



Research Article

Chinese and Other Foreign Influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans: A Tale of Cooperation, Competition, and Distrust?

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Abstract: Adopting a storytelling approach, this article unravels the intricate narratives of cooperation, competition, and distrust that define the interactions between Serbia, China, and the European Union. Using on-site observations and personal narratives, the article vividly portrays the complexities and nuances of Serbia’s multifaceted relationships with key global actors. It provides stakeholders with a nuanced understanding, enabling informed and conscientious decision-making. The contrasting approaches of China and the European Union toward Serbia highlight a strategic opportunity for the country, which can—and does—exploit the rivalry to its own advantage by balancing the two against each other.

As the largest country in the Western Balkans, Serbia has a long and complex historical relationship with its neighbors and the European Union. It is a critical actor for major powers seeking to engage in the region and is occasionally described as Europe’s “inner courtyard” due to its pivotal geographical and strategic role. Serbia’s significance in this geopolitical puzzle cannot be underestimated. It is not merely a result of its status as the largest country in the Western Balkans; rather, its importance transcends geographic considerations.

Keywords: foreign interference, foreign influence, psychological defense, resilience, hybrid threats, Serbia, China, Western Balkans, EU, Russia, Turkey, BRI.

Introduction

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans,¹ China's influence has expanded significantly, positioning Serbia as a strategic nexus in this complex web of relationships. Situated between East and West, Serbia plays a unique role in navigating the competing interests of China and the European Union in the region. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate: Can Serbia's approach to foreign policy—leveraging relationships with both the European Union and China—truly yield sustainable cooperation, or are competition and distrust inevitable byproducts of this balancing act? This study examines whether the approach of Serbia, positioned at the intersection of competing great power ambitions, represents a viable strategy for advancing its national interests or constitutes a precarious endeavor with potential long-term risks.

Drawing upon extensive fieldwork conducted in Serbia, China, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Hungary in 2023 and 2024, this article adopts a storytelling approach to unravel the intricate narratives of cooperation, competition, and distrust that define the interactions between Serbia, China, and the European Union. Utilizing on-site observations and personal narratives, it vividly portrays the complexities and nuances of Serbia's multifaceted relationships with key global actors. It also offers a research-driven resource that provides insights designed to equip stakeholders with a nuanced understanding, enabling informed and conscientious decision-making.

Serbia's significance in this geopolitical puzzle cannot be underestimated. It is not driven merely by its status as the largest country within the Western Balkans; Serbia's importance transcends geographic considerations. Situated at a critical political crossroads, Serbia is at the helm of deciding its political destiny, facing a consequential decision regarding its future trajectory: whether to fully engage with and adopt the values and membership requirements necessary to join the European Union or to continue standing on the fence, deeply engaging with countries like China, Russia, Turkey and others that do not fully share the democratic principles, freedoms, and values of the European Union. This issue, which has been debated since the late 1990s, is expected to remain central for the foreseeable future.²

China, the focus of this article, has expanded its presence in the region, particularly after the 2008–2009 financial crisis. China's rise in the Western Balkans—from a position of little influence to that of a key player—has evolved

¹ This article adopts the EU definition of Western Balkans, defining the region as comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo (“...without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence”). See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/#Balkans>.

² See, e.g., Vesna Pavičić, “Serbia’s Orientation Challenge and Ways to Overcome It,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 18, no. 1-2 (2019): 111-127, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.18.1-2.07>.

gradually. Although China's influence notably increased after 2008, it took several years for the country to establish itself as a significant force in Serbian foreign policy, joining the ranks of the European Union, Russia, and the United States. This represents a fundamental shift for a power that has historically been, at best, peripheral in the Western Balkans.

The nature and impact of China's investments, particularly in infrastructure, raise important questions about the long-term implications for the region. While these investments offer an alternative to traditional Western funding, they come with their own set of challenges, including concerns over governance, strategic intent, environmental security, public health, labor rights, the rule of law, corruption, and transparency. China's growing influence, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has reshaped its engagement in the Western Balkans.³ Serbia has emerged as a critical entry point for China's ambitions in Europe, often described as an "inner courtyard" facilitating Beijing's broader penetration into the continent.

The genesis of Serbia's alliance with Russia and China dates back to Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 and the 2008–2009 financial crisis. This period marked the beginning of a significant shift in regional dynamics, with China's influence burgeoning, particularly through the BRI and its strategic engagement with the Global South. Particularly noteworthy is China's emphasis on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), especially in infrastructure development, which stands in stark contrast to its engagement in trade. Offering an alternative to traditional funding mechanisms, China's approach minimizes bureaucratic hurdles and largely overlooks issues of corruption. This surge in engagement is further bolstered by the Balkans' attractiveness due to its geographical connectivity.

The long-term implications of China's regional engagement, however, remain debatable. Questions persist as to whether these developments indicate structural shifts or represent more transient, strategically-limited interventions. This underscores the need to explore further China's evolving role within Serbia and the broader Western Balkans, a topic that will be addressed in the subsequent sections of this article.

As mentioned in the introduction, this article adopts a storytelling approach. Storytelling is a qualitative methodology that collects and analyzes narratives to explore how we make sense of our experiences and the world around us. This

³ Established in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's primary framework for expanding its economic influence by securing access to vital land and maritime routes. The BRI aims to drive China's economic growth while opening new trade pathways and building an extensive infrastructure network, thereby strengthening China's global presence. See Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, "China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans," Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 733.558, June 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EP_RS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EP_RS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf); Wouter Zweers et al., "China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A Zero-Sum Game?" Clingendael Report (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, August 2020), <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>.

method provides in-depth insights into cultural, social, and psychological phenomena, including state behavior. While storytelling originates in literary studies, narrative analysis has, over time, become an established practice in international relations research, particularly in the study of foreign policy, as it offers a fundamental means of making sense of the world.⁴ As Oppenheimer and Spencer argue, “[w]e understand the world in which we live through narratives as they give meaning to context, actors, and events. Narratives are essential in all areas of social interaction in which there is a need to elaborate, justify, and explain actions, decisions, and behavior. Foreign policy is no different in this regard.”⁵

The material for this article was gathered through interviews and group discussions (primarily in Serbia and China), along with audio-visual recordings and textual sources, including primary sources such as official statements, as well as media reports and other secondary materials. Approximately a dozen experts were interviewed in both Serbia and China. In Serbia, the interviewees were predominantly academics and think-tank members, with a few discussions involving government officials. Most of the Chinese material was collected during fieldwork in Beijing in the spring of 2024, where interviews and discussions were conducted with experts from leading research institutions, including universities and government think tanks. Additionally, a small number of interviews and discussions took place in North Macedonia, Hungary, and Sweden, as well as via Zoom, and were further complemented by consultations with experts from the European Union between 2023 and 2024.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: First, it provides an overview of Serbia’s current situation. Next, the author examines Serbia’s external relations, focusing on the engagements of the European Union and China. Understanding the EU’s involvement helps contextualize Chinese influence and illustrates how Serbia balances—or, some would argue, plays off—the European Union and the West against China, Russia, and other less democratic states. Finally, the article concludes by outlining Serbia’s external relations, emphasizing three key elements: cooperation, competition, and distrust.

Context – Where Is Serbia Today?

As the largest country in the Western Balkans, Serbia has a long and complex historical relationship with its neighbors and the European Union. It is a critical actor for major powers seeking to engage in the region; it is not without reason that Serbia is sometimes described as Europe’s “inner courtyard,” owing to its pivotal geographical and strategic role. This also highlights the complexity and

⁴ See, for example, Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2019): 387-406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623498>.

⁵ Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, “Narrative Analysis,” in *Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis Methods*, ed. Patrick A. Mello and Falk Ostermann (London: Routledge, 2022), 117, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003139850>.

challenges faced by Serbia and its adjacent areas, including regional stability and EU integration.

To give attention to Serbia is important not only in its own right but also because it currently stands at a crucial historical juncture. It may be that, as Pavičić argues, “[r]ational choices in regard to economic integration, trade and investment, and the effects of consolidating democracy should drive Serbia in the direction of the West. However, as demonstrated by some cases, there are factors other than rational choice,” including “[e]motional association with Russia, orthodox Christianity, the Russian backing of Serbia in the dispute of the latter with Kosovo. ... That results in an inconclusive situation that requires attention to avoid the continuation of hesitancy and uncertainty in the long run. China potentially offers an alternative, primarily as a trade partner and investor. However, its interests in Serbia’s future orientation may be different from Moscow’s as its investments may offer higher returns if Belgrade becomes a member of the European Union sooner rather than later.”⁶

It is worth noting that the significance of emotional ties to Russia and Orthodox Christianity has been questioned. For example, Samorukov and Vuksanovic argued that “Russia’s appeal to the Serbian public has less to do with what it stands for, and more with what it does not. Cultural and historical affinity, and Orthodox and Slavic brotherhood, are all secondary concepts compared with the crude fact that Russia is simply not the West.”⁷

The Serbian populace embodies a broad range of sentiments, fluctuating between resilience, frustration, despair, and optimism at the same time. This reflects not only Serbia’s internal disposition but also its perception of international actors such as the European Union, the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey. The uncertainty in these relationships stems from the question of which nations truly support Serbia and align with its interests. This ambiguity is further complicated by entrenched nationalism, corruption, and the influence of the elite.

The issue of Kosovo is pivotal in discerning those who genuinely support Serbia, serving as a focal point of contention and a litmus test for foreign relations. The handling of Kosovo’s status is not only a domestic issue for Serbia but also sets the framework and drives foreign policy. In discussions with Serbian experts and diplomats on foreign relations, and when exploring the official narratives and how the Kosovo question is presented in Serbian museums, it becomes clear

⁶ Pavičić, “Serbia’s Orientation Challenge and Ways to Overcome It,” 111.

⁷ Maksim Samorukov and Vuk Vuksanovic, “Untarnished by War: Why Russia’s Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia,” Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2023, accessed April 22, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/poilitika/88828>.

that its importance cannot be underestimated or avoided.⁸ The Kosovo question has not only been a recurring friction in relations with the European Union but also an important factor in shaping Serbia's modern relations with Russia. Additionally, it has been an underlying positive force in Serbia's relations with China since 2009, the year after Kosovo declared independence, when Serbia and China signed a Strategic Partnership Treaty.⁹

Kosovo is at the forefront of domestically displayed narratives. One of the more visual representations is a message found on the side of a bridge over the main passageway from Belgrade airport to the city center, written in large black capital letters: "SERBIA IS KOSOVO." The observant visitor can also notice another, less conspicuous message on the other side of the bridge, visible when leaving Serbia: "REMEMBER – KOSOVO IS SERBIA."¹⁰ Graffiti in the red-blue-white colors of the Serbian flag can also be found at the site of the NATO bombing of the Army headquarters, emphasizing the importance of Kosovo. One piece roughly says, "When the army returns to Kosovo..." [author's translation]

Arguably, more serious and significant manifestations appear in museums, where the Battle of Kosovo, fought in June 1389 on the Field of the Blackbirds ("Kosovo Polje"), is given pride of place. On this battlefield, located in Kosovo, Serbian Prince Lazar fought the Ottoman Sultan Murad I, culminating in both of their deaths. The Ottomans won, precipitating the collapse of Serbia and marking the full encirclement of the weakening Byzantine Empire by Ottoman forces. Kosovo also figures prominently in the graffiti proliferating around Belgrade, which the government conveniently leaves untouched.¹¹

Regardless of the historical basis or legal considerations, these narratives suggest that the Kosovo factor must always be considered when trying to understand Serbia's foreign relations and external influences.

Serbia and the World

Serbia's relations within and beyond the Western Balkans are a complex interplay of historical events, geopolitical alliances, economic partnerships, and public sentiments. Serbia has a complicated relationship with its regional neighbors, shaped by a "shared" yet conflictual history, including the Yugoslav wars, which serve as the pinnacle of a long history of cooperation and conflict. Russia and China play significant roles in Serbian politics despite their geographical distance

⁸ Visits to the Historical Museum of Serbia, the Josip Broz Tito Mausoleum, the Museum of Yugoslavia, and the Belgrade Military Museum, along with discussions and interviews conducted with Serbian experts and officials in Belgrade, June 2023 – March 2024.

⁹ "Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on Establishing Strategic Partnership," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 20, 2009, accessed March 31, 2024, www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367232.html.

¹⁰ Author's observations during fieldwork, June–August 2023.

¹¹ Author's observations during fieldwork, June–August 2023.

and, in the case of China, cultural differences. This influence can be attributed to the economic benefits they provide and their support on the Kosovo issue at the international level, particularly in the United Nations, where both China and Russia hold veto power, ensuring that Kosovo will not be recognized as an independent sovereign state. Serbia's skillful use of Russia and China to gain greater bargaining power with the West and to expand its leeway in multipolar settings must be emphasized. Accordingly, relations with Russia and China are an extension of Serbia's broader relations with the West.

These relations are further complicated by the fact that foreign influence in Serbia is often domestically driven. It is not necessarily the foreign actors pushing their agenda—or at least not solely—but rather a strong “pull factor” in Serbia that welcomes and exploits foreign influence and interference, as it is perceived to enhance Serbia's own agenda. The influence of non-Western actors like China and Russia in Serbia can partly be attributed to EU's perceived lack of effectiveness. That said, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the perceived value of Russia as an ally and partner, where the affiliation is more on cultural than economic grounds, has diminished, leading to a shift toward China, along with Turkey and Hungary, as Serbia's preferred partners.¹²

¹² Some examples illustrating the nature and complexity of Serbia's external relations can be found in, for example, Vuk Vuksanovic, “So Similar, Yet So Different: Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans – the Case of Serbia,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 20, no. 79 (2023): 105-122, <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.1300342>; Jelena Gledić, “The Development of Sino-Serbian Relations Under the Belt and Road Initiative: Forging the ‘Iron Friendship’,” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, no. 3 (2019): 21-35, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=886479>; Nikolaos Tzifakis et al., “Geopolitically Irrelevant in Its ‘Inner Courtyard’? The EU amidst Third Actors in the Western Balkans,” The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), December 2021, https://balkanfund.org/pubs/uploads/Geopolitically_irrelevant_in_its.pdf; Will Bartlett et al., “The UAE as an Emerging Actor in the Western Balkans: The Case of Strategic Investment in Serbia,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 94-112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2017.1322753>; Nina Markovic Khaze and Xiwen Wang, “Is China's Rising Influence in the Western Balkans a Threat to European Integration?” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 2 (2021): 234-250, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340>; Predrag Jureković, “Serbia – China's Preferred Partner in the Western Balkans,” in *China's Footprint in Strategic Spaces of the European Union: New Challenges for a Multi-Dimensional EU-China Strategy*, ed. Johann Frank and Doris Vogl, Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie No. 11 (Vienna, Austria: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2021), www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/book_chinas_footprint_08_serbia_chinas_preferred_partner.pdf; Alexis Troude, “Serbia, Between East and West,” in *Security Challenges and the Place of the Balkans and Serbia in a Changing World*, ed. Ana Jović-Lazić and Alexis Troude (Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2020): 184-195, https://doi.fil.bg.ac.rs/pdf/eb_book/2020/iipe_balkans_rssc/iipe_balkans_rssc-2020-ch12.pdf; Barbora Chrzová et al., eds., *Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors* (Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019), <https://cens.ceu.edu/sites/cens.ceu.edu/files/attachment/article/813/publicationwesternbalkansatthecrossroadsfinal1.pdf>.

Regarding external relations, Serbia has skillfully balanced and leveraged its position between the West (the European Union, the United States, and NATO) and other powers, particularly China, Russia, and, to some extent, Turkey. Anti-EU sentiments are widespread, as evidenced by anti-EU graffiti prominently displayed throughout Belgrade. Recently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić also signaled that “...his country was ‘not enthusiastic’ about European Union membership anymore....”¹³ The growing anti-EU sentiment is fueled by a sense of betrayal among pro-Western democracy activists, who are frustrated by the EU’s failure to counter or penalize the Serbian government’s authoritarian drift.¹⁴ The disappointment also stems from the prolonged and uncertain EU accession process. There is further disillusionment among liberals regarding the West’s apparent tolerance of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Furthermore, since 2014, the government has been promoting an anti-EU narrative, adding to the complex emotional and political landscape.

Serbia also grapples with the legacy of NATO’s campaign against Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War (commonly known as “the NATO bombing,” with the official NATO operation code-named “Operation Allied Force,” while the United States referred to it as “Operation Noble Anvil”). As part of this narrative, Serbia has preserved key buildings bombed by NATO—including the Ministry of Defence, Army Headquarters, and the Radio Television of Serbia headquarters—as monuments.

The Belgrade military museum contains an exhibit outlining the memories of the NATO campaign.¹⁵ The room is filled with selected memorabilia, including scraps from the US F-117 Nighthawk, depleted uranium ammunition used during the bombing, and captured uniforms. There is also an interactive virtual reality display where you stand in front of a monitor, and a camera projects you into a pilot’s helmet, accompanied by the narration of the NATO campaign. A captured Hummer is displayed outside the entrance, along with the S-125 Neva/Pechora surface-to-air missile system, which was allegedly used to shoot down the US F-117 Nighthawk stealth bomber on March 27, 1999.¹⁶

¹³ Wilhelmine Preussen, “Serbia ‘Not Enthusiastic’ about EU Membership Anymore, Says President,” *Politico*, January 19, 2023, accessed March 31, 2024, www.politico.eu/article/serbia-vucic-davos-world-economic-forum-european-union-membership/.

¹⁴ “Serbians Dreaming of EU Membership Feel Betrayed by Vučić’s Government,” *Euronews*, December 13, 2023, accessed March 31, 2024, www.euronews.com/2023/12/13/serbians-dreaming-of-eu-membership-feel-betrayed-by-vucic-governments-and-the-bloc. The author also encountered this sentiment in discussions and interviews (Belgrade, Summer 2023). Also see Angelica Vascotto, “Backsliding in Belgrade: The State of Serbia’s European Future,” European Council on Foreign Relations, January 29, 2024, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/backsliding-in-belgrade-the-state-of-serbias-european-future/>.

¹⁵ Author’s visits, Military Museum, Belgrade, Serbia, Summer 2023.

¹⁶ Story told by a Serbian informant at the Military Museum, Belgrade, Serbia, Summer 2023.

The accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by U.S. forces during Operation Allied Force is memorialized today. A Chinese Cultural Center, built on the ruins of the site and opened in May 2024, symbolizes a powerful yet subtle message about the incident and the enduring ties that followed.¹⁷ The shared memory of the NATO bombing is used by both Serbia and China to facilitate cooperation.¹⁸

The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Serbia, coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the US bombing, highlights these memories. The opening of the Chinese Cultural Center at the site will send a very strong soft power message and serve as a reminder of the past. As Xi is quoted: “The China-Serbia friendship, forged with the blood of our compatriots, will stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples, and will inspire us to march forward with big strides.”¹⁹

European Union

The most influential external actor in Serbia is arguably the European Union, with Serbia being granted candidate status in 2012. Serbia’s journey toward EU membership has involved several important milestones, reflecting its complex and ongoing integration process. It was granted candidate status by the European Council in 2012, nine years after being identified—along with five other Western Balkan countries—as a potential candidate at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit. Accession negotiations began in June 2013. In September of the same year, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between Serbia

¹⁷ Reid Standish, “China Builds a New Symbol in the Balkans – at the Site of a NATO Bombing,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, October 4, 2022, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-serbia-belgrade-embassy-balkans-presence-standish/32064870.html>. On the US statement after the bombing, see “Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary of State, Oral Presentation to the Chinese Government Regarding the Accidental Bombing of the P.R.C. Embassy in Belgrade,” U.S. Department of State, June 17, 1999, accessed March 31, 2024, https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990617_pickering_emb.html. For an article on the Chinese reaction, see, for example, Peter Hays Gries, “Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing,” *The China Journal* 46 (July 2001): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182306>. For examples of commemoration, see *Xinhua* (www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/07/c_139930944.htm), *Global Times* (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1265013.shtml>), Serbia Embassy in Beijing (www.beijing.mfa.gov.rs/newstext.php?subaction=showfull&id=1683448594&ucat=19&template=Headlines&), or *China Global Television Network* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNpSN0A3vSg).

¹⁸ Gries, “Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing.” See also “Xi Jinping Lashes out at Nato over 1999 Belgrade Bombing Ahead of Serbia Visit,” *Financial Times*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/ca536cdb-8847-4c2e-9eca-1621e48a04dc>.

¹⁹ As quoted by Zhang Han, “Cultural Center Bridges Chinese, Serbian Peoples, Breeds Friendship,” *Global Times*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202405/1311928.shtml>.

and the European Union, signed in April 2008, entered into force, marking a pivotal advancement in EU-Serbia relations. To date, Serbia has opened 22 out of 35 negotiation chapters and provisionally closed two, highlighting both progress and the remaining challenges in aligning with the EU's membership criteria. Understanding Serbia's current status in the accession process is essential for interpreting its strategies in balancing EU membership aspirations with other foreign partnerships, including its deepening ties with China.²⁰

The European Union is also Serbia's primary trading partner, representing 54 % of Serbia's overall trade in 2022, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over the years. Serbia's exports to the European Union grew more than fivefold, from nearly EUR 3.2 billion in 2009 to almost EUR 18 billion in 2022.²¹ In comparison, total trade with China, Russia, and the United States in 2022 amounted to EUR 5.8 billion (imports: 4.7 billion, exports: 1.1 billion), EUR 4.03 billion (imports: 2.9 billion, exports: 1.13), and EUR 1.19 (imports: 0.68 billion, exports: 0.51 billion), respectively.²² Between 2010 and 2022, over 59 % of Serbia's FDI originated from the European Union, totaling EUR 20.3 billion.²³ By contrast, China, Russia, and the United States accounted for 9 % (EUR 3.1 billion), 7 % (EUR 2.6 billion), and 2 % (EUR 0.84 billion) of FDI, respectively, during the same period.²⁴

Beyond economic cooperation, official EU narratives have emphasized the importance of the June 2003 EU-Western Balkans summit, which culminated in the Thessaloniki Declaration, "affirming unequivocally that 'the future of the Balkans is within the European Union'."²⁵ The European Council has also outlined the EU's enlargement policy, stating that "[t]he EU is committed to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, has close links with the Western Balkans partners and cooperates with them in a number of important areas."²⁶ It is further emphasized that the region benefits from substantial assistance and financial support from the European Union, stressing the new growth plan for Western Balkans presented in November 2023, which aims to "[t]o support the partners in undertaking socio-economic and fundamental reforms, including in the

²⁰ For details on the EU membership process, see the EU delegation to the Republic of Serbia, <https://europa.rs/>, the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) on the European Commission, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/serbia_en, or the Ministry of European Integration of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/serbia-and-eu/history/>.

²¹ EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, "Trade," accessed March 18, 2024, <https://europa.rs/trade/?lang=en>.

²² EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, "Trade."

²³ EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, "Trade."

²⁴ EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, "Trade."

²⁵ Quote from Stanicek and Tarpova, "China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans," 2.

²⁶ European Council, "How EU Enlargement Works," accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/>.

area of the rule of law and fundamental rights, and to support them in their enlargement process” [Emphasis in bold in the original text has been removed].²⁷

As observed by Tzifakis and colleagues, “[t]he Western Balkans is probably the single region in the world where the EU should exert uncontested influence and unparalleled power of attraction.”²⁸ However, despite the high level of economic cooperation and the EU’s narratives about the region’s future, the situation is not necessarily as positive as it is often depicted. To quote Tzifakis and colleagues, “the EU image is no longer shining in the Western Balkans.”²⁹ In the case of Serbia, they find that

...Russia and China largely outpace the EU across almost all indicators of influence and appreciation. Worryingly, Serbia has attempted to extend its influence through most of the region and with it, there is a risk that external orientation towards China and Russia coupled with its critical views of EU policies may present a paradigm for other Western Balkan countries.³⁰

This is also an area where there was a strong feeling of frustration among the author’s respondents, who felt that the European Union could and should do more.³¹ To cite one of them, “If the European Union cannot integrate Western Balkans, what is it going to do in global affairs? China is going to eat [the EU’s] lunch every day.”³²

In short, the EU narrative is clear not only about where the future of the Balkan lies but also about the necessary reforms for EU membership and its commitment to supporting its partners in reaching that goal. At the same time, it is evident that at least some segments of the Serbian population and its elite are resistant to and disapprove of these requirements. This resistance creates space for potential alternatives for those disinclined to undertake comprehensive reforms. The next section explores one such alternative pathway, examining China’s growing involvement and influence in Serbia as a contrasting option to the European Union.

China

Within a decade, China transformed its role in Serbia, alongside its increasing presence in the Western Balkans and Central Europe, moving from minimal involvement to becoming a crucial economic and political ally for Serbia.³³ This

²⁷ European Council, “How EU Enlargement Works.”

²⁸ Tzifakis et al., “Geopolitically Irrelevant in Its ‘Inner Courtyard’?” 4.

²⁹ Tzifakis et al., “Geopolitically Irrelevant in Its ‘Inner Courtyard’?” 4.

³⁰ Tzifakis et al., “Geopolitically Irrelevant in Its ‘Inner Courtyard’?” 3.

³¹ Interviews with Serbian experts, Belgrade, June–August 2023.

³² Interview with a Serbian expert, Belgrade, Summer 2023.

³³ Interview with a Serbian expert, Belgrade, Summer 2023. To explore the economic relations between China and Serbia. See the World Bank data at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS?locations=RS>; OEC.com, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/srb/partner/chn> (both accessed March 29, 2024).

collaboration was marked by the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2009, further strengthened in 2013, and elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2016. In October 2024, another milestone was reached when a Free Trade Agreement was signed during Vučić's visit to Beijing for the third "Belt and Road" Forum.³⁴ A similar development has occurred in the narrative regarding the strength of Sino-Serbian ties, which has reached a new level, with the term "Iron Friendship" often used to encapsulate the relationship.³⁵

The official Chinese narrative, as conveyed by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs,³⁶ emphasizes a strategic partnership that has grown "in a comprehensive and in-depth manner with greater cooperation across the board" and the "close political exchanges at various levels," including high-level visits. The narrative also highlights a range of "practical cooperation," such as "the construction of a railway linking Budapest ... and Belgrade," a "Chinese enterprise undertak[ing] the construction of the Serbian section of European Route 763," and projects like "the Danube bridge in Belgrade and the Kostolac Power Plant (Stage I)."

Meanwhile, its Serbian counterpart³⁷ emphasizes the range of cooperation projects and highlights how "intensive political dialogue and exchange of visits at the high and highest political level" characterize the relationship between Serbia and China. It is also stressed that Vučić has conducted "several visits" to China. The importance of China as a trading partner is emphasized, stating that China is "the most important trade partner of the Republic of Serbia in Asia" and, in 2022, "the second most important foreign trade partner of the Republic of Serbia." Additionally, "this year, the historical maximum of our exports to the People's Republic of China was achieved."

Perhaps the best way to characterize the narrative of these relations—beyond statistics, the number of visits, or labels like "Iron Friendship"—is to cite how Vučić described them in an interview with China Central Television (CCTV),

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, "China," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/china>.

³⁵ See, for example, Xinhua, "Xinhua Headlines: Iron-clad China-Serbia Friendship Stronger in COVID-19 Fight," *Xinhua Net*, April 2, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/02/c_138941828.htm; Xinhua, "Xi Story: Steel Gift of Iron-clad Friendship," October 16, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20231016/3053fe43a6764a24b7905c3d2fb0cfd/c.html>; "China-Serbia Ironclad Friendship Sets a Good Example of China-CEEC Cooperation amid World Complex: Embassy," *Global Times*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1257321.shtml>; "Vučić, Xi Jinping Hail Ironclad Friendship between Serbia and China," *Euractiv*, February 7, 2022, www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/vucic-xi-jinping-hail-ironclad-friendship-between-serbia-and-china/. For an analysis of the "Iron Friendship" narrative, see, for example, Gledić, "The Development of Sino-Serbian Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative."

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Serbia," accessed March 21, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3260_664742/.

³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, "China."

China is a good, very, very good friend of Serbia ... China has been the most supportive in difficult times for Serbia. Friend in need is a friend indeed. There was a new disease, a very contagious one. No one knew how to tackle that issue at that time. At that period of time China was the only country that was really helpful and supportive. ... we were all desperate at that time, and everybody was closing themselves within their own borders. Everybody was speaking about solidarity, and as a matter of fact, no one was showing that solidarity before everybody found enough vaccines and medications and ventilators for themselves. And Chinese friends did not forget one small country, one small nation, and as I told you, we believe that we are relatively loyal or more loyal than some others and we cannot forget it.³⁸

This quote also points to what has arguably been a critical juncture in Serbia's foreign relations – the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked a pivotal moment in Serbia's foreign relations, underscoring the impact of Serbia not being an EU member, especially when China stepped in to help. Furthermore, China's role as a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council highlights its critical political importance to Serbia in preventing Kosovo's recognition, arguably even more so than Russia, whose commitment has sometimes been questioned³⁹ due to the Taiwan issue. Ensuring Chinese support in the United Nations is a key national interest for Serbia.

Furthermore, when looking beyond official narratives, it is clear that China offers alternatives in the economic sphere, leveraging its position against the European Union and the West. It not only provides an alternative source of investment and economic cooperation but also offers funding that avoids the legal and bureaucratic strings attached to EU and other Western financing. For example, China's growing influence in Serbia's infrastructure development is partly driven by the perception that EU funding entails excessive bureaucratic hurdles.⁴⁰ Moreover, Chinese funding lacks the stringent safety and environmental requirements imposed by the European Union. In a country dominated by elite interests and plagued by widespread corruption, there is a marked preference for such seemingly "unconditional" funding.⁴¹ This preference is rooted in an environ-

³⁸ "China Is a Very Good Friend to Serbia: Serbian President," CCTV Video News Agency, YouTube, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynOuk0UGlsE>.

³⁹ Also see Orhan Dragaš, "How Russia De Facto Recognised Kosovo," *Euractiv*, July 14, 2022, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/how-russia-de-facto-recognised-kosovo/>; Zeljko Trkanjec, "Serbian Diplomat Says Putin Recognises Kosovo," *Euractiv*, April 28, 2022, accessed March 26, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbian-diplomat-says-putin-recognises-kosovo/.

⁴⁰ Interview with a Serbian expert, Belgrade, Summer 2023.

⁴¹ It should be noted that Chinese funding is not always as "unconditional" as it may appear. While often free from typical Western constraints, it frequently includes financial terms and long-term obligations. In various developing countries, similar Chinese-funded projects have led to vulnerabilities and raised concerns about "debt-

ment where opacity and a lack of accountability can be advantageous. In an environment where elite interests and corruption prevail, the lack of formal conditions is often preferred.

The above pattern has been expressed in different ways during discussions with officials and experts. One official,⁴² for example, explained that Serbia simply asks for the European offer, and then they approach China. If China offers better conditions, Serbia accepts its offer. The same official added that the fact that the Chinese offer comes with no strings attached is seen as a bonus. Another Serbian respondent was more direct, noting that with China, “If you order a bridge, there will be a bridge [actually built].” In contrast, when the European Union promises a bridge, the process becomes bogged down by demands for transparency, public tenders, and numerous conditions, making the outcome uncertain.⁴³ More cynical respondents pointed to clientelism and kleptocratic tendencies among some members of the Serbian elite, noting that the Chinese do not particularly care if a portion of a contract is diverted to personal or “family coffers.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, China and other non-Western states have an inherent advantage when engaging with Serbia.

Additionally, an emotional aspect comes into play. Some respondents expressed the belief that the European Union mistreated Serbia at the negotiation table, raising the question of why Serbia should negotiate with the European Union when, in contrast, negotiations with China are based on “mutual respect.”⁴⁵ Regardless of the accuracy of this perception and the level of public diplomacy embedded in the narrative, the fact that it is put forward is significant when trying to understand how Serbia balances the West with China and others, as well as the advantages China may have in engaging with Serbia. This perception also aligns with China’s own viewpoint, which emphasizes non-interference and the importance of good relations with Serbia while sharing a sense of having been mistreated by the West.⁴⁶ As one Chinese expert put it, “China understands being

trap diplomacy,” where accumulated debt allows China to exert economic or political leverage. Thus, while Chinese investments may lack Western-style conditions, they may carry implicit expectations that could impact Serbia’s autonomy in foreign policy and economic decisions.

⁴² Interview with a Serbian official, 2023–2024.

⁴³ Interview with a Serbian expert, Belgrade, Summer 2023.

⁴⁴ Interview with a Serbian expert, Belgrade, Summer 2023. See also Branislav Radeljić and Vladimir Đorđević, “Clientelism and the Abuse of Power in the Western Balkans,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 5 (2020): 597-612, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2020.1799299>; Slobodan Tomić and Dušan Pavlović, “Blatant, Not Latent: Patronage in Top-Level Appointments in Serbia,” *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2023): 181-209, <https://doi.org/10.2478/nispa-2023-0008>.

⁴⁵ Interview with a Serbian official, 2023–2024.

⁴⁶ Interviews with Chinese experts from governmental think tanks, Beijing, February–March 2024.

treated unfairly and being poor. We remember being poor [like Serbia and the Western Balkans].”⁴⁷

Similar concerns were raised regarding Serbia fulfilling the EU’s demands related to the rule of law, corruption, democracy, and certain values. For a “semi-traditional society where basic needs of daily life such as education and healthcare are the top priority for people,” some argued that a “non-interference, no-strings-attached” approach was more suitable when engaging with Serbia “as long as nothing Serbia does threatens China’s core interests.”⁴⁸ One Chinese expert even suggested that the European Union and China could play complementary roles, with “China doing our thing” while the European Union “teaches them your ways.”⁴⁹ In short, the stark differences between China’s and the EU’s approaches toward Serbia present a strategic opportunity for Serbia, which can and does exploit their rivalry to its advantage by balancing the two against each other.

Complicating the situation for Western interests, China has well-developed frameworks for engaging with Serbia and the wider Balkans, particularly through its “Belt and Road Initiative,” but also through its ability to use state-owned companies to pursue economic cooperation.⁵⁰ The latter is especially important for major infrastructure projects, such as railways, where good government-to-government relations are crucial before the market steps in. Essentially, not only can much red tape be cut when dealing with a country where the government controls or has significant influence in the business sector, but it also reduces a lot of uncertainty, given that the primary source of risk is political. Although such dependency could be a double-edged sword, there are clear benefits to well-managed political relationships.

It should be noted that while Chinese narratives and rhetoric can often be offensive, there is also a good understanding of EU and Western views and responses to Chinese engagement. During discussions in Beijing,⁵¹ the author observed that while Chinese officials defend their actions, there is an acknowledgment that the European Union “is not very happy to see others in its own backyard” and that Serbia uses China and other external actors to gain leverage against the European Union, partly to show that they have alternatives. Similarly, the EU and the West’s countermeasures against Chinese influence were anticipated, but this does not mean China will yield to them. Their firm position is strategic rather than a result of misinterpretation due to a lack of knowledge or understanding. This strategic position aligns with the view of Serbia and the

⁴⁷ Interview with a Chinese professor at a public university in Beijing, February–March 2024.

⁴⁸ Interviews with Chinese experts at a public university in Beijing, February–March 2024.

⁴⁹ Interview with a Chinese expert at a public university in Beijing, February–March 2024.

⁵⁰ Interviews with Chinese experts from governmental think tanks, Beijing, February–March 2024.

⁵¹ Discussions and interviews with Chinese experts, Beijing, February–March 2024.

Western Balkans as a courtyard or gateway for China to penetrate Europe more easily, a view commonly expressed by Serbian respondents.⁵²

At the same time, it is important not to overestimate the significance of Serbia and the Western Balkans to China. While the region is central to the European Union as part of Europe, where, as we have seen, it has been made clear that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union,” in interviews in China, it was highlighted that Serbia and the Western Balkans are not of key strategic importance for China in the same way as its relations with great and big powers or its neighbors. As one Chinese expert said, “Even Central Asia is more important than the Balkans.”⁵³

At the same time, it was evident to the author that China recognizes Serbia’s importance to the European Union, given its geographical proximity and the ability to leverage influence there with relatively limited effort and cost. With a population of approximately 1.4 billion and a gross domestic product (GDP) of about EUR 17,000 billion, China can easily exert influence over a region of about 18 million people with a combined GDP of EUR 100 billion, despite being geographically distant. Given the current geopolitical rivalry, it would have been more surprising had China not sought to engage with and influence Serbia and the Western Balkans.

To summarize, seen through a Serbian lens, Serbian national interests are not fully aligned with those of the European Union and the United States. Accordingly, any potential negative impact on EU and US interests resulting from Serbia’s international engagements may be considered of secondary importance. Likewise, Serbia views the overarching ambitions and potential gains of external actors, such as China, as secondary – as long as they do not directly harm Serbian national interests. Consequently, the gains of others are not, in themselves, necessarily a reason for Serbia to refrain from engagement or collaboration.⁵⁴ The same logic applies in reverse, as Serbia’s interests are not entirely aligned with those of China, Russia, or other external actors.

Conclusion

Serbia’s external relations, particularly its interactions with China and the European Union, revolve around three pivotal elements: cooperation, competition, and distrust. These themes shape—and are shaped by—the narratives each party constructs. These elements both influence, and are influenced by, the stories each entity tells. The narratives do not strictly adhere to facts, moral judgments, or appropriateness; rather, they are attempts to create a perception of

⁵² Interviews, Belgrade, Serbia, June–August 2023. This view is also shared by many European and US experts.

⁵³ Interview, Beijing, February–March 2024.

⁵⁴ The tendency to focus on the benefits and risks for Serbia has emerged in the author’s interviews and discussions with both experts and officials, June 2023–March 2024.

reality, with each party presenting the version of events that best serves its preferred future path. Regardless of the preferred, it is important to understand how different actors think, whether for comprehension or for maximizing efficiency in one's own decision-making.

Regarding cooperation, Serbia has demonstrated a remarkable ability and willingness to cooperate with any state interested in engaging with it, provided there are benefits to be gained. This includes pursuing closer ties with the European Union, the United States, China, Russia, and Turkey, as well as being open to engagement with the Middle East and Africa if opportunities arise. Needless to say, this broad-based cooperation has not been appreciated by all parties, particularly by the European Union, which conditions Serbia's integration into the Union on socio-economic and fundamental reforms, including in the areas of the rule of law and fundamental rights. In contrast, China explicitly adheres to a policy of non-interference in its foreign economic policy as long as its core national interests are not threatened.

The next dimension is competition. Numerous external actors seek to engage with and influence Serbia. This competition is amplified and exploited by Serbia, which has demonstrated great skill in balancing and playing the European Union (and the West) against China (as well as Russia, Turkey, and other non-Western countries). The competition between the European Union and China is arguably the most obvious, as both offer Serbia very different terms in their cooperation "packages." Serbia attempts to reap the benefits of trade and foreign direct investment from the European Union while simultaneously taking advantage of support, investment, and trade opportunities from China.

Finally, distrust is paramount in EU-China relations. There is also significant mistrust in Serbia, particularly regarding the EU's (and the US's) intentions in general and specifically concerning Kosovo. While Serbia harbors distrust in its relations with other actors as well, it tends to be more discreet in those cases.

However, how will the future unfold, given the intricate and interlinked relations between Serbia, the European Union, and China? Clearly, Serbia has adeptly navigated its foreign engagements and relations, skillfully leveraging its geopolitical position by balancing and capitalizing on its relationships with the European Union (and the West) against China (alongside Russia, Turkey, and others) and vice versa. It continues to benefit from the European Union in terms of trade and foreign direct investments while also seizing opportunities from China and other actors. Serbia's strategy of avoiding explicit alignment reflects its commitment to maximizing advantages. It is unlikely to choose a side unless compelled to do so by the European Union, China, or the West as a whole.

It is essential, especially for the European Union and the West, to understand that the problems related to Serbia will not be resolved by ignoring them. Failing to integrate Serbia into the European Union will create a rift within its borders. Whether this is resolved by being "flexible" on conditions, playing hardball to force Serbia to change, or successfully encouraging Serbia to transform—or something else—unless a solution is found, the "problem" will remain.

Moving forward, understanding and acknowledging the significance of Kosovo is essential; it cannot be dismissed or ignored. To put it bluntly, the Kosovo issue cannot be resolved through wishful thinking (although there is sometimes a tendency to try). Resolving this issue is a prerequisite for Serbia's integration into the European Union, regardless of personal views. The focus should be on finding a mutually acceptable solution or compromise that enables progress.

The responsibility for deciding the path forward in relation to Serbia and making relevant decisions rests with policymakers and stakeholders. This article, by breaking down the elements of cooperation, competition, and distrust—as well as the narratives behind them—aims to support research-based decision-making. By offering insights into the complex dynamics and perspectives of the parties involved, it seeks to equip stakeholders with the comprehensive knowledge necessary for well-informed, thoughtful decision-making.

Disclaimer

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