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China's Ideational Impact in the Western Balkans 2009–2019

Anastas Vangeli

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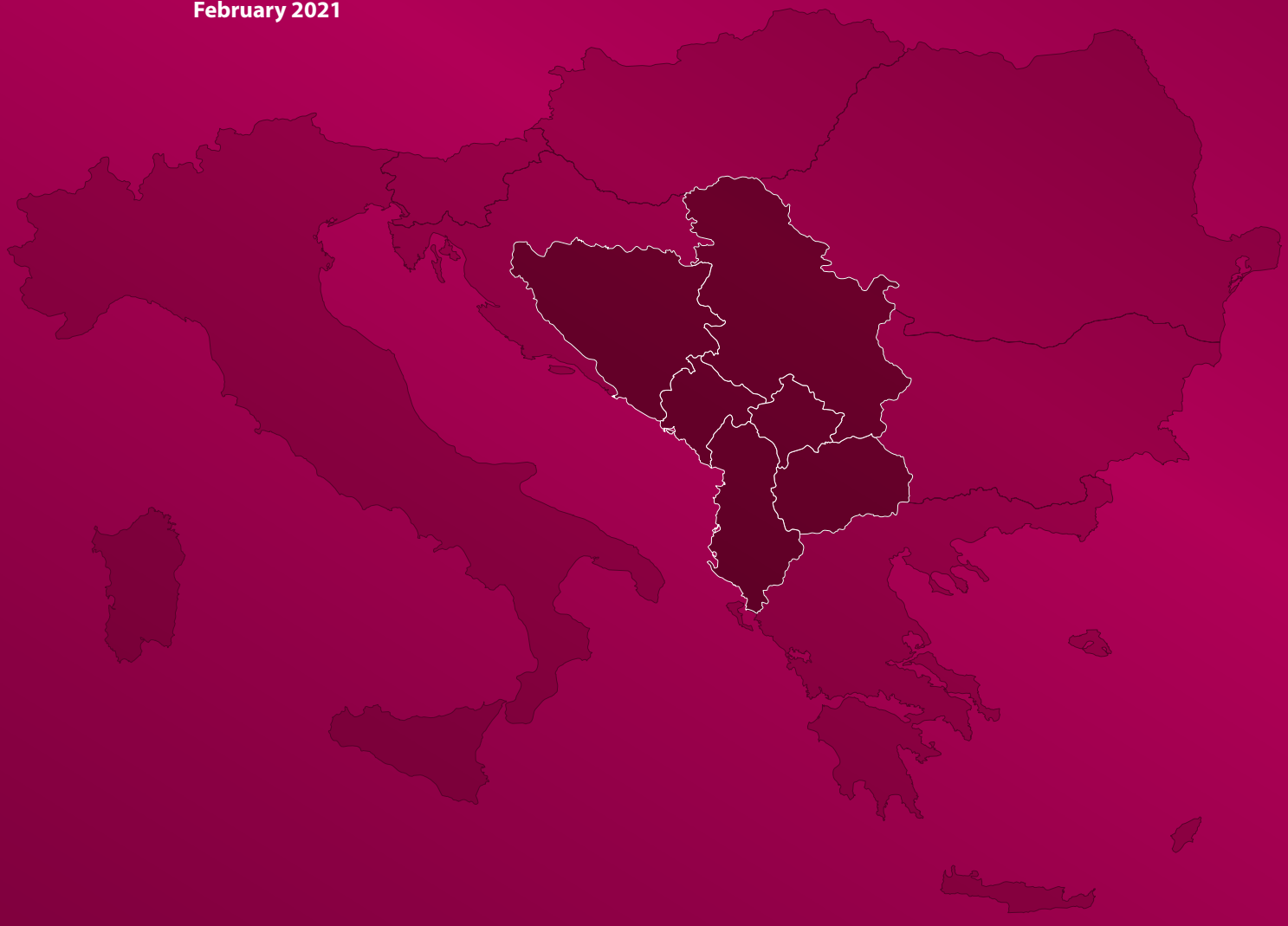

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China's Ideational Impact in the Western Balkans 2009-2019

Author: **Anastas Vangeli**

Proofreading: **Zack Kramer**

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The Prague Security Studies Institute, Pohořelec 6
118 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic
www.pssi.cz

Executive summary

As a global actor with a distinct trajectory marked by its economic rise and pro-active approach in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, China already has a significant ideational impact on how elites in various regions think not only of the global political economy, but also their role in it. This is also the case in the Western Balkans, which has noted increased interaction with China not least by being part of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's platform for cooperation with Central, East and Southeast Europe dubbed "17+1." However, often, the complexities that characterize the process of ideational impact are overlooked by researchers and policymakers alike.

This study aims to disaggregate different forms of China's ideational impact. It proposes two criteria that help distinguish between them: the role of China's intentions (i.e. some forms of impact are intended while others are not), and the degree of mediation (i.e. some forms of impact take place as a result of direct, unmediated interaction, while others are mediated). Such a framework also accounts for the agency of regional actors, as well as for the impacts of other external actors (in the first place, the EU and the US).

The paper shows that in the period 2009-2019 China has managed to affect the way Western Balkan elites think of China, but not to the extent Chinese actors originally aimed. While actors from the region have welcomed the idea of regional prosperity under a Belt and Road framework, they do not desire broader global transformations. Moreover, contrary to Beijing's attempt not to get involved in domestic political debates, China has become an increasingly politicized topic due to both external and internal factors. Most significantly, as a result of the tensions between the US and China, Western Balkan actors now increasingly subscribe to (and sometimes instrumentalize) a primacist, zero-sum vision of global politics. A key contradiction that is shaping the attitude of Western Balkan actors, is the belief (or rather desire) that growing Sino-Balkan economic cooperation can be achieved in isolation from any significant disturbances in the geopolitical status quo. Referring briefly to the dynamics that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, the paper concludes that external inputs will remain the key variable that shapes the thinking on China among Western Balkan elites.

Introduction

The explosion of interest in China worldwide, motivated by the perception of China as a global game-changer, shows one important aspect of its rise that often goes under-researched: China already has a significant ideational impact, or rather an impact on how others think about the world and their role in it. Two elements shape this process: (i) Global China emerges as an abstract subject in discussions of global affairs at a conceptual level; and (ii) it emerges as a potent external actor, increasing its interactions, presence and visibility all over the world, shaping debates on a policy level. Taking the overall trend of increased interest in China's global imprint as an invitation, this paper examines the ideational impact of China (both as an abstract subject and an actor in the material world) in the Western Balkans – a region which has had a burgeoning relationship with the world's second largest economy in the past decade (2009-2019), and in particular, with the development of the platform for cooperation between China and the seventeen countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) dubbed "17+1" and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The ideational changes induced by China's rise, even though manifesting differently across different areas of the world, are part of a global trend that is unfolding simultaneously in all corners of the planet. In that sense, it is unavoidable to discuss the relevance of these processes in the Western Balkans as well. However, there are several particularities which add on to the significance of discussing the ideational impact of China in the Western Balkans. For one, China is a relative newcomer to a region already crowded with the significant presence of other external actors. At the same time, the Western Balkans is also a region that to some extent (as other places around the world) has been caught off guard by China's rise and the changes it brings to the global stage. During the past three decades the Western Balkan elites devoted little attention and resources to observing non-Western actors and their parts of the world. In fact, while the West has been deepening its ties with China since the 1970s, the Western Balkan countries had been divesting their pre-existing linkages after 1990, as has also been the case in much of post-socialist Europe (Wasserstrom 2000). Finally, the Western Balkans is a region that historically has been shaped – and it has also internalized the view – of being a venue rather than an agent in the global political economy, and in that sense, the countries located in the region have developed a relatively lesser sense of agency in dealing with global powers. All of these aspects make the topic of inquiry additionally intriguing.

In the following section, the paper develops an analytical framework for studying ideational impact, which is subsequently applied to the case of China in the Western Balkans. The paper studies both China's intended and unintended ideational impact, both in their direct and mediated forms. Empirically, the paper draws upon secondary literature and media sources, and on fieldwork carried out by the author in the period 2014-2018 in the form of participant observation carried out in "Track 2" diplomatic and scholarly events in China, CESEE and beyond, as well as interviews with Chinese and Western Balkan experts.

Analytical framework and theoretical considerations

This paper studies the ideational impact of rising China as an external actor, and the rise of China as a broader phenomenon on the Western Balkan elites' understanding of: a) the rise of China itself; b) the dynamics of the global political economy (in light of China's rise); c) the position of the Western Balkan region in a changing global constellation.

Ideational impact refers to the changes in thinking and behavior of individual and collective actors that happen as a consequence of a particular external stimulus. In the domain of global politics and economy, actors are continuously impacted by a wide array of such external stimuli. Changes in context and circumstances, social and political events and performances, disruptive, low-probability, high-impact events, embodied and emotional experiences, and other social and natural phenomena can all have a particular ideational impact in an unpredictable way – think of, for instance, the manifold impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple impacts on how we think about a whole range of issues, or the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers on thinking on security, or the impact of the Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear accidents on thinking about energy and the environment. So too does the rise of China impact our thinking on global politics and economics.

The emergence of China as a global actor, and moreover a pro-active actor with increased engagement with the rest of the world in general, and the Western Balkans in particular, is an external stimulus, or rather a set of stimuli that take place over a prolonged period of time, continuously inspiring a change in thinking and behavior among the Western Balkan policy, business and knowledge elites (as among their counterparts from all over the world). This impact occurs both in the domain of foreign and security policy, as well as in that of economic development and cooperation.

Previous research (Vangeli 2019a) has shown that in the context of China's new relations with CESEE – including the Western Balkans – instances of ideational impact can be found in the interactions of knowledge actors and the emergence of nascent transnational knowledge networks and epistemic communities convened by Chinese actors. Taking this research agenda forward, this paper therefore sets out with the task of extending the study of China's ideational impact in the Western Balkans by focusing on the impact (1) beyond the domain of interaction and exchange of knowledge elites; and (2) in relation with developments in the global political economy in the period 2009-2019 (that is, from the emergence of China as an actor in the region in the aftermath of the global financial crisis up until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has itself had a particularly disruptive effect, deserving of a separate study). To do so, the paper disaggregates the concept of ideational impact by taking into account the role of intentions, and the degree of mediation of this impact (direct vs. indirect) (Figure 1), and applies it to the case of Sino-Balkan relations.

Figure 1. A model to study ideational impact

	Intentional	Unintentional
Direct		
Indirect		

The ideational impact of China, as defined here, approximates the concept of "ideational power" as devised by Carstensen and Schmidt (2016), referring to "the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements," as this approach allows for distinguishing between different manifestations of ideational power – both direct and indirect (e.g. power-through-ideas, power-over-ideas, and power-in-ideas). The direct forms of ideational impact (e.g. persuasion-as-influence, conversion, soft power, sharp power, etc.) are just some of the many possible pathways of ideational impact taking place, but they are far from the only ones. Other changes in the broader constellation of actors and ideas, not necessarily linked to China's actions directed at the Western Balkan countries, matter just as much in understanding its ideational impact.

The ideational impact of China, importantly, does not necessarily occur as an outcome of external "promotion" of norms and values, nor does it take the place of a coerced emulation of the so called "China Model." In reality these developments take the form of gradual, incremental, somewhat "subterranean" transformation(s) of the global ideoscapes that is the cumulative result of a number of processes of reconfiguration of interactions, relationships and fields of practice. At the core, the impact is relational and dialogical – as it concerns the relations between non-Chinese actors and China, the dispositions and the positions of non-Chinese actors in the world, and the relations between non-Chinese actors with one another.

Context-(re)shaping

The ideational impact of China is primarily a "context-shaping" one (Hay 1997, 50; Vangeli 2019b), meaning that it redefines "the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others" (Vangeli 2018a). With the arrival of China, the context of the relationship between a number of different non-Chinese actors and their own immediate fields of practice is profoundly affected. Suddenly, a number of policymakers from various sectors ranging from trade and economics to culture, tourism, healthcare or education; knowledge producers and civil society as well as media workers; business actors of all sizes and from various industries find themselves faced with the immense task of dealing with China – a country of 1.4 billion inhabitants, with immense socio-political and economic complexities, and most importantly, a country that has been associated with the most unprecedented economic rise in human history, while still being ruled by a Communist Party. For an increasing number of actors in the Western Balkans, the rise of China is not something that happens far away anymore – it rather happens in front of their own eyes on a daily basis, with all the novelties and quagmires it brings.

Consider this example: researchers from a non-governmental organization from the Western Balkans who have been socialized into a Western, "end of history" mindset, with their agenda being dominated by questions pertinent to the advancement of liberal democratic ideology, and the practice of operating in a liberal civil society environment suddenly face a novel and, to them, alien situation. They now have to discuss China, a country they know little about, or are invited to a conference in China and end up in a conference room in Beijing with communist paraphernalia surrounding them. Over time they witness and partake in a process in which China, a country no one really cared about only a few years ago, becomes one of the key topics for discussion in the region. By the same token, businesses that had no ties to China flock to fairs in China in a frenzy to join the Chinese market (and vice-versa, Chinese businesses are increasingly coming to the region); professionals in a variety of fields have to be updated with the latest developments from China and opportunities for linking up; and even the broader public is exposed to an ever-increasing amount of news about China. Overwhelmingly, there is a sense of being puzzled with the nature and implications of China's involvement; however, despite this, there is no significantly-developed public discussion on it in the region.

Over time, of course, actors from the region will get synced up with this new reality and will know (a bit more than they know now) how to position themselves and act with regards to China. However, this in-between situation, the period in which China has emerged and the debate on China is still unsaturated, creates an opening for ideational structures to undergo significant transformation in any direction, as the new context is not fully established yet, while the old one is withering away.

Intentions and mediation

China today openly showcases its ambition to change the world, not least by changing how others think about it. It also possesses the resources to do so. However, there are two significant caveats to this. First, China's resourcefulness is finite, meaning that it is not an omnipotent superpower, and it faces certain constraints and limitations in its quest. Furthermore, even though the top leadership may see ever more ambitious, significant parts of China's elite are still self-conscious and aware of the numerous challenges China faces at home and abroad, as well as the costs that come with being a world superpower that changes the world (Zhao 2018). In other words, the display of ambition on the part of China is still moderate. Second, pro-activity and resourcefulness do not automatically convert intentions into profound ideational impact. They are necessary, but far from sufficient conditions for China to successfully impact others in the manner it intends to. An increasing body of work points out to the limitations and obstacles that China faces, ranging from souring deals to changing public (and elite opinion); some are suggesting that China may be overstretching and overreaching, to its own detriment (Fickling 2018). In sum, what these debates show is that China is neither in an ideal position to change the world, nor is its (ideational) impact a straightforward consequence of its efforts and intentions.

The ideational impact of China, as argued in this paper, can take different paths. On one hand, in the era of pro-activity, Chinese actors and their overseas counterparts are establishing unprecedented levels of linkages, which allow direct communication, and an unmediated impact to take place. Diplomatic exchanges, China-led diplomatic forums, people-to-people exchanges, programs, and similar endeavors are blossoming, facilitating ideational impact through direct, unmediated interaction between Chinese actors and their overseas counterparts. The increased Chinese economic presence through development projects, foreign direct investments, increased trade, and commercial activities and linkages also allows for direct, unmediated (ideational) impact to take place. Of particular significance here are the embodied experiences of non-Chinese elites who now (or at least in the pre-COVID days) increasingly traveled to China and have been getting first hand, unmediated insights from the ground. While to some extent Chinese actors have a capability to control the discourse of official interactions, non-Chinese actors have their own agency, and ultimately it is their own interpretations and understanding that determines the direction of the ideational impact. This is a particularly significant development in cases such as the one of the Western Balkans, where prior to the increase in interaction with China, the image and understanding of China during the pre-2010s almost in its entirety has been shaped through the mediation of Western media and channels for communication. While the density of mediated messages on China increases, today the social representation of China in the region is a cumulative result of the projections of a multiplicity of images of China, including the ones that have been produced by an increasing number of actors who have had their own first-hand insights.

The mediated messages on China, however, must not be discarded from this discussion. Today, China changes the global debates, and creates a different worldview in particular among policy, business, intellectual and media elites in the West, which in turn, are in a position to affect the ideational structures in the Western Balkans. As China features ever more prominently in the external (and domestic) affairs agenda of the US and the EU, and as Western elites undergo their own processes of ideational impact as a result of the emergence of China as a global actor, this then has a second-order, mediated effect on how elites in the Western Balkans experience a China-induced ideational change.

Figure 2. Disaggregating ideational impact

	Intentional	**Unintentional**
Direct	Shaping pragmatic positions vis-a-vis China	Inspiring a new open-ended understanding of China
Indirect	Shaping a new understanding of global dynamics	Inspiring a primacist understanding of world affairs

If one combines the different aspects, that is the role of intentions, and the direct/indirect pathway of impact, we can break down the different forms of ideational impact in a 2x2 matrix (Figure 2). The *direct intentional impact* refers to the intended actions (and their consequences) that China takes to shape the immediate Balkan countries' attitudes

pertinent to Sino-Balkan cooperation; it is manifested in the facilitation of a somewhat (economically) liberal, pragmatic understanding of the Western Balkans' relations with China. The *indirect intentional impact* refers to the intended actions (and their consequences) that China takes to reshape the broader context in which Balkan actors operate; it is seen in the shaping of a new worldview that is attuned to the dynamics and changes in balance/power caused by the rise of China. The *direct unintentional impact* refers to the unintended consequences of China's actions and the mediated external impulses that impact the Western Balkan countries' understanding of China and their own relationship with it; it manifests itself through the politicization of the topic of China. The *indirect unintentional indirect outcome* refers to the unintended consequences of China's actions and the mediated external impulses that shape the broader context in which the Western Balkan actors operate; and it is the seen in the ignition of a 'status-quo-under-threat' kind of worldview, in which global actors are seen in a struggle for primacy and are engaged in strategic competition (Evans 2011). How these forms of ideational impact work in practice in the Western Balkans, is elaborated in the following sections.

China's Intended Ideational Impact in the Western Balkans

In the taxonomy of Chinese policymakers, the Western Balkans, framed as part of the broader CESEE region, are part of the Global South (Kowalski 2018), and therefore was to be included in the China-led South-South cooperation initiatives, treated particularly amicably and with a certain level of solidarity atypical for the relations of China with the developed Western countries (Yang 2015). In their perception, what classifies CESEE and the Western Balkans as part of the Global South is not so much their cultural or civilizational legacies, but rather the structural economic factors that make them dependent capitalist economies, according to the varieties of capitalism perspective (Nölke and Vliegenthart 2009). According to the Chinese official discourse, in the relationship with what they see as the Global South (which includes the Western Balkans), China aims to foster "sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith," treating the less developed more amicably than they treat the more developed countries (i.e. they treat CESEE, including the Western Balkans, differently than they do Western Europe) (Yang 2015).

The intentions in terms of exercising a particular ideational impact in the Western Balkans have therefore been quite modest in terms of scope, while ambitious in terms of depth. Scope-wise, being a newcomer to the region, Chinese diplomats and experts had to only convey to the Western Balkan countries the idea that China is a reliable partner, and that the vision and support for development it provides are worthwhile and feasible opportunities for cooperation. However, given that South-South cooperation also carries a particular normative load, Chinese diplomats, experts and entrepreneurs coming to the region also needed to facilitate a deep process of re-imagining the global political economy, and mainstream the vision of a dynamic and evolving multi-polar world order – very much in line with the official messaging by Beijing. Consequently, Chinese actors had the task of promoting a new geographical reading of the region and its role in the global economy, taking the Western Balkans as an intersection between the various economic corridors – both the overland "economic belt(s)" stretching through Central-East Europe and Turkey, as well as the maritime routes throughout the Wider Mediterranean. They also tried to re-frame the relative underdevelopment of the region as an untapped potential, and its status as a region still not being included as an equal part in the "West" (both formally as a non-EU region; and informally, as a region seen that has yet to fully "Westernize") as a relative flexibility. In this respect, they have achieved mixed success in exercising such an ideational impact: while they have had some success in shaping the image of China as a partner, they have not managed to fully re-shape the understanding of the global order in the region.

Direct-Intentional Impact: China as a Friend in Need

China's goal of projecting an image of itself as a reliable partner in tough times is straightforward and simple, although achieving it in practice is not the easiest of tasks for Chinese actors in the Western Balkans. A major obstacle on the way has been the distance and unfamiliarity between the two sides heading into the post-crisis world. Historically, the Western Balkans has not featured prominently in China's foreign policy. While the 1960s were a period of blossoming Sino-Albanian ties, and the late 1970s and the 1980s saw intense contact between Yugoslavia and China, during the 1990s this contact was significantly reduced. Moreover, Western Balkan policy and knowledge elites have been rather Western-centric and have devoted little resources to their relations with non-Western actors. While this unfamiliarity has granted China the benefit of the doubt, the Western-centrism has been an offsetting ideational force.

For China, the promotion of new ideas in the Western Balkans has had less to do with its particular interest in the region, but rather with the general turn in China's foreign policy posture. In the Chinese geopolitical imaginary, the Western Balkans has been associated with political unreliability as a result of the turmoil from the region's

continuous instability since the 1990s.[1] Inherent problems related to low economic efficiency, corruption, and the minuscule size of the markets of the Western Balkan countries have rendered the region far from being the most optimal business partner of China. In that sense, Chinese actors had to work first on changing their own understanding of the Western Balkans as a region that offers opportunities – in light of the broader shifts in China's foreign policy discussed above (i.e. the South-South shift that peaked with the Belt and Road) – and only afterwards, pursue closer relations with it. At the same time, they had to reconcile the idea of the Western Balkans as part of the Global South with the self-understanding of the region as "Europe in the making;" and more importantly, with the economic interests of Chinese commercial actors that have been particularly attracted by the proximity, the economic integration and the market access of the Western Balkan countries to the EU (Liu 2019).

The understanding of China by the Western Balkan leaders prior to the period of China's arrival in the region (2009-2011) has also been far from enthusiastic. China has been imagined as a physically and culturally distant and backwards society, associated with cheap, low-quality and often counterfeit exports (Gjorgjioska and Vangeli 2017). However, the enthusiasm significantly increased around the time of the announcement of the special platform for China-CESEE cooperation (back then still 16+1). As this was a period when the EU and the US were still facing the immediate consequences of the global financial crisis, they had little resources and attention to devote to the Western Balkans. China's charm offensive with the Budapest and Warsaw summits of the 16+1 in 2011 and 2012 provided a sense for the Western Balkan countries that they are still relevant and part of global economic flows. Concrete proposals for cooperation and mechanisms to bankroll physical cooperation projects further facilitated the shift in attitudes in the region. At least on the official level, after the advent of the 16+1 cooperation in the period until the victory of Donald Trump in the US (2016), the interest demonstrated by China has been reciprocated with enthusiastic discourse from the Western Balkan elites. Driven by the idea that China is on its way to becoming a new regional power, then Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha in 2012 called on Albanian schools to start teaching Chinese language (Musabelliu 2020). In 2013, former Croatian president Stipe Mesić co-authored a book on China and its potential role in the Balkans and in Croatia mimicking the approach of Kissinger and other authoritative Western voices on China [this book was critically received as selective and one-sided (Đurić Mikušević 2013)]. In 2014, then Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Đukanović has lauded the "high quality" cooperation with China, the entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes the Sino-CESEE relationship, and saw China as a partner for Montenegro's economic renewal (Mina Business 2014).

This in itself constituted a significant change in thinking: while for a long time China was not considered a worthwhile option, in a short period of time it became an influential part of the decision-making calculus all over the region. In 2016, then Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Denis Zvizdić has argued that the cooperation with China helps in accentuating "the comparative and competitive advantages of the region" (FENA 2016). But more than words, deeds – such as the proliferation of joint projects in infrastructure and industrial capacities (Vangeli 2019b) – illustrate this point even stronger. A string of projects – most notably highways, power plants, and restored industrial capacities – have been accompanied with enthusiastic messaging about China bringing "salvation and hope" to the region (Borić 2019). On the surface, China had succeeded in exercising its most immediate goal. This was particularly reflected in the coverage by Western policymakers, experts and media, who have developed a narrative of China taking over the Western Balkans.

Yet, there have been several caveats to this shift in thinking. In economic terms, Western Balkan countries have embraced China primarily as a source of finance and provider of know-how for the implementation of economic projects eschewed by traditional stakeholders in the region.[2] China in this sense, was not seen as the partner they have desired or chosen, but rather the only one that was available for particular undertakings. However, outside these projects, not only the strong preference for partnerships with Western actors has persisted, not least because they have re-asserted their positions in the region (Pavlićević 2019).

1 This point was discussed in an interview with Chinese scholars on the history of Sino-Balkan relations during meetings in October 2014 and July 2017 in Beijing.

2 Conversations with regional stakeholders in Tirana, May 2019 and with experts in Skopje, September 2020.

Second, the most significant shift in thinking has occurred within the (narrow) insiders' circles - officials and experts – that have worked on closely aligning developmental agendas and arranging joint developmental projects between the Western Balkan countries in China, but not beyond them (Vangeli 2019a). As the ones who have worked closely with China, insiders have taken part in the collective co-production of a new geoeconomic imaginary, and the re-thinking the economic perspectives of the Western Balkans in the context of China's global vision. At the official 17+1 and Belt and Road themed events there has been no shortage of enthusiasm, and talk of things such as building high-speed railways, state-of-the-art highways, restarting of rusting industrial capacities, investments in advanced technologies, and so on.[3]

It is hard to distinguish to what extent such discussions have been mere mental exercises for a select few insiders, and to what extent a harbinger of a sweeping trend. Even in Serbia, a significant outlier that has had a much more ample relationship with China compared to the other Balkan countries, the Sino-enthusiasm has been mostly constrained to the circles of political elites and insiders in cooperation with China; moreover it has had a strong personal overtone, being associated primarily with President Aleksandar Vučić. At the same time, aside from Vučić, there have been no other Balkan leaders nor authoritative knowledge elites who have pushed similarly enthusiastic discourse towards China. While arguably the increased presence and platforms for interaction could create a potential "critical mass"[4] of a greater number of influential actors who would develop a different understanding of China (and perhaps a more sympathetic one), so far this has not taken place.

Third, the change in the thinking towards China among the Western Balkan elites, even among the most enthusiastic ones about China, has taken place within the strict boundaries of the discourse of the strategic orientation of the region towards integration into the EU (and in most cases, NATO as well). Official statements by Balkan political leaders have frequently argued that while they do welcome China, its global vision and its calls for deepening Sino-Balkan cooperation, they have always taken in account the relationship with the West and avoided jeopardizing it. In 2013 the then Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, argued that Macedonia is not aiming at positioning itself in-between China and the West, and wants cooperation with both (Kanal 5 2013). Illustratively, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, in a joint press-conference with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, has argued that he seeks an approval from the EU for every deal that Serbia makes with China (Kurir 2018).

Finally, even when enthusiasm towards China has been displayed in the Western Balkan countries, this itself has not helped fully overcome narrations that appear unsophisticated at best, and racist at worst. In other words, while Balkan actors have deferred to China's stature as a global economic power, many of them have not developed any sensitivity towards Chinese people and culture. In the most brazen example, at the occasion of welcoming Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Serbia, the then Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić has infamously quoted a poem by the obscure 19th century prophet Tarabić that said "yellow people will come from the East, they will conquer the world and will drink water from the river of Morava" (N1 Srbija 2014). Leaked audio tapes in Macedonia showed that despite the enthusiasm of the former VMRO-DPMNE elites about the now controversial highway projects financed through a tied loan of China's Ex-Im bank and implemented in partnership with Sinohydro, a significant element of racial profiling has remained when discussing China (i.e. the Minister of Transport was overheard making racially insensitive jokes in one of the leaked conversations). Prejudice towards China and the Chinese have been visible in the region during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

3 Participant observation by the author in a series of 17+1 and Belt and Road forums 2014-2018.

4 Concept discussed by a CESEE diplomat during an event in Sofia, June 2018.

Indirect–Intentional Impact: Changing Trajectory of the Western Balkans in the World

The policy elements of China's global vision and its emergence as a global actor are to be sought in the Belt and Road initiative and its associated mechanisms, as well as the "shadow order" (Heilmann 2008) of international institutions and mechanisms established by China. The Belt and Road is of particular significance, as it is a vision that is underpinned by a particular geoeconomic vision, as well as a set of normative principles that comprise a novel policy logic compared to existing arrangements in the region, embracing state-led development which is at the core of China's overseas initiatives, including the idea of policy rights, development responsibilities, and the acceptability of risks that diverge from some of the core policy principles of the EU (Vangeli 2018b). These have included embracing political will as overriding free market logic as a driver of economic cooperation, and special legislation that circumvents public procurement as a go-to regulatory instrument. Most notably, in a string of joint projects with a negative impact on the environment, Western Balkan policymakers seem to have internalized a trade-off between economic development and environmental sustainability, while Chinese policymakers and companies have not stood up to the standards for environmental protection (Tsimonis et al. 2019).[5] As we will see in the later sections of this paper, these practices have been increasingly challenged and already to a certain extent revised, not least as a result of the pressure of the EU and the US.

Additional ideational pillars are to be found in the rhetoric of developing a sense of a shared future of planetary scope, and working towards the construction of a community of common destiny for humanity (CCD) (Zhang 2018). Championed by Xi Jinping, the concept of constructing CCD provides a general direction for a globally responsible China to lead by example and steer the development of global affairs under a particular set of principles.[6] CCD emphasizes the interdependence between China and the rest of the world, and is often juxtaposed against the growing nationalist tendencies in the West, in particular, against the slogan "America First" promoted by former US President Donald Trump (Gardels 2018). In their relations with CESEE; the notion of CCD has been instrumental in the endeavors by Chinese actors to gradually change the international context from one of geopolitical/geoeconomic struggle, to one of rather desecuritized (Jakimów 2019), benign cooperation, and indirectly promoting a different narrative of a world in which China has an ever-more central role.

China's global vision is ultimately aimed at those that did not fare well under Western-led globalization: actors coming from developing countries, transitional economies and developed countries ravaged by crises; it is therefore understandable that ideas of corridors, belts, roads, industrialization and modernization will not be as appealing to the most advanced economies – who have already reached significant levels of development.[7] In theory, such a worldview is poised to be appealing to Balkan audiences; nevertheless, in reality there are as many obstacles to its diffusion as there are catalysts.

For one, the "New Silk Road" narratives have indeed managed to trigger the geoeconomic imagination of insiders in the cooperation with China (but also of people outside the insider circles). The idea of taking advantage of the Western Balkan's geographical position and turning its structural weaknesses into advantages has inspired many in the region. The promise of the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Line connecting Budapest, Belgrade, Skopje and Athens (and even a Danube-Morava-Vardar-Aegean waterway); the promise of expanding the highway network in the region, re-industrialization, technological upgrade and other investments have helped create narratives about the geoeconomy of the region, different from anything else before. While these narratives have been to some extent reinforced by the advent of certain projects on the ground, overall, they have been primarily based on ideational considerations, and sometimes wishful thinking by Western Balkan actors. The imagination of Western Balkan actors

5 In 2020, according to Financial Times, Chinese actors have been increasingly pursuing green development projects, which now represent the majority of all the Belt and Road investment (Shepherd 2021). But the Western Balkans seems to be an exception to this trend.

6 These principles are to be found in the discursive practices of China's top leaders; for instance, talking in front of the UN General Assembly and presenting the idea of constructing CCD for humanity, China's President Xi Jinping discussed the principles of developing international relations on equal footing, engaging in "mutual consultation and show mutual understanding," develop a global security architecture based on "fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits," promotion of open and inclusive development, boost "inter-civilization exchanges" and "build an ecosystem that puts mother nature and green development first" (Sonnad 2015).

7 However, OECD countries also note increasing connectivity and infrastructural gaps themselves.

even trumps the one of their Chinese counterparts. At one event, a Chinese expert responded to the wish lists of some Western Balkan and other CESEE interlocutors by stating that "China is not Santa Claus."[8]

Yet, local actors have envisioned a prosperous Western Balkans (under the Belt and Road) not as a product of a significant geopolitical and geoeconomic transformation, but rather as an outcome of a mere China-driven nudge of their economies (Dimitrijević 2016). Regardless of their shared interests with China, Western Balkan policymakers and experts have remained firm believers in the end of history narrative, and subscribe to the idea of belonging to the West civilizationally, and to the Global North developmentally. In other words, whereas they have embraced economic cooperation with China, they never embraced a role as part of the Global South, but rather had continuously restated their identity as a part of the North who has not quite made it there yet (but could make it with China's help, among others').[9] In fact, far more often, Western Balkan actors perceive the world through the East-West dichotomy, rather than the North-South one. For many, then, the "Eastern" overtone of the cooperation with China is a major deal breaker; they do not want to have anything to do with the "East," even when the stakes are high. A discussion with local scholars and stakeholders has led to one of them proclaiming that North Macedonia should not get involved with projects with China even if it is economically beneficial, since the country has a strong pro-Western orientation and interest in maintaining its Western partnerships. It was proclaimed that the country should be ready to even pay a higher economic cost for staying true to its strategic orientation.[10]

The strengthening of the Western identity of the Balkans as a byproduct of the relations with China, even though it may intuitively suggest that China has been failing in the region, is paradoxically not necessarily far off from China's intentions. Chinese policymakers, while openly expressing their vision for a new world, are aware about the constraints posed by incumbent power relations, and thus sometimes express contradicting points. Therefore, it is not surprising when authoritative Chinese voices, while thinking of the Balkans in "Global South" terms, also express support for the accession to the EU of the Western Balkan countries, arguing that "China believes this will make its own investment safer;" while at the same time warning Western Balkan leaders "not [to] fall into the trap of seeing China as an alternative to the EU" (Liu 2019, 102).[11] The legacy of the Euro-optimistic thinking in China plays a particular role as well: aside from the economic interdependence between the EU and China, who comprise the largest trading relationship in the world, Chinese policymakers and experts have historically seen the process of European integration as a net positive development for the world, and to be something in accord with China's interests (Shambaugh, Sandschneider, and Zhou 2007).[12] However, this has not really had a significant impact on the worldview of the majority of Balkan actors.

Altogether, ideas of a Sino-centric world order, driven by the CCD rhetoric in ideational and the globalization of China's developmental state in material terms, have provided novelties in the debates on the role and trajectory of the Western Balkans in the global political economy. Yet, enthusiasm about closer cooperation with China did not automatically translate into enthusiasm about any significant changes on the global stage, while Chinese actors themselves have also supported this point of view. Instead, the debates on global issues have been absent from Sino-Balkan dialogues, as the interactions between the two sides were always framed as pragmatic, economy-oriented and almost non-political in nature (Jakimów 2019). The lack of consideration of the global context, however, has proven to be short-sighted and one of the key blind spots of the contemporary Sino-Balkan relationship. It is the changes on the world stage, beyond the Western Balkans, that have most shaped the region's relationship with China in the last few years.

8 Event in Budapest, July 2018.

9 During 17+1 events, official speeches made by Western Balkan and other CESEE officials always include references to the commitments to the EU and NATO (Serbia being an exception to the latter). For example, see the speech by the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić to the China – CEEC Think-Tank Symposium in Beijing 2016, who pointed out to the fact that "[Serbian] citizens have elected the European path and embraced reforms as the only way to make their economy competitive and achieve the European standard of living" (MFA Serbia 2016).

10 Event in Tetovo, October 2018.

11 After all, Chinese authoritative voices have also called China's relations with CESEE "South-South cooperation with North-South characteristics," too.

12 To a significant extent, China's support for European integration is owing to the belief that China needs united and strategically autonomous Europe as a check of the hegemony of the United States.

China's Unintended Ideational Impact

Ideational impact is not always intentional, or it does not unveil itself in the intended way. As Arrighi (Arrighi 2008, 8) has long ago hypothesized, the combination of China's advance and the backtracking of the West could indeed have major consequences for the global constellation of power. These consequences could occur regardless of the intentions and desires of the Chinese leadership.

The change of posture of the CCP and the Chinese government does not happen in a vacuum, but rather against the background of a changing global landscape with an open-ended trajectory. With the growing number of problems experienced at home in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, key promoters of the hegemonic liberal democratic normative blueprint – chiefly, the US and the EU – have slowed down in terms of their efforts to promote their values abroad (and increasingly struggle to uphold their values at home) (Carothers 2015). As a consequence, the global financial crisis affected the balance not only of economic power, but also reduced the appeal of the liberal-democratic script (Womack 2017).

What stands in the way for Chinese policymakers are the unintended consequences of Chinese actions, and the reactions they inspire among others – both actors in the regions where they are present (in this case, the Western Balkans), and external stakeholders. While China has immense resources at its disposal, it still has to overcome the lack of experience, transgressive practices and behavior and the differences in culture and values which complicate the ever-increasing volume of its interactions abroad. At the same time, beyond China's actions there are numerous strategies of contestation and adaptation proliferated among a number of actors; these efforts are increasingly transnationally coordinated (e.g. the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China). They also (re)shape the ideational structures of others. An exclusive focus on Chinese actions – even if the most refined one – thus cannot fully explain China's ideational impact.

The transnational public debates on rising China, the (re) interpretation of the global political economy in which China occupies an ever-more central role, and the inevitable challenge for actors from all over the world to adapt to the new reality are all open-ended processes. These debates, by definition, do not only concern China and "us in relation to China," but also the question of "our dispositions" and "us in relation to the West," which interweaves the debate on China with important questions pertaining to(self-identification and positioning at the national, regional and global levels (Pan 2018).

These interpretive processes can never be fully disentangled; and therefore, an objective, value-neutral framework to understand Global China (and its implications for "us") is impossible to reach. Instead, what happens is a constant deliberation, conversation, and a quest for creating a provisional inter-subjective framework for understanding a world in which China plays a significant role. The notion of such processes of negotiating the meaning of China renders the actual knowledge of China – and in particular China's intentions – ever less significant for the outcomes of the grand processes of interaction, and for the assessment of China's ideational impact. Instead, what matters is "our" discussion of China and the various factors that shape it.

Direct–Unintentional: China as a Contentious Issue

The arrival of China as an external actor in multiparty democracies makes relations with it a (potential) subject of debates and potential political divisions. The sheer size of China, coupled with its extraordinary socio-political and economic trajectory, and its global aspirations, make it a hot topic for societal actors in all countries of the world. And the discussions on China in some parts of the world in turn affect the discussions on China in others. Thus, with its increasing visibility and presence in the Western Balkans, China has become an important issue in domestic debates in the region, while the Western Balkans has joined the global discussions on China.

The topic of (relations with) China has become gradually more significant, complicated, and contentious in the region, as interaction with it has proceeded. While in the period of establishing the new cooperation parameters with China (the early 2010s) few actors seemed to have an opinion on China, by the 2020s, the topic of China has morphed into a full blown (foreign) policy dilemma. Paradoxically, then, the less experience Balkan actors had with China, the more certain they seemed about how to proceed with it; and as they have been gaining experience in dealing with it, they have also grown more uncertain about it. Illustrative is the shift of the former Montenegrin

President Đukanović from a Sino-enthusiast who oversaw the signing of the expensive Bar-Boljare railway deal, to an alarmist about China's economic influence in the Western Balkans in 2019 (Stojanović 2019). In North Macedonia, cooperation with China under the 17+1 and Belt and Road frameworks featured prominently in the electoral program of Social Democratic Union of Macedonia in 2016; however, after coming in power in 2017, one of the first moves of the party has been to halt and renegotiate ongoing projects done in cooperation with Chinese actors.

The decreasing certainty in the thinking about China is a result of the restoration of Manichean East-West dichotomies in the region, as a consequence of recent global political developments (see the section below). While regional actors initially did not interpret the arrival of China in the Western Balkans as necessarily contradicting the values and interests of the West, over time, this narrative has been gradually changing. The impact of China in this sense has been the creation of an altogether new, parallel discussion about the prospects for development of the region beyond traditional notions and partners. The rising uncertainty in the thinking on China has led to an increase in the bifocal portrayal (Pavlićević 2018) as an opportunity vs. threat, or rather a simultaneous opportunity-cum-threat.

Another unintended consequence, rooted primarily in domestic developments, is what can be termed 'politicization by association.' In principle, when going abroad, while cultivating relations with a broad range of actors (including the opposition) (Hackenesch and Bader 2020), Chinese actors have a strong preference in discussing with incumbent officials, and have a strong preference for official channels for communication. Due to this association, when the incumbents in the region are controversial, China itself becomes part of the controversy.[13] This is a particularly significant issue in cases where domestic politics are strained, and there are elements of state capture or other form of transgressive governance. Such has been the example of the relations between China and North Macedonia under the Gruevski regime (2006-2015), where a strong anti-Gruevski sentiment has also produced distrust towards China (Gjorgjioska and Vangeli 2017). Additionally, China is politicized cooperation with it is often used as a way to win domestic political support, the most recent example being the one of Serbia, where China has been central to the economy-oriented political communication strategy of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and President Vučić (Prelec 2020). By extension, China is necessarily associated with Vučić in the Serbian public discourse (Vladisavljev 2021).

The terms of discussion on China, therefore, are becoming increasingly different from what China projects. While China wants to be associated with narratives of economic progress, without many questions being asked about (geo) politics, in practice this is rarely the case. However, the emergence of China as a contentious topic in the Western Balkans is distinct from the process of the normative charge of the China debate in Western societies. In the West, there is a spirit of economic competition with China, and fear of too many linkages with China. In the Western Balkans, China is increasingly challenged from different perspectives: the fear is getting caught in a cross-fire of great power competition, and a moderate backlash by once-enthusiastic supporters who become disillusioned due to unfulfilled expectations (Turcsányi 2020). In fact, for all the discussions on the "China Model," the differences in norms and values, and the different mode of cooperation, it is worth remembering that the approach of the Western Balkan leaders to China in many ways echoed their approach to attracting other foreign direct investment. Once they have come to terms with the distinctiveness and the true weight of the partnership with China, they had to either backtrack, double down, or maneuver out of the diplomatically unfavorable situation.

At the same time, some points of convergence between trends in the West and in the Western Balkans do exist. Liberal media and liberal civil society organizations play a crucial role in the process. They act as watchdogs – following both China's footprints in the region (and addressing questions such as financial and environmental sustainability of projects carried in cooperation with China, security implications, labor relations, and so on – directly challenging the proposed pragmatic economic logic of the cooperation), but also following the Western debates on China, drawing lessons, and working on aligning themselves with the positions of the EU/US. They find new ways to connect, and forge a common geopolitical identity in relation to the common "Other" that China resembles – which has never been the case before.

13 The EU and US as traditional stakeholders are also often held up to a similar standard, however their position in the region is much stronger and stabler than the position of China.

Indirect–Unintentional: Primacist Worldview

China's arrival inevitably impacts the broader context in which Balkan actors operate in ways that are unforeseen, unintended, and even take place as a 'boomerang effect.' Moreover, the most significant unintended consequences of China's actions are the ideational shifts among powerful actors in the West, who then have a significant impact on how actors in the Western Balkans think about China.

The most dramatic change as a result of the rise and pro-activity of Global China took place in the United States (US). As a result of China's new global posture, under President Donald J. Trump, China was put front and center in America's national security strategy. All aspects of US-China relations, including both commercial and people-to-people ties are seen as belonging in the domain of national security (Rosen 2018). As part of this foreign policy shift, American diplomats in the last few years have urged their partners from abroad, including the Western Balkans, to be more vigilant about China (Kuhn 2020).

Europeans, while adopting a slightly meeker approach, have also been adjusting to a world in which China plays an ever more central role. After a long period of cooperation-cum-competition and co-evolution (Austermann, Vangeli, and Wang 2013), as a result of the shift in the dynamics of the EU-China relationship, the EU now defines China simultaneously as a partner in policy areas where there is agreement (e.g. climate), an economic competitor and a systemic rival – and often paradoxically juggles the three epithets simultaneously and interchangeably (Bütikofer 2020). Economic relations are a subject of securitization (Rogelja and Tsimonis 2020), and investment – as a result of the surge of Chinese capital in Europe – is now subject to protective regulation (Duchâtel 2020), while China's strategy to become global innovation leader has prompted pan-European debates for new industrial policies (*The Economist* 2019). In light of China's pro-activity, national debates on China undergo deep transformation (Esteban and Otero Iglesias 2020). Developments in the United Kingdom (UK) (Warrell 2020), and Australia have followed a similar pattern (Kassam 2020).

These developments have dramatically changed the ideational context in which Balkans-China relations develop as well. At the moment of its arrival in the Western Balkans (late 2000s), China still had a rather cooperative relationship with the West, and in particular with the EU, despite Europeans' concerns. China has for a long time contemplated tripartite cooperation (China-EU-Balkans). Initially, a number of people in the Western Balkans picked up interest in China and in exploring possibilities for cooperation with China in order to "Westernize" themselves: up until the 2010s, having a prolific relationship with China was a sign of being a successful participant in globalization. Some policymakers and intellectuals picked up an interest in China by reading Anglophone works such as Kissinger's "On China."[14] The new possibilities for interaction with China were really seen as an opportunity to catch up with the rest of Europe, which had built substantial relations with China ever since the 1970s. However, with the ideational shift in Europe and the US in recent years, such thinking has diminished. Even more so, the EU has problematized Balkan-China relations and reframed its agenda so as to respond to China's initiatives (Pavlićević 2019). A similar, but much more resolute transformation was seen in the attitude of the US, which has taken the Western Balkans as one of the venues in which its global efforts to contain the advance of China take place.

This in turn has had a significant impact on how Balkan actors have been rethinking the role of China in the region, as well as their own relationships with China. While the prospects of economic cooperation and the promise of geoeconomic vision still retain significant attractiveness, the actions of China are increasingly interpreted through the lens of zero-sum competition among the major powers. China is increasingly seen with cautiousness, economic cooperation is increasingly seen as a politically sensitive and even a security issue, and what has begun as an exercise in diversifying the Western Balkan countries' global partnerships is increasingly seen a risky endeavor that may be at odds with the EU reform agenda (Markovic Khaze and Wang 2020).

This new reality, in some ways, benefits the Western Balkans actors. While for many of them getting sucked into great power competition is an undesirable scenario, it still offers opportunities. For one, the relationship with China can be framed as helping in the attainment of the pro-Western agenda, e.g. in terms of economically catching up with

14 Interview in Belgrade, April 2018.

the rest of Europe (even if this may sound awkward to Westerners), but even more significantly, it can be used as a point to attract the attention of Western actors. As the then Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov had put it, China has been filling up the void left behind by the West (Foster 2017). Similar point has been argued by the then President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, who has called on the EU not to leave the region dependent on China (and Russia) (Stojanović 2019). To some extent, this strategy may have already had an effect - in response to China, the EU has reasserted itself in the region (Pavlićević 2019), and so has the US too.

Concluding Remarks

In general terms, we can distill the findings from this paper into the following four points:

(i) in the period 2009-2019 China has exercised a direct intentional impact and has managed to affect the way Western Balkan elites think of China, but not to the extent Chinese actors originally desired;

(ii) the new geoeconomic vision of China has been acknowledged in the region, but embraced selectively – Western Balkan actors have welcomed the idea of regional prosperity under a Belt and Road framework, but without buying the idea of broader global transformations;

(iii) contrary to China's desire not to get involved in domestic political debates and its desecuritization efforts, it has become an increasingly politicized topic; and

(iv) contrary to China's intention to promote a benign vision of the world based on cooperation, as a result of the tensions between the US and China, Western Balkan actors increasingly subscribe to (and instrumentalize) a primacist, zero-sum vision of global politics.

These findings are displayed in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Outcomes of China's ideational impact in the region

	Intentional	**Unintentional**
Direct	Accepting Chinese initiatives as a Plan B	Politicization of China as both an opportunity and a threat; emergence of China as a domestically contentious topic
Indirect	Acknowledging but not fully internalizing China's view of the world; accepting Chinese visions for the region	Reinforcing the understanding of a Western-centric world under threat

As previous research has shown, within knowledge networks of dense and regular interaction, where a certain level of intersubjectivity has been established, notable elements of China's ideational impact can be observed. Taking a broader look at Balkan societies, this paper however confirms that this impact slowly dissipates the further one moves from those networks. At the same time, whatever snapshots have been taken at different points in time, Sino-Balkan relations today become ever more convoluted, thereby making the question of ideational impact highly complex. The reasons for this are manifold – and they are to be found both at the micro and macro levels – or rather the interaction between the dispositions and interests of regional actors, and the dynamics in global politics and the global economy.

Moreover, while the debate on China in the region is still in its nascent stages, we can identify a key contradiction that is shaping the attitude of Western Balkan actors, which also permeates throughout the analysis presented here. It stems from the belief (or rather desire) that growing Sino-Balkan economic cooperation can be achieved without causing any significant disturbances in the geopolitical status quo. Conversely, the most significant ideational non-impact among Western Balkan elites has been the misrecognition of the point that the rise of China and its ability to become an economic actor in the region is a result of a disturbance of the status quo to begin with. While cooperation with China may have once appeared as a shortcut to success, it is therefore increasingly becoming a risky strategy for local actors. Some are ready to embrace the risk, while others look for ways to avoid it.

While this analysis focused on developments in the period 2009-2019, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has even further advanced the zero-sum global power constellation and increased anxieties about the future of the Western Balkans (Latal 2020), and about the trajectory of the planet as a whole. China has become an ever more sensitive topic. Yet, recent developments suggest that this trend may take on a new direction. On one hand, the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the European Union and China at the end of 2020 and the launch of the EU-China High-level Environment and Climate Dialogue point out to potentially significant changes in the Brussels-Beijing relationship; or at least at the return of constructive diplomacy. On the other hand, even though Chinese authoritative sources have greeted the inauguration of the incoming US President Joe Biden (Wang 2021), Biden himself has embraced a tough line on

China which is in some ways more explicit than the one pursued by his predecessor Donald Trump (Churchill 2021). Given how much such developments matter for China's indirect impact on the Western Balkans, it is to be expected that in the coming period the thinking on China in the region will be further shaped by these trends in the West. Should the positions of the EU and US on China significantly diverge, eventually, Western Balkan leaders may eventually be faced with a choice not whether they embrace a "pro-Western" or "pro-Chinese" attitude, but rather whether they embrace a "pro-European" or "pro-American" stance on China. Should such a scenario take place, it may resemble a curious twist in how China has been challenging and (re) shaping the thinking of actors in the region in ways never before anticipated.

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About the author

Anastas Vangeli (PhD, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences) is a Research Fellow at the EU*Asia Institute at the ESSCA School of Management, and an Adjunct Professor at ESSCA's Shanghai Campus. He is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow with the ChinaMed Project of the Turin World Affairs Institute and a Contract Professor at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Turin. His research interests include the ideational impact of Global China, economic nationalism and the dynamics of globalization in the (post)COVID-19 era. His work has been published in *Journal of Contemporary China, The China Journal, China & World Economy, Asia Europe Journal, Journal of Current Chinese Affairs and Nationalities Papers.*

About the project

"Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence" is a follow-up project that aims to build upon a knowledge base established in the preceding project "Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities," which mapped, analyzed and publicized Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States' influence activities in the region. The innovative project focuses on in-depth socially rooted research and investigative journalism. Its design reflects the aim to go beyond conventional analytical frameworks, overcoming ideologically constructed stereotypes and methodological nationalism while combining a variety of methodological approaches from security studies to visual anthropology.

Project outputs consist of fifteen analytical studies and fifteen journalistic articles drawing on their findings. Major observations on external actors' influence gathered throughout the work on the project will be summarized in a final reflection paper.

Project duration: 10/2019 – 03/2021
Project coordinators: Barbora Chrzová (chrzova@pssi.cz), Petr Čermák (cermak@pssi.cz) and Anja Grabovac (grabovac@pssi.cz)
Scientific advisor: Ioannis Armakolas

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PSSI is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI's mission is to build an ever-growing group of informed and security-minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

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