



HELLENIC REPUBLIC

**National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens**

— EST. 1837 —

MA IN SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN STUDIES: POLITICS, HISTORY, ECONOMICS

MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS

PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA AS AN OPPORTUNITY OR A THREAT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE:
THE CASE OF THE SINO-SERBIAN RELATIONS

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Athens, September 2022

ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has grown its presence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) dramatically, mainly inside the “14+1” initiative. This is an unexpected development as China had difficult and at sometimes no relations with CEE states during the 20th century. As multilateral and bilateral relations intensify, China and the “14+1” initiative have become subjects of increased interest and debate in CEE. These debates have primarily focused on analysing the intentions behind China’s “charm offensive” in the area, and the consequences of China’s engagement in CEE for the different states’ economic and political future. Two conflicting narratives have arisen as a result of this process, both offering starkly opposed interpretations of China’s relationship with CEE. They portray Chinese interests and ambitions in CEE, as well as their consequences, in either extremely optimistic/favourable or pessimistic/unfavourable terms, in what has been described as the “bifocal lens”. Such diametrically opposed narratives also offer opposing perspectives on what concerns should be emphasized within that interaction, and what actions and policies should be implemented to adequately address them. The purpose of this study is to look into the significance of domestic discourse and these conflicting narratives in one CEE state, Serbia. It seeks to provide answers to the following questions: How has Serbia interpreted China’s diplomatic efforts, as well as the consequences of closer relations with China? What can empirical data reveal us about the accuracy of these interpretations? And, last, how does the interaction between perceptions and real developments influence the potential of the China-Serbia relations now and in the future? This study’s research hypothesis is that Serbia has been perceiving China as a great opportunity. However, I try to analyse that this perception is not based on the actual evidence but rather on bias and unrealistic expectations. This, in turn, fuels opposition voices inside Serbia who understand this relationship as a threat. Once again, I claim that this understanding is false, based on hyperbolic threats, which do not represent the actual situation. This leads to the conclusion that, in order to best evaluate China’s presence in Serbia, one must not rely on biased narratives but use empirically based assumptions, which are created through deep analysis of the actual data.

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Introduction

In recent years, China's relationship with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has grown dramatically. These ties are coordinated inside a multilateral initiative by China, more commonly known as the "14+1" initiative, which was established in 2012 to develop the relationship between China and CEE¹. At the same time, bilateral relations between China and the CEE states have grown in both volume and depth. All current and former members of the initiative have at least once expressed their support for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)². China's interaction with CEE states under the "14+1" initiative and the BRI is also significantly influencing the dynamics of CEE domestic politics and their relations with the EU (Vangeli, 2018).

This is an unexpected development. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, CEE states have had difficult, and at sometimes no relations with China. CEE states were either part of the Eastern Bloc or non-aligned Yugoslavia, with which China had weak ties throughout the majority of the Cold War. CEE was almost entirely missing from China's international relations during the 1990s and first years of the 21st century. During this time, China focused more on developing relations with the developed Western European states, considered important to China's economic goals of increasing trade, attracting FDI, and securing other essential resources such as foreign assistance and technology, as well as attaining the positive international environment required for domestic development and modernization. Throughout the same time period, the CEE states were coping with a variety of issues, which were the result of the developing political and economic transition that marked CEE in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In terms of foreign policy, the majority of CEE states prioritized EU and NATO membership as the crucial aspect of their political and economic lives.

These factors combined to create a gap in knowledge about the "rising" China, as well as a lack of preparedness to respond to Beijing's diplomatic efforts after the establishment of the "14+1" initiative in 2012. In reality, the scale and number of operations, initiatives, and suggestions launched by China appear to have overwhelmed the CEE states. Furthermore, in many situations, positive public dialogue and formal involvement in procedures have been followed by a lack of active subsequent actions "on the ground". The discussions over the fundamental principles of the "14+1" initiative, including existential issues about its essence and goal, absorb the majority of conversations in CEE, and thus lag far behind the aggressive agenda established on the official level (Vangeli, 2019). Since the beginning of the "14+1" initiative, the CEE states have certainly progressed from "not considering China" to "not knowing how to consider China".

New Narratives and the Effects they Have on China-CEE Relations

As multilateral and bilateral relations intensify, China and the "14+1" initiative have become subjects of increased interest and debate in CEE. Scholar and think tank activities centred on relations with China, the "14+1" initiative or other China-related matters, which were previously essentially non-existent, have become highly prevalent throughout CEE. There has been a rapid increase in the number of research, analyses, and opinion pieces on the "14+1" initiative published in the area and, increasingly, elsewhere, attesting to the fact that the study has grown in size and scope and that the "14+1" initiative is now regarded as a "big question"³ and an issue of global importance. These debates have primarily focused on analysing the intentions behind China's "charm offensive" in the area⁴, the consequences of China's engagement in CEE for different states' economic and political future, policy proposals for strategically developing the China-CEE multilateral format, and the future implications on the CEE region's relationship with the EU.

Two conflicting narratives have arisen as a result of this process, both offering starkly opposed interpretations of China's relationship with CEE. Chengxin Pan (2015) has described these interpretations as being seen through a "bifocal lens". They portray Chinese interests and ambitions in CEE, as well as their consequences, in either extremely optimistic/favourable or pessimistic/unfavourable terms. Such diametrically opposed narratives also offer opposing perspectives on what concerns should be emphasized within that interaction, and what actions and policies should be implemented to adequately address them. Since these narratives are articulated in the media and government circles, they play an important role in setting expectations, perceptions, and ultimately policies regarding China, which are bound to have a considerable impact on the course and outcomes of the "14+1" initiative.

The purpose of this study is to look into the significance of domestic discourse and these conflicting narratives in one CEE state, Serbia. It seeks to provide answers to the following questions: How has Serbia interpreted China's diplomatic efforts, as well as the consequences of closer relations with China? What can empirical data reveal us about the accuracy of these interpretations? How does the interaction between perceptions and real developments influence the potential of the China-Serbia relations now and in the future? And, last, how can all of these help us comprehend the wider context of the China-CEE relations?

This study's research hypothesis is that Serbia has been perceiving China as a great opportunity both for economic gains, as well as for political ones. However, I try to analyse that this perception is not based on the actual evidence but rather on bias and unrealistic expectations. This, in turn, fuels opposition voices inside Serbia who understand this relationship as a threat for the Serbian people and economy. Once again, I claim that this understanding is false, based on hyperbolic threats, which do not represent the actual situation. This leads to the conclusion that, in order to best evaluate China's presence in Serbia, one must not rely on the "bifocal lens" but use empirically based assumptions, which are created through deep analysis of the actual data.

An explanation about the selection of the case study is required at this point. During the two decades prior to the foundation of the "14+1" initiative, Serbia's relations with China were marked by somewhat eventful bilateral interaction. This was notably true in the years following the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, during which the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was destroyed. Since then, Serbia's official stance toward the development of relations with China has been one of proactivity and enthusiasm. Beijing has been even referred to as among the "pillars" of Serbia's foreign policy (Pavličević, 2011). Furthermore, both in governmental and semi-official Chinese documents and reports, the relationship between China and Serbia has been seen as both a model and a launchpad for furthering China's relationship with the entirety of CEE (Liu, 2013). Within the context of the "14+1" initiative, the partnership has already resulted in the production of a large number of joint agreements and initiatives, which positions it as a relative success story. As a result, this relationship provides sufficient empirical data to support the arguments presented in this study. Additionally, the status of Serbia as a "model" within China's foreign policy strategy in the region suggests that China's relations with the other CEE states may evolve in ways analogous to those of China's relationship with Serbia. In the final section, it will be further examined how these results may apply to the rest of the CEE region.

To that aim, the study continues as such: First, it presents the methodological approach of a "bifocal lens" to explain the analysis that follows in the next chapters of the study. The next chapter presents the background of the Sino-Serbian relations. Then, using the Sino-Serbian relations as a model, the following

chapter will explain how the two discourses, that portray China as either an exceptional opportunity or a dire threat, shape people's perceptions of China, and the consequences of deeper relationship with Beijing. It also examines these paradigmatic perspectives against the real data, as well as their effect on the development and course of the relationship. After this, the study continues by presenting the EU's application of double-standards regarding the Sino-Serbian relationship. The final chapter will review the results and examine their consequences for future research on the China-CEE relations.

The “Bifocal Lens” as a Method for Visualizing China

In order to explain the phenomenon of competing narratives on China in Serbia, this study uses the contribution of Chengxin Pan (2015), who stated that the Western portrayals of China are mainly divided into two “fundamental images”, namely, the image of China as a “threat” and the image of China as an “opportunity”, which together form the “bifocal lens” through which China is seen and understood. Pan contends that Western images of China as an “Opportunity” and a “Threat” function as commonly accepted normative frameworks, defining “what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 673) and as a result, defining the understanding and perceptions of so-called China's rise. However, instead of relying on a thorough empirical analysis and understanding of China and its actions, the concepts of “Opportunity” and “Threat” are rather extensions of the “meaning”, hopes, and fears that others associate with China, in accordance with their own personal ideas, worries, and biased knowledge of their own self and others. As a result, the concepts “Opportunity” and “Threat” serve as “cognitive frames” in which normative concerns and prejudice come first, while actual evaluation of the issues at hand comes a clear second. Through this approach, such polar cognitive frames establish twisted “regimes of truth”, which limit our knowledge and understanding of China.

Inside the “Opportunity” framework, China is viewed as a political and ethical opportunity to reinforce one's own ideals, as expressed in the so-called Western liberal-democratic model. China is expected to embrace and follow this model, and to make a contribution to the current world order in accordance with the existing values, customs, and balance of power, asserting the superiority of the West's own normative and political systems and practice.

Another aspect of the “Opportunity” framework regards China as a source of richness. Pan, for instance, describes the picture of the “fabled China market” that has traditionally featured noticeably in Western beliefs of China, and has taken on a modern interpretation of the “one billion customers” market — obtaining even a portion of that market would lead to enormous wealth accumulation. Pan also describes China's image as the “factory of the world”, demonstrating how in Western thought and media, China has been portrayed as “an ideal production base, investment destination, export platform in global supply chains, and an excellent destination for outsourcing,” with “offshoring to China enabling Western businesses to free up talent, machinery, and capital to higher-value industries and cutting edge R&D, thus allowing them to capture even greater profit margins” (Pan, 2015, p. 33).

The “Threat” framework, on the other hand, connects China's strategy, political economy, and actions with menacing aspects. China is seen as pursuing objectives that advance China's interests at the cost of everyone else's, portraying China in a zero-sum game against the political establishment. China's system of governance and ideals, China's state-controlled economy, China's “ardent” nationalism, and even China's traditional beliefs are all seen as inexorably setting China on a collision path with the West, threatening the latter's interests.

Another facet of the “Threat” framework that is particularly pertinent to this study is China’s involvement in the global economy. Issues concerning Chinese trade patterns (most notably positive trade balances, mercantilism, and dumping), currency manipulation, abuse of national resources, ecological pollution, or safety regulations of “Made in China” goods have been constantly relevant to the “Threat” framework (Broomfield, 2003), resulting in the “representation of a manufacturing superpower that threatens not only Western jobs, but also its sense of security and pride” (Pan, 2015, p. 24).

Using the Opportunity/Threat Framework in the CEE Context

This study contends that the “Opportunity/Threat” framework is an appropriate resource for trying to explain CEE portrayals and preconceptions of China. Nevertheless, in this unique regional context and in light of China’s changing position in international politics and economics, both the “Opportunity” and “Threat” frameworks have taken on new forms. Three related topics are particularly important in this research.

Firstly, because Pan’s analysis was centred on understandings of China within the West, it cannot fully reflect the complexities of specific regional circumstances, including CEE. However, because of the unique characteristics of the region, various problems and themes are understood through the “bifocal lens”. The EU’s role as the region’s normative, political, and economic pole, as well as the CEE states’ relations with Brussels inside that context, significantly influence the types of opportunities and threats considered regarding China’s emergence as an important regional power.

Moreover, the personality of CEE states, which include Serbia, has been formed in a context distinct from that of the “West”, owing to the idea that CEE states are located geographically and politically between East and West, and that external powers have traditionally had a major impact in the area. This has led to ideas of “meaning, hopes, and fears” for China that differ from those indicated by Pan in certain ways, while still fitting neatly inside the “Opportunity” and “Threat” frameworks.

Second, after Pan’s book was published, China’s international relations have progressed, and its foreign policy has gotten more optimistic. Questions about the goals and implications of China’s newly found willingness for involvement through Beijing-initiated multilateral initiatives such as the “14+1” have recently gained prominence. Despite the fact that the context of China’s foreign policy has changed dramatically, the interpretations provided adhere to the logic of a “bifocal lens”.

Third, in the past few years, China has become an important contributor to global investment and economic aid. Outgoing financial flows from Beijing are nowadays one of the characteristics of China’s involvement in the international economy that receives the greatest interest and requires analysis. China has invested over 12 billion USD in low-interest loans and via an equity investment fund in CEE. The objectives and implications of China’s assistance and investments have also been viewed worldwide and, as will be shown below, in CEE through the narratives of “Opportunity” and “Threat”.

The Background of the Sino-Serbian Relations

When discussing the nature of bilateral relations between two states, it is normal to assert that it is influenced by geographical proximity or shared culture. In practise, however, distinct cases may be encountered. This is the case between China and Serbia. These two states and their bilateral relationship demonstrate that political ties can be at the highest level even when none of the conditions listed above are present. Nevertheless, one must not jump to the conclusion that this has always been the case. Even though the then-Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of which Serbia is considered a successor state,

recognised the People's Republic of China after its establishment in 1949, contacts between the two states were only formalised in 1955. The rationale for this delay was ideological, and it was directly related to Yugoslavia's position toward the Soviet Union, which stresses the impact of the evolving nature of the world (Johnson, 1974). In practise, this meant that the Chinese government supported only Moscow during the infamous period of the Yugoslav-Soviet split.

This position changed when China began cultivating ambitions to become more influential and expand its own sphere of influence. The Sino-Soviet split occurred when the Soviet Union understood that such a domain included not only Asian states but also European ones, such as Albania. The distance between Beijing and Moscow remained until the end of the Cold War. Thus, the act of normalising relations with Yugoslavia was not unexpected (Lađevać, 2020). As a significant leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia supported China's request to join the United Nations in 1971.

Particularly critical to the development and quality of future relations was the fact that the two states shared the same ideals of international law and peaceful coexistence. This argument was proved in the following decades as their relations were further developed. The processes that began to inevitably change the previously bipolar world order, and the weakening of the communist block had a substantial impact on the Sino-Serbian relations (Vangeli, 2020). The most notable incident was the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, when one of NATO's missiles struck the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring 20 others. The diplomatic struggle that the two states, along with Russia, waged on international relations, particularly within the UN, strengthened their ties. The signing of agreements targeted at forming strategic relationships formalised this growing trend (Gledić, 2019).

After the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 1999, a significant shift in Serbia's foreign policy occurred. The newly established government focused its efforts on restarting cooperation with the European Union, viewing membership as the only future for the prosperity of the country and its people. The first visit of the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vojislav Koštunica, to the Biarritz European Council in October 2000, signified the beginning of the process of normalisation of ties, resumption of political dialogue, and cooperation with the EU (Stahl, 2013). Serbian-EU relations were formalised a month later with the signing of the Framework Agreement for the implementation of financial assistance and support programmes for FR Yugoslavia. As a result, FR Yugoslavia got entry to the Stabilization and Association Process, which was set to conclude with full EU membership.

However, in the next years, Serbia would encounter a number of issues that would strain its ties with the EU. The first issue concerned the existing association between Serbia and Montenegro as constituent republics of FR Yugoslavia. Their relations were badly damaged between 1998 and 1999, and counter to predictions, the situation in the State Union between the two republics did not improve, but worsened. Eventually, the two republics were divided after the 2006 independence referendum in Montenegro.

The second issue was Serbia's (lack of) cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). This issue even prompted the European Commission to halt negotiations with Serbia in 2006 (Obradović, 2009). Following that, the negotiations were reopened in 2007, and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) was expected to be signed by the end of the year. Nevertheless, as the negotiations on the status of Kosovo proceeded, additional issues emerged. The first conflict arose when the EU deployed the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) to Kosovo in 2008 as a compliment to the UN Mission (UNMIK). Moreover, tensions have remained high since Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence

in 2008. The problem was exacerbated when most of the EU member states decided to recognise Kosovo as independent. However, both the EU and Serbia have made significant attempts to address this situation. The negotiations were successful and Serbia signed its SAA with the EU in April 2008.

Alas, Serbia's European journey did not have a happy ending. Not only has Serbia faced the full extent of EU conditionality politics, or more commonly the carrot and stick method, but it also faced a problem that prior pre-accession states had not encountered. The 2008 global economic crisis severely impacted not only all member states, but also the global financial system as a whole. Not only this but the EU was increasingly unwilling to accept new member states, in what has been described as enlargement fatigue. Suddenly, Serbia was unable to receive the European funds intended for investment in its decades-long damaged economy. At that moment, Serbia was compelled to make the adjustments required to improve its economy and raise the standard of living for its population.

This is why Serbia resolved to further its already-excellent relations with China by signing the Agreement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This agreement was signed in August 2009 during former Serbian President Boris Tadić's visit to Beijing. The dedication to each other's strategic national goals was emphasized in the Joint Statement signed by former Chinese President Hu Jintao and Serbian President Tadić⁵. Serbia reiterated its support for the "One-China" policy and its opposition to the "independence" of Taiwan, while China reiterated its support for Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and completely supported the official Serbian position on Kosovo's secession from Serbia (Marciacq, 2021).

Shortly after the formation of the strategic partnership with China, President Tadić highlighted the significant shift in Belgrade's foreign policy that has been captured in its "four pillars of diplomacy" (Entina, 2013). To fit the strategic cooperation and represent China's importance for Serbia, Beijing was added to the list of key international points of reference for Serbia, which already included the EU, the USA, and Russia. Additionally, a strategic cooperation with China meant that Serbia was China's closest partner in CEE.

The two states developed a three-point plan for deepening the Sino-Serbian strategic cooperation based on their Strategic Partnership⁶. First, more political engagement was required. President Hu stated that the two sides should hold high-level contacts and engagement, as well as encourage cooperation on governmental, parliamentary, and party levels. Second, there was an essential need to expand economic and trade interactions. In this regard, both sides would take coordinated actions to actively exploit potential, develop new growth areas, sustain and stabilise bilateral trade development, and progressively improve the balance of trade. There were various areas of serious interest in which China was keen to expand cooperation with Serbia. Infrastructure projects, petrochemical products, the energy sector, and high-technology were some among them. Finally, the plan included the promotion of people-to-people interactions in the fields of culture, sports, health, education, tourism, and others. Youths, non-governmental organisations, and local governments would be encouraged to participate in various kinds of exchange programmes in order to strengthen bilateral ties.

After this official prerequisite was met, significant diplomatic action ensued in order to strengthen Sino-Serbian trade and investment relations. Several delegations began to interchange, and high-level forums or summits began to be held on a regular basis. Not only did Serbian officials advertise Serbia's economic climate as inviting and simple to invest in, but Chinese businesses were also drawn to Serbia due to its free-trade agreements with the EU, CEFTA, and EFTA states, as well as Russia and Turkey (Lađevać, 2019).

Following the conclusion of the Strategic Partnership, the first major project was the agreed-upon erection of the China-Serbia Friendship Bridge over the Danube River in 2014. The project's overall cost was 260 million EUR, 170 million of which were funded by a loan from the Exim Bank of China, which had a 3% interest rate and a grace period of 3-5 years. This construction was completed by China's state-owned-enterprise (SOE) China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), which was significant for the CRBC because it was the first of its kind in Europe. By that time, CRBC had only been operating in the Asian and African regions.

The “Bifocal Lens” Applied to the Serbian Case

Even though the “bifocal lens” was created to explain another context, it does not fail to explain the perceptions of China in Serbia, as was previously described. The upcoming analysis uses the “bifocal lens” as the analytical approach to describe different perceptions of China in Serbia, demonstrating how the “Opportunity” and “Threat” frameworks have been voiced in new forms as a response to a shifting context of China's engagement with the world and the specific local context of CEE.

China as an Opportunity for Serbia

Inside the “Opportunity” framework, China has been interpreted as a provider of remarkable economic growth, a means to strengthen Serbia's international status, and a platform to confirm Serbia's supposed “international character” as a “bridge between East and West”. This perception is mainly held by the political elite and most of the media.

China is viewed as a “game-changer” for the country's troubled economy. For instance, at the 2014 China-CEE Summit in Serbia's capital Belgrade, various experts described China's desire to strengthen economic relations with the region as the “beginning of better days” for Serbia. Overall negative economic indicators and forecasts of the Serbian economy are consequently projected to be reversed with the support of Chinese money, signalling the start of a new investment period and long-term development (Pavličević, 2015).

A widespread optimism expressed at the time was that Chinese investment in Serbian farming, as well as the arrangement for the export of beef and lamb to China, would “revive Serbian villages”. In the years after, government officials and the media have referred to China as “offering a big opportunity” for all agricultural products and agricultural industries⁷. Chinese companies' actual or prospective interest in some state-owned companies in reorganisation and privatisation has also been highlighted as an enormous opportunity to reinvigorate the Serbian economy.

Considering all of this, Chinese investments in Serbia are frequently viewed as a means of ensuring higher employment rates and living conditions. The existing and potential Chinese investments are frequently described in Serbian news as “life-saving” by a “saviour” China, whether for a corporation in financial crisis⁸, an industry⁹, or a geographic area in Serbia¹⁰ where investments are likely to be channelled. In one of the most aggressive assertions, a Serbian official stated that a joint Sino-Serbian industrial park to be constructed near Belgrade would house over 1,000 high-tech firms and create 15,000 vacancies¹¹.

These opinions have been expressed multiple times, not only in expert and media conversations about Serbia's relations with China, but also in top-level officials' statements, press conferences, and interviews, demonstrating how the “political class glorifies current and potential cooperation with China” (Teokarević, 2016). In response to the Chinese SOE Hesteel's acquisition of the previously heavily subsidised Smederevo steel factory in Serbia for 46 million EUR, and the revival of a large power plant in Kostolac by

a conglomerate of Chinese SOEs, Serbia's President, then Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić stated that "only one country could solve it [revive the factory] and it [China] really did. When Kostolac started working [after China's acquisition], it produced much more electricity than we are used to and that will mean new figures for us". Vučić went on to say that the BRI will bring many more economic advantages to Serbia and that "without an important role played by China and her dedicated participation, we would not be able to succeed"¹². Only a few days later, Vučić claimed that "it would be a fairy tale for Serbia"¹³ in response to the Chinese ambassador's proposal that three new Chinese potential candidates were thinking of investing in Serbia, including in the production of electric vehicles.

Beyond the economic aspect, improving relations with China is predicted to allow for a dramatic development of Serbia's international position. On the one hand, Chinese economic interaction is viewed as providing developmental prospects that will enable Serbia to close the infrastructure gap with the rest of Europe, improve its international image, and promote its development (Zweers et al., 2020). Furthermore, by making Serbia a vital component, if not a "key hub", of the BRI (Jojić, 2017), Serbia will not only become better connected with the region and the world, but will also earn worldwide prominence. For example, former Serbian Transport Minister Mihajlović has stated that "thanks to China, Serbia is becoming a centre for investment in this part of Europe"¹⁴.

President Vučić reiterated this enthusiasm while remarking on the now-completed Belgrade-Budapest high-speed rail (HSR), calling it a "real game-changer", not only in terms of its economic effect, but also "regarding our EU path, [and] regarding our closeness to Central and Western Europe"¹⁵. Multiple comments from Serbian politicians and officials have argued that enhanced relations with China offer Serbia the potential to hold a "much more favourable geopolitical and geoeconomic position in the region itself, and in the wider world"¹⁶.

Finally, China is perceived as helping Serbia to realize its unique character as a state located between the "East" and the "West" — both geographically and geopolitically. The main feature of Serbia's understanding of its position on both regional and international stages is its geographical location. Serbia, located in the Balkan Peninsula between the southwestern corner of Asia and the rest of Europe, sees itself as an important junction connecting East and West. In terms of politics, Serbia maintains a foreign policy that, although devoted to achieving EU membership, nevertheless maintains close ties with Russia and China. According to the principles of the "Opportunity" framework, such "identity" is pursued through assumptions that Serbia will be a "hub" on one of China's BRI corridors to Europe, and as having "an important role to play" in the larger connection between China and Europe. Participating actively in the "14+1" initiative is viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate its distinct identity and achieve its potential and purpose as a "bridge" between East and West.

Dreams of China: Unrealistic Expectations

As was mentioned in the introduction of this study, the "Opportunity" framework creates unrealistic expectations, as it fails to take into account the elements that motivate China's interest in the region. For one thing, China's economic policy is primarily motivated by return-on-investment analyses. This is fundamentally defined by market factors driving China's recent "going global" strategy — that is, the need to integrate into the international market in order to create momentum for the Chinese economy in the face of concerns associated with domestic economic slowdown and reform (Jie, 2017). While aspects of the Chinese government, such as its foreign office, are employed to promote economic activities, this does not imply that projects are formulated without due consideration of their potential to bring results

to China and Chinese businesses, and are delivered in order to gain favour with the receiving states and strengthen China's influence in CEE.

Several linked findings imply that both Chinese SOEs and private-sector businesses are mainly concerned with maintaining sound balance sheets. These include: lengthy negotiations over the conditions of various joint agreements with the help of the Chinese state to achieve profit-generating terms¹⁷; China's advocating for more lenient regulations that would allow easier firing rather than hiring workers in a steel factory purchased by China¹⁸; and the so-far failed efforts to create effective "special zones" designated for Chinese investors due to a lack of interested Chinese businesses. More specifically, the desired Chinese investments should not be taken for granted unless there is a compelling business plan for Chinese companies and China's wider economic interests.

Claims that the Chinese market will provide unparalleled opportunities for Serbian exports must be challenged as well. On the one hand, many of the businesses and sectors regarded as excellent possibilities for CEE states already have tough competition from both Chinese and international businesses. These businesses have a significantly greater competitive edge when it comes to access to the market, connections in China, and product and brand recognition. This is in addition to the various restrictions imposed on foreign businesses in more than 30 sectors in China, coupled with China's influence on the retail market¹⁹. On the other hand, given their existing focus on much smaller markets back in Europe, the CEE states' ability to grow and modify their industrial capacity to the needs of such a vast market is questionable. Taking all of this into consideration, it is evident that the Chinese market is a difficult place for Serbian and CEE businesses.

In the meantime, China-backed initiatives in Serbia often use technology and resources that are not locally available, such as high-speed railways, solar panels, waste management and recycling facilities, and others. After years of deindustrialization, Serbian businesses simply lack the skill and know-how to fully utilise and benefit from projects of this scale (Teokarević, 2016), nor to operate in a market the size of China's.

As an example of the gap between current expectations and the real situation, it is worth mentioning that when Serbia signed a contract allowing the export of Serbian beef to China, it was uncovered that Serbia's supply capacity is 6.5 times lower than the allowed maximum²⁰. Closing this difference in the future will be extremely challenging, even if proactive and successful policies are implemented in the future to draw Chinese and other investors into boosting beef production capabilities in Serbia.

Furthermore, Serbia's economic interaction with China is overshadowed by the tens of other states involved in the BRI. In regards to economic significance to China, Serbia ranks lower than the majority of other BRI states, as well as the EU. In other words, several other states within the "14+1" initiative and the BRI receive and may anticipate to receive equal or greater benefits from a tighter engagement with China and involvement in the BRI. Additionally, Serbia is merely one of several "stations" on the BRI's multiple logistic corridors that traverse the Eurasian region and beyond. Moreover, not only Serbia, but other states promote themselves as China's "bridge to Europe", highlighting their proximity to the geographical boundaries between Europe and Asia or their location along the BRI routes, or their good relations with China²¹. As a result, it is quite doubtful that Serbia will position itself as an actually important bridge between East and West, and will gain disproportionate economic and political benefits from its "unique geographic location".

Given the aforementioned, the expectations generated by the “Opportunity” framework appear unrealistic. A more nuanced understanding of the sphere on which the Sino-Serbian relations exist suggests that neither can closer cooperation with China cause a significant change in Serbia’s economic prospects, nor is Serbia’s international role likely to change substantially only as a result of a closer relationship with China.

China as a Threat in Serbia

Despite China being portrayed generally as an opportunity in Serbia, mainly by the political elite and the media, there are diametrically opposed voices, who think that China is a grave threat for Serbia. The “Threat” framework can be seen in a number of often encountered contexts. First, there is widespread belief that economic cooperation with China will have serious negative effects for Serbia’s economy. Second, there is a growing perception that Beijing is utilising economic leverage and “win-win” discourse to achieve bigger strategic objectives through increased political interference at the detriment of Serbia’s and the EU’s interests. Lastly, there is a general understanding that China represents a major threat to Serbia’s goal to join the EU as well as Serbia’s integration into the EU’s political and normative structures.

For one thing, the political economy of China’s involvement is frequently questioned. China’s economic strategy to the area is believed to depend on imported materials and labour while not adequately involving local businesses, limiting any positive effect from occurring to the states involved. China-led projects are seen to move forward only once major advantageous terms for Chinese firms are obtained. Other sources of concern include projects approved through opaque processes and believed to be delivered to relatively low standards²². Overall, the sense is that they are being conducted on conditions that are fundamentally negative to Serbia and harm domestic companies and the economy as a whole (Teokarević, 2016). Unbalanced trade is frequently used as another instance, resulting in accusations that China profits unfairly from the economic interaction with Serbia (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017).

Moreover, the “Chinese way of doing business”, according to analyses frequently reported and debated by mainstream Serbian media, “allows Balkan decision-makers ... to fuel patronage networks” and burdens “the target countries with enormous debts owed to China” (Makocki, 2017). Chinese construction projects are thus regarded as “exacerbating both the high levels of corruption and governance problems that exist in the region” (Makocki & Nechev, 2017).

The second aspect of the “Threat” framework is the assumption that China’s economic initiatives hide China’s real strategic goals. The participation of SOEs in various projects, for instance, is thought to illustrate China’s strategic yet threatening goals of gaining influence. China is frequently accused of gaining leverage over CEE states by making them heavily reliant on the Chinese economy through the financing of strategic projects, loan extensions, and increasing trade and investment. As a result, it is widely assumed to push CEE states, particularly Serbia, to conform with China’s line on topics of significance to Beijing.

One such instance is the apprehension and deportation of Falun Gong activists at the 2014 China-CEE Summit in Belgrade. Serbian President Vučić responded to worldwide criticism in a later interview with China’s CCTV, saying, “When some people wanted to protest against China for some reason, we did not allow it. I said - I’m responsible for it, you can protest against us, but not against our friends. We are very loyal and faithful friends. We hope that this cooperation will continue”²³.

In respect to the relationship's political dimensions, China is perceived as having goals that are either openly hostile or opposed to supposed EU objectives. For one thing, Beijing's goal in building relations with CEE states is frequently interpreted as a zero-sum game wherein China seeks to grow its influence at the detriment of the democratic "West" and, in CEE regard, the EU. As a result, it is widely considered that the "14+1" initiative poses an existential threat to the European Union, whose popularity and power over CEE are feared to be dwindling as the region's relations with China improve.

This notion supports most of the discussion about Sino-Serbian relations in the media and among scholars. Both local and international news outlets have reported that China has "dark intentions" for establishing a "gateway" (Holzner, 2022) to states considered future EU members in order to get access to European markets while also exerting political influence. China is widely considered to be attempting to bypass various restrictions and gain access to rich EU markets through Serbia by making Serbia a strategic centrepiece for "breaching into Europe". Furthermore, China may soon find itself in a place to exert political influence in the EU. Serbia, like other CEE states, is seen as especially vulnerable to enticement by China's capital, and as a result will advocate for and adopt policies that favour China but are against the interests of the EU in general. As a result, China affects not just the EU's economic interests, but also the EU's status in CEE, and possibly the EU's ability to establish internally consistent and uniform policies.

A related part of the "Threat" framework is the idea that China causes political and normative backsliding away from the European Union's political leadership and European "values and ideals". Firstly, many commentators view China's approach to CEE as aimed at securing the alignment and support of CEE states for China's policies and standards. As judged by the European Commission for the first half of 2022, Serbia's alignment with the EU's foreign policy declarations and measures was only at 44% (Novaković et al., 2022), allegedly in part due to its growing connection with Beijing. President Vucic's assertion that Serbia is a true friend of China and admires its leadership, has enhanced this impression²⁴. In comparison, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia repeatedly score above 90% alignment rates.

Serbia's and some other CEE states' support for China's stance on the South China Sea issue has been interpreted in accordance with these assertions – as repayment for China's capital, both current and potential, and at the expense of a united and cohesive European position on the matter (Fallon, 2016). China's perceived influence, and concerns that it may expand in the future, draw criticism and pressures from Brussels, hurting Serbia's relations with the EU and so negatively impacting Serbia's integration in the EU.

Moreover, Chinese projects in Serbia, which are agreed through state-to-state discussions rather than open and fair legal procedures, are frequently viewed as a "battle of principles" between the EU and China (Makocki & Nechev, 2017), "undermining the EU's reformist agenda" while tipping "the balance between the market-oriented and the state-led model to the latter's favour" (Makocki, 2017). Thus, Serbia is thought to be departing the progressive road of embracing European normative and legal norms as a result of China's economic enticement.

Fears of China: Hyperbolic Threats

As with the "Opportunity" framework that creates unrealistic expectations, judgments based on the "Threat" framework are clearly incorrect. The available data, for instance, contradicts claims that Chinese projects are distinctly characterised by governance problems. There is a lengthy list of ventures in Serbia involving Western businesses, including public tender projects, that have been plagued by problems generally associated with the "China Threat" framework. These include, among other issues, multiple

corruption cases, many opaque state-to-state contracts, and overly preferential conditions provided to foreign companies (European Commission, 2021). As an example, the preliminary investigation into the sale of the Smederevo steel factory to its former owner, US Steel, has been underway since 2004, based on a report from the Serbian Anti-Corruption Council²⁵. As a result, even if the idea that the “Chinese way” does not meet the minimum standards is proven correct, such an event would make it the rule rather than an exception.

In regards to China’s understood strategy of “money for influence”, China’s economic involvement in Serbia cannot be used as a source of functional leverage for China, as China’s engagement in the Serbian economy remains minimal, lags far behind that of the EU, and is likely to stay so for the near future. Though infrastructure investments are crucial for Serbia’s economic future, they do not significantly increase the Serbian economy’s vulnerability to China, and they are delivered over several years with loans returned after over 15 to 20 years, reducing their relevance in the country’s economy. Existing Chinese loans do not considerably affect the structure of Serbia’s foreign debt, which has been accumulated to a greater extent from established Western and international creditors, all of which reduce their capacity to acquire leverage for China.

In terms of capital flows, the EU accounts for more than 80% of FDI stock in Serbia, while Chinese investment in the EU overshadows Chinese investment in CEE, which includes Serbia. This shows that China does not view Serbia and CEE as the EU’s “backdoor”, nor is it able to gain considerable leverage if it does. China continues to have a limited role in Serbian trade, particularly when compared to the EU. Serbia’s trade with the EU amounts to 60.3% of total trade, whereas trade with China accounts for only 8.9% of total trade (European Commission, 2021). All in all, while Chinese engagement in Serbian construction projects, trade, and investment are positive additions to the Serbian economy, they do not equal to a “game-changer,” nor do they grant China an economic leverage.

A closer study of Serbia’s policy alignments with China suggests that they are not indicative of Serbia’s search to replace the EU and the “West”. Serbia’s solidarity with China on the South China Sea dispute should not be seen as a result of Chinese influence and leverage. On the contrary, this instance demonstrates Serbia’s adherence to the values of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Serbia uses these principles in regard to the status of its breakaway province of Kosovo, which declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. Regarding its own territorial and sovereignty disputes, China has backed Serbia in its rejection to recognise Kosovo’s independence. The apprehension of Falun Gong activists during the 2014 Summit in Belgrade may be best viewed in terms of Serbia’s and China’s mutual support based on the values of non-intervention and sovereignty, rather than as an indication of China’s political leverage gained through economic relations.

The low rates of conformity with the EU’s foreign policy declarations and measures are unlikely to be driven by Serbia’s closer engagement with China, as Serbia has voted the other way on matters in which China does not have a substantial interest, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo, signifying other reasons on Belgrade’s side. More importantly, this rate has fallen dramatically compared to the previous years, mainly because of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and Serbia’s refusal to take part in the EU’s sanctions against Russia (Novaković et al., 2022).

Concerning China’s political influence, there is no evidence that the principles and morals that China supposedly stands for — like authoritarian rule through an one-party system, a state-controlled national

economy, or disregard for political freedoms, civil rights, and human rights — are transmitted within CEE states as a result of closer ties with China. It is practically impossible to connect “illiberal” practices in several CEE states, including Serbia, to an increased engagement with China. While Serbian officials have in multiple times lauded China’s achievements, they have also sought neoliberal economic policies like disassociating from the state-owned sector, reducing public spending on social assistance, and preserving and expanding a positive environment for private businesses, all while seeking EU accession.

The case of Serbia demonstrates how, rather than being the consequence of strategic manoeuvring and reprioritization, interaction with China is the result of “identifying changing global circumstances and working within those” and making a skilful adaptation to the new conditions marked by China’s rise as a major player with worldwide presence. Serbia is exercising its own autonomy by broadening its foreign policy choices and acquiring new means of economic and other assistance (Dimitrijević, 2020a), all while staying “firmly in acceptance of the status quo, rather than plotting a challenge to it” (Dimitrijević, 2020b). Partnership with China is considered as complementary to, rather than as an alternative to, EU membership and principles. Both Chinese and Serbian policymakers have frequently stated that aligning Chinese activity in the region with EU goals and principles is critical on both a legislative and operational levels.

Table 1 highlights how different perspectives of Serbia’s relations with China apply to the “bifocal lens”, building and strengthening perceptions of “China Threat” and “China Opportunity”. Ultimately, although some interpretations see China as providing a unique, “game-changing” opportunity for Serbia to overcome its current political and economic situation, others perceive an equally dire threat to the country’s political and economic future.

	“China Opportunity”	“China Threat”
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth • Acquisition of SOEs • Higher employment rates • Investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investments that don’t “trickle down” to the citizens • Opaque procedures and poor management • Increasing trade imbalance • Investments geared towards China’s strategic goals
International Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realisation of country’s true identity • Shrinking the gap with other European states • Becoming the “bridge” between East and West 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking to create a leverage • Zero-sum game of influence • Damaging the country’s European path

Table 1: Perceptions of China inside the Opportunity/Threat frameworks

It is important to recognize that these conflicting narratives are not easily linked to traditional political divisions such as “left” and “right” or “pro-Western” and “pro-Russian”, and the associated conceptions of national strategic objectives (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014), nor are they dependent on changes in “factual” data of China’s abilities (Yang & Liu, 2012). Contrarily, most political parties across the political scale support establishing stronger and broader cooperation with China, while both frameworks are found in about equal share in all of the major media. This is consistent with Pan’s claims that the “Threat” and “Opportunity” frameworks are more than just tools for competitive ideological and political narratives,

but co-existing basic, stereotypical images of China that cut across the ideological and political spectrum and are fundamental for “understanding” China.

The EU’s Double-standards Regarding Serbia’s Relationship with China

This chapter explains that the EU has been applying double-standards regarding Serbia’s relations with China, as well as its own relations with China. As is the case inside Serbia, the EU perceives China as both an opportunity and a threat, and depending on what framework it uses falsely at any given time, its attitude is formed accordingly.

The EU has been actively watching the development of Sino-Serbian relations. The EU has been a part of the “14+1” initiative since its inception, via the member states which have joined it. However, there was not any official representation from EU institutions themselves participating at the first 2012 China-CEE Summit in Warsaw, and afterwards only Slovakia and Croatia dispatched their respective officials to Beijing to form the Cooperation Secretariat. Since the sixth meeting in Budapest in 2017, the EU has had an observer status. With the launch of “14+1” projects, the European Commission has repeatedly questioned the conformity of their implementation methods to EU legislation (Skala-Kuhmann, 2019).

The European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs and the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee displayed the relationship between Serbia and China in their reports on the Serbian accession process, focusing primarily on economic support and aid, trade, foreign direct investments (FDI), security, and defence (Stojadinović & Talović, 2018). More particularly, the Commission evaluated the Chinese takeover of the Serbian steel factory in Smederevo by Hesteel to see whether it threatens steel production and prices in the single market. The report found no cause for concern. However, other investments have also been examined. The next case under review by the Commission was the agreement signed between Hungary, Serbia, and China to reconstruct and upgrade the Belgrade-Budapest railroad with a new high-speed one. Hungary, as a member state, was asked to observe EU standards during the project’s public procurement procedure. An examination was conducted once more to ensure that the procedure complied with EU competition regulations.

The EU highlights significant hurdles to Serbia’s accession requirements posed by its engagement with China. It implies that financial assistance in the form of loans is a strain on Serbia’s economy. Furthermore, it is concerned about China’s strategy of using cooperation with CEE states as a launchpad to put its products in the EU’s single market, taking advantage of the free trade agreements between these states and the EU while simultaneously avoiding multiple forms of EU legislation (Stojadinović & Talović, 2018). It has previously been pointed out that states who are working toward EU membership will be able to attract larger investments from China as they go further on the path toward membership (Jacimović et al., 2018).

According to the “money for influence” and “divide and conquer” concepts, China is building power and influence over the CEE states by making them heavily reliant on the Chinese economy through the funding of projects in key strategic areas, prolonged periods for paying back loans, and the expansion of trade and investment. In exchange for such economic gains, the CEE states are expected to “pay back” China by adopting its position on topics of significance to Beijing. These important suggestions lead to the assumption that China’s strategy to CEE should be viewed as being geared to secure and result in the region’s alignment with and support for China’s objectives and values (Pavličević, 2019).

On the basis of this discourse, the EU has turned to applying pressures on the CEE states behind closed doors, unfriendly rhetoric, and regulatory tools to stymie the expansion of China-CEE relations. Officially, it has generally ignored the “14+1” initiative while also withholding official support for the BRI (Reilly, 2017).

China’s continued strong engagement with the CEE states, as well as other European economies, has caused new tensions and inner-EU conflicts. In April 2018, 27 EU member states issued a negative assessment on China’s BRI, with only Hungary abstaining, claiming that this initiative “runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalising trade and pushes the balance of power in favour of subsidised Chinese companies” (Grieger, 2018). Yet, Hungary, and later Greece, opted to sign bilateral agreements with Beijing on the basis of the BRI, along with Poland, Portugal, and Austria. Italy, becoming the first G7 economy, officially became a cooperating partner of China’s BRI in March 2019.

The EU frequently applies a double standard to its engagement with China. On the one hand, it attempts to bring China closer through its common institutions as well as individual initiatives of member states, particularly in critical BRI areas such as infrastructure and energy, where Hungary and Poland are leaders. In response to this offer, China joined the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in 2016, with the goal of improving cooperation with the EU-backed bank in a variety of areas, including shared financing and regulatory frameworks. The United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy have taken the opposite path and joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a Chinese-backed bank intended to fund BRI infrastructure projects.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the European Commission and the Chinese government, which launched cooperation on regional policy to connect the EU and China in 2006, demonstrates coordination through common institutions²⁶. European infrastructure development projects, that is, the implementation of Juncker’s investment plan for Europe beginning in 2015, were welcomed by China, and China vowed to financially support them. As a result, China is the first non-European state to be included in the EU project. The advantages of cooperation are evident given China’s economic importance for the EU and vice versa. China has the world’s second-largest economy and is the largest trading state. The EU-China trade relationship is the world’s second-largest economic cooperation. China has become the EU’s largest supplier and one of the fastest-growing economies for European exports (Lađevač & Đorđević, 2016).

On the other hand, the EU is attempting to regulate Chinese businesses’ access to its single market. Several EU member states have introduced legislation to assess, and hence permit or prohibit, FDI. Moreover, additional legislation has been enacted to defend the European market from low-cost Chinese imports. The strategic approach taken by the EU towards Chinese initiative has bolstered China’s bilateral relations with some of its border states, but has also sought to retain control and direction from common institutions in Brussels. This has given the EU a flexible position in the sense that it does not have to take responsibility for the outcomes of joint agreements.

The EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which emphasised win-win cooperation opportunities in certain areas such as peace and security, prosperity, and sustainable development, nominally addressed this double-standard approach²⁷. The agenda emphasised collaboration and consultation within international organisations and multilateral structures, apart from bilateral projects. Nevertheless, such an agenda has remained merely a formal statement of both sides’ readiness to engage in discourse and exchange of ideas.

Expectations and Threats: Towards Disappointment

Though incorrect, stereotypical views of China have had a considerable impact on developments in the Sino-Serbian relations. Moreover, the gap between the perceptions formed through the “bifocal lens” and the actuality of the Sino-Serbian engagement is creating forces that are negatively impacting the relationship’s potential for the future.

As has been demonstrated previously, unreasonable expectations stemming from conceptions of China as “Opportunity” have led Serbia to implement policies that are unlikely to achieve the intended outcome. The effect of construction projects has not yet boosted the country’s general economic indicators, and the centrepiece railway project connecting Belgrade and Budapest, though in service as of March 2022, still relies on other unreliable railways, making the trip from Piraeus to Budapest sometimes up to 4-8 days. Despite efforts to promote special zones for Chinese businesses, and to portray Serbia as a particularly friendly destination for Chinese investments, there has been only minimal success in attracting Chinese capital. The trade balance has stayed substantially tilted in favour of China, with the margin between Chinese imports and exports to China widening. Despite the contracts that ease access to the Chinese market, Serbian agriculture has not been “revitalized” and is unlikely to be. All of this indicates that thinking about the opportunities of a cooperation with China through the “Opportunity” framework has prevented Serbian policymakers from pursuing the development of bilateral cooperation on the basis of educated and careful analyses, resulting in incompetent policies and mediocre results.

On the other hand, views of the “Threat” framework have led to an increase in the number and popularity of voices denouncing cooperation with China, which have spilled over from the media to the international relations stage. While Serbia has so far remained dedicated to developing its relations with China, this may become increasingly complicated as the EU toughens its stance against China’s rising involvement in CEE. Local and international media have also reported that Brussels is pressuring Serbia to rethink its relations with China using behind-the-door practices.

The EU has also employed regulatory frameworks to keep Sino-Serbian and CEE-China ties from growing further. According to multiple press reports, the EU has examined the Belgrade-Budapest HSR, as well as the Chinese purchase and administration of the Smederevo Steel factory, for complying with EU legislation, causing severe setbacks in what could be a deterrence tactic for future Chinese economic initiatives in CEE.

There could be two major points to be made here. Pan contends that because both depictions of China as an “Opportunity” and a “Threat” are founded on misconceptions about China, they hold unrealistic expectations and hyperbolic threats. As optimistic expectations are not realized, a sense of disappointment and anxiety develops, while the “Threat” becomes increasingly real, with the risk of becoming a “self-fulfilling prophecy”. As a result, the Sino-Serbian cooperation may be destined for failure, or at the very least a perpetual state of disillusionment and anxiety that will keep the partnership uncertain.

Since it became evident that China is not going to be “the saviour” of Serbian agriculture because of the gap between Serbia’s production capabilities and China’s market demands, the obvious dissatisfaction voiced in the media implies that such a development may already be underway. Moreover, reports that China is applying “slave labour” conditions on the employees of a recently acquired tyre factory in Serbia²⁸

or its lobbying to ease labour law to facilitate layoffs²⁹, clearly demonstrates how Serbia's "dreams" of China may easily be converted to "fears".

Second, interpreting China through a "bifocal lens" assumes that the consequences of interaction with China are set and predictable, leaving little room for more complicated and dynamic analyses. It remains to be seen if politicians will allow the inevitably unrealistic expectations and parallel "securitization" of China, as suggested by the above study, to push the relationship toward disenchantment and failure. To avoid such a predicament, it appears that a deeper knowledge of China and Sino-Serbian cooperation, based on better-informed debates that surpass the cognitive limitations and preconceived assumptions of the "Opportunity" and "Threat" frameworks, as well as developing methods to engage with China appropriately, is required.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study contends that perceptions of China and its expanding involvement in Serbia are shaped by the "bifocal lens" of the "Opportunity" and "Threat" frameworks. On the one hand, China is viewed, mainly by the political elite and the media, as offering "game-changing" prospects that will pave the way for a brighter, better future through investments, construction projects, and other kinds of political and economic partnership and cooperation, where Serbia's self-image and capabilities will be affirmed and fulfilled. However, the expectations generated by the "Opportunity" framework appear unrealistic. In reality, neither can closer cooperation with China cause a significant change in Serbia's economic prospects, nor is Serbia's international role likely to change substantially only as a result of a closer relationship with China. On the other hand, "moving closer" to China is frequently interpreted as unavoidably leading to negative domestic political and economic implications, threatening the crucially essential relationship with the EU and weakening adherence to the related "positive" standards, principles, and customs. Nevertheless, the fears generated by the "Threat" framework appear hyperbolic. In reality, neither can China's involvement in Serbia be used as a source of political leverage for China, nor will Serbia's increasing engagement with China drive it further away from its European path.

By giving biased interpretations, these frameworks act as a replacement for an empirically based understanding of China's intentions. Their high prevalence reveals an incapacity to assess the consequences and potential of the engagement with China in an informative, evidence-based, and thus effective manner. Yet, the "bifocal" cognitive frameworks have a concrete influence on the relationship with China. Those who adhere to the "Opportunity" framework actively and unconditionally support and push for measures that are unlikely to yield intended results. The unavoidable failure to meet the high expectations associated with conceptions of China as an "Opportunity" fuels and strengthens ideas of "fears" of China, making constructive cooperation and tangible results unlikely.

Even though the author's preliminary analysis assumes that the preconceptions and assumptions mentioned here in the framework of the Sino-Serbian relations are reflective of those existing across other CEE states, the study's applicability to the level of the "14+1" initiative is assumed rather than proved at this point. Additional research should look into whether the "Opportunity" and "Threat" frameworks play a role of equal importance in the other CEE states and beyond.

Regardless, academics and politicians alike should avoid depending on the "bifocal lens's" preconceived assumptions and instead position their research inside analytical frameworks that are mindful of the flaws of the "Opportunity" and "Threat" frameworks. The outcomes are unlikely to be simple categorization

and will offer less obvious results, instead providing a more comprehensive and accurate depiction of the consequences and opportunities of China-SEE relations, and, more generally, China's "rise".

Notes

- ¹ Originally known as "16+1" or "17+1", the initiative includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. As of the date of writing, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have withdrawn their support making the current number of members 14, plus China.
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