



THE SUM OF ALL FEARS – CHINESE AI SURVEILLANCE IN SERBIA

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Executive Summary

The Serbian government, in cooperation with the Chinese technology company Huawei, has been actively working on the implementation of the surveillance “Safe City” project in Belgrade since 2019. The project involves the installation of thousands of smart surveillance cameras with object and facial recognition features. This paper aims to shed more light on the ongoing discussions about the use of the Chinese technology by Serbian authorities. It provides information about the political context in Serbia and its deepening relations with China in the security sector. It presents the official government narrative on the benefits of the smart surveillance system developed by Huawei, which rests on its purported ability to fight terrorism and reduce the crime rate. The paper then proceeds to review the main arguments against the use of cameras as developed by Serbian civil society actors. It analyses how civil society challenges the introduction of Chinese technology, and what its critical responses to its use are along three main lines: lack of transparency and accountability, risk of misuse of smart surveillance cameras for political purposes, and poor legal regulation.

This analysis shows that the biometric smart surveillance project has raised concerns about the deterioration of privacy, as well as human rights and freedoms in Serbia. The Serbian public does not share the same concerns as civic activists because it lacks basic information about the scope of the entire project. The Serbian government has classified the surveillance project as “confidential” and avoids public debate on its potential benefits and risks. There are many still-unanswered questions, such as: where the data will be stored, who will be responsible for data processing and what are the mechanisms for protection against misuse, where are cameras installed, how many are there and what is their function. The Serbian government’s strong control over the information and media space makes it difficult for critical voices to be heard. Public awareness about the opaque terms of the Safe City project is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and poor regulation of artificial technology, which leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law.

Surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition software are particularly worrisome to human rights defenders and civic activists in Serbia because this system will be used in a country with weak democracy, abuse of executive power and loose checks and balances. Civil society representatives thus fear that China’s cutting-edge technology will strengthen the capacities of Serbia’s increasingly authoritarian leadership to control every citizen and all aspects of life and thus further endanger its weak democracy and human rights enforcement. Moreover, civic activists fear that face recognition cameras will allow Serbian authorities to track and intimidate critics of the ruling political elite.

Poor legal regulation of video surveillance in Serbia and the lack of laws regulating the facial recognition system and biometric data processing represent another line of argumentation against the introduction of smart surveillance. According to critical voices in Serbian society, if such powerful facial recognition technology is not legally regulated and handled by trained professionals under democratic civilian control, the surveillance system could be easily misused. The lack of legal regulation is one of the main reasons why Serbian civil society has called on national authorities to suspend the process of introducing smart surveillance and to engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity and implications of such a system.

The paper also shows that demands by civil society representatives to address the existing shortcomings, provide a legal basis for the use of the smart surveillance system, and conduct further assessment on all related risks remain unanswered by Serbian authorities. The Ministry of interior continued to install smart surveillance cameras across Belgrade during the coronavirus outbreak without any notice or publicly available information, and has announced even greater surveillance in the near future, as the city of Belgrade will now be covered with 8,100 cameras instead of the initial 1,000.



Introduction

Most Western analyses of Huawei facial recognition technology, including official reports, examine China's attempts to "export authoritarianism" by exporting its surveillance system, often embedded in projects aimed at increasing public safety.¹ In addition, China and Huawei are problematized at the global level as a security threat to the US and their allies ever since Washington began to scrutinize China's attempt to establish dominance in the technology sector and in the field of artificial intelligence. The global debate on the risks associated with Huawei and facial recognition technology has also entered Serbia, which introduced smart surveillance in 2019. On the local level, however, the debate gained specific contours, reflecting concerns shared by authoritarian states in Asia or Africa rather than those in other parts of Europe. Due to gradual erosion of the rule of law, human rights and media freedom in Serbia, Chinese surveillance technology is most debated in relation to democracy and human rights. In line with other discussions about misuse of artificial intelligence in authoritarian regimes (e.g. repressive policies against Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in China), some in Serbia fear the technology would enable Serbian authorities to exercise more robust political control over opponents of the regime.

Against this background, the aim of the paper is to shed more light on ongoing discussions about the use of Chinese technology by Serbian authorities. The research presents an official narrative explaining the purpose of the cameras and brings an overview of main arguments against the use of

Huawei cameras with facial recognition technology shared by some civil society organizations' representatives. The main research questions to which the paper seeks answers are: According to officials, what is the main rationale for introducing Chinese surveillance technology? How does civil society challenge the introduction of Chinese technology and what are the critical responses to its use?

The answers to these questions are sought by analyzing existing literature and available sources on China and Huawei in English and Serbian. The information and data are primarily based on media articles, mostly published in the Western, but also in the Serbian press. Additional evidence is gathered through a review of political statements and legal documents, official reports compiled by independent state bodies, and several studies conducted by local organizations and experts.

The paper begins by examining the political context in Serbia and explaining the reasons for deepening and widening cooperation with China. An analysis of local narratives reveals that there are two conflicting perceptions of China and Huawei in Serbia. While the Serbian government and its officials see Huawei as a Chinese instrument for modernizing Serbia, most civil society representatives believe that the use of face recognition cameras in a country with poor governance and loose 'checks and balances', such as Serbia, constitutes a threat to democracy and human rights. Finally, the answers to the main research questions are summarized in the conclusion.

1 There are countless papers on China digital authoritarianism, dystopian dictatorship, the impact of Huawei and other CCTV cameras on human rights. For example: United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations. 2020. "The New Big Brother. China and Digital Authoritarianism." July 21, 2020. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf>; CSIS. 2019. Watching Huawei's "Safe Cities." CSIS, November 4, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/watching-huaweis-safe-cities>.

The Serbian domestic context – path to a hybrid regime

As democratic changes in Serbia started taking place after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević's regime in the early 2000s, the security sector was gradually opened to the public thanks to political leadership that advocated for the introduction of democratic principles in security sector reform (SSR). Significant progress has been made with the adoption of the first Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance (2004), and later with the adoption of the Law on Data Secrecy (2009), as well as the establishment of independent bodies such as the Data Protection Commissioner. After the currently ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) party came to power in 2012, the culture of secrecy and closure of security sector institutions was renewed and access to information of public importance was limited not only to citizens, civil society organizations and the media, but also to independent state bodies (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2020a). Moreover, security sector institutions played an important role in establishing the monopoly rule of the SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, current Serbian president. Under the guise of fighting corruption, Vučić first centralized power and at the same time held key positions in the security system – minister of defense, coordinator of civil and military intelligence services, member of the National Security Council, as well as Deputy Prime Minister (Petrović and Pejić Nikić, eds. 2020).

"Years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by President Aleksandar Vučić have downgraded Serbia to a 'hybrid regime'" (Fruscione 2020). By 2019, the country had entered a political crisis characterized by a lack of dialogue on any important issue, polarization in society, politically motivated violence against opponents, attacks on journalists² and deep public distrust of government institutions (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2020b; Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2020). The political crisis deepened when citizens took to the streets, unable to channel their accumulated dissatisfaction with government policies and actions through the parliament or media, both under strong SNS control.³ After an attempt to find a solution to the crisis through political dialogue between some political opposition figures and MPs failed, in late 2019 a campaign began among citizens and the opposition to boycott the National Assembly, the government, as well as parliamentary elections.⁴ The authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian regime⁵ have become more pronounced after the ruling SNS won the parliamentary election in June 2020 with over 60 percent of votes (188 out of 250 seats). This landslide victory resulted in the marginalization of the opposition, as only two other parties crossed the 3% representation threshold – the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the SNS coalition partner, and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS), the SNS junior ally. According to Giorgio Fruscione from ISPI, "Serbian parliamentary elections

- 2 For more information, see maps of attacks on journalists from Serbia: <https://safejournalists.net/rs/homepage/>. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) recorded 119 attacks on journalists in 2019, the most in the last 10 years. This fact was also included in the World Index of Media Freedoms of Reporters Without Borders, where Serbia was ranked at the 93rd place of 180 countries. Reporters without Borders, 2020 World Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>; NUNS, <http://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare>.
- 3 The anti-government protests actually began in 2016, when the civic movement "Don't let Belgrade drown" (Ne davimo Beograd) organized its biggest protest against the unlawful night-time demolitions in Belgrade's Savamala district, demanding that the Belgrade authorities resign because they didn't respond to this incident. In 2017, Serbian protests against perceived dictatorship were ongoing mass protests organized across Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and other cities and towns in Serbia, against Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, as a result of the presidential election. Since the end of 2018, the new wave of anti-government protests known as the "1 of 5 million" protest have spread across Serbia due to the rise of political violence and against the authoritarian rule of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his governing Serbian Progressive Party. The protesters have called for greater freedom of the press, political freedom and pluralism, stronger protection of journalists and political opponents from violence, an investigation of political assassination of Kosovo-Serb leader Oliver Ivanović, electoral reform, new elections and greater government transparency and accountability, among other things. The most violent protests were those held in early July 2020 when police used excessive force against demonstrators.
- 4 Selected reports and articles showing the political situation in Serbia include: Key findings of the 2019 Report on Serbia, Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Serbia, europa.rs/key-findings-of-the-2019-report-on-serbia/?lang=en; Westminster Foundation for Democracy. 2019. "Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans." WDF, 2019, <https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/WFD-WB-Boycotts.pdf>. CRTA. 2018. "Audit of political engagement in Serbia." CRTA, 2018, <https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Audit-of-political-engagement-in-Serbia-2018.pdf>.
- 5 In 2019, Serbia was classified as an "incomplete democracy" on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. "Democracy Index 2019," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2020, <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

crowned an 8-year-long trend that was described by Freedom House in 2020⁶, which stated Serbia was no longer a democracy (Freedom House 2020). During the time of the SNS rule, no real progress has been achieved in the accession negotiations with the EU or resolving the Kosovo issue. Also, the European Commission's 2020 progress report reflected Serbia's democratic backsliding, calling it a captured state without political pluralism (European Commission 2020).

In this context, the timing of the introduction of Chinese surveillance technologies and the lack of official information on its use and purpose raises fear among opponents of the government, including among citizens and parts of Serbian civil society.⁶ They share concerns that Huawei cameras will enable the ruling regime – already concentrating significant power in its hands without real checks and balances – control over every citizen and all aspects of life and thus further endanger Serbia's weak democracy and human rights enforcement.

⁶ See under section 'Risks to Democracy and Civil Liberties'.

The Road to Sino-Serbian partnership

China's engagement with Serbia was limited before 2009, when the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement (Vuksanović 2019b). Sino-Serbian relations have since flourished as a result of local politicians' demands to attract much-needed investments in infrastructure and the economy after the global financial crisis, but also as a result of China's global ambition to penetrate the European market through the Balkans. China's veto of the declaration of Kosovo's independence in the UN Security Council in 2008 gave China political leverage in Serbia and facilitated their strategic partnership. As a rising economic power and a supporter of Serbia's territorial integrity, China has become an important part of Serbia's so-called 'four pillars foreign policy'⁷ alongside Russia, the EU and the US. This policy was first formulated by Boris Tadić in 2009 during his tenure as president of Serbia and went untouched by the change in power, having also been embraced by the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Vučić is pursuing a foreign policy based on balancing among great powers, while trying to strengthen his own rule (Nausbam 2020).

As Serbia become one of the major recipients of Chinese loans for the implementation of large infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative⁸, the SNS-led government promotes China as a friend and ally in creating new jobs (Bjeloš, Vuksanović and Sterić 2020). Serbian President Vučić was quoted describing the friendship with China as one "made of steel" (Tanjug 2018; The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2020) because the Chinese Hesteel Group had recently bought the Smederevo steel plant and saved jobs for 5,000 workers. In promoting Chinese investments as an important element of Serbia's progress and future, the ruling party relies on public broadcaster (RTS) and government-friendly media as well as Chinese diplomats in Serbia (Chen Bo 2020). As a result of the government control of the media narrative on bilateral relations, large segments of Serbian society hold a positive view of China. The latest public opinion survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy shows that 87 percent of Serbian citizens

believe that Chinese influence in the country is positive, which is an impressive increase of 34 percent compared to the 2017 survey (Bjeloš, Vuksanović and Sterić 2020). In the narrow information and media space, it is difficult to push through a more critical and alternative narrative about Beijing and Chinese companies in Serbia (Vuksanović 2019b).

Although China is a newcomer to the Balkans, its nuanced and multifaceted strategy (Shopov 2020) enabled China to quickly diversify its portfolio from the economy to other areas, such as health care, agriculture, trade, foreign policy, and culture. Recently, Serbia and China have expanded cooperation to technology and security. The use of Huawei's face recognition cameras as an integral part of the country's surveillance system, joint police patrols and joint police trainings, as well as the purchase of military equipment and possible joint military exercises are new features of China's growing presence in Serbia's security sector (Zivanović 2019). In July 2020, the EU raised red flags after China delivered armed drones to Serbia, which has become the first European state to deploy Chinese combat drones (Roblin 2020). But unlike the EU representatives, Serbian government does not seem to be concerned about China's engagement in the domestic security field and continues to show its readiness to accept Chinese military equipment, exchange of know-how, as well as the Chinese-style surveillance system, whose introduction and declared purpose is described in the next section. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has taken Sino-Serbian relations to the next level and further strengthened China's position in Serbia vis-a-vis other global and regional powers (Ruge and Oertel 2020). It has also sharpened the interest of Serbian authorities in Chinese aid and investments, including interest in digital surveillance as a tool to control citizens. This became evident after a striking statement by Serbian President Vučić, who openly told the Serbian press on March 19, 2020, that the state used surveillance techniques to monitor the movement of Serbian citizens who returned from coronavirus-hit countries like Italy (Vuksanović 2020).

7 According to Mr. Tadić, the principal goal of Serbian foreign policy remains joining the EU, while building "strategic partnerships" with America, Russia and China. See more at: "Tadić on Serbia's „four pillars of diplomacy“", *B92*, August 30, 2009, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454 or at ISAC Fund, "From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integration," *ISAC Fund*, 2013, https://www.isac-fund.org/download/From_four_pillars_of_foreign_policy_to_european_integration.pdf.

8 Serbia has obtained such amounts of Chinese funding that the US-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies lately warned that the nation risked "becoming a Chinese client state". See more at: "Becoming a Chinese client state – the case of Serbia," *CSIS*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/becoming-chinese-client-state-case-serbia>; or Matthew Karntitschnig, "Beijing's Balkan backdoor," *Politico*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-serbia-montenegro-europe-investment-trade-beijing-balkan-backdoor/>.



The beginning of the face recognition saga in Serbia

The Serbian face recognition saga began with a tragic event that occurred in 2014 when a young man was killed in a hit-and-run car accident known as “The (Mini Cooper) Countryman Case”⁹. The perpetrator, a Serbian citizen, fled to China where he was arrested by the Chinese police in just three days with the assistance of facial recognition cameras. Serbian authorities were impressed with their performance (Stojkovski 2019). This case triggered a series of high-level talks on the introduction of cameras with face recognition software in Serbia. These talks were held mainly on the sidelines of summits and meetings of political leaders of Serbia and China, and eventually resulted in the signing of a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Huawei in February 2017. Although the document is classified as ‘confidential’ and thus not known to the public in full, Huawei became a strategic partner of the Serbian government as the company was expected to help “Serbia to further accelerate its digital transformation, which has been among the key priorities of the government, and boost innovation and creativity in the Serbian economy” (China Daily Global 2020). Huawei was then also selected as a strategic partner of the Ministry of Interior for the introduction of smart surveillance in the Serbian security sector.

A greater impetus for the introduction of smart surveillance followed the visit of the Special Envoy and Secretary of the Central Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPP, Meng Jianzhu, to Belgrade in September 2017. During his visit, Meng Jianzhu said that he had agreed with the Serbian interior minister Nebojša Stefanović that Serbia and China “would take strong measures to combat organized and cross-border crime,” adding that terrorism was the enemy of the whole world and they would oppose it together (RTS 2017). Stefanović announced they agreed on the exchange of information between the two countries and on the sending of Serbian police officers to China for training on artificial intelligence, as well as on the hosting of Chinese counterparts for the same purpose. According to the Serbian officials, increased cooperation with China in the security field was thus justified as part of crime prevention and the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Three months after Jianzhu’s visit, 100 surveillance cameras were installed at 61 locations in Belgrade. The Serbian daily *Blic* then published news about the installation of 32 new cameras in the streets of Belgrade, which the police denied and the city authorities remained silent on (Blic 2017; Ristić 2017). Under suspicion that these were facial recognition cameras, the news provoked a huge reaction from the public, which resulted in complaints submitted to the Ministry of Interior (Mol) and an independent state body, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Rodoljub Šabić. Only after pressure from the public and the media, city manager Goran Vesić made a statement that the new Traffic Safety Strategy for Belgrade for the period from 2017 to 2020 included the installation of 60 new cameras on city streets (Studio B. 2017). The interior minister denied that these were face recognition cameras, saying that the police “replaced old video surveillance cameras with those with higher resolution” as part of the first phase of the “Safe City” pilot project (The Ministry of Interior 2017).

The Commissioner conducted a surveillance procedure against the Ministry and the City Administration of the City of Belgrade in order to determine the identity of the operators of these cameras, the legal basis and purpose of their use, and the manner of processing and protection of collected personal data. At the beginning of 2018, the commissioner concluded that it was a false alarm, because the Mol replaced the technically obsolete cameras with more advanced cameras of a new generation and higher resolution, at the existing 61 camera locations. The commissioner also noted that the Ministry failed to inform the public in advance and that this omission, along with newspaper articles and contradictory statements by officials, caused unnecessary anxiety among the citizens (Blic 2018). Based on state budget spending in 2017 and 2018, it became clear that more than ten million euros were invested in the surveillance system from the national, not the city budget (Božić Krainčanić 2019).

In 2018, the Serbian Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, signed several inter-governmental agreements with China as part of long-term cooperation within the context of BRI. They

9 Named after the car that the perpetrator was driving during the accident.



also included a security-related agreement “that mandated that Huawei provides surveillance systems and auxiliary services for traffic surveillance, particularly for Chinese infrastructure projects” (Vuksanović 2019a). Based on the agreement, the reason for installing Huawei cameras was therefore framed as the protection of Chinese investments in Serbia.

The cooperation with Huawei further developed in 2019, when a smart surveillance system was “officially” introduced. With the proclaimed aim of crime prevention and fighting terrorism, the interior minister officially announced a plan to install 1,000 new-generation Huawei cameras using facial and license plate recognition software at 800 locations in Belgrade. He added also that “there will be no significant streets, entrances or passages between buildings that will not be covered by cameras” (Danas 2019). In addition, he said that patrol vehicles as well as police officers would be gradually equipped with cameras. In that way, he added, Serbia would join modern Western European countries, whose governments act on the principle that greater surveillance equals greater security (Bojić 2019).

Manifesting little interest in the issue of data protection, then Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, Rasim Ljajić, said that Huawei was the “correct partner.” He asserted there was no reason for the Serbian government to adopt a *lex specialis* to regulate Huawei’s business in Serbia as Germany did or suspend cooperation with Huawei due the US-China conflict (Bogdanović 2019; Avakumović 2019). Problematic aspects of using invasive technology that encroaches on privacy and has the potential to control citizens’ behavior or to leak personal data to China, described below, are not discussed by officials and seem to be disregarded.

Cooperation between Serbia and Huawei has intensified in 2020 despite the fact that Serbia signed the so-called Washington agreement in the White House on September 4, which prohibits the use of 5G equipment from “untrusted vendors” (Ruge and Vladislavljev 2020). As of December 8, 2020, Huawei is a commercial user of the State Data Center in Kragujevac, which stores data from city administrations, public companies and institutions and provides connections to national databases. Also, in September 2020, the Huawei Center for Innovation and Digital Development was opened in Belgrade (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020).

Risks to Democracy and Civil Liberties

Although foreign and local independent media often write about Huawei cameras in Serbia,¹⁰ there has been little public-wide debate or awareness about the potential benefits or risks of expanding Chinese engagement in the Serbian security sector by using surveillance systems powered with artificial intelligence (i.e. facerecognition cameras) known as “Safe Cities”. Nonetheless, the government’s initiative to introduce such a system in Belgrade has met with criticism from associations of citizens and experts dealing with security, human and digital rights, and the protection of personal data. Think tank and civil society organizations, such as Share Foundation (a non-profit organization that advocates for human rights in the digital environment), Partners for Democratic Change, Belgrade Center for Security Policy and the left-wing civic movement Inicijativa Ne davimo Beograd (Initiative Don’t Let Belgrade Drown – NDMBGD),¹¹ share common concern

that Huawei facial recognition cameras will enable the ruling regime to track and suppress its opponents and will have negative a impact on freedom and human rights – and even expose Serbian citizens to Chinese surveillance if the data is stored on Huawei’s servers outside of the country. In other words, they fear that China’s technology exports erode democracy and civil liberties in Serbia by strengthening the capacities of Serbia’s increasingly authoritarian leadership to track and intimidate critics of the government (Conley et al. 2020).

The following sections outline three areas seen as the most problematic in terms of China’s artificial surveillance system in Serbia – the lack of transparency and accountability, risk of misuse of the cameras for political purposes and poor legal regulation.

Lack of transparency and accountability

The lack of transparency associated with the Huawei Safe City project and other Chinese investments goes hand in hand with non-transparent political decision making and the corrupt system of public administration in Serbia. Many government contracts and agreements with Asian, European and Middle Eastern countries and companies, including those with China and Huawei, are classified as “confidential.” Public awareness about the opaque terms of Sino-Serbian agreements is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and poor regulation of artificial technology, which leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law. The reason for the poor performance of the parliamentary oversight role could be found in the fact that members of the Committee on Defence and Security¹² come from the ruling coalition.

The consequence of withholding information on the Safe City project is that citizens do not have access to basic information about the scope of the entire project, such as: where the data will be stored, who will be responsible for data processing and what are the mechanisms for protection

against any misuse, where cameras are installed, how many and what their function is (Božić Krainčanić 2019). Concerns about the persistent refusal of the authorities to provide the public with information about the installation and functioning of the “Safe City” system were also expressed by former Data Protection Commissioner, lawyer and data protection expert, Rodoljub Šabić (Danas 2019).

While the Serbian government withheld information from the public about Chinese involvement in the “Safe City” project in Serbia, Huawei published a case study on the company’s website in 2019, revealing that it has offered the MoI its smart video surveillance and intelligent transport systems, advanced 4G network, unified data centers and related command centers (Share Foundation 2019b). Furthermore, the study confirmed that during the trial period, nine test cameras originally installed at five locations performed successfully. The successful trial resulted in the partnership agreement, while the first phase of the Safe City project included installation of 100 high-definition video cameras in more than 60 key locations, as

10 Among the most influential are: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, CNN branch in Belgrade – N1 Beograd, Nova S, Balkan Investigative Network (BIRN).

11 See more at: <https://nedavimobeograd.rs/>.

12 See more at: “Odbori,” The official website of National Parliament of the Republic of Serbia, <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/narodna-skupstina-/sastav/radna-tela/odbori.98.895.html>.



also pointed out in Huawei's study (Archive Today 2020). The content on cooperation with the MoI was, however, swiftly removed from Huawei's website after the Share Foundation released a report citing the same information.

In addition to the questions about the scope and functioning of the project, the lack of information affects the assessment of whether this type of surveillance is really needed, proportional to security challenges and threats, and whether it is in accordance with the law. The official narrative of the benefits of the smart surveillance system developed by Huawei, voiced by Serbian authorities, rests on reducing the crime rate in Belgrade and other cities. This explanation has, however, come under public scrutiny since the reasons for the (rapid) installation of a large number of Huawei cameras to prevent crime does not find support in official data from MoI, which show that the crime rate in

Serbia is declining every year.¹³ For example, the crime rate in Belgrade decreased by 14.8 percent in 2019 compared to 2018 (Novosti Online 2019).¹⁴ In 2019, the Minister stated that Belgrade had the lowest number of crimes committed among many other large European cities such as Budapest, Hamburg, Vienna or Berlin (Novosti Online 2019) while in early 2020 he said that "Serbia is the leading country in the region in reducing crime rates" (Tanjug 2020). Given that the smart surveillance wasn't yet in place in 2018, and when it was introduced in 2019, it was limited to traffic safety and offences, the decreasing crime rate in Belgrade is likely to be primarily attributable to other factors. Several newspapers, (Savković 2020), other news media (Božić Krainčanić, Toader and Milovanović 2019), web-portals (Crnjanski, 2020), activists (Hiljade Kamera 2020), experts (Kukić 2019) and CSOs representatives therefore raised the question of why Serbia actually needs Huawei FR cameras.

Risk of misuse of the smart surveillance cameras for political purposes

The left-wing civic movement Ne Davimo Beograd adds in its public statements on the project's lack of transparency that "such a sensitive project must not be conducted in secrecy, but it should be open for public discussion in which the smallest details would be explained and all doubts about the possibility of its abuse could be removed" (Ne davimo Beograd 2019). The movement is convinced that the face recognition cameras are a new weapon for monitoring citizens in the hands of the ruling party members because the secret government deal with Huawei is "arranged by people who have already abused the less advanced surveillance techniques such as wiretapping and monitoring against dissidents" (Ne davimo Beograd 2019). The police have already misused (regular) surveillance cameras during the 2018/19 anti-government protests. Photos of the protesters from surveillance cameras were publicly displayed by the interior minister revealing the identity of people who protested during one of his press conferences to control damage and reassure SNS constituencies that it was not a mass protest as reported by independent media (Politika 2018). However, this act speaks

volumes about the regime's intention to intimidate and deter protesters from participating in new demonstrations, because knowing they are being filmed, people would no longer feel free to take to the streets to demonstrate.

Former Data Protection Commissioner Šabić also warned that the surveillance system can be used to monitor political opponents and critics of the regime, which is contrary to existing laws in Serbia. Based on his previous work, he emphasizes that Serbia "has very bad experiences in how state bodies and security structures handled citizens' databases" (Glas Amerike 2017). This is linked to sensitive data in the field of health, social protection, party or trade union affiliation, which "have been brutally misused several times and used against critics or opponents of the regime, although this is strictly prohibited and punishable by law as a criminal offence" (Glas Amerike 2017).

The fact that Serbia is falling in its implementation of human rights and at the same time wants to introduce a thousand smart surveillance cameras that pose a risk to privacy as

13 The interior minister Serbia Nebojsa Stefanovic stated in 2016 that in the period from January to September 2016, the crime rate in Serbia was reduced by 5.4 percent. In 2017, the Minister also said that the "crime rate was significantly reduced." In 2019, 73,634 crimes were committed, which is a decrease compared to the previous year, when 77,724 crimes were committed.

14 In the first six months of 2019, 10,616 crimes were committed in Belgrade, which is 14.8 percent less compared to the same period in 2018. See at: "Stefanovic; Stopa kriminala manja za 14,8 odsto." *Novosti Online*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:805922-Stefanovic-Stopa-kriminala-u-Beogradu-manja-za-148-odsto>.



a basic human right, is also problematic for think tanker Danilo Krivokapić from the Share Foundation. He points out that Serbian officials “must understand that the introduction of a thousand cameras is a blow to privacy” (Ranković 2019). Former security researcher Saša Djordjević from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy has a similar view, believing that “in an environment where there are no strong institutions, where democracy is in some way declining, citizens should worry about how their data will be collected and used” (Ranković 2019). It is therefore essential to establish a system in which abuses of power can be limited.

These socio-political arguments against face recognition cameras thus warn of inauguration of a “surveillance

society”. According to an informal group of experts and think tankers, which launched the *Hiljade.kamera.rs* portal in May 2020 with the aim at pointing out possible abuses of surveillance cameras, “technology for recognizing faces and objects is based on the assumption that we are all possible criminals: our movements and encounters are recorded, our actions are analysed, our behaviour is predicted (Share Foundation 2020a). The complete loss of anonymity is a kind of deprivation of liberty – the awareness that we are under surveillance drastically changes our decisions” (Bulajić 2020). Therefore, according to critics what makes Chinese cameras more dangerous than other cameras is the level of technology (facial recognition) and data analysis.

Poor legal regulation

Another important worrisome aspect of the use of face recognition cameras is the fact that the use of video surveillance cameras in Serbia is poorly regulated. The key shortcoming of the Safe City project and the installation of cameras with safe recognition software, according to the current Commissioner for Personal Data Protection Milan Marinović, is that there is still no legal basis for its implementation (Jeremić 2020). The use of the surveillance system in Serbia is regulated by several laws, such as the Law on Police, the Law on Private Security or the Law on Road Traffic Safety. However, the problem is that there is no legal basis for the use of face recognition system and biometric data processing. Therefore, a system of supervision should not be applied before the adoption of a law that will regulate this area.

In the absence of a comprehensive systematic law on video surveillance, many experts believed that the new Personal Data Protection Law adopted in 2018 was an opportunity to improve personal data protection standards in the face of new surveillance technology. But although the Law introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), it has failed to comprehensively regulate this area as it does not regulate biometric data processing and the right to anonymity in public space (Insajder 2018). Furthermore,

due to numerous ambiguities and inconsistencies of the new law with the Serbian legal system,¹⁵ its application has been postponed for a year, as it is expected that many authorities and companies do not have enough capacity to comply with the law.¹⁶

Despite not regulating all necessary areas, this Law is important and sets out some obligations that state bodies must fulfil. Most importantly, to comply with the Law, the Ministry of the Interior had to prepare a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) on the use of smart video surveillance prior to the introduction of Huawei’s cameras with facial recognition technology and submit the document to the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection for an opinion. In late 2019, the Commissioner issued an opinion that the MoI’s DPIA does not meet even the minimum requirements prescribed by the Law (Marinović 2019). As the ministry is not obliged to take into account the Commissioner’s opinion on the assessment, no substantial progress has been made. The MoI eventually passed a by-law (rulebook) prescribing the manner of recording in a public place and the manner of announcing the intention to record that recording, as prescribed by the Law on Police (Vulović 2020). But, it refused to submit the Safe City project to the Commissioner at his request.

15 Harmonization of the final version of the text took four years (2012–2016), while a record 4,000 amendments were submitted to the text of the regulation, mainly by representatives of economic interests.

16 Law on Personal Data Protection (“Official Gazette of RS” 97 / 08,104 / 09-other law, 68/12 – decision of Constitutional Court and 107/12) – ceased to be valid on August 22, 2019, when the application of the new Law began (“Official Gazette of RS” No. 87/2018).

Simultaneously, three Belgrade-based civic organizations published a detailed analysis of the MoI's assessment requesting an immediate suspension of the process and asking the authorities to engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity, implications and conditionality of such a system (Share Foundation 2019a). These organizations believe that if such powerful facial recognition software technology is not handled by trained professionals under democratic civilian control, the surveillance system could easily turn into a mechanism that provides almost unlimited opportunities to those in power to control every citizen of the country, regardless of the initial intention.

The Ministry of Interior ignored calls from civil society to engage in public debate and address existing concerns

by taking measures to ensure that personal data of Serbian citizens are handled in accordance with personal data protection and privacy laws. Instead, MoI officials announced greater surveillance. In the near future, Belgrade would be covered with 8,100 cameras instead of 1,000. In addition to 2,500 cameras that will be placed in public places, the police will have another 3,500 mobile cameras (eLTE terminals) and 1,500 cameras attached to officers' uniforms (bodycams), and another 600 that will be located on police cars (Share Foundation 2020b). The context of the pandemic suited the MoI's pursuit of its goals. Additional face recognition cameras, as well as 5G network infrastructure, were installed on the streets of Belgrade overnight during the lockdown in March and April 2020 without any previous notice or information (Pantović 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the introduction of smart surveillance in Serbia, with an aim of explaining the political motives for deepening security cooperation with China and summarizing the concerns shared by some civil society representatives about the use of cutting-edge technology by Serbian authorities. The analysis of the local debate reveals the existence of conflicting views on the introduction and use of smart surveillance. According to the official narrative, Serbia's enthusiastic embrace of Chinese surveillance system was motivated by both a desire to technologically modernize Serbia and also to prevent crime and terrorist attacks. On the other hand, part of Serbian civil society strongly believes that the use of the Chinese surveillance system in a country with poor governance and loose 'checks and balances', such as Serbia, poses a threat to democracy and human rights. There is a growing fear for some civil society representatives that face recognition cameras will allow the regime to track and intimidate critics of the government, as well as impose total control over every citizen and all aspects of life. Contrary to the fear present in part of Serbian society, most Serbian citizens hold a positive view of China and are unaware of the opaque terms of Sino-Serbian agreements due to strong government control of the media and its strict confidentiality policy. The Ministry of Interior, whose representatives make vague and contradictory statements about Huawei cameras, keeps the Safe City project secret and information about it unavailable to both state

independent bodies and civil society. Public awareness about the project and facial recognition technology is also limited by the lack of strong parliamentary oversight and public debate on the potential benefits or risks of expanding Chinese engagement in the Serbian security sector. In addition, poor regulation of artificial technology leaves room for political manoeuvre and dominance of the executive over the law, which is especially worrisome in an atmosphere of rising authoritarianism.

Serbian civil society has called for national authorities to suspend the process of introducing smart surveillance and engage in an inclusive public debate on the necessity, implications and conditionality of such a system. The Ministry of Interior – which did not receive a 'green light' from an independent state body for the use of cameras with facial recognition technology, as there is still no legal basis for its implementation – ignored the calls and continued to install even more cameras across Belgrade during the coronavirus outbreak.

In order to address existing shortcomings, a legal basis for the mass use of smart video surveillance systems should be urgently created and further assessment of all risks related to the rights and freedoms of persons under surveillance should be conducted. Also, future research could examine whether and how China influence Serbia's security sector through smart surveillance.

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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

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About Prague Security Studies Institute

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

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