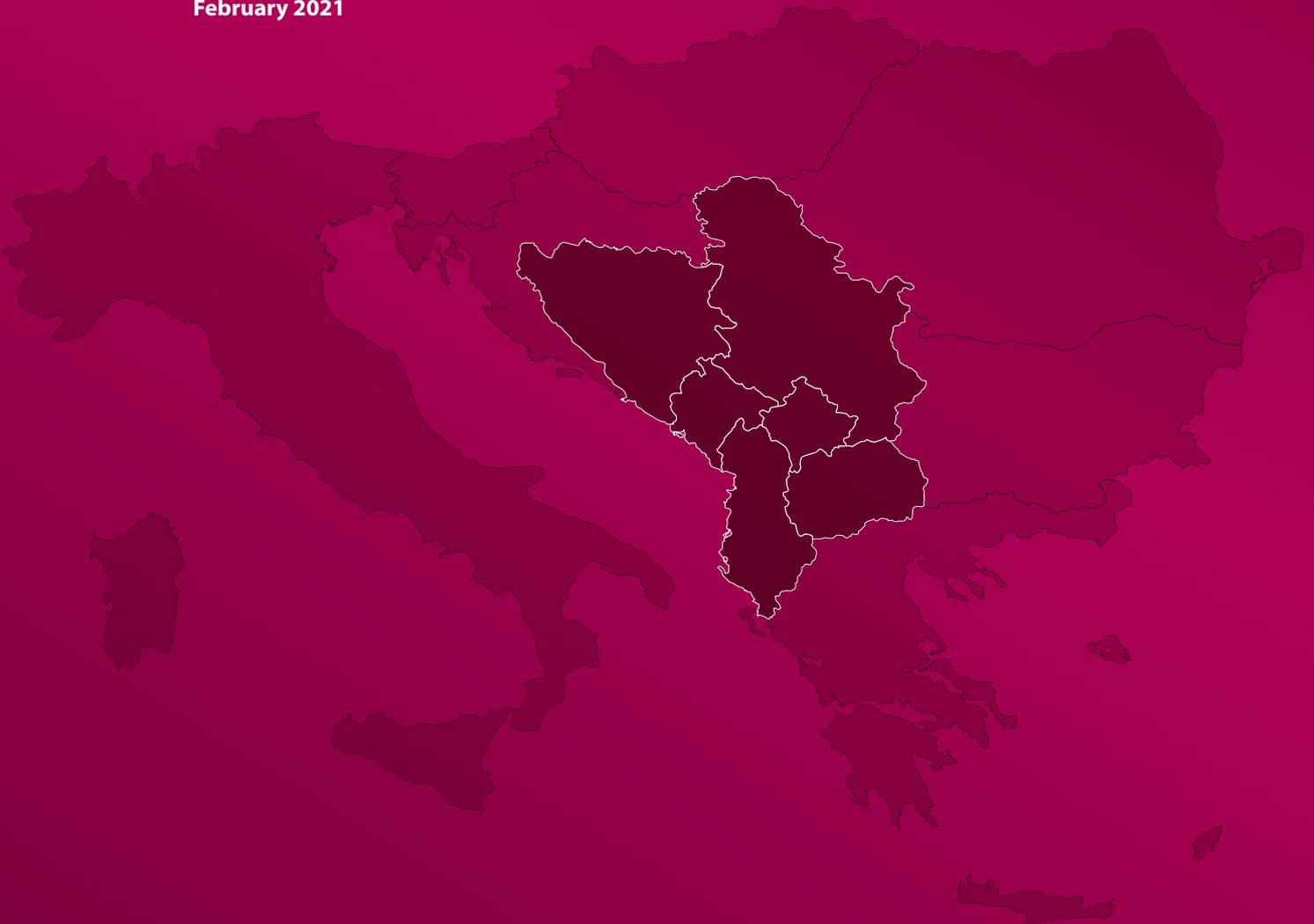




# **Western Balkan Discourses On and Positioning Towards China During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Anastas Vangeli**

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During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Author: **Anastas Vangeli**

Proofreading: **Zack Kramer**

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The Prague Security Studies Institute, Pohořelec 6  
118 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

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## Executive summary

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The COVID-19 pandemic has placed China in the spotlight in global news, intensifying the already vibrant discussion on its rise around the world – and in the Western Balkans as well. For the Western Balkan countries, China has overall been far from the main concern as COVID-19 swept through the region. However, the association of COVID-19 with the outbreak in Hubei Province was too strong for China to be disregarded. Later on, China itself was proactive, and over time positioned itself as a significant external actor in the region during the pandemic, while attracting the attention of concerned observers in the West, who have also had an impact on how regional actors have seen and positioned themselves in relation to China.

The discourses on China in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic went through three stages. In the early stage (roughly January – March 2020), the central topic was the onset of the outbreak in China; later on, as the outbreak in China dwindled and outbreaks elsewhere spiked (roughly April – September 2020), including in the Western Balkans, the debates centered on so-called “mask diplomacy” and geopolitical competition with regards to the response to the pandemic; and finally, the debate entered the “vaccine diplomacy” stage once COVID-19 vaccines became yet another subject of geopolitical competition, with ripple effects also felt in the Western

Balkans (since October 2020, and escalating in early 2021). Initially, China was seen through the prism of the chaos in Wuhan and the global skepticism about its handling of the crisis; in the “mask diplomacy” stage, it was seen as an external actor that could be a source of assistance or source of trouble (or both); and in the “vaccine diplomacy” stage, it has become seen as a partner in efforts to immunize the population of the region against COVID-19. The attitudes of regional actors have not been uniform. Serbia’s approach of active opportunity-seeking has stood out, as opposed to the under-the-radar approach of other governments, which altered between opportunism and cautiousness. There have been vigilant alarmists about China’s role in the region too, but not among ruling elites.

Developments during the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed that as a highly asymmetrical relationship, Western Balkans-China relations depend greatly on the standing and actions of Beijing at the world stage. Currently, China is the sole external actor in the Western Balkans that is not facing deep uncertainty on the domestic front, and has the luxury to plan the future on the external one. In some ways, this is an instance of history repeating itself, as what facilitated China’s arrival as an actor in the region in the past decade to begin with was its emergence in better shape than the West in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

# Introduction

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The global debates on China, and by extension, the debates on China in the Balkans have arrived at a new critical juncture with the COVID-19 pandemic. China was the first country to experience a major COVID-19 outbreak and to undergo lockdowns in the first months of 2020, and it was the first to come out of emergency mode, ending its lockdown measures by the middle of 2020. Its early outbreak and the handling of the situation became a contentious topic in the global debates. Subsequently, China has attempted to position itself as a leading player in the global response to the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. China was, moreover, the only major economy that noted positive economic growth in 2020, and is now set to overtake the US as the largest economy in the world a few years earlier than previously expected (BBC 2020). All of this has put China in the spotlight in global news, intensifying the already vibrant discussion on its rise around the world – and in the Western Balkans as well.

This paper explores how the discourses on China in the Western Balkans have been (re)shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this has affected the positions of Western Balkan countries vis-a-vis China. The Western Balkans is a region in which China in the period 2009-2019 has emerged as one of the external actors, and has been perceived as a “Plan B” partner by the locals (Vangeli 2019). It has been also increasingly perceived as a potentially

disruptive actor by traditional stakeholders (in the first place, the EU and the US). The paper considers the discourse and positioning of policymakers, media, knowledge elites in the Western Balkans, as well as, to the extent that is backed by credible data, the popular discourse. It looks for points of continuity and change in how Western Balkan actors have perceived and talked about China in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also examining how China’s agenda has fared in the region, and to what extent developments in the Western Balkans have mirrored and/or contrasted those in the West. To do so, the paper uses secondary sources and evidence from traditional and social media.

In the following section, the paper provides background on the discourses on China in the Western Balkans prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and develops an analytical framework centered on the “opportunity/threat” dichotomy originally developed by Pavličević (2018), while also taking into account the degree of pro-activity with which different actors have approached China. It then turns to analyzing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing three elements in particular, or rather three stages that were central to the development of the discourse on China in the period between February 2020 and February 2021: the Wuhan stage; the “mask diplomacy” stage; and the “vaccine diplomacy” stage.



# Background and Analytical Framework

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After three decades of post-socialist transition, the Western Balkan countries today are still considered to be a zone of instability and potential crisis. However, despite the tumultuous transition, Western Balkan elites have not turned their backs on Western-led, liberal globalization. The protracted transition, nevertheless, made them primarily inward-looking; while the superior positions of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) as external actors in the region led to the emergence of an undisputed Western-centric understanding of the world, in which both the Western Balkan countries' agencies at the global stage and events and developments beyond the West were rarely discussed. Throughout this period, Western Balkan nations have embraced an identity as Europeans-in-the-making, treating their European future as their destiny and a condition for their survival, but at the same time, a goal that needs to be earned, and which requires total devotion of time and resources – and most importantly, which is still not within reach. China, in this sense, has been welcomed as a partner in the economic renewal of the region, but not embraced as a force that can transform the global order nor that can confer a new identity on the Western Balkans (Vangeli 2021).

China became relevant in the region in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008-09. During the 1990s, previous ties with China were divested and China was not high on the agenda up until 2009. It was China's pro-activity that led to new momentum. Here, the Balkans was not alone: in the past decade, China became an actor with a worldwide presence, becoming an important topic of discussion even in the most remote parts of the world, and all countries and territories irrespective of size. Along with a dozen other countries in the broader region of Central-East and Southeast Europe (CESEE), the Western Balkan countries have been socialized in the 17+1 format convened by China; and moreover, they have been involved, along with dozens of other countries around the world, in the flagship Belt and Road Initiative. What was obvious now was that throughout the Western Balkans, there was a big knowledge gap on China, marking the "[transition] from

'not knowing about China' to 'not knowing what to do about China'" (Pavličević 2018, 689).

China itself came with an agenda of desecuritizing the relationship between the two sides (Jakimów 2019). Yet, as China has been promoting its discourse in the region, the 2010s were a period characterized by increased discussion of the global shift in power and scrutinization of the role of Global China in the West. This also affected how Sino-Balkan relations have been discussed in the region and beyond. As Balkan actors have been seeking alignment with external stakeholders on strategic issues, the inputs from the West – usually critical of China's role in the region – have been particularly authoritative in shaping the debate on China (Vangeli 2021). However, in reality, the Western Balkan thinking on China is not solely an externally-driven process. The dispositions, context and interests of local actors also determine the (re)positioning towards China. The discourses on and positions towards China are therefore a result of a complex dialogical process, which is informed through interactions between the various inputs – from China, from the West, and local ones.

What is equally striking about how the thinking on China develops in the region, is the tendency to portray China in categorical terms. The different perspectives on China in the Western Balkans are clustered in broader sets of binaries, of which the most significant ones include, for instance, the discourse on China's strategic genius, as opposed to the one of its strategic incompetence; the discourse on China as a game-changer in the region and China bringing nothing but empty promises; the one on win-win partnership as opposed to the one of neocolonialism. All of these boil to the way of seeing China being an opportunity, and China being a threat (Pavličević 2018). Importantly, these binaries are often based on exaggerations and embellishments, and are often more emotional than rational in nature. Finally, not always have the opportunity and threat approaches to China been mutually exclusive – actors may alternate between the two, or even develop a discourse that rests simultaneously on both the opportunity and threat narratives.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The contemporary binaries on China in the Balkans and beyond are nothing new. Harold Isaacs (1954, 12–13) called these binary images of China "jostling pairs [...] jumbled all together," which include: "the good heathen and the ungrateful wretch, the wise sage and the sadistic executioner, the famine victim and the eater of wondrously good food, the opera bouffe warrior and the heroic or dangerous fighter, the traditional friend and the contemporary foe, the thrifty and honorable man and the sly and treacherous criminal." Other authors ever since have written on the "bifocal lenses" with which outsiders see China (Pan 2012).

At the same time, in addition to the opportunity-threat binary, the level of pro-activity is another factor that determines the way Western Balkan actors positioned themselves towards China. Some actors have voiced

their position on China much more visibly than others. Combining the two criteria, we can come up with a more complex model, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Ideal-type model showing different discourses on China pre-COVID-19

	<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Threat</b>
<b>Visible</b>	<b>Active opportunity seeking</b> Pro-active participation in China-led initiatives, platitudes to Chinese leadership, advertising of cooperation	<b>Active alarmism</b> Voice criticism on China, link domestic with global debates
<b>Under the radar</b>	<b>Cautious opportunity utilization</b> Some participation in China-led initiatives, some cooperation, but without attracting too much attention	<b>Threat avoidance</b> Reduction of contact/interaction with China, but without making too much noise

In sum, there have been four general ideal types of attitudes towards China in the pre-COVID-19 world: (1) active opportunity seeking; (2) cautious opportunity utilization; (3) active alarmism; and (4) threat avoidance. In practice, of course, there have been blurred lines between the different positions. Moreover, while some actors like Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić can be easily classified as active opportunity seekers, others, like Montenegro's President Milo Đukanović have transitioned from active opportunity seekers to active alarmism. However, with the exceptions of China-convened summits where all guests usually voice their appreciation for China, and with the exception of the announcements of joint projects, most

of the Western Balkan actors have not been too vocal about cooperation with China. Likewise, even when they have had a more critical stance towards China, they have usually not confronted it openly, but rather tried to reduce contact behind closed doors. In fact, the loudest alarmist voices about China in the Western Balkans have come from outside of the policy elite, but rather from the media and civil society.

Having clarified the conceptual foundations, we now turn to the analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the discourses and positioning towards China in the region.

# The Impact of COVID-19

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Until the moment of writing this paper (mid-February 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic induced a number of overlapping, mutually reinforcing crises: (1) global public healthcare crisis of immense proportions; (2) collective mental health crisis as fears and uncertainties associated with both the pandemic and the restrictive measures taken in response to it took their toll; (3) socio-political crisis as polarization in societies deepened, and conspiracy theories have proliferated; and (4) unprecedented economic crisis, with economic activity being interrupted and consumption hampered. As most of the world sees new waves, peaks and emergence of mutant strains a year after the onset of the pandemic, all of the aforementioned crises are still ongoing, and will be changing the world in ways that are difficult to imagine.

Events, or rather historical episodes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impact both material reality (including the daily life of people in all walks of life) and public debates on virtually any topic. The COVID-19 pandemic, in that sense, has prompted the reconceptualization of a number of core debates in societies, from philosophical issues such as life and death, to public policies and economic models, to global politics, and in particular, the role of China. To some extent, China's experience as the first-exposed nation to the deadly virus is used to better understand the spread of the disease and to devise response strategies (WHO 2020). However, to a much more significant extent, COVID-19 is taken as a critical historical juncture that affects how actors in the West and beyond understand and position themselves towards China.<sup>2</sup>

In both the US (Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020) and the EU (Leonard and Krastev 2020), right from the onset of the pandemic, the image of China significantly worsened, as Beijing has been subjected to an unprecedented level of suspicion and criticism in global debates, on issues ranging from transparency and disclosing information from the early Wuhan outbreak, to the handling of the contagion once it became clear that it had spread to tens of thousands of people, to its alleged influence in the World Health Organization (WHO), to its attempt to lead the global

response to the pandemic. Western voices fear that the pandemic is precipitating the power shift from West to East, calling China an "unpopular winner" of 2020 (Spross 2020). However, this victory, in addition to being unpopular, has been also deemed unfair: feeling biologically violated by China, a number of actors in the West have been seeking responsibility and accountability from China for the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have even called for China to pay reparations (Moffett 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with a number of other global developments, and therefore the geopolitically charged discourses on China could not be seen in isolation from them. The trade and tech war initiated by the Trump administration of the US continued throughout the pandemic; and American debates heated further as China emerged as one of the central issues in the 2020 US presidential elections. The incoming EU Commission aimed to flex its geopolitical muscles, especially in the context of its relations with China.

On the other side, unlike any other occasion in recent history, Chinese diplomats during the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated a pro-active, highly self-confident approach, promoting their methods in containing COVID-19 as the best way of tackling the pandemic, at times criticizing the Western response, and promoting an alternative narrative on the origin of the pandemic (Feng 2020). Being the world's leading producer of respiratory masks and protective equipment, China's so called "mask diplomacy" has been challenged in the West, prompting a whole new discourse on on-shoring and near-shoring medical supply chains, and reducing dependency on China in other critical sectors as well (Fuchs et al. 2020). The situation got a new dynamic once vaccines against COVID-19 were developed. With the global distribution of vaccines experiencing major shortcomings, China has seized the moment by offering its significantly cheaper vaccines to countries around the world, which has become another contentious issue in Western debates (AFP 2020).

For the Western Balkan countries, China has overall been far from the main concern as COVID-19 swept through

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2 In the understanding of Global China in the West, COVID-19 as a critical juncture has been preceded by: (i) the global financial crisis (GFC) 2008, with China emerging as relatively better off than the West; (ii) the strengthening of the Communist Party under Xi Jinping and China's change of posture post-2012; (iii) the shift in US foreign policy and ensuing tensions in the US-China relationship, which started under the Trump administration (2017-2021). All of these points in time have shaped how actors in the West have interpreted China and how they have positioned themselves with regards to it; the COVID-19 pandemic follows up on these preceding episodes (Vangeli, n.d.).



the region. Domestic woes, related to the handling of the disease (i.e. hospitalization, testing and tracing, quarantining, restricting socio-economic activities and providing state stimulus) have been the central challenge, as in the rest of the world. Moreover, for a few of the Balkan countries, 2020 and early 2021 were election years (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo had parliamentary elections; Bosnia and Herzegovina had municipal elections, and Albania is gearing for its own parliamentary elections), which made them particularly focused on domestic affairs. Externally, Albania and North Macedonia focused on their respective EU bids and the overdue start of their accession talks. Serbia has been focused on solving the Kosovo conundrum. For Montenegro, domestic political uncertainty has been

interlinked with its relations with Serbia. Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced serious political instabilities.

However, China was far from disregarded. For one, developments in China in January and February 2020 themselves were quite dramatic and the association of COVID-19 with the outbreak in Hubei Province was too strong. Moreover, Western Balkans-China relations have been a hot topic in international debates, and increasingly the US and the EU have expressed their concern with the development of the relationship. On the other hand, China itself was proactive and over time positioned itself as a significant external actor in the region during the pandemic.

# The Balkans and China in Times of COVID-19

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When discussing discourses on and positions towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic, one can note three different stages of development. In the early stages (roughly January – March 2020), the central topic was the onset of the outbreak in China, and in particular in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province; later on, as the outbreak in China dwindled and outbreaks elsewhere spiked (roughly April – September 2020), including in the Western Balkans,

the debates centered on so-called “mask diplomacy” and geopolitical competition with regards to the response to the pandemic; and finally, the debate entered the “vaccine diplomacy” stage once vaccines against COVID-19 became yet another subject of geopolitical competition, with its ripple effects being felt in the Western Balkans, too (since October 2020, and escalating in early 2021).

## First stage: Chaos in Wuhan and global Sino-skepticism

The first major outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan had a significant impact on how the discourse on China developed in the Western Balkans. At least temporarily, the discourse on China took a full swing towards the “threat” perspective. The fear of the novel coronavirus, but also a certain racialization of the outbreak in China, prompted many in the Western Balkans to look at Chinese authorities, but also Chinese people as major culprits for the contagion. This has given fuel to conspiracy theories about the origin and spread of COVID-19, which have not subsided even months after the onset of the pandemic. According to a survey by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advocacy Group (BiEPAG) conducted in October 2020:

“Among the conspiracy theories [in the Western Balkans], the least implausible is the theory that the virus escaped a lab in Wuhan, i.e. that it had existed for longer than publicly known and its origins had been obscured by China. Already less plausible is the theory that claims the Chinese government engineered the coronavirus in a lab”(Bieber et al. 2020).

According to the report, beliefs in these and other conspiracy theories (e.g. that the virus has something to do with the pharmaceutical industry, Bill Gates or the US government) often intersect with attitudes towards foreign policy and global politics (e.g. this is why in Serbia, where the population is most friendly towards China, conspiracy theories that concern China are less popular than in other countries in the region and vice versa). If the proliferation of China-focused conspiracy theories is an indicator, then, COVID-19 has significantly affected geopolitical sentiments on China among the Western Balkan populations.

In the early stage of the pandemic, one could also notice a rise in xenophobic sentiments towards Chinese people, and more broadly, people of Asian descent, who have been profiled as potential carries and spreaders of the virus; some of them were subject to harassment (Hodžić 2020; Makfax 2020). Much of this was based on racist tropes and prejudices, including ones on the eating habits and lifestyle of Chinese people and their portrayal as pathological and backwards (BNN 2020), even in countries with more favorable views towards China such as Serbia. Permutations of the trope “it’s China’s fault” became widespread on social media. Chinese migrants in Serbia were also targeted and harassed, and Chinese migrant-owned shops lost customers due to the belief that they were spreading COVID-19 (Mondo.rs 2020). However, there are two caveats to this: first, xenophobic sentiments in the Western Balkans were perhaps less widespread and less conducive to harassment and violence as the discourse in some Western European countries or the US with more sizeable Chinese communities (HRW 2020); and second, prejudices have been primarily manifested on the level of the popular discourse, but not among elites. In the early stages of the outbreak in Wuhan, while the topic dominated the world news, aside from reports from international news agencies, there was limited original discussion of China in the Western Balkan media. Likewise, policymakers and experts in the region were largely silent.

However, authoritative voices were also silent with regards to the expression of support for China. On a societal level there were some expressions of solidarity (i.e. the “I stand with Wuhan” campaign), primarily organized through some of the Confucius Institutes in the region, however, this was not a widely-shared sentiment. Moreover, initially,



there were no discussions on the effect of the pandemic on cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and China, and in particular the fate of the joint megaprojects constructed in the region. There was some concern about the loss of Chinese tourists (although later on, there was news about the rising interest in the Balkans among Chinese tourists, Bi 2020). Major concerns were voiced in relation to the expected delays of the shipments of goods purchased through AliExpress, the Chinese online retail giant that has amassed a sizable consumer base in the region (Saveska 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the voice of healthcare professionals was amplified, and some of the Balkan epidemiologists talked often about China. Unlike the broader public, and unlike the critical voices among civil society activists and some of the media, healthcare professionals positively assessed China's early response and dealing with the outbreak in Wuhan (Avaz.ba 2020). Later on, a contingent of Chinese medical workers helped set up a COVID-19 center in Serbia (Tanjug 2020), while the undertaking of harsh Chinese-style anti-contagion measures including lockdowns and curfews were labeled a successful model of quarantining, and its implementation in Serbia was enthusiastically greeted (Govoruša 2020).

Yet, the overall picture was that the early stages of the pandemic did more damage than help China's standing in the region. Unhappy with the initial negative publicity, Chinese ambassadors in the region, as in a number of other places around the world, embarked on a charm offensive to present the Chinese point of view. In the months of February and March, their activity was focused on narrating the Chinese version of the story of the outbreak in Wuhan and China's contagion efforts (Embassy of the PRC in Albania 2020), while their message in subsequent weeks was expanded to address the shared challenges and the need for cooperation to tackle COVID-19, and to discuss Chinese assistance to the Western Balkan countries (Kosović 2020; Dan/CDM 2020; SRNA 2020). Even if tamer compared to the activity of Chinese ambassadors in other countries, such pro-activity of Chinese diplomats in the Western Balkans has been in many ways unprecedented. Altogether, however, what these publicity endeavors achieved remains to be seen. While there is a solid trace of how Chinese ambassadors projected their message, there is little data that can help in measuring their impact. Even more so, their messages were contested by some of the media in the region, who echoed the criticism of China in the Western media (RTCG 2020).

## **Second stage: “Mask diplomacy” and political calculations**

Once COVID-19 hit Europe, China attempted to position itself as a key international actor that could help in mitigating the effects of the pandemic and helping countries around the world cope with it. China's global diplomacy, including the landmark Belt and Road Initiative, were now re-purposed as drivers of healthcare cooperation (Moritz 2021). The Western Balkans was one of the regions where China was actively offering assistance, utilizing previously established mechanisms for regional coordination in CESEE. The multilateral forums convened and led by China (under the 17+1 framework) have played a key role in promoting China during the COVID-19 pandemic as well, with a number of video-conferences taking place since March 2020, which have involved policymakers and experts from China and the broader region, including the Western Balkan countries (Huaxia 2020; Xinhua 2020; Liu 2020). Linkages, coordination and cooperation in healthcare were pursued by Chinese actors with their

Western Balkan counterparts even at the municipal level (Municipality of Štip 2020).

China also profiled itself as the largest (and at some point the only) provider of protective and other medical equipment (i.e. respiratory masks, protective gear, testing kits), and pharmaceuticals. Part of the shipments from China came in the form of aid, while part of them were procured via commercial routes (the exact ratio remains unknown, but the estimate is that the majority of the equipment was bought commercially). In some cases, however, there were doubts about the quality of the supplies arriving from China. The problem with Chinese supplies got particular negative publicity in Bosnia, where Prime Minister Fadil Novalić has been mired in a corruption scandal regarding the purchase of ventilators from a Chinese company (Sito-Sucic 2020).



The overall assessment of China's role as assistance provider in mitigating the pandemic during this stage had both elements of "opportunity" and "threat." A popular trope in the West was that China was taking advantage of the pandemic to advance its foreign policy agenda. Liberal media and civil society organizations in the Western Balkans echoed Western narratives about alleged Chinese disinformation campaigns and alleged ulterior motives behind the "mask diplomacy" (Dukovska 2020), reinforcing a "threat" perspective of China in the region. However, the threat narrative did not catch on in the Western Balkans as it did in other parts of Europe. China's help arrived as the Western Balkan countries struggled to overcome their shortages, at a time when there were no alternative suppliers and the EU had introduced a ban on medical equipment exports (Bayer et al. 2020). At the official level, therefore, Balkan policymakers expressed their appreciation and gratitude to China for the assistance. The responses, of course varied – with the dramatic and by now widely known "Brother Xi" speech by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić in which he also shamed the EU for the lack of solidarity (Chrzová and Čermák 2020) getting the widest coverage and provoking reactions in the world press. In the other countries, however, gratitude towards China was accompanied with much more caution. Leaders have seemed to avoid following in the footsteps of Vučić and instead opted for keeping the relationship with China outside of the spotlight, thanking China in a

formal, unspectacular manner (Kabinet Potpredsednika Vlade 2020; Vlada na SRM 2020). In North Macedonia, there was less emphasis on inter-governmental relations. Media also talked about bottom-up initiatives led by citizens who secured donations of masks through their Chinese networks (Republika 2020).

The key point here is that a number of actors in Western Balkan societies were willing to cooperate with China, but, with the exception of Vučić, they were unwilling to legitimize China as a game-changer in dealing with COVID-19. Interactions with insiders suggest that such an approach very much fits the spirit of the time: as both the US and the EU have sharpened their stance on China, by taking a "low profile" approach Western Balkan elites could avoid being targeted for selling out to China. Thus, for them, dealing with China during the COVID-19 pandemic posed the challenge of not weakening their own positions vis-a-vis Washington, Brussels and other European capitals. And even Vučić, who initially tried to at least rhetorically play China against the West, had to eventually give in both to the pressure coming from the EU (including a public reaffirmation of the role of the EU as by far the largest provider of investment and capital to the region, Tatalović 2020), and from the US (by signing the Kosovo deal which, among other issues, had a clause on 5G and other areas pertinent to cooperation with China, Hopkins 2020).

### **Third stage: "Vaccine diplomacy" and pragmatism**

The development of vaccines was the key milestone in the global struggle against COVID-19. The speed and agility with which pharmaceutical companies around the world developed several vaccines has been unparalleled. However, despite the achievement on the research end, the distribution of vaccines turned out to be a major stumbling block all over the world, throwing a large shadow on the otherwise monumental success.

The Western Balkan countries have noted diverse success in obtaining vaccines and carrying out the vaccination process. Serbia has been an exceptionally successful case, standing out not only in the region, but also within Europe as a whole. Serbia's early success with the vaccination campaign has owed to the fact that it quickly approved and procured a significant amount of Sinopharm's vaccine (1 million doses arrived in mid-January). The Chinese vaccines were welcomed with a pompous ceremony organized by

President Vučić himself, reinforcing the already familiar tropes about China's influence in the region, but also the shortcoming of the EU in its enlargement area (Vuksanović 2021). In addition to Sinopharm, Serbia procured American, British and Russian vaccines, too, and provided its citizens with the right to choose which vaccine they would take; symbolically, different political leaders took different vaccines. Notably, liberal voices in the country who are critical of Serbo-Chinese cooperation, such as the opposition leader Dragan Đilas, have voiced their opposition to the procurement of Chinese vaccines (SSP 2020); Đilas has recently also called Serbia the first Chinese colony in Europe (RSE 2021).

Other than Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (in particular, Republika Srpska) and Albania have been the two other countries in the region to start vaccination by mid-February 2021, although the scope of their vaccination campaigns

have so far been minuscule compared to that of Serbia. In general, with the exception of Serbia, other Western Balkan countries have been struggling to secure sufficient vaccine supplies. They have relied on the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) mechanism initiated by the WHO, and on promised assistance by the EU, both in terms of financing and access to vaccines (EC 2020). Both of these options have so far been inefficient.

Initially, most Western Balkan leaders had either rejected or avoided making decisions on vaccines coming from China. However, faced with limited opportunities, by mid-February, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have all made pre-orders with Sinopharm, making the region a particularly important one for China's healthcare diplomacy in general. The online 17+1 summit that took place in early February 2021 gave an additional impetus to "vaccine diplomacy" (EURACTIV Network 2021); while the occasional favorable coverage of the Chinese vaccines in Western media (Prabhala and Ling 2021) helped diffuse the tension surrounding the issue.

The case of Serbia has been the most widely discussed (and is a good illustration of active opportunity-seeking with regards to China). However, the case of North Macedonia is perhaps most illustrative of the shift in thinking on China, from more of a "threat" to more of an "opportunity." The Macedonian government led by Zoran Zaev has a devout pro-Western orientation. Initially, the government and its supporters have dismissed the idea of obtaining vaccines from China (and Russia), not least by citing geopolitical rationale for such a decision. As the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev had put it, North Macedonia as a NATO member state does not have the maneuvering space that Serbia has; moreover, he noted that North Macedonia is now obliged to adhere to the policies and regulations of its partners (Libertas 2021). However, once the alternatives were exhausted by February 2021, Zaev has changed his position, arguing that "the procurement of Chinese vaccines is not a geopolitical issue but rather the sovereign right of every country" (Georgievski 2021).

# Concluding remarks

Although China has not emerged as a central topic during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans, and even though theirs have been uneventful in comparison to the China debates elsewhere, this paper shows that the importance of China increased over time. With a degree of generalization, we can conclude the following: initially, China was seen through the lens of the Wuhan mayhem and the global skepticism towards the government’s handling of the situation; in the second stage, it was seen as an external actor that may be a source of assistance or source of trouble (or both); and finally, in the “vaccine diplomacy” stage it is increasingly becoming seen as a significant partner in the attempt to immunize the population of the region against COVID-19.

One important feature of how this process has developed in the region, is that there has been a significant difference between the approach of Vučić’s Serbia and everyone else. First, Serbia has been consistent in seeking out

and utilizing opportunities for cooperation with China (despite the occasional acts of balancing). In the rest of the countries, the attitude has varied in between opportunism and cautiousness. Second, Serbia’s leaders, and in the first place Vučić, have sought out opportunities in a quite visible, proactive manner. In the other cases, cooperation has been almost formalistic, and as much under-the-radar as possible. In fact, based on the official rhetoric, one can often get an impression that the elites from Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, even when pursuing cooperation, have avoided giving out the impression of getting too involved with China. On the other hand, among the ruling political elites, the region has not seen vocal vigilance towards China. This position was reserved primarily for certain liberal voices in the region. At the level of ruling elites, skepticism or criticism towards China took a passive, low-profile form. A summary of how these different perspectives on China played out in practice is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Western Balkan discourses on and positioning towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic

	<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Threat</b>
<b>Visible</b>	<p><b>Active opportunity seeking</b> Laud China’s handling of the pandemic and be proactive about health care cooperation and assistance <i>example: Serbia’s government throughout the duration of the pandemic</i></p>	<p><b>Active alarmism</b> Call out China on early COVID-19 mishandling, alleged disinformation; object to healthcare cooperation and assistance on geopolitical grounds <i>example: Liberal voices throughout the duration of the pandemic</i></p>
<b>Under the radar</b>	<p><b>Cautious opportunity utilization</b> Take the masks and vaccines, participate in China-led initiatives and see what happens, while not making too much noise <i>example: North Macedonia’s government in the later part of the “vaccine diplomacy” stage</i></p>	<p><b>Threat avoidance</b> Avoid collaboration with China without escalation <i>example: North Macedonia’s government in the earlier part of the “vaccine diplomacy” stage</i></p>

From an analytical standpoint, the pairing of the opportunity/threat dichotomy with the degree of visibility and vocality of the different discourses seems to be particularly useful in capturing the dynamics of how Western Balkan actors position themselves towards China, and moreover, to capture the differences between them. In that sense, the COVID-19 pandemic did not bring significant qualitative change to how Western Balkan actors approach China, but only reinforced existing tendencies. Serbia has remained a vocal opportunity-seeker, while the rest of the region has shifted between silent avoidance and cautious opportunism. In other words, accepting the masks

and the vaccines was done not so much out of ideological convictions, but rather out of necessity, and even more so, in spite of the awareness that cooperation with China is becoming an increasingly sensitive topic.

Finally, when discussing China and the Western Balkans in the context of COVID-19, we must always keep the big picture and the long-term perspective in mind. As a highly asymmetrical one, the Western Balkans-China relationship depends greatly on the standing and actions of Beijing at the world stage. What enables China to remain such a significant actor in the region even at times of



geopolitical polarization, is that it is already bracing itself for the post-COVID-19 era, while the rest of the world is still struggling with the virus. In other words, China is the sole external actor in the Western Balkans that is not in facing deep uncertainty on the domestic front, and has the luxury to plan the future on the external one. This may sound somewhat familiar. One must not forget that what facilitated China's emergence as a global player, and its arrival in the Western Balkans in the past decade, was

the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-08 and the emergence of China in its aftermath as an actor in a position that allowed it to establish all its various linkages abroad, at a time when the West was trying to regroup itself. With an ever more dramatic crisis taking place in 2020-21, history may well be on track to repeat itself. And one lesson that has been well learned in the past decade, is that semi peripheral countries such as those of the Balkans can only adapt to it.

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## About the author

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**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

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**“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](mailto:chrzova@pssi.cz)), Petr Čermák ([cermak@pssi.cz](mailto:cermak@pssi.cz)) and Anja Grabovac ([grabovac@pssi.cz](mailto:grabovac@pssi.cz))

Scientific advisor: Ioannis Armakolas

## About Prague Security Studies Institute

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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

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