

STEEL FRIENDSHIP AND STEEL MILLS



Serbian Media on China's Investments and Kosovo Policy



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Serbian Media on China's Investments and Kosovo Policy

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINA*MED* PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by longterm trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa, and Asia. Our research team at ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer, sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the

countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management & Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through its partnerships such as those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China-Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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It is a pleasure to express our gratitude for the support provided to our project – in accordance with Article 23 bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967 – to the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, its brilliant head Counsellor Giuliana Del Papa, and her valuable team. It goes without saying that the views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amid concurrent political crises in Serbia and Kosovo, Serbian media and analysts have increasingly focused on China's growing influence in the Western Balkans. In Serbia, the deadly collapse of a newly renovated train station canopy in Novi Sad, which claimed sixteen lives and sparked mass protests, has renewed international scrutiny of the nexus between Chinese investment and domestic corruption. Meanwhile, in Kosovo, inconclusive parliamentary elections have left Prime Minister Albin Kurti struggling to form a governing coalition, with his assertive policies in Serb-majority northern municipalities continuing to strain relations not only with Belgrade, but also with the European Union and the United States.

In this fraught context, public opinion of China in Serbia remains largely favorable. This is attributable, in part, to the longstanding diplomatic solidarity between Belgrade and Beijing: China opposed the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, refused to recognize Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, and has consistently reaffirmed its support for Serbian territorial integrity. Moreover, China has emerged as a key financier of Serbian infrastructure, resource extraction, and manufacturing projects, including the ill-fated renovation of the Novi Sad train station. Against this background, China's pro-Serbia stance on Kosovo, coupled with its visible economic engagement, continues to receive enthusiastic endorsement from Serbian officials and pro-government media.

However, local independent analysts and civil society organizations present a more nuanced perspective. Many interpret Beijing's position on Kosovo not as a reflection of principled solidarity, but as an extension of its own concerns, particularly regarding Taiwan. Meanwhile, Serbian NGOs and journalists have raised red flags regarding the labor practices, lacking transparency, and environmental consequences associated with Chinese-backed projects.

Nevertheless, Chinese firms have largely escaped direct blame in the aftermath of the Novi Sad disaster. Protesters have directed their frustration mainly at the Serbian government of President Aleksandar Vučić, while criticism of foreign involvement has increasingly targeted the European Union, as its projects in Serbia, like the controversial Jadar lithium mine, draw similar scrutiny for environmental damage and lack of transparency. If Brussels seeks to remain a credible actor in the region, especially amid concerns over renewed Russian influence and U.S. disengagement it must hold its own investments to the standards it promotes. Furthermore, it may also need to consider pragmatic cooperation with China to facilitate dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, lest it forfeit further ground in a rapidly shifting regional landscape.

EDITOR

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Introduction

The Western Balkans are once again at a crossroads. In Serbia, months of mass protests against corruption and authoritarian governance have culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister **Miloš Vučević**, a close ally of President **Aleksandar Vučić**. Sparked by the tragic collapse of a newly renovated train station canopy in Novi Sad, which left sixteen people dead, the protest movement has grown into a broad social uprising, uniting students, workers, and civil society organizations around demands for transparency, accountability, and an end to state capture.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Kosovo, the February 2025 parliamentary elections saw Prime Minister **Albin Kurti's** Vetëvendosje! (Self-Determination Movement) fall short of a majority, plunging the country into a difficult coalition-building process. Tensions between Pristina and Belgrade remain high, especially over the Kurti government's assertive policies in Serb-majority North Kosovo, policies that have drawn concern from the European Union (EU) and the United States. The specter of a potential U.S. military withdrawal following the re-election of Donald Trump have only deepened fears of regional instability.

Amid these twin crises, Serbian commentators and analysts are increasingly turning their gaze eastward, toward China. The tragedy in Novi Sad reignited scrutiny of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Serbia, many of which are viewed as emblematic of the opaque and unaccountable governance practices protesters are rallying against. At the same time, Beijing's growing alignment with Belgrade on the Kosovo issue has fueled speculation about China's potential role in future diplomatic negotiations in the region.

In this report we explore how China's presence in the Western Balkans is being interpreted in light of the region's overlapping political crises. Drawing on local perspectives, we examine the paradox of China's influence: on one hand, seen by some in Serbia as a steadfast ally on the Kosovo question; on the other, as contributing to the very system of unaccountable governance that has driven Serbians into the streets. At a time when the credibility of the EU as a partner for peacebuilding and economic development is being questioned by both protesters and policy elites, the growing interest in China highlights a shifting landscape of influence in Southeast Europe, one that could redefine the region's future.

Background on China-Serbia Relations

In 1998, full-scale war erupted in Kosovo, then an autonomous province within Serbia, which, along with Montenegro, constituted what remained of Yugoslavia. The conflict arose from escalating political repression and ethnic discrimination against the province's ethnic Albanian population. Specifically, after the failure of peaceful resistance to address Kosovo's future in preceding peace negotiations, the Kosovo Liberation Army launched armed attacks aimed at ending Serbian rule. In response, Yugoslav forces and Serb paramilitary groups initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing targeting Kosovar Albanians.

The escalating bloodshed, alongside the memory of the international community's failure to prevent the violence

in Bosnia, prompted NATO to launch large-scale aerial bombardment of Yugoslav military infrastructure in March 1999. Justified as a "humanitarian intervention," the campaign remains highly controversial, both for its many civilian casualties and for being conducted without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Among the casualties were three Chinese journalists, who were killed on May 7, 1999, when the U.S. bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. The attack provoked an immediate and vehement rebuke from Beijing, as well as mass protests across China against the U.S. and NATO. Although Washington issued formal apologies and maintained that the bombing was a mistake, many within China believe it to have been a deliberate act of aggression.

The bombing not only intensified China's opposition to NATO operations against Yugoslavia but also reinforced concerns about Western interventionism. NATO involvement in Kosovo, which led to the province's *de facto* independence, was perceived by Chinese policymakers and analysts as establishing a dangerous precedent that could legitimize Western interference in China's internal affairs, particularly concerning Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

As such, when Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in February 2008, Beijing sided with Belgrade. China thus became one of the nearly eighty countries that does not recognize the Republic of Kosovo as a sovereign nation, alongside Russia, India, Brazil and even some EU member states with their own secessionist concerns like Spain.

Although China officially supports Serbia's position on Kosovo in the UN, it has historically maintained a rather hands-off approach, viewing the matter as a European issue best handled through EU-led mediation as well as expressing a willingness to accept any resolution that is agreeable to all parties. This stance contrasts with Russia's more active support for Serbia's claim, as Moscow has lobbied other states to withhold or withdraw recognition of Kosovo.

Beijing's response to Pristina's declaration of independence was welcomed by Belgrade, especially given China's status as a permanent member of the UNSC. Already in 2009, under President **Boris Tadić**, Serbia committed to a "four pillar" foreign policy, aiming for good relations with the U.S., the EU, Russia, and, notably, a still-rising China. This positive outlook continued under subsequent administrations and was reciprocated by an increasingly globally oriented China.

Conversely, China's close ties with Serbia and its refusal to recognize Kosovo's statehood has led to much of Kosovar society and media to dislike the People's Republic. This, alongside how alignment with the U.S. and EU is viewed as essential to Kosovo's recognition, security and development, has led Pristina to maintain a rather critical stance toward Beijing.

For instance, Albin Kurti has on multiple occasions described China as an "enemy" and promised to reject Chinese engagement at any cost. As Prime Minister, he even refused to accept gifted Chinese vaccines during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that Kosovo should not accept aid from countries that do not recognize its independence.

As noted by the team behind the **European Council on Foreign Relations'** "Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans" project, this political context has contributed to China's nonexistent economic presence in Kosovo, the only country in the Western Balkans not to have signed up to the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹ However, this does not mean economic ties between the two are entirely absent. Bilateral trade has been growing and Chinese firms have made a few, unsuccessful bids for Kosovar infrastructure projects. Nevertheless, the entrenched presence of Western companies since post-war reconstruction, combined with the country's lack of significant natural resources and diplomatic concerns, has led China not to actively prioritize a strong economic presence in Kosovo.

The Ukraine War and a "Common Destiny" for Kosovo and Taiwan?

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 turned Serbia's historically close partnership with Russia into a liability. With its EU accession prospects and financial assistance on the line, Belgrade yielded to Western pressure by (partially) distancing itself from Moscow. This reversal has complicated President Vučić's long-standing strategy of hedging amid escalating international competition, as his government has sought to extract political and economic concessions from the EU, while simultaneously preserving space for Serbia's assertive foreign policy and increasingly authoritarian domestic agenda.

In this context, many analysts have interpreted Belgrade's outreach to China as an effort to secure a non-Western great power partner capable of filling Russia's shoes. A clear example is in military procurement as Serbia, while terminating many of its Russian contracts, has begun purchasing Chinese weaponry, most notably, CH-92 and CH-95 armed drones, as well as the K-3 air defense system.

The Ukraine War also strengthened China's strategic interest in Serbia. As Beijing's relations with the EU soured due to its "neutral" stance on Russia's aggression, Serbia emerged as one of China's few remaining reliable partners in Europe; both economically, as a gateway for Chinese firms seeking access to the EU market, and politically, as Belgrade has expressed open support for China's alternative vision of the international order.

Vučić was one of the very few European leaders to attend the Third Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in October 2023. In contrast to Western calls for "de-risking," the Serbian President voiced his support for the BRI and inked a free trade agreement with China. The so-called "ironclad friendship" between the two countries was further reinforced in May 2024 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade. During the visit, numerous memoranda were signed, including one committing Serbia to building a "community of common destiny" (China's vision of a new international order aimed at overcoming the perceived inequities of the current Western-led system), making Serbia the first European country to do so. Notably, during the visit, Xi and Vučić also publicly reaffirmed China's support for Serbia regarding Kosovo, with the Serbian President drawing a direct parallel between Kosovo's status for Serbia and Taiwan's status for the People's Republic.

Although Kosovo has always been a pertinent issue in Serbian politics, Vučić's robust efforts to court Chinese support are

likely due to the ongoing crisis in North Kosovo. Since Kurti assumed office in Kosovo in 2021, his government has sought to consolidate control over the four Serb-majority northern municipalities. Serbia provides various public services to residents in these towns, a practice that Pristina views as a challenge to its sovereignty, given Belgrade's steadfast rejection of Kosovo's statehood.

After tensions first erupted over Serbia-issued license plates in North Kosovo, Pristina began implementing a series of measures in the summer of 2022 ostensibly aimed at integrating the region more firmly under its authority. This heavy-handed campaign – which included deploying special police forces, banning goods and medicines from Serbia, and halting the construction of Serbian-funded housing – led to the mass resignation of Serbs from Kosovar institutions. Serbs then boycotted the April 2023 local elections, resulting in ethnic Albanians being elected as mayors in North Kosovo. In response to barricades, Kosovo authorities seized control of the municipal buildings by force to allow these mayors to take office. This move was condemned by both the U.S. and EU, as it provoked violent protests, prompting NATO's resident peacekeeping force to intervene.

In September, the crisis deepened when a deadly clash broke out between Kosovo police and Serb paramilitaries in the northern village of Banjska. Pristina blamed Belgrade's interference for the incident, viewing it as justification to continue dismantling parallel Serb institutions. With the debacle weakening local resistance, the Kurti government pressed ahead, banning use of the Serbian dinar, closing Serbian banks and post offices, and attempting to bar the main political party representing Kosovo's Serbs from running in the 2025 elections. These actions further diminished prospects for an internationally advocated agreement guaranteeing autonomy for North Kosovo, as well as broader normalization between Belgrade and Pristina.

Although domestic political considerations played a significant role given the 2025 Kosovar parliamentary elections and the Vučić government's ongoing legitimacy crisis, the international dimension was also crucial. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine War, Pristina has attempted to frame its actions as part of a wider struggle against "Russian-sponsored hybrid warfare," aiming to secure Western support as Kosovo pushes for EU and NATO membership. Meanwhile, Belgrade has sought to position itself as a "responsible" actor, appealing to NATO, the EU and the UN for support against Kurti's purportedly destabilizing actions. Nevertheless, despite serious concerns over Pristina's policies in North Kosovo, Vučić's controversies surrounding alleged electoral fraud, repression of civil society, and crackdowns on mass protests have undermined Western willingness to back Belgrade.

Against this background, Serbian commentators have discussed Serbia's outreach to the Global South, particularly its bid to join BRICS, as a strategy to rally non-Western support for blocking Kosovo's participation in the UN and other international organizations.² Among these partners, China clearly stands out as the central focus of Serbian diplomatic efforts, as was prominently displayed during Xi Jinping's visit to Belgrade, but also more recently.

¹ European Council on Foreign Relations, "Mapping China's rise in the Western Balkans – Kosovo," accessed on April 1, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/kosovo/>.

² Kosovo Online, "Rodic: Most BRICS countries support Serbia on the Kosovo issue," September 13, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/rodic-most-brics-countries-support-serbia-kosovo-issue-13-9-2024>.

Kosovo Online, "Milivojevic: Serbia made the right decision regarding BRICS attendance, there will be no change in relations with Russia," October 22, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/milivojevic-serbia-made-right-decision-regarding-brics-attendance-there-will-be-no>.

On January 21, 2025, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Aleksandar Vučić addressed reporters about his meetings with EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue **Miroslav Lajčák** and Chinese Vice Premier **Ding Xuexiang** (丁薛祥) regarding Kosovo. He discussed the two engagements consecutively, contrasting the positions of the EU and China. Vučić remarked:

"I am concerned about the European policy on this issue [...] the policy of surrender to Kurti and their announcements that despite all active provocations, they will allow them into the Council of Europe and other organizations [...] We also talked about political issues with China [...] The Chinese have unequivocally declared their support for preserving the territorial integrity of Serbia, including Kosovo."³

President Vučić has not been the sole member of the Serbian government soliciting and celebrating Chinese support on Kosovo.⁴ Since Xi Jinping's state visit, a succession of high-ranking Serbian officials has traveled to China, each raising the Kosovo question with their Chinese counterparts.

For example, in September 2024, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister **Ivica Dačić** visited China, where he met State Counselor and Minister of Public Security **Wang Xiaohong** (王小洪). During their discussions, Dačić informed Wang of "the terror against Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija and the disregard for all international agreements."⁵ He also expressed gratitude to China for its support in "preserving the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia," particularly emphasizing China's "consistent and unequivocal position on the issue of non-recognition of the so-called Kosovo."⁶ Dačić's office later underscored the importance of China's backing in the UN, expressing confidence that Serbia "will certainly have their support."⁷

These expressions of gratitude are in response to Beijing's continued statements of support on the North Kosovo crisis. For instance, on September 16, 2024, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that "China respects Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and believes that the security and lawful rights and interests of ethnic Serbs in the

Kosovo region should be upheld."⁸ Although these statements are rather boilerplate (as evidenced by them being repeated almost word for word on January 17, 2025⁹) they have received extensive and celebratory coverage in Serbian media.¹⁰

A more assertive comment came from China's Permanent Representative to the UN, **Fu Cong** (傅聪), during a Security Council meeting on October 30, 2024. In his statement, Fu Cong not only reiterated Chinese support for "reaching a mutually acceptable political solution through dialogue and consultation" in a process that must respect "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Serbia," but also explicitly blamed the crisis on Pristina. In a strongly worded statement, Fu Cong declared:

"Tensions in northern Kosovo have escalated with a high incidence of violent security incidents. The responsibility lies with the Kosovo authorities."¹¹

The Chinese Ambassador criticized the Kosovo authorities' heavy-handed policies, the lack of Serb representation in North Kosovo institutions, and Pristina's continued refusal to implement the long-promised autonomy plan for Serb-majority municipalities. Although Fu Cong reiterated China's willingness to "work with all parties concerned to [...] promote an early political settlement of the Kosovo issue," it is evident that Beijing has no intention of expanding its role on Kosovo beyond its traditional hands-off diplomatic posture, with the Ambassador placing the onus of mediation on the EU:

"We hope that the new EU leadership will maintain its neutrality on the Kosovo issue and use its good offices in a fair and impartial manner. We expect all parties, with EU mediation, to continue to engage in discussions on the political solution to the Kosovo issue."¹²

This position is consistent with China's long-standing policy of deferring to Brussels with regard to mediation between Serbia and Kosovo. While one could conclude that China's reluctance to contribute actively to Serbia-Kosovo dialogue may show that Belgrade's diplomatic outreach has been unsuccessful, it is unlikely that Serbian authorities either expected or desired greater Chinese involvement.

³ Kosovo Online, "Vucic: I am concerned about European policy regarding Kosovo," January 21, 2025,

<https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/vucic-i-am-concerned-about-european-policy-regarding-kosovo-21-1-2025>.

⁴ Fonet, "Aleksandar Vučić: Izuzetno smo zahvalni na principijelnoj poziciji Kine po pitanju Kosova" [Aleksandar Vučić: We are extremely grateful for China's principled position regarding Kosovo], nova.rs, October 14, 2024,

<https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/aleksandar-vucic-izuzetno-smo-zahvalni-na-principijelnoj-poziciji-kine-po-pitanju-kosova/>.

⁵ Beta, "Dačić: Srbija će sigurno u UN imati podršku Kine u vezi s Kosovom" [Dačić: Serbia will certainly have China's support in the UN regarding Kosovo], September 14, 2024, <https://beta.rs/content/211429-dacic-srbija-ce-sigurno-u-un-imati-podrsku-kine-u-vezi-s-kosovom>.

⁶ KoSsev, "Dačić in China: Thank you for not recognizing Kosovo," September 9, 2024,

<https://kossev.info/en/dacic-u-kini-hvala-vam-jer-ne-priznajete-kosovo/>.

⁷ See note 5, Beta, September 14, 2024.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – The People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on the Situation in the Kosovo Region," September 16, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202409/t20240914_11491079.html.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – The People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on January 17, 2025," January 17, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202501/t20250117_11538094.html.

¹⁰ Dalibor Stankov, "KINA REAGOVALA ZBOG KURTIJEVOG TERORA NA KOSOVU Poruka koju šalju je KRATKA I JASNA" [CHINA REACTED DUE TO KURTI'S TERROR IN KOSOVO The message they are sending is SHORT AND CLEAR], Pink.rs, September 16, 2024, <https://pink.rs/politika/624833/kina-reagovala-zbog-kurtijevog-terora-na-kosovu-poruka-koju-salju-je-kratka-i-jasna>;

Nemanja Negovanović, "Kina reagovala na jednostrane poteze Prištine: Poštovati bezbednost i prava Srba na KiM, pozivamo na nastavak dijaloga!" [China reacted to Pristina's unilateral moves: Respect the security and rights of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, we call for the continuation of the dialogue!], K1 Info, September 16, 2024, <https://www.k1info.rs/vesti/politika/56795/kina-pristina-jednostrani-potezi-vest>.

Kurir.rs, "KINA POŠTUJE SUVERENITET I TERITORIJALNI INTEGRITET SRBIJE" Portparol MIP Kine o situaciji na Kosovu: Jednostrani potezi ne pomažu u rešavanju ovog pitanja" ["CHINA RESPECTS THE SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF SERBIA" Spokesperson of the MFA of China on the situation in Kosovo: Unilateral moves do not help in solving this issue], September 16, 2024,

<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/9439443/portparol-mip-kine-o-situaciji-na-kosovu>.

¹¹ Fu Cong, "Remarks by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Briefing on UNMIK," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, October 30, 2024, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/202412/t20241220_11507834.htm

¹² Ibid.

Nonetheless, Kosovar authorities have reacted strongly to Beijing's close ties with Serbia. For instance, Prime Minister Kurti expressed strong disapproval of Serbia's acquisition of Chinese weaponry, stating in a social media post:

*"This makes Serbia the first and only operator of Chinese weapons in Europe while openly showing violent aggression towards Kosovo"*¹³

Similarly, during a Council on Foreign Relations interview in September 2024, Kosovo's President **Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu** expressed deep distrust of China in response to a question about Kosovo's alignment with the U.S.:

*"We believe that [China's BRI] is a malign influence. We believe that [it] has not led the other countries in our region towards more prosperity. Actually, it got them mostly in trouble. [...] We don't cooperate with China. We haven't allowed China to use any of its instruments to influence whether policymaking or even opinion making in Kosovo. Of course, they try. They do try."*¹⁴

Sentiment critical of China is not limited to Kosovar government officials but is also echoed by the opposition. Democratic Party of Kosovo MP **Enver Hoxhaj**, for example, when criticizing Kurti and Osmani for not aligning more closely with the U.S., argued that: "Kosovo does not only have Serbia as an enemy, but also Russia and China."¹⁵

While such statements likely reflect the widespread distrust of China in Kosovo, they do not necessarily signal genuine concern over Beijing's direct involvement in negotiations. Rather, given that these remarks are often made during meetings with EU and U.S. officials, as well as in engagements with Western media and think tanks, this rhetoric may serve to court Western support by emphasizing Kosovo's alignment with Western security concerns, in a mirror of Serbia's own use of the "China card."

It is against this backdrop that experts from Serbia, Kosovo and the rest of the region have begun analyzing the growing diplomatic outreach between Kosovo and Taiwan. While Taipei was the first Asian government to recognize Kosovo's declaration of independence, Pristina has yet to reciprocate, as doing so would have inevitably provoked Beijing and very probably complicated Kosovar efforts to join the UN.

However, under Kurti, UN membership has become less of a priority for Pristina, with a stronger focus instead on joining the EU and NATO. As a result, driven by their shared status as partially recognized U.S.-aligned liberal democracies facing irredentist neighbors, Kosovo-Taiwan exchanges have notably increased. In March 2023, the first parliamentary delegation from Kosovo visited Taiwan, led by former Prime Minister **Avdullah Hoti**, who met with then-President **Tsai Ing-wen** (蔡英文), provoking a rebuke from the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Hoti led another delegation in April 2024, and more recently, in February 2025, Kosovo Minister of Defense, **Ejup Makedonci**, visited Taipei, the first visit by a sitting Kosovo official.

Local Perspectives on China's Position on Kosovo

As we previously noted, many experts from Serbia and the region interpret Belgrade's courting of Beijing as a response to Moscow's diminishing capacity to serve as leverage in negotiations with the West, particularly in light of the war in Ukraine. This view continues to be predominant and was expressed by **Vuk Vuksanović**, a Senior Researcher at the **Belgrade Centre for Security Policy** (BCSP), a Serbian pro-EU think tank. In an interview with *Kosovo Online*, he explained why Serbia may find Chinese support preferable to that of Russia:

*"[There is] a desire among leaders in Belgrade for China to be a more outspoken protector of Belgrade because Belgrade doesn't like a trend they see, which is Moscow using the Kosovo precedent to justify territorial annexation in Ukraine and other locations in the post-Soviet space. This puts Belgrade in a very awkward position, as can be seen from the statements of Serbian officials but also from Serbia's voting in the UN."*¹⁶

On the other hand, Beijing supports Serbia's stance due to its own territorial disputes, though it has so far preferred to "fly under the radar," having historically allowed Russia to take the lead on the issue. For Vuksanović, it remains uncertain if this approach will evolve as China has become increasingly active, having mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Serbian analyst argues that, for now, Beijing still views Kosovo as a distant dispute that is primarily a European problem.¹⁷

Other analysts agree that China is a more reliable partner on Kosovo with respect to Russia as Beijing "is not pressuring Serbia to choose a side, nor is it trying to stop its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures."¹⁸ Moreover, China has a much more consistent outlook than Russia on the "Kosovo precedent." In an interview for FoNet's "Kosinus" series, journalist **Nemanja Todorović Štiblija**, the editor-in-chief of the portal *European Western Balkans*, noted how while China has an unchanging position on the issue of Kosovo's UN membership, Russia's stance depends on "its personal interests towards what is happening in Ukraine, Georgia or in any case in which Moscow can use the Kosovo precedent."¹⁹

Similar confidence in China over Russia was also expressed by political scientist **Aleksandar Djokic** in an interview for independent magazine *Radar*. However, Djokic also warned that interstate relations are not just confined to diplomacy:

*"A separate question is how China would treat Kosovo in practice, especially in economic terms, and whether it would regard it as an independent state without formally opening an embassy there."*²⁰

However, regarding diplomatic relations, the consensus among Serbian analysts is that China has no intention of ever recognizing Kosovo independently outside a solution

¹³ Albin Kurti, X, November 21, 2023, <https://x.com/albinkurti/status/1727026004999405871>.

¹⁴ Vjosa Osmani Sadriu and Linda Robinson, "A Conversation With President Vjosa Osmani Sadriu of Kosovo," Council on Foreign Relations, September 26, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-president-vjosa-osmani-sadriu-kosovo>.

¹⁵ Kosovo Online, "Hoxhaj: Kurtis and Osmani are sometimes not aware of how Kosovo was declared an independent state," December 13, 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/hoxhaj-kurts-and-osmani-are-sometimes-not-aware-how-kosovo-was-declared-independent>.

¹⁶ Kosovo Online, "Vuksanović: China does not recognize Kosovo's independence, but sees it as a European problem," May 9, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/vuksanovic-china-does-not-recognize-kosovos-independence-sees-it-european-problem-9-5>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Branimir Vidmarović, "Zašto je Kina za Srbiju i Vučića privlačan partner?" [Why is China an attractive partner for Serbia and Vučić?], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, May 11, 2024, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2024/5/11/zasto-je-kina-za-srbiju-i-vucica-privlacan-partner>.

¹⁹ KoSSev, "Štiblija: China would not allow Kosovo to join the UN," March 10, 2025, <https://kossev.info/en/kosovo-vesti-stiblija-kina-un/>.

²⁰ Stefan Slavković, "Kosovo i srpska diplomatija: Od 'četiri stuba' do ruba petoparca" [Kosovo for Serbian diplomacy: From the "four pillars" to the edge of the penny], *Radar*, April 9, 2024, <https://radar.nova.rs/politika/kosovo-od-srca-spoljne-politike-do-balasta/>.

agreed upon by Belgrade and will actively veto Pristina's accession to the UN until such an agreement is reached. While some government-aligned experts attribute Beijing's stance to the "traditional friendship" and growing economic and political partnership between China and Serbia, most Serbian commentators take a more pragmatic view, arguing that China's position is primarily driven by concerns over its own territorial integrity.²¹ Some Serbian sources even report that Chinese officials have stated they will never recognize Kosovar statehood, even if Serbia itself were to do so, due to the precedent it would set for China's own territorial disputes.²²

Among these disputes, Taiwan is the most prominent for Serbian analysts, who often point to it as the reason why they are confident that Serbia will continue to enjoy unwavering Chinese support.²³ This connection is even noted by Kosovo Serbs, like **Miodrag Marinković** the director of the Center for Affirmative Social Actions, an NGO promoting Serb rights, interests and opportunities in Kosovo.²⁴ In this context, the growing diplomatic engagement between Kosovo and Taiwan has sparked debate among both Serbian and Kosovar analysts, specifically on whether the historical, political and security circumstances of these two territories are comparable.²⁵

For Serbian historian **Stefan Radojković**, Pristina's attempt to strengthen ties with Taipei represents, from its view, a reasonable strategic move. As he explained to Kosovo Online:

*"Kosovo constantly tries to return to the center of Washington's attention by associating itself with current, highly significant global security challenges such as Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East between Hamas and Israel. In that context, Pristina's diplomacy will attempt to align itself with Taiwan because they understand that all or most of Washington's focus will be directed toward the Pacific."*²⁶

However, Radojković rejects direct comparisons between Kosovo and Taiwan for two key reasons. First, while Taiwan does not present itself as an "antithesis to the Chinese people, Chinese civilization, or the People's Republic of China," he argues that "[Kosovar] Albanians attempt to deny any Serbian presence in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as the existence of the Republic of Serbia." Second, he highlights the stark economic contrast between the two, noting that Taiwan is a technologically advanced and economically vibrant entity, whereas Kosovo is not. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that both represent "separatist attempts" facing significantly

larger and more powerful internationally recognized states.²⁷

This final point is echoed by Pristina-based security expert **Nuredin Ibishi**, who conceded that "historically, they have no similarities at all, but the security risks are indeed alike for both." However, he is quick to highlight a crucial distinction, emphasizing that while "Taiwan is recognized by 17 states, Kosovo is recognized by 117, including the world's most powerful countries."²⁸

In contrast, **Nikola Lunić**, Executive Director of the Council for Strategic Policies, a Serbian think tank specializing in international affairs, rejects the notion that Kosovo and Taiwan face the same security challenges, arguing that their circumstances are fundamentally different. Speaking to Kosovo Online, he stated:

*"Taiwan is facing a robust global power that has overtaken Russia in global influence, while Serbia merely possesses some Chinese weaponry that serves a purely defensive purpose."*²⁹

Building on this point, Lunić also addressed Defense Minister Maqedonci's visit to Taiwan, dismissing it as part of Pristina's "donor diplomacy." He argued that Kosovo's current diplomatic strategy revolves around "searching for donations," with its outreach now extending beyond Western countries to include Taiwan as well.³⁰

It must also be noted that it was not just Serbians who criticized Maqedonci's trip to Taiwan, but also Kosovars, with former ambassador **Muhamet Brajshori** arguing that:

*"For almost two decades, Kosovo's foreign policy has strongly adhered to the One China Policy. The Defense Minister's visit to Taiwan is the most reckless & strategically damaging move in the history of Kosovo's foreign policy. It is an adventure with diplomatic consequences."*³¹

Brajshori is not the only Kosovar diplomat to advocate for maintaining open the chance to build diplomatic ties with China. A similar stance was articulated by former ambassador **Mimoza Ahmetaj** in an article published by *Radio Free Europe* looking into the Representative Office of China in Pristina. The same article also features a contrasting perspective from **Ramadan Ilazi**, Head of Research of the **Kosovo Center for Security Studies**, an independent policy research center based in Pristina. While Ilazi acknowledges that Kosovo

²¹ Kosovo Online, "Close cooperation with China as a pledge of support on the issue of Kosovo," October 17, 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/close-cooperation-china-pledge-support-issue-kosovo-17-10-2023>.

²² See note 20, Stefan Slavković, *Radar*, April 9, 2024.

²³ Kurir.rs, "AKO KINA GLASA DA TZV. KOSOVO UĐE U UN, OSTAJE BEZ TAJVANA' Stručnjaci: Ova situacija Srbiji ide naruku!" ["IF CHINA VOTES FOR THE SO-CALLED KOSOVO TO JOIN THE UN, THEY WILL BE LEFT WITHOUT TAIWAN" Experts: This situation is helping Serbia!], October 11, 2022, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/4028387/ako-kina-glasa-za-prijem-kosova-u-un-ode-tajvan/>.

²⁴ Kim, Beta, "Marinković: Kosovo je u poslednjih deset godina napustilo oko 40.000 Srba" [Marinković: About 40,000 Serbs left Kosovo in the last ten years], Media Center, February 20, 2023, <https://www.medijacentar.info/marinkovic-kosovo-je-u-poslednjih-deset-godina-napustilo-oko-40-000-srba/>.

²⁵ Kosovo Online, "Taiwan - Continuation of flirting with separatism," January 14, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/kontext/taiwan-continuation-flirting-separatism-14-1-2024>.

²⁶ Kosovo Online, "Pacific dilemma: Do Taiwan and Kosovo face similar security threats?," March 3, 2025, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/pacific-dilemma-do-taiwan-and-kosovo-face-similar-security-threats-3-3-2025>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Telegrafi, "Former Kosovo Ambassador to Thailand: Macedonian's visit to Taiwan, the most damaging move in the history of foreign policy," February 22, 2025, <https://telegrafi.com/en/ish-ambasadori-ne-tajlande-vizita-e-maqedoncit-ne-tajvan-levizja-e-demshme-ne-historine-e-politikes-se-jashtme/>.

should remain open to engaging with China, particularly in light of its veto power in the UNSC, he emphasizes that any such engagement “should be done in full coordination with the USA.”³²

On this note, the Kosovo Center for Security Studies published an analysis by Research Fellow **Besar Gërgi** on China-Serbia relations and their impact on the dialogue with Kosovo, arguing that China has effectively filled the vacuum left by Russia to the detriment of regional security in the Western Balkans. After outlining the history and current state of Belgrade’s ties with Beijing, highlighting their political, economic, and military benefits for Serbia, Gërgi contends that a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan would have serious consequences also for Kosovo:

“Experts agree that in lieu of a convincing deterrence by Kosovar army [sic.], Serbian security forces would try to reassert control over the territory. Therefore, a global threat requiring the bulk of the attention & resources of NATO forces, such as a hypothetical Chinese attack on Taiwan, has the potential of military escalations in as far a place as the Western Balkans.”³³

Gërgi concludes by asserting that “As long as there is China in the Western Balkans, there shall be no progress in the dialogue between Kosova and Serbia.” Among his recommendations to the Kosovar government is a reconsideration of “its self-imposed ban on relations with Taiwan, since China has not upheld its promise to remain distanced from Kosovo’s issues.” Moreover, he suggests that with the Trump administration mainly focused on the threat posed by Beijing, Pristina “should present the risks of Beijing’s interference in the region to Washington, D.C. more actively and comprehensively.”³⁴

could china get more involved in kosovo?

The cautious optimism among both Serbians and Kosovars regarding Donald Trump’s return to the White House is increasingly in doubt, as his foreign policy throws international politics into more and more disarray. Although the Western Balkans are not a priority for the Trump administration, whose diplomatic focus is largely on Ukraine and Gaza, developments in Washington are nonetheless fueling uncertainty across the region.

Richard Grenell, who previously served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo peace negotiations from 2019 to 2021, has once again been nominated by Trump, this time as his “Special Presidential Envoy for Special Missions.” A vocal critic of Albin Kurti, Grenell has already begun intervening

in regional affairs, making statements against Kurti ahead of the Kosovar elections. Given the U.S. and Grenell’s alleged role in the fall of Kurti’s first government in 2020, speculation is mounting over whether Washington is undermining the coalition negotiation process in Pristina, potentially to cobble together an anti-Kurti coalition.

This political instability is compounded by the uncertainty surrounding U.S. security commitments to the region and by recent deep cuts to foreign aid, which have hit Kosovo especially hard. Meanwhile, Serbia has found itself targeted by Trump’s new trade policies, facing (now suspended) 37% tariffs, the highest rate in the Balkans (Kosovo has gotten off relatively lightly with the base tariff of 10%).

Nevertheless, many observers suggest that Trump may tilt in favor of Belgrade over Pristina.³⁵ This likely has not been lost on Aleksandar Vučić, who appears to have seized the moment to advance a nationalist agenda, illustrated in the “All-Serbian Assembly” declaration. The ripple effects of this unrest are also being felt in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where secessionist efforts led by Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik have pushed the country deeper into crisis.

As **Agon Maliqi** noted in a piece for the Atlantic Council, escalating U.S.-EU tensions risk transforming the Western Balkans into a theater of Transatlantic competition rather than cooperation.³⁶ The Trump administration’s approach to conflict mediation, marked by a disregard for European security concerns in the case of Ukraine, and a lack of commitment to achieving a humane and sustainable resolution in the case of Gaza, suggests that securing a mutually acceptable peace agreement in the Western Balkans may no longer be a priority for Washington.

It is in this context that European capitals are expressing increasing worry that Moscow could use the Balkans to open a second front of instability against Europe, especially if a U.S.-brokered peace deal in Ukraine leaves Russia with its hands untied.³⁷ This growing unease could push the EU to seek unlikely partners, such as China. Despite deep-seated concerns within Europe about China’s influence in the region, particularly given its current alignment with Moscow, Beijing could be seen as a more stable and pragmatic partner than Washington in the context of Kosovo. China has continued to support EU-led mediation, expressed interest in regional stability, and shown acceptance of Serbia’s European integration process. Moreover, Beijing may be one of the few actors capable of working with the EU to exert meaningful pressure on Belgrade to accept a negotiated settlement.

While such a rapprochement currently seems impossible, mutual frustration over U.S. protectionism is already rapidly accelerating interest in Sino-European cooperation. Belgrade,

³² Valona Canvas & Arton Konushevci, “Šta radi kineska kancelarija u Prištini?” [What is the Chinese office doing in Pristina?], *Radio Free Europe*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kineska-kancelarija-kosovo/32944045.html>.

³³ Besar Gërgi, “The Quiet Power Broker: China in Serbia and Its Effect in the Dialogue with Kosova,” *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, December 16, 2024, <https://legalpoliticalstudies.org/the-quiet-power-broker-china-in-serbia-and-its-effect-in-the-dialogue-with-kosova/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fron Nahzi, “Trump’s ‘America First’ Agenda Risks Leaving Kosovo Isolated,” *Balkan Insight - BIRN*, February 13, 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/02/13/trumps-america-first-agenda-risks-leaving-kosovo-isolated/>.

³⁶ Agon Maliqi, “What Trump’s approach to Europe means for the Western Balkans,” *Atlantic Council*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-trumps-approach-to-europe-means-for-the-western-balkans/>.

³⁷ Sam Blewett, “Putin wants Western Balkans as his next ‘playground,’ UK warns,” *POLITICO*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/with-all-eyes-on-ukraine-europe-is-urged-not-to-forget-the-other-hotspot/>.
Clare Nuttall, “BALKAN BLOG: Upended world order enables Russia’s return to Southeast Europe,” *bne IntelliNews*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.intellinews.com/balkan-blog-upended-world-order-enables-russia-s-return-to-southeast-europe-367683/>.

for its part, may be amenable to Chinese involvement; as we have seen, many Serbian officials and analysts now view China as preferable to Russia on Kosovo. In contrast, Pristina is skeptical of both the EU and China, but given the Trump administration's erratic stance, Washington may no longer represent a reliable alternative with regard to ensuring Kosovar sovereignty.

A more relevant question is whether China would be willing to intensify its engagement in what it traditionally views as a predominantly European issue. While most local analysts are skeptical, there is broad agreement that China's approach is driven by concerns over its own territorial integrity, especially regarding Taiwan. This sensitivity has already led some Kosovar diplomats to publicly caution Pristina against deepening ties with Taipei. Should Kosovo move closer to Taiwan, an idea advocated by certain Kosovar analysts, Beijing could likely retaliate by expanding its diplomatic involvement. A relevant precedent can be found in China's increasingly assertive stance in favor of Somalia following Taiwan's renewed engagement with Somaliland, another disputed breakaway territory.³⁸

Nonetheless, attempting to forecast future developments in the Western Balkans is speculative at best. The region continues to grapple with unresolved political crises in both Serbia and Kosovo, while the trajectory of EU relations with both the U.S. and China remains uncertain. In such a volatile context, it is unclear which external power the EU might ultimately partner with in the attempt to ensure stability in the region.

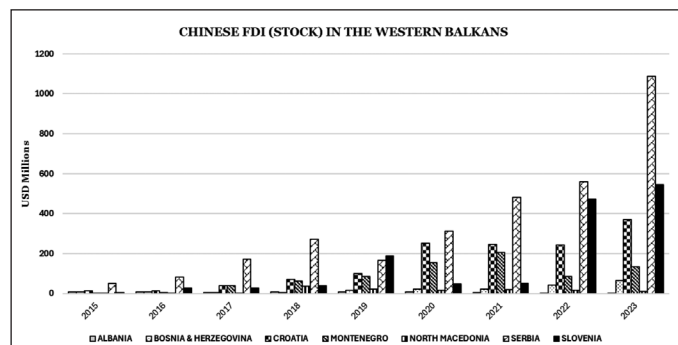
It must be noted however that many within the EU do not perceive China's ties with Serbia positively, especially its economic influence. As the subsequent sections will examine, this unease is shared also by many within Serbian civil society and by independent analysts, who raise questions about Chinese investments' long-term sustainability and their lacking transparency and accountability.

Serbian Perspectives on Chinese Investments³⁹

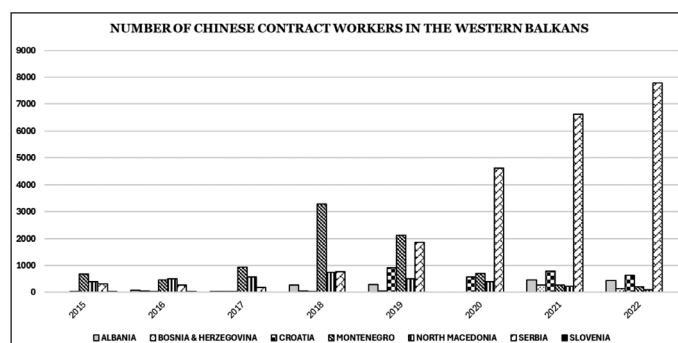
Among the countries of the Western Balkans, Serbia stands out both for the scale of Chinese investment and the controversies surrounding its bilateral partnership with China. Since signing a memorandum of understanding on the BRI in 2015, Chinese investment in Serbia has surged.⁴⁰ According to ChinaMed Data, the stock of Chinese foreign direct investment in Serbia grew from less than USD 50 million in 2015 to USD 545.6 million by 2023, more than an elevenfold increase.⁴¹ Likewise, the value of contracts awarded to Chinese firms rose from approximately USD 717 million in

2015 to an estimated USD 4.6 billion in 2022. The number of Chinese contract workers in Serbia also climbed dramatically, from just 313 in 2015 to 7,791 by 2022.

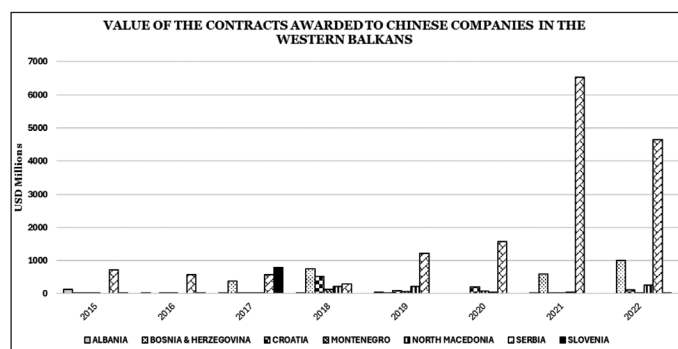
While this growth has raised alarm among EU-based analysts,



Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/southern-europe> [Source: PRC Ministry of Finance]



Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/southern-europe>



Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/southern-europe>

who view China's expanding economic footprint in the Balkans with apprehension, many Serbian commentators have expressed just as much concern. However, as we noted in a previous *ChinaMed Observer*, not all Serbian analysts are wholly negative on Sino-Serbian economic ties, with it remaining a contentious topic within Serbian public discourse.⁴²

³⁸ Moustafa Ahmad, "A Tale of Two Recognized and Unrecognized Republics," *The China Global South Project*, January 29, 2025, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/a-tale-of-two-recognized-and-unrecognized-republics/>.

³⁹ The authors would like to thank Ivana Rudinac for her precious insights on this issue.

⁴⁰ While Serbian government officials and many media outlets often refer to Chinese financing for projects in Serbia as "foreign direct investment," much of Chinese financing more accurately falls under what the OECD defines as "official development finance." This broader category includes loans from Chinese policy banks that are typically tied to Chinese firms. Some Serbian analysts have pointed out this mischaracterization, yet the vague, and often inaccurate use of the term "investment" remains widespread. In this analysis, we also use the term for consistency with common usage, but we wish to clarify that it is not necessarily accurate in all cases.

⁴¹ For more data regarding Chinese and European development finance in Serbia and the Western Balkans, see: Branimir Jovanović and Sonja Stojadinović, "The EU's and China's grants and loans in the Western Balkans," *The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*, April 2025, <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-eu-s-and-china-s-grants-and-loans-in-the-western-balkans-dlp-7279.pdf>.

⁴² Anja Duvnjak and Leonardo Bruni, "Serbian Media on Xi Jinping's Visit to Belgrade," *ChinaMed Project*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.chinamed.it/observer/serbian-media-on-xi-jinpings-visit-to-belgrade>.

Serbian government officials, pro-government media outlets and certain commentators defend the partnership with China citing their alleged contributions to economic growth, infrastructure development, and its role as a pragmatic alternative amid limited support from Western partners. Conversely, opposition figures, civil society groups and independent analysts frequently accuse Chinese projects of poor labor standards, offering limited long-term economic benefits, placing Serbia into debt distress, derailing its EU accession process, and empowering authoritarianism.⁴³

Environmental concerns also feature prominently in Serbian critiques of Chinese investments, including the **Smederevo steel mill**, acquired by China's **Hesteel Group** in 2016, an oft-cited symbol of the "ironclad friendship" between China and Serbia. As **Igor Rogelja** notes in his profile of the plant for *The People's Map of Global China*, the Smederevo mill has had significant environmental repercussions for surrounding towns and villages. One reason is the facility's legal exemption from national waste regulations, effectively permitting Hesteel to dispose of industrial waste near the plant without proper oversight or accountability.⁴⁴

Investigations by the **Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia** have also documented a dramatic deterioration in local air quality since Hesteel's acquisition.⁴⁵ Despite this, authorities have reportedly been hesitant to inform nearby residents or publish pollution data. This opacity has spurred protests and mobilized the Smederevo-based environmental NGO **Pokret Tvrđava** to try to obtain reliable data on local pollution levels and contest Hesteel's practices.

In August 2023, **Tvrđava's** petition to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg calling on it to protect citizens' right to a healthy environment was dismissed, with the court ruling that domestic legal avenues had not yet been fully exhausted.⁴⁶ The following year, these avenues led to Serbian courts fining Hesteel just one million dinars (~USD 9,600), much to the disappointment of local residents.⁴⁷

Another controversial Chinese project is the **Linglong tire plant in Zrenjanin**. According to Belgrade, the factory represents Serbia's largest-ever greenfield investment, with an estimated value of USD 1 billion. Construction began soon after its first announcement in August 2018, but the project quickly became mired in legal disputes. The **Regulatory Institute for Renewable Energy and Environment (RERI)**,

a Serbian environmental think tank, accused Linglong of failing to conduct a legally required environmental impact assessment. On this issue, RERI recently published a report accusing the Chinese firm of employing a strategy of "salami slicing," dividing the project into smaller ones to bypass environmental regulations, a salient concern given the plant's proximity to a protected nature reserve.⁴⁸

According to the Dutch NGO **Just Finance International**, however, the Chinese project in Serbia which has attracted the most criminal complaints is the **Bor Mining and Smelting Complex**. Acquired by **Zijin Mining Group** in 2018, the project has been at the center of many environmental issues. As documented by both *Just Finance* and *The People's Map of Global China*, the complex has been accused of severe water, air and soil pollution; unlawful displacement of locals (many of whom belong to the underrepresented Vlach minority); illegal demolition; and construction without permits or environment impact assessments.⁴⁹

Despite mounting evidence of environmental degradation and legal violations by China-backed projects, the public debate in Serbia on this issue remains polarized. While a vocal segment of civil society continues to raise concerns, much of the Serbian population remains supportive of economic engagement with China (according to a 2024 survey conducted by the International Republican Institute, 88% of Serbian citizens view China positively).⁵⁰

Beyond just consistently favorable portrayals of China in mainstream government-aligned media, **Stefan Vladislavljev**, Program Coordinator at the **Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society**, argues that public support for Sino-Serbian economic cooperation is fueled by widespread misconceptions, largely stemming from a lack of transparency. Writing for the economic and political magazine *Nova Ekonomija*, Vladislavljev identifies several common misunderstandings about the nature of Chinese investments in Serbia.⁵¹

One such misconception concerns the actual volume of Chinese investment. While China has been among Serbia's most visible investors in recent years, Vladislavljev contends that a closer analysis reveals that Beijing is neither Serbia's primary economic partner nor a significant alternative to the West. Between 2010 and 2023, total Chinese investment in Serbia amounted to approximately €5.5 billion, substantially less than the €20.6 billion invested collectively by EU member

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Igor Rogelja, "Hesteel Smederevo Steel Plant," *The People's Map of Global China*, Last updated March 31, 2021, <https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/hesteel-smederevo-steel-plant/>.

⁴⁵ Dina Đorđević, "Air Harmful across Serbia, Official Data Late to issue Warning in Some Locations," December 15, 2020, <https://www.cins.rs/en/air-harmful-across-serbia-official-data-late-to-issue-warning-in-some-locations/>.

⁴⁶ Just Finance International, "High price for China's investments in Serbian steel plant," November 1, 2023, <https://justfinanceinternational.org/2023/11/01/high-price-for-chinas-investments-in-serbian-steel-plant/>.

⁴⁷ Jelena Mirković, "Prvi put kažnjena Smederevska Železara zbog zagađenja, meštani očajni: 'Mizerna kazna, neće biti poboljšanja'" [Smederevo iron and steel plant fined for pollution for the first time, locals desperate: 'miserious punishment, there will be no improvement'], N1, August 25, 2024, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/prvi-put-kaznjena-smederevska-zelezara-zbog-zagadenja-mestani-ocajni-mizerna-kazna-neece-biti-poboljsanja/>.

⁴⁸ Nikolija Čodanović, "Šta je to 'Salami slicing' i kakve veze ima sa kineskim kompanijama koje posluju u Srbiji?" [What is "salami slicing" and what does it have to do with Chinese companies operating in Serbia?], *Istinomer*, December 31, 2024, <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/analize-analize/sta-je-to-salami-slicing-i-kakve-veze-ima-sa-kineskim-kompanijama-koje-posluju-u-srbiji/>.

⁴⁹ Dušica Ristivojević and Dejan Lazar, "Bor Mining and Smelting Complex (Serbia Zijin Copper)," *The People's Map of Global China*, Last updated November 14, 2023, <https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/bor-mining-and-smelting-complex-serbia-zijin-copper/>. Just Finance International, "Despair among Serbian farmers when their land is confiscated," February 23, 2024, <https://justfinanceinternational.org/2024/02/23/despair-among-serbian-farmers-when-their-land-is-confiscated/>.

⁵⁰ International Republican Institute, "Western Balkans Regional Poll | February –March 2024 | Full-Deck," May 14, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>.

⁵¹ Stefan Vladislavljev, "Srbija i Kina – zablude i stvarnost saradnje sa džinovskim partnerom" [Serbia and China - misconceptions and reality of cooperation with a giant partner], *Nova Ekonomija*, December 2, 2024, <https://novaekonomija.rs/price-i-analize/srbija-i-kina-zablude-i-stvarnost-saradnje-sa-dzinovskim-partnerom>.

states, not including an additional €1.4 billion from the United Kingdom and €800 million from the United States.⁵²

Vladislavljje also stresses that the quality of investment is just as important as its quantity. He points out the lack of comprehensive analyses of whether Chinese-funded projects genuinely support local employment, community development, or the transfer of skills and technology. Instead, many of these ventures seem to serve mainly as channels for resource extraction, which do little to address Serbia's significant trade deficit with China. He highlights how 92.1% of Serbia's exports to China consist of goods with limited added value, in particular copper in the form of ores and cathodes.⁵³

Moreover, Vladislavljje challenges official claims that Chinese involvement in Serbia primarily takes the form of foreign direct investment, as many Chinese infrastructure projects are in reality financed through loans from Chinese policy banks. While pushing back against alarmist narratives about potential "debt slavery," he acknowledges that Serbia's debt to the China Eximbank, amounting to €2.7 billion or approximately 7% of Serbia's total public debt, still warrants attention.⁵⁴

More troubling than the debt itself, Vladislavljje argues, is the pervasive lack of transparency surrounding Chinese-financed projects. Under the terms of the 2009 agreement signed by the Serbian government under President **Boris Tadić**, Chinese-funded infrastructure projects are exempt from public procurement rules, competitive tender procedures, and are shielded from standard transparency obligations.⁵⁵

This framework has significant implications for accountability, as Vladislavljje notes in his article, published in December 2024, a month after the disaster in Novi Sad:

"Closely tied to the problem of a lack of transparency, if the terms of a contract are not publicly known, it becomes difficult for any party to be held responsible in the event of damage – or even tragedy – resulting from joint infrastructure projects. Given the scale and significance of the projects that have been implemented, ensuring accountability should be one of the key priorities, which is currently not the case."⁵⁶

China's Role in the Novi Sad Tragedy

The renovation of the Novi Sad train station was part of the broader Belgrade-Budapest high-speed rail line project, undertaken by a consortium led by China Railway International and China Communications Construction Company. Financed through a multi-billion-euro loan from China Eximbank, this

project was envisioned as a section of the BRI's flagship effort to link Central Europe with the China-operated port of Piraeus in Greece.

While the Belgrade-Novı Sad section was completed in March 2022, the renovation of the Novi Sad station itself was not finalized until July 2024 in preparation for the extension of the line toward the Hungarian border, scheduled for November 22, 2024. However, the collapse of the station's canopy brought the project to an abrupt halt and triggered a wave of public outrage.

The tragedy profoundly affected the Serbian public, particularly students, who began holding silent vigils to honor the victims. Although the government pledged a thorough investigation, public anger intensified amid accusations that the disaster was no mere accident, but rather the consequence of inadequate standards.⁵⁷ Claims that the authorities were intentionally delaying the investigation to avoid political repercussions further inflamed Serbian students, who were angered both by initial government assertions that the collapsed canopy had not been part of the renovation project as well as the Ministry of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure's refusal to release relevant documentation, citing confidentiality clauses in the agreements with the Chinese consortium.⁵⁸ As was reported by the Novi Sad-based broadcaster *Radio 021* back in January 2024, the Ministry of Transport allegedly stated that "no contract-related information can be shared with third parties until the project is completed and a certificate of satisfactory completion issued."⁵⁹

This lack of transparency sparked a student-led protest movement that quickly spread beyond Novi Sad. In response, authorities resorted to repression, including the detention and violent dispersal of protestors. Rather than dissipating, the students consolidated and articulated a series of concrete demands: the public release of all documentation related to the station's reconstruction, accountability for police violence, the withdrawal of criminal charges against protestors, and a 20% increase in funding for state universities. Growing public sympathy for the students, coupled with mounting public pressure, eventually led to the resignation of several government ministers and what appeared to be a concession to the first demand: the publication of documents related to the renovation of the Novi Sad station.

In their analysis, **Transparency Serbia**, an anti-corruption NGO, contended that the released documentation was incomplete, but they nevertheless exposed systemic issues in the way infrastructure projects are managed in Serbia.⁶⁰ These revelations, as well as concerted efforts by the government to shield such practices from scrutiny, prompted a wave of criticism from Serbian media figures. Journalist **Nenad Kulaćin**, in an opinion piece for *Al Jazeera Balkans*, characterized the treatment of Chinese firms in Serbia as

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Katarina Baletic and Milica Stojanovic, "Serbian Govt Faces Growing Calls for Answers Over Railway Station Deaths," Balkan Insight – BIRN, November 4, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/11/04/serbian-govt-faces-growing-calls-for-answers-over-railway-station-deaths/>.

⁵⁸ Support4Partnership, "Why are contracts with Chinese companies hidden in Serbia?," November 11, 2024, <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/why-are-contracts-with-chinese-companies-hidden-in-serbia>.

⁵⁹ Dragana Prica Kovačević, "FOTO Obnova Železničke stanice u Novom Sadu tajna: Kinezi tako žele, a ministarstvo poslušno," *Radio 021*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/365297/FOTO-Obnova-zeleznicke-stanice-u-Novom-Sadu-tajna-Kinezi-tako-zele-a-ministarstvo-poslusno.html>.

⁶⁰ Transparency Serbia, "Published documents on the collapse of the canopy are incomplete," <https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/en/ts-and-media/press-issues/12794-published-documents-on-the-collapse-of-the-canopy-are-incomplete>.

privileged, describing them “as protected as polar bears.” He went on to state:

*“All the jobs that Chinese companies get in Serbia are awarded without tenders and public procurement. Not to mention that all the contracts between Serbia and Chinese companies are secret. [...] His [President Vučić’s] friends from the Far East impose no conditions when granting loans to Serbia, which is slowly but surely sliding into a vassal-like relationship with China. [...] If the money for the reconstruction had been obtained from European funds, much of it would have to be public and it would be known how every euro was spent.”*⁶¹

However, despite Serbian Prime Minister **Miloš Vučević** dismissing concern over the irregularities over the station renovation as “potential anti-China hysteria,”⁶² as the protest movement expanded nationwide it ultimately focused on broader issues of corruption, lack of transparency and insufficient accountability. As Foundation BFPE’s **Stefan Vladislavljev** writes for *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe* (where he is a visiting fellow), Chinese companies have largely escaped scrutiny as “public outrage over the Novi Sad station collapse was overwhelmingly directed at the Serbian government and its officials.”⁶³

Vladislavljev explains that Chinese firms were partly shielded from public scrutiny due to the government’s swift move to place blame on a Serbian subcontractor. As reported by *Forbes Srbija*, official documents show that the Chinese consortium overseeing the project had delegated responsibility for renovating the Novi Sad station canopy to a Serbian company named Starting.⁶⁴ However, despite the difficulties in assigning blame due to the lack of transparency and the involvement of numerous subcontractors, Vladislavljev still raises the crucial question: who ultimately enabled and facilitated the practices that led to the disaster?⁶⁵

Other Serbian experts and commentators, while acknowledging the tragic loss of life in Novi Sad, do not view the incident as an isolated case but as one dramatic example of how Belgrade systemically mismanages infrastructure projects, with or without Chinese involvement.⁶⁶ This is in line with most empirical studies which suggest that, when

subject to proper regulation and oversight, Chinese-financed projects can be just as or even more effective than those from traditional Western partners.⁶⁷

This focus on the Serbian government and its officials as the root of the problem is not new. Experts on China’s role in the region, such as **Vuk Vuksanović**, voiced a similar perspective even before the Novi Sad disaster. In comments to *Voice of America* in May 2024, Vuksanović stated:

“The main risks relate to a lack of transparency and the failure to uphold environmental and labor standards. But ultimately, the main responsibility always lies with the local elites, not with the Chinese. The key issue is how an individual government manages

Serbia's Protests, China, and the European Union

As previously noted, the protest movement in Serbia has grown beyond the immediate context of the Novi Sad tragedy, evolving into a broader expression of public discontent with the Vučić government. The scale and persistence of this mass mobilization have significantly weakened Vučić’s hold on power, with several high-ranking officials resigning, including Prime Minister Vučević.

Attempts by Serbian authorities to discredit and repress the demonstrators have largely failed. Notably, the alleged use of a sonic weapon against protestors on March 15 has only galvanized public outrage, further legitimized the protest movement, and rallied support from a broad swath of Serbian society.⁶⁹

Despite Beijing signaling its support for Vučić and his framing of the unrest as a Western-backed “color revolution,” Chinese influence remains far from a central issue for protestors. A possible factor may be the protests’ increasing heterogeneity. What began as a student-led movement has grown to encompass a wide and politically diverse spectrum of Serbian society. As journalists have noted, recent protests have seen the participation of nationalist groups, some of whom

⁶¹ Nenad Kulacin, “Vučić pljeskavicama brani Kineze od istrage” [Vučić defends the Chinese from the investigation with burgers], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, November 30, 2024, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2024/11/30/vucic-pljeskavicama-brani-kineze-od-istrage>.

⁶² N1 Beograd, “Serbian PM: Anti-China hysteria sparked after Novi Sad tragedy” N1, November 11, 2024, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-pm-anti-china-hysteria-sparked-after-novi-sad-tragedy/>.

⁶³ Stefan Vladislavljev, “The Novi Sad Railway Station Collapse: The Cost of Sino-Serbian Infrastructure Deals,” *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe* (CHOICE), February 6, 2025, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-novi-sad-railway-station-collapse-the-cost-of-sino-serbian-infrastructure-deals/>.

⁶⁴ Ivan Radak, “Nova dokumentacija na sajtu Vlade potvrđuje: Starting je bio odgovoran za renoviranje stanice” [New documentation on the Government’s website confirms: Starting was responsible for the renovation of the station], *Forbes Srbija*, December 22, 2024, <https://forbes.n1info.rs/biznis/nova-dokumentacija-na-sajtu-vlade-potvrduje-starting-je-bio-odgovoran-za-renoviranje-stanice/>.

⁶⁵ See note 63, Stefan Vladislavljev, *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe* (CHOICE), February 6, 2025.

⁶⁶ Iskra Krstić, “Predugo smo pod nadstrešnicom” [We’ve been under the canopy for too long], *Radar*, November 8, 2024, <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/predugo-smo-pod-nadstrešnicom/>.

Jelena Jerinić, “Prete nam nove nesreće” [We are threatened by new disasters], *Radar*, November 16, 2024, <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/prokop-nema-upotrebnu-dozvolu/>.

Fonet, “For Vučić, Mihajlović and Dinkić to explain why they took one billion euros more expensive arrangements,” *Vreme*, March 25, 2025, <https://vreme.com/vesti/da-vucic-mihajlovic-i-dinkic-objasne-zasto-su-uzeli-milijardu-evra-skuplje-aranzmane/>.

⁶⁷ See: Dreher, Axel, Andreas Fuchs, Bradley Parks, Austin Strange, and Michael J. Tierney. *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China’s Overseas Development Program*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

⁶⁸ Rade Rankovic, “Poseta Ši Đinpinga Beogradu: Šta je srpska, a šta kineska perspektiva?” [Xi Jinping’s visit to Belgrade: What is the Serbian and what is the Chinese perspective?], *Voice of America*, May 6, 2024, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/poseta-kinseki-predsednik-si-djinpings-beograd-srbija/7599453.html>.

⁶⁹ Saša Savanović, “The protests in Serbia are historic, the world shouldn’t ignore them,” *Al Jazeera*, February 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/2/23/the-protests-in-serbia-are-historic-the-world-shouldnt-ignore-them>.

N1 Beograd, “Tadić pisao UN zbog ‘anticivilizacijskog napada’ režima u Srbiji na građane” [Tadić wrote to the UN because of the “anti-civilizational attack” by the regime in Serbia against the citizens], N1, March 27, 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/boris-tadic-pismo-un-zvucni-top/>.

have carried anti-EU and anti-NATO flags or even displayed “Z” symbols in support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, contrasting with past pro-democracy protests in Georgia and Ukraine, where EU flags and anti-Russian slogans were prominently displayed.⁷⁰

While this divergence reflects longstanding public sentiment in Serbia, the absence of pro-EU symbolism also points to growing frustration with Brussels’ approach to Vučić’s leadership. Although it must be noted the protests are not “anti-EU” and remain domestically focused, it is interesting to note that criticism from Serbian commentators is increasingly directed not at China, but at the EU, which many in Serbia accuse of turning a blind eye to democratic backsliding.⁷¹ This frustration has been exacerbated by the EU’s own controversial involvement in environmentally harmful projects in Serbia, most notably, the Jadar lithium mine.⁷²

In July 2024, the EU and Serbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on raw materials cooperation centered around the development of a lithium mine in the Jadar Valley by British-Australian multinational Rio Tinto. The mine may soon be designated as a “strategic project” by the EU under its Critical Raw Materials Act, legislation aimed at reducing dependence on Chinese imports by securing alternative supply chains, including for lithium, a key component in battery production for electric vehicles.

However, the project has been highly controversial in Serbia for years, drawing criticism over its lack of transparency, questionable economic viability, and fears that it will cause irreversible environmental damage to the Jadar Valley. Since 2021, there have been frequent protests in Serbia over the project, with many activists accusing the EU of outsourcing the environmental costs of lithium extraction to Serbia, despite untapped lithium reserves in EU member states such as Germany. The project has sparked continued protests against both the Serbian government and the EU itself, even in recent months. Public opposition to the project is also strong; polls show that 55% of the Serbian population is firmly against it.⁷³

Although not all EU policymakers support the mine, the European Commission continues to push forward the project, with it receiving explicit support from Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security Maroš Šefčovič. This is regardless of concerns about electoral irregularities in Serbia during recent elections, nationalist rhetoric from Belgrade, and the mass

protests now unfolding. Many commentators argue that the relative silence from the EU and member states reflects a broader strategy: maintaining a close relationship with Vučić as a guarantor of regional stability (and critical raw materials), regardless of his democratic shortcomings.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in Serbia remain a contentious issue, drawing sustained criticism from NGOs, analysts and local residents over their environmental, labor and safety issues. While one such project, the Novi Sad train station renovation, sparked recent protests following the deadly collapse of its roof, public outrage has not been directed at Chinese involvement. Rather, most protestors and analysts have placed the blame squarely on the Serbian government, widely viewed as the chief beneficiary of opaque contracts, nepotism and regulatory negligence. Indeed, Chinese investments are not necessarily seen as the root cause but mostly as enablers within a wider system of governmental mismanagement and corruption. Similar backlash has also arisen in response to EU-supported projects in Serbia, like the Jadar lithium mine, criticized for its projected environmental damage and lack of public consultation.

With the protest movement also expanding well beyond its initial catalyst, it is unsurprising that Chinese economic engagement has not been singled out, nor that EU flags are largely absent from demonstrations. In fact, Brussels is increasingly accused by the Serbian opposition and commentators of prioritizing regional stability over democratic accountability, with many accusing the EU of being tacitly complicit in President Vučić’s growing authoritarianism. These allegations are likely exacerbated by the little perceived difference between EU and Chinese investment practices; both are now associated with environmental degradation, non-transparent processes, and the entrenchment of unaccountable governance. As Vučić aims to hold on to power by forming a new government, public confidence in the European integration process will unlikely improve unless the EU takes concrete steps to reassert itself as a credible and principled partner. This requires not only highlighting the risks of Chinese practices but also ensuring that its own investments meet the same advocated standards of transparency, environmental sustainability, and accountability.

⁷⁰ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, “Belgrade’s historic day of anger: Hundreds of thousands of Serbians protest for ‘laws and justice that work’,” *Le Monde*, March 16, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/03/16/belgrade-s-historic-day-of-anger-hundreds-of-thousands-of-serbians-protest-for-laws-and-justice-that-work_6739206_4.html.

⁷¹ *NI Beograd*, “Dan uživo: Zašto EU čuti na masovne proteste i blokade u Srbiji?,” *NI*, February 11, 2025, <https://n1info.rs/najave-emisija/dan-uzivo-zasto-eu-cuti-na-masovne-proteste-i-blokade-u-srbiji/>. Violeta Beširević, “What Madonna Got and the EU Did Not,” *Verfassungsblog*, February 18, 2025, <https://verfassungsblog.de/what-madonna-got/>; Tena Prelec and Sonja Stojanović Gajić, “Serbia’s protests are a call against kleptocracy – The EU must seize the opportunity,” *European Western Balkans*, March 20, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/03/20/serbias-protests-are-a-call-against-kleptocracy-the-eu-must-seize-the-opportunity/>.

⁷² *European Western Balkans*, “Will the rush for lithium crush EU standards in the Western Balkans?,” December 6, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/12/06/will-the-rush-for-lithium-crush-eu-standards-in-the-western-balkans/>. Aleksandar Ivković, “EU’s endorsement of lithium mining will further tarnish its reputation in Serbia,” *European Western Balkans*, July 29, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/07/29/eus-endorsement-of-lithium-mining-will-further-tarnish-its-reputation-in-serbia/>. Bojan Elek, “How Brussels Risks Undermining Serbia’s Democratization Potential,” *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, April 2, 2025, <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/04/02/how-brussels-risks-undermining-serbias-democratization-potential>.

⁷³ Nova Srpska Politička Misao, “Истраживање НСПМ: Против рудника литијума 55,5 одсто грађана Србије, „за“ 25,6 одсто” [NSPM survey: 55.5 percent of Serbian citizens are against lithium mines, 25.6 percent are “in favor”], July 18, 2024, <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/istrazivanje-nspm-protiv-rudnika-litijuma-555-odsto-gradjana-srbije-za-256-odsto.html>.

⁷⁴ Paul Millar, “Why has the EU kept silent on Serbia’s massive protest movement?,” *France 24*, March 20, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250320-why-has-eu-kept-silent-serbia-massive-protest-movement-aleksandar-vucic>.

Against this backdrop, Europe must also reckon with China's growing relevance in the Kosovo issue. With Russia increasingly seen by Serbians as unreliable and diplomatically toxic due to the war in Ukraine and its use of the Kosovo precedent for its own expansionist goals, Belgrade appears to be turning to Beijing for support. While Serbian officials and many analysts recognize and welcome China's pro-Serbia stance, they also note that Beijing's position is driven primarily by its own concerns over territorial integrity, especially regarding Taiwan. Consequently, Chinese support is expected to remain limited to the realm of international forums like the UN.

However, Kosovo's outreach to Taipei could provoke greater Chinese involvement in what has traditionally been seen by Beijing as a European issue. Thus, if tensions continue to escalate between Kosovo and Serbia, particularly over the status of ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo, China and the EU may find themselves on the same side. Both global actors support EU-led mediation, Serbia's European path, and the pursuit of a mutually acceptable settlement. Consequently, if the apparent rapprochement between the EU and China holds, Kosovo may present one of the few areas where constructive engagement remains possible.

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