023, stated that an agreement had been made with the President of Serbia to open two factories in northern Montenegro.¹⁵³ Although this coalition is part of the executive government, there are no indications so far that this pre-election promise will be realized.

Negative Mentions of China

Montenegro has so far paid 8 installments of loans totaling 256 million dollars. As of January 14, 2025, the debt to China's EXIM Bank stands at 688.5 million dollars.¹⁵⁴

The negative perception of China in Montenegro is largely associated with the highway, specifically Montenegro's debt to China's EXIM Bank. This became particularly evident after the speech of the former Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, in the European Parliament in 2021, where he called for EU assistance in repaying the debt. Abazović also stated in an interview on BBC World News that if Montenegro is unable to repay the debt, China would have the right to part of Montenegrin territory.¹⁵⁵ However, Abazović's statements were primarily aimed at targeting political opponents who had signed agreements with the Chinese, rather than fundamentally limiting China's influence in Montenegro.

Fear of *debt slavery*, as well as concerns raised by the EU regarding the debt to the Chinese bank, have somewhat shaken the positive perception of China in Montenegro. The spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, stated that *Chinese investments have no geopolitical motives, do not pose a security threat to countries in the region, are not linked to any political con-*

Import-Export Montenegro – China in 2024

The People's Republic of China is one of Montenegro's most important foreign trade partners, accounting for 12% of Montenegro's total imports, but only 4% of its exports to China.

▼ Import from China

481 mil.

▲ Export to China

22 mil.

Source: RFE

ditions, do not interfere in the internal affairs of countries in the region, and do not hinder investments from other countries, adding that China is ready to deepen cooperation with Montenegro.¹⁵⁶

Economy

As in other countries in the region, China's presence in Montenegro is most visible through infrastructure projects, with the construction of the first section of the Bar-Boljare highway standing out. In 2014, Montenegro took a 20-year loan totaling 944 million dollars from the Chinese Exim Bank, followed by an additional 90 million dollars for the construction of access roads. The contractor for the works was the Chinese state-owned company China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). The construction of the first section of the highway was marked by a lack of transparency, fiscal issues, and environmental problems. The first section, covering 41 kilometers, took seven years to complete, with the project being delayed five times, and it was opened for traffic on July 13, 2022. Due to fiscal problems in repaying the debt, with the mediation of EU countries, Montenegro had to enter a hedging arrangement to protect public debt from currency risks with two American and two European banks.

In the tender for the construction of the new section of the highway from Mateševci to Andrijevića, Chinese companies dominated, with five Chinese companies and three consortia applying.¹⁵⁷ The Gov-

ernment of Montenegro canceled the prequalification tender due to alleged changes in the route. The European Commission announced at the beginning of the previous year that it would participate in the construction of this section with 100 million euros in non-repayable support, while the EBRD would provide a favorable loan of 200 million euros.¹⁵⁸ The prequalification tender was announced in April 2024, according to the rules and procedures of the EBRD, and was completed at the end of June 2024. One of the leaders of the parliamentary majority from the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian coalition ZBCG stated in parliament that the *European Commission and the EBRD requested the annulment of the previous tender and ordered the announcement of the main tender because Chinese, Turkish, and Azerbaijani companies had applied.*

Other Chinese infrastructure projects include the reconstruction of the Pljevlja Thermal Power Plant, the Možura Wind Farm, the reconstruction of the Tara Bridge, and the reconstruction of the Tivat – Jaz road.

Interestingly, Chinese projects often start as the cheapest option but end up being much more expensive compared to the initial price. This was the case with the highway, and now with the Tivat – Jaz road. The reconstruction of this road, carried out by the Chinese consortium *Shandong*, could end up costing the state 25% more than the contracted amount of nearly 54 million euros, and the new deadline for completion, set for the beginning of 2026, is unlikely to be met.¹⁵⁹

China is not a major investor in Montenegro, and a significant influx of investments from the country was recorded in 2020. According to data from the Central Bank of Montenegro, from 2006 to the end of 2019, investments from China amounted to around 10 million euros, with a sharp rise to 71.2 million euros in 2020. After that, there was again a decline in investments from China, with investments in 2021 amounting to 6.4 million euros and 882 thousand euros in 2022. In 2024, no significant influx of investments from China was recorded. According to data from Monstat, Montenegro's largest trade partners for imports last year were Serbia (trade exchange of 661.7 million euros), China (481 million euros), and Germany (368.2 million euros). Exports from Montenegro to China amounted to 22 million euros. In the Central Register of Economic Entities (CRPS), the number of active companies in which legal or natural persons from China hold shares or are founders is 235.¹⁶⁰

Media, Culture, and Education

Over the past decade, China has successfully built a media empire. The campaign called *Power of Discourse* is part of a strategy to increase China's influence through soft power. It includes promoting Chinese narratives and perspectives, thus countering the negative portrayal in Western media. This campaign is also present in Montenegro.

China and Chinese companies do not own media outlets in Montenegro, but the Chinese Media Group and Chinese institutions maintain cooperation and contacts with the management structures of Montenegrin media. In Montenegrin media reporting, China is presented as a well-meaning and modest power that exclusively seeks mutual benefits and the promotion of its own culture. Economic and geopolitical aspirations of China, as well as the authoritarian aspects of the

ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), are generally overlooked. The absence of a critical tone towards China in most Montenegrin media indicates a lack of awareness about Chinese actions and the presence of its propaganda.

The Media Institute of Montenegro analyzed content on the private media platform Media Biro (which is broadcast for free by Montenegrin media) and the Public Service Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG) during 2023. The analysis revealed that these platforms air an average of 10 to 20 news items about China per month, most of which are positive. In a six-month period, *no negative information about China was published on Media Biro, while the narratives about China on the Public Service were mostly positive or neutral, with a few articles where representatives of Western powers expressed their negative views towards China.*¹⁶¹

Chinese public broadcasters signed cooperation memoranda with Montenegrin public service broadcasters as early as 2008. In 2019, RTCG (Radio and Television of Montenegro) signed an agreement with the China Media Group, making it a member of the *Belt and Road* community, the largest distributor of TV and radio programs in China.¹⁶² In 2023, the General Director of RTCG, Boris Raonić, and the President of the China-Montenegro Friendship Association, Samir Hadžić, signed a Memorandum of Understanding, Exchange, and Cooperation, establishing media exchange and collaboration with the International Channel of Shanghai (ICS), part of the Shanghai Media Group (SMG). Adria TV, owned by Serbian capital, also aired Chinese documentary series, presenting content broadcast in collaboration with the China Media Group.

Often, Chinese diplomatic representatives write opinion pieces that are published by almost all of Montenegro's most-read media outlets. This practice is also present in other countries in the region as part of China's strategic diplomatic efforts.

A significant aspect of China's soft power is its study visits. It is estimated that 70 Montenegrin journalists have visited China, and following these trips, they have written positive articles and reports about the country.¹⁶³ The relationship of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) towards freedom of speech and the journalism profession in China has not been a focus of interest for Montenegrin media professionals.

Culture and education are also crucial channels for the spread of China's soft power, and Montenegro continues to develop cooperation with China in these areas. In early 2024, the Minister of Education, Science, and Innovation, Andela Jakšić Stojanović, and the Minister of Education of the People's Republic of China, Huai Jinpeng, signed an educational

cooperation program for the 2024-2027 period in Shanghai, as well as an agreement on mutual recognition of higher education diplomas. This agreement aims to improve the exchange of students, teachers, and academic staff, as well as the joint implementation of scientific and research projects.¹⁶⁴ In November 2024, the Minister also made a working visit to China.¹⁶⁵ China frequently organizes study visits to the country for Montenegrin educators.

Regarding culture, the Confucius Institute at the University of Montenegro was established to promote the Chinese language and culture and to develop friendly relations between Montenegro and the People's Republic of China. On November 1, 2019, an independent Confucius Classroom was opened at the University of Donja Gorica.

New Three - Innovative Areas for the Development of Practical Cooperation Between China and Montenegro

The Chinese Ambassador to Montenegro, in an article titled *New Three—Innovative Areas for the Development of Practical Cooperation Between China and Montenegro*, which was published in all key media outlets in the country, presented three areas in which China wants to develop cooperation with Montenegro. These are the areas of energy, electric vehicles and technology. China is already present in energy through the projects of reconstructing the Pljevlja Thermal Power Plant and the Možura Wind Farm.

China has become the largest producer of electric vehicles in the world and particularly wants to expand into the European market, which is evident in the example of Serbia. Additionally, the Chinese Embassy in Podgorica is increasingly donating Chinese electric vehicles to Montenegrin institutions.

The third area is the development of 5G network technology, artificial intelligence, big data, and cloud computing. When it comes to the 5G network, two operators in Montenegro, M-Tel and Crnogorski Telekom, have installed Ericsson base stations according to the technological and security standards of the European Union. However, the company ONE, owned by the Hungarian group 4iG, has installed Huawei base stations. During the 43rd Government of Dritan Abazović, Montenegro signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the company 4iG to expand cooperation in the field of 5G network development, infrastructure, and the introduction of innovative solutions.¹⁶⁶ As a NATO member, Montenegro must be cautious in using Chinese technologies, including 5G base stations.

Conclusion



The Chinese strategy in the context of reshaping the modern international order demonstrates a high degree of pragmatism, long-term planning, and geopolitical sophistication. Beijing is using the war in Ukraine as a pivotal moment to strengthen its global position and to test its vision of a multipolar world. Its ambivalent stance toward the conflict—formal neutrality combined with *de facto* support for Russia—allows China to balance between strategic partnership and the preservation of key economic interests, particularly in Europe.

Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, technological sovereignty, and increasing engagement within BRICS, China aims to lay the foundations of an alternative global architecture. This strategy involves a carefully calibrated use of both soft and hard power—ranging from infrastructure investments and partnerships to digital surveillance, intelligence activities, and the spread of disinformation.

Examples from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Serbia show that Chinese engagement often comes as part of economically attractive but politically and security-wise risky arrangements. Investments and technological cooperation frequently become instruments of political influence, which can lead to dependency and the erosion of democracy.

In this context, China's stance on the war in Ukraine reflects Beijing's broader ambitions to position itself as a leader of a new world order—one not based on universal democratic values, but on the principles of absolute sovereignty, pluralism without liberal foundations, and redefined international norms. Although China is currently managing to balance between different geopolitical directions, it faces a number of challenges—including growing skepticism in Europe, doubts about the true intentions behind Chinese investments, and concerns over the debt exposure of countries in the Global South.

China's role in shaping the modern global order will be one of the decisive factors in the configuration of international relations in the coming decades. The outcome of the war in Ukraine, along with China's ability to simultaneously manage complex challenges in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific, will determine to what extent its model of multipolarity becomes the dominant paradigm of the 21st century.

China's use of media and social networks as an instrument of soft power represents a sophisticated and strategic approach to shaping public opinion and redefining the global narrative in line with the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. Its model of informational influence is long-term, highly centralized, and carefully adapted to local contexts. Through the global dissemination of media content, the establishment of partnerships, and the targeting of vulnerable regions and local actors, China seeks to establish a stable presence in the information space.

Social media platforms are used to spread favorable narratives, polarize soci-

eties, and influence political actors, the academic community, and researchers. The mechanisms include the use of bots, trolls, fake accounts, and sophisticated campaigns, with the key objective being a long-term shift in perceptions of China—as a reliable partner and an alternative to Western value-based models.

Analysis of Chinese information operations confirms that, much like Russia, China relies on multilayered propaganda models that go beyond traditional state channels. These activities include covert digital operations, fake media outlets, coordination with diplomacy, and the increasingly frequent use of artificial intelligence in shaping and disseminating content.

The issue of Chinese 5G technology in the global context has evolved from a technical matter into a deeply geopolitical and security concern. Although solutions offered by Chinese companies are technologically advanced and price-competitive, their ties to Chinese state and intelligence structures raise concerns about security, including the potential for espionage, sabotage, and control over critical infrastructure.

Education and culture represent another dimension of China's soft power strategy. Through Confucius Institutes, academic agreements, scholarships, and films, China promotes its own narrative—often accompanied by efforts to control content and restrict academic freedom. Although these initiatives are presented as platforms for cultural exchange, numerous European countries have expressed concerns about their political and surveillance components.

In the Western Balkans, Chinese influence takes on specific forms. In Serbia, it is deeply institutionalized and strategically grounded, while in Montenegro it is manifested through bilateral projects, infrastructure investments, and affirmative political messaging. In both cases, the common denominator is a lack of transparency and selective media representation of China. Such practices contribute to the long-term normalization of China's presence and reduce the willingness to critically assess its impact on the rule of law and democratization.

China does not operate as a classical imperial power, but its engagement model tests the institutional resilience and the ability of states to balance between attractive foreign investments and the preservation of democratic standards.

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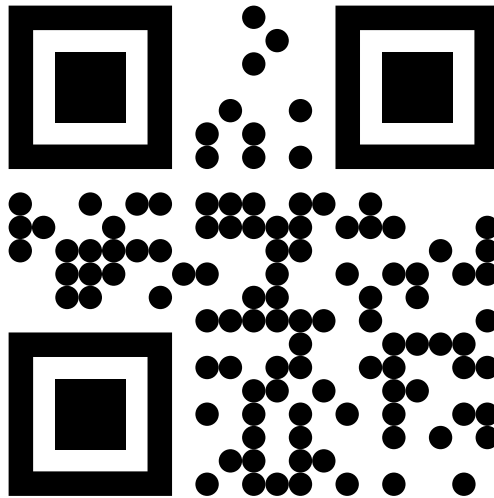
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