

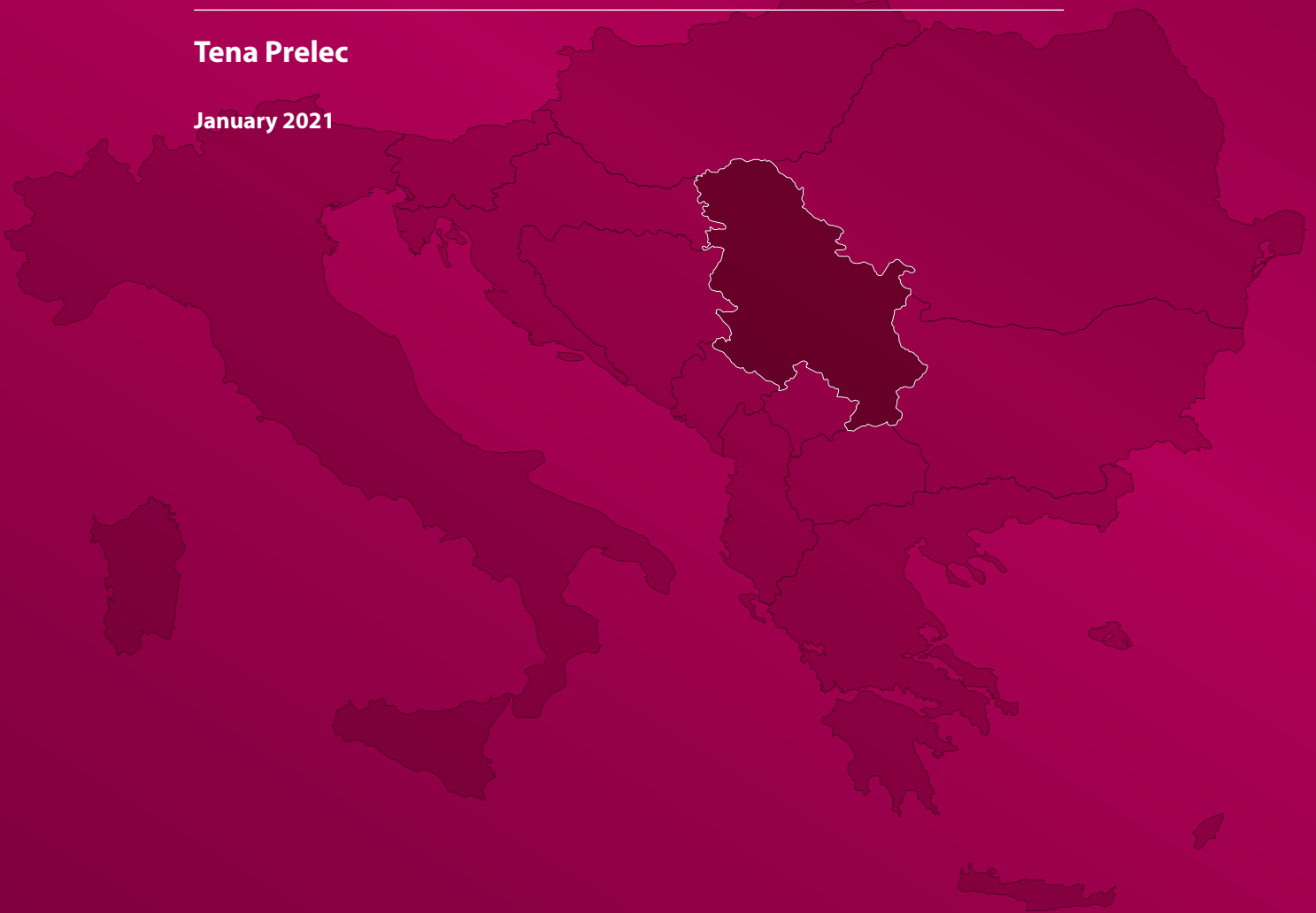


# **Eco-monsters & eco-fighters: China's investments in Serbia's heavy manufacturing industry as seen through an environmental lens**

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**January 2021**



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Serbia's heavy manufacturing industry as seen through an  
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**Published by the Prague Security Studies Institute,  
January 2021, Prague**

The publication is written within the framework of the project  
**“Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing  
External Actors Influence”** led by the Prague Security Studies  
Institute with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy.

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## Executive summary

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In the second half of the 2010s, China has become one of the foremost investors in Serbia. Some of its largest investments, linked to heavy industry, have been accompanied by a manifest increase in pollution levels, sparking great concerns among the local populations and turning many citizens into environmental activists. Is the health hazard real or perceived, and who is to blame? Making use of interviews with activists and experts, as well as of official documents and government responses, the paper analyses the ways in which environmental concerns, governance issues, and a 'closed' government are interlinked. In contrast to the myth of China as a 'bad investor', it is argued that the foremost responsibility lies with the institutions of the recipient country, allowing for such environmental abuses to occur.

The paper analyses two main case studies: the copper smeltery located in Bor (taken over by China's Zijin Mining in 2018) and the steel mill in Smederevo (acquired by the Hesteel Group in 2016). Spontaneous civic activism has arisen in response to the environmental and health hazards in both cases. The perception of finding themselves caught between two fires – an investor looking to maximise its interests, and a government allowing citizens' health to suffer in return for economic gain – has sparked widespread anger among the population. This helps explain why

environmental activism is joined with anti-government sentiment: the voices of the activists are not neutral, nor they could be, as the two are interlinked. The cases examined thus illustrate the issues connected with the Chinese investments, but also specific modes of resistance to the dominant conception of power in Serbia.

The problems characterising the case studies presented in this paper are reflected in several other Chinese investments in Serbia (such as the coal-fired plant in Kostolac and a tire factory in Zrenjanin), and beyond Serbia, too (e.g. the Chinese-funded expansion of a heavily polluting coal-fired powerplant Tuzla, in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina). They are not, therefore, isolated cases. The designation of most of these deals as 'Projects of National Interest' situates investors above the laws others have to abide by, and allows authorities to decline most Freedom of Information requests. It is argued that the specific mix of environmental and governance concerns unpacked in this study should be much more front and centre in the policy of EU conditionality and value-based democratic assistance than it is at the moment. These issues should, furthermore, be viewed within the host of clientelistic and kleptocratic practices that both the EU and the new Biden administration in the US have vowed to fight against.

## Intro: Serbia is choking

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On 10 January 2021, thousands of protestors marched through the streets of Belgrade complaining about the unsustainable levels of pollution that have enveloped Serbian cities in recent months and years. The organisers of the 'protest for safe air', comprising several environmental grassroots organisations born in recent years, made simple requests: their main demand is the systematic and transparent monitoring of all relevant parameters of air pollution on the whole territory of the Republic of Serbia, accompanied with the transparent communication of these issues through official government channels (Eko Straža 2021; Danas 2021).

While this is the latest in a long string of protests, it surely will not be the last one. In recent years, pollution has reached very high levels across the Balkans and in Serbia in particular, becoming a problem that is impossible to ignore, and as much a health hazard as a quintessential political issue. The pollution caused by 16 coal-based power plants in South Eastern Europe exceeds that produced in the rest of Europe combined (Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) 2019; Hafner and Baumgartner 2020). This exposes the local populations to a huge health risk, while also posing considerable problems to neighbouring European countries, which are reached by the polluted air originating from this area (Coalition 27 2019). The pressure on Belgrade's authorities to address this issue has been mounting since a 2019 report claimed that Serbia had Europe's worst per capita record for pollution-related deaths: 175 per 100,000 people (Global Alliance on Health and Pollution 2019). Since then, Serbian cities have regularly fared among the most polluted in Europe and the world.

Several of the Serbian towns affected by high levels of pollution have one thing in common: their plants have been taken over by Chinese investors over the past half-decade. The scenes of children in Smederevo – home to a steel mill owned by China's Hesteel since 2016 – covered by thick black dust in summer 2020 have reached thousands via online media, sparking outrage (Blic 2020). In Bor, whose copper mine has been acquired by China's Zijin Mining in 2018, alarmingly high levels of sulphur dioxide<sup>1</sup>

are not even the highest cause of concern. In September 2020, citizens protested the unsustainable air pollution, pointing out that the deadly toxin arsenic<sup>2</sup> has often been detected in Bor's air. "This is not a protest, but a cry for life", they stated (Jovanovic 2020).

While the new Chinese owners might be one culprit, they are not the only one. Pollution has been damaging these and other cities well before their arrival. Moreover, the politically charged nature of the issue has, so far, yielded more trouble than benefit: in an attempt to obscure pollution data, Serbian authorities seem to have retrenched further into secrecy, instead of increasing transparency (Pantovic and Harris 2021). A case in point: the firing of expert Milenko Jovanović from the Agency for the Protection of the Environment, in December 2020, after the latter pointed out that the continuous change in the measurement of air pollution parameters was inappropriate (interview with Jovanović, 2011). His reinstatement was one of the requests moved forward by the 10 January protesters in Belgrade.

This paper therefore aims to investigate the question of whether, and to which extent, Chinese investors' influence is impacting Serbia's bad environmental conditions, and analyses modes of resistance to this health hazard in two Serbian cities (Bor and Smederevo). It deals with the intersection of governance and environmental problems, as seen in connection with China's investments in Serbia, while taking stock of the civil society activism that has resulted from a combination of the deep-seated problems with the management of these factories and of a retrenchment into further non-transparency that has ensued after the Chinese takeover.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review addresses the most useful takeaways offered by the incipient literature on Chinese investments in South Eastern Europe in connection with environmental problems, while the 'policy review' lays out the actions taken by the European Union in this respect so far. The empirical sections that follow focus on the case studies of Bor and Smederevo: each of them sets out a brief chronology of the ownership

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1 Sulphur dioxide is a toxic gas, released by volcanic activity or as a by-product of copper extraction and the burning of fossil fuels. It is a major air pollutant and has significant impacts upon human health, plants and animal life. Its emissions are a precursor to acid rain and atmospheric particulates.

2 Arsenic is a metalloid ranked among the most hazardous in the world by the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. It is a Group-A carcinogen.



structure over the past decade, providing an overview of the governance-related and environment-related problems, while giving voice to the activists interviewed for this research project. The reaction (or inaction) of

national and international institutions is picked up again in the conclusion, arguing for the urgency of a problem that needs to be given absolute priority if Serbia is to truly breathe again.

# Literature review: Environment meets governance

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In light of the burgeoning relations between Serbia and China, policy and academic literature on the subject has been rapidly growing, with a focus on the geopolitical implications, on the economy, on security, and on whether China's soft power and symbolic power are on the rise (Janković 2016; Grubišić 2017; Dimitrijević 2017; Vangeli and Pavličević 2019; Vangeli 2020). However, the scholarly debate has been slower to devote attention to the environment, although this was identified as one of the main risks of Chinese investments in the region in a 2017 risk-mapping exercise (Andrić, W Zou, and Author 2017).

And yet, as explained above, the urgency of this topic is all too evident. One of the most useful academic contributions to this debate was put forward by a group of researchers comparing the environmental impact of Chinese investments in six South East European countries, including Serbia (Tsimonis et al. 2020). The main argument they put forward is that the adverse environmental impact of many Chinese projects in this region cannot be attributed to "the commonly held perception of the Chinese as inherently 'bad' investors and of host states as 'weak' and dependent". Instead, they find what they term a *synergy of failures* between investors, host states, and regional institutions that results in poor regulation and compliance. Their analysis is useful because it serves to highlight the relevance of state-investor relations as an important element to understand the behaviour of firms from emerging economies such as China, as they "co-create different practices and regulatory norms in liminal regions such as SEE" (Tsimonis et al, 2020: 3). In discussing their conclusions, they state:

Our findings identify an unfortunate "synergy of failures" by the actors involved as the heart of the problem. On the one hand, Chinese investors **tend to disregard the necessity of environmental impact assessments (EIAs)**, the need for compliance with local regulatory frameworks and the importance of engaging with local communities and civil society. On the other hand, **host governments demonstrate a lack of political will** to pursue sustainable development or enforce compliance, especially at the entry point, which renders them **primarily responsible for the negative environmental impact** of these projects. The closed nature of bilateral negotiations mitigates

against effective civil society oversight until many of the environmentally damaging effects are already happening, or at least until the project has taken on an institutional inertia which can be difficult to stop. This is particularly relevant given the high level of host state involvement in many of the Chinese-invested projects in SEE (Tsimonis et al 2020: 6) (*emphasis added*).

Therefore, it is often not analytically possible to distinguish the impact of Chinese capital from the effects linked to improperly designed or implemented neoliberal reform programmes. Similarly, it is difficult to extricate them from the consequences of weak governance and corruption. As is increasingly recognised in the literature on external actors in the Western Balkan region, the problems deriving from non-Western actors' influence are much more a result of a *demand-side*, rather than of a *supply-side*, problem (Maliqi 2020a; Prelec 2020a). In other words, the quality of the governance of the recipient country matters more than the foreign actor's practices in ensuring that investments are transparent and beneficial for the whole population.

In this sense, it is significant to note that China is far from being the only player to 'not play by the rules' in the region, nor was it the first one. In South Eastern Europe, there is often a long track record of exploitative activities by international corporations (Duanmu 2014; Elliott and Freeman 2004; Moran 2002). In fact, as will be discussed in the case studies below, the companies examined suffered from a range of problems before the Chinese takeover. In more recent times, Western investors were also found to be implicated in funding environmentally-damaging projects in the Balkans (Đorđević 2020).

A final topic worthy of attention is that of environmental protests as linked to anti-government activism. This theme is a burgeoning one in the specialised literature on countries with transitional or hybrid democracies, and is therefore not limited to South Eastern Europe. From Belarus to Kyrgyzstan, from Armenia to Uzbekistan, and from Romania to China, demonstrators have increasingly taken action against perceived environmental injustices, confronting the government (Vesalon and Crețan 2015; Wooden 2013; Christoph Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Buyon 2020). The 2020 Nations in Transit report by Freedom House

highlighted the link between eco-activists' demands and anti-corruption sentiment (Buyon 2020):

[M]any of the ecological issues driving this activism are downstream of governance failures including clientelism, graft, and gross incompetence. Consequently, in free and unfree societies alike, environmental protests have become ciphers through which citizens can advocate against corruption and for good governance—and expect results.

It is therefore no surprise that grievances related to governance and those related to the environment go hand in hand in the case studies examined in the sections that follow. A note of caution, however, concerns the possibility of such groups to be co-opted by the very regimes they are protesting against. As the political importance of environmental activism looms ever larger, so does autocrats' temptation to create puppet parties or 'Government-organised non-governmental organizations' purporting to fight for the environment, but serving the ruling elites' political interests – a scenario that has already materialised in both Russia and Uzbekistan (Buyon 2020).

## Policy review: The EU's role

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The activity of the European Union (EU) in countering environmental problems identified above has, so far, not been very forceful. The EU's Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) screening mechanism, set up in 2019, was created with China in mind. However, this mechanism was – and still is – primarily aimed at safeguarding the EU against security and public order threats, whereas the environmental issues fare much lower on the scale of priority. The press release announcing the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) (European Commission 2020) mentions 'sustainability' – a dimension containing reference to both labour rights and environmental protection – as the fifth of seven bullet points in summarising the agreement. Market access, ensuring 'equal footing' for EU companies in China, the predictability and legal certainty for investments, and regulating the behaviour of SOEs are all principles cited before concerns regarding the environment.<sup>3</sup>

Voices worried with this situation are, however, starting to make themselves heard in Brussels. In January 2021, a cross-party group of Members of the European Parliament sent a hard-hitting letter to the European Commissioner in charge of Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, raising the problem of the environmental impact of Chinese investments in Serbia and asking for the EU to step up its game in this regard (Group of MEPs 2021). Aside from the cases of Bor and Smederevo that are treated in this study, the letter summarises the issues that characterise the Shandong Linglong tire plant in Zrenjanin. Like the others, this project, too, has been labelled 'of national interest' by the Serbian authorities, which allows it to be treated differently, bypassing standard procedures and walling it off from scrutiny. The opacity of the venture is connected with a series of troubles:

The establishment of the plant in itself raises questions, given that the land has been alleged to be leased to Shandong Linglong free of charge and with equally generous terms on utilities, taxation or import fees. More than two dozen law suits and administrative requests have already been filed to challenge the irregularities of this project. Claims have been put forward that the population around the site have been barred from testifying with regards to potential environmental impact on their homes. Besides concerns about

air quality, the project is currently slated to also be directly linked to the Zrenjanin public water system without any guarantees of filtration or safeguards to maintain water quality, presenting yet another possible hazard to the health and well-being of the surrounding population (Group of MEPs 2021).

In many ways, these issues are strongly at odds with Serbia's EU aspirations. Expanding the coal-based powerplants, such as in the case of Kostolac (Serbia), is a particularly glaring pitfall. Simon Ilse, Head of the Belgrade Office of the Heinrich Boell Stiftung, expressed great concern about China-Serbia cooperation in heavy industry plants, calling it 'a huge step backwards', and adding:

The gap between climate and energy legislation and goals in the EU on the one hand, and Serbia on the other hand, is increasing to a level that will make it almost impossible for Serbia to catch up because of lock-in effects. According to a recent study by the Energy Community, to which Serbia is a contracting partner and whose goal it is to bring countries of the East- and South-Eastern European region closer to the EU's Energy Union, Serbia is spending more than double on subsidies for coal than for renewables. If the EU is still the objective, there needs to be a decisive turn-around immediately (Interview with Ilse, 2020).

Two takeaways are clear: that the EU has not taken a very active role in this regard as yet, and that it should. It should do so not only out of selfless considerations. Safeguarding the rule of law and the environment in its accession countries is also an investment in its own future, as it is a real worry about the grave spill-over effects the air pollution coming from the Western Balkans is already having in nearby EU member states (Coalition 27 2019). The clear link between the potential abuse of public resources and these environmentally-damaging ventures should, furthermore, send alarm bells ringing across the pond. The new US administration has vowed to fight modern kleptocracy (Logvinenko and Michel 2020): cracking down on these practices in its democracy-promotion efforts should be seen as part and parcel of this new agenda.

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3 While we do not yet know the exact content of the EU-China trade and investment agreement that was signed in December 2020, there are indications that any issues potentially critical of China may have been swept under the rug, to the benefit of economic relations (Fallon 2021).





## Bor: From RTB-Bor to Zijin Bor Copper

“We could never boast of being an ‘air spa’, but it has never been this bad”, says Irena Živković, one of the leaders of the protests for clean air that have been taking place in Bor from 2015 onwards (Interview with Živković, 2020). Irena says she is lucky to be in good health now, but is worried about her children. She does not seem to notice her own, continuous, cough: the impression is that she does not consider it even worthy of mention, compared to what many of her fellow Bor citizens are experiencing.

To be sure, many of the grave environmental problems affecting the mining town in Eastern Serbia, rich in copper, gold and other precious metals, predated the arrival of Chinese investors in 2018. Branislav Radošević, an engineer with a long experience of working with companies operating in the Bor area, says: “It is not down to the Chinese alone. If you walked down the streets of Bor in nylon stockings, even a decade ago or more, they would

start to tear apart pretty soon. It is the sulphur dioxide that does it” (Interview with Radošević, 2020). Even worse than the sulphur dioxide, significant amounts of highly toxic arsenic have been recorded in Bor’s air. Its provenance has never been clarified.

Bor’s heavy pollution is not a new problem, then. But, as with all other interviewees consulted for this project, Radošević is also convinced that the ‘new era’ marked by the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party and the Chinese investors – from 2018 to date – has brought “a situation worse than we have ever witnessed before” (Interview with Radošević, 2020), in terms of pollution as well as in regard to the lack of transparency. After a short historical overview of Bor’s smeltery, this section outlines the damage to the environment and citizens’ health, considering available data. Finally, it looks at activists’ responses.

### A string of economic woes and governance problems

That the area around Bor was rich in precious metal is something that has been known for thousands of years, predating even Roman times. In its modern form, the mining complex and smeltery was developed at the beginning of the 20th century, when the Serbian industrialist Đorđe Vajfert ensured the influx of French capital into the venture. The company, headquartered in Paris, was founded in June 1904 (RTB Bor 2012). In the interwar period, it is rumoured that the main ‘gatekeeper’ for any business deal in that region was Radomir Pašić, the son of renowned politician Nikola Pašić, who was defined as “the haughtiest daddy’s son in Serbian history... leaving his mark on each and every corruption scandal” (Srbija Danas 2020). French capital backed the venture until the Second World War. Further investment and expansion of the mining area followed under Yugoslavia, until 1999 – when it was restructured (RTB Bor 2012).

Politics has always played a leading role in RTB Bor. Even in the early 2000s, during the reformist governments that followed the demise of Slobodan Milošević’s authoritarian regime, the company’s activity was not transparent. Question marks hang over a failed takeover by Australian colossus Rio Tinto in this period, which was allegedly already agreed and stopped abruptly (interview with Radošević, 2020). Two failed purchases followed in 2007

and 2008, by Romanian company Cuprom and Austrian A-TEC, respectively.

Increasingly, RTB-Bor kept running into serious economic difficulties. As with many state-owned companies in Serbia, the opportunities offered by the rich mining company were abused by the elites in power: wages were kept high and excessive employment was long the norm, to keep ‘social peace’ among the population and ensure a loyal class of voters through clientelistic practices (Cvejić 2016; Günay and Dzihic 2016). Furthermore, the debt incurred towards other state-owned companies, chiefly EPS, to foot the mining and smelting complex’s energy bill, was regularly waived or just not paid.

These factors contributed to a worsening economic performance of the company. The bad economic position of RTB Bor was a matter of concern for the International Monetary Fund (IMF), too, which actively encouraged Serbia to either find a strategic partner or to privatise the company altogether (Telesković 2017) and expressed satisfaction after the acquisition by the Chinese investor, judging it an “important step” (International Monetary Fund 2018).



It is within this context that Zijin Mining Group's takeover occurred in August 2018, with the acquisition of a 63% stake in RTB Bor – thence known as Zijin Bor Copper. The Serbian Minister of Energy and Mining Aleksandar Antić (of the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS) announced that Zijin would invest \$1.26 billion in the Serbian company, with an extra \$350 million foreseen for its recapitalization. The

Chinese partner also pledged to open the Cerovo mine and to modernize Bor's smeltery, increasing its capacity. They vowed to keep 5,000 workplaces and to invest \$200 million in covering pre-existing debts (Vlada Republike Srbije 2018). No wonder, then, that President Aleksandar Vučić was able to present this and other takeovers, and the Chinese investors, as 'saviours' (Prelec 2020b).

## **The environmental damage and the response: worse than 'just' sulphur dioxide**

A new smeltery was unveiled and made operational in 2015. However, engineers working in Bor contested this move in an open letter to authorities (Solaris media Bor 2015), accusing the government of releasing the smeltery before its construction was finalised and the relevant controls were done. "The truth is simple and inescapable: the launch of the new smeltery [...] occurred in a situation that was lacking the basic technical requirements", they wrote<sup>4</sup>.

As it turned out, the engineers' worries were not misplaced. The sub-standard smeltery could not cope with an increase in production and, as a consequence, pollution levels rose considerably. This triggered the first protests, after which the first citizen mobilisation was initiated. "We first tried to act through institutional channels, but we encountered a wall, and we took to the streets", says Vladimir Stojičević, an active member of another activists group, Glasno Za Omladinu ('Loud for our Youth').

The pressure paid off, at least to some extent. After authorities conceded to decreasing the level of activity of the new smeltery in 2015, and the high levels of air pollution that were recorded that year decreased somewhat. However, after Zijin Mining's takeover in 2018, the activity has ostensibly resumed, bringing pollution levels back up. In 2019 the city saw five anti-pollution protests – but levels have further increased in 2020 (Đorđević 2020).

There is mounting evidence to assert that, while the environmental problems had clearly started before the

privatisation of the company, the way this was carried out has compounded environmental risks. A first object of controversy is the Agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the Chinese company Zijin Mining: the 1,124-word document (published as an unsearchable pdf file by the Serbian authorities) contains a number of contentious areas. An in-depth study published in 2020 argues that the Serbian government gave the new investor a 'free-pass' on any environmental damage done in the transition period, while crucially 'missing' defining the duration of said period (Novaković and Todorović Štiplija 2020).

Not everyone in the institutions has always turned a blind eye. In November 2019, the Environmental Inspectorate pressed charges against Zijin Bor Copper for air pollution, after an officer took it upon herself to visit the city and measure the pollution first-hand. The Inspectorate's report stated that, in the days observed, the concentration of sulphur dioxide was between 5.6 to 8.3 times higher than the legal maximum (Ministry for Environmental Protection of Serbia 2019)<sup>5</sup>. The company, however, ignored the report and continued to operate. The court ruled against Zijin Bor Copper, but only by issuing an undisclosed fine between EUR 13,000 and 26,000 (Danas 2020) – a drop in the bucket for a company whose annual turnover exceeds EUR 465 million (Serbian Business Registers Agency 2020).

Voices of officers trying to bring this issue to light are stifled and marginalised. The most prominent case is the above-mentioned dismissal of air pollution expert Milenko

4 The issues raised by the engineers included the insufficient amount and inadequate physico-chemical properties of the concentrate; the improperly carried out discharge and transport of slag; the questionable readiness for release of two converters and of the gas treatment system; the failure to include managers and workers in the control of the modernisation works; and the inadequate training of workers to operate the new smeltery (Solaris media Bor 2015).

5 Official data from the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency's measuring point Bor – used for filing this complaint – reveal that from September 13 to September 15 2020 up to 2,000 micrograms of sulphur dioxide were measured in Bor (Spasić 2020). The legally sanctioned level of this substance is between 125 and 500 micrograms, after which the concentration of toxins becomes hazardous for human health. There is considerable uncertainty over these figures, which could be even worse: activists and experts stated that the measurements have, on occasion, surpassed 4000 micrograms of sulphur dioxide during 2020 (interview with Živković 2020 and Radošević 2020).



Jovanović from the Agency for Environmental Protection (SEPA) in December 2020. Interviewed for this study, Jovanović expressed his deep worries about the copper mining complex: “Bor is, in my opinion, the bleakest case of them all” (interview with Jovanović, 2021). He raised the issue of highly venomous arsenic particles in the air: a problem unanimously considered a serious risk for human health<sup>6</sup>. Experts lament the non-transparency of the provenance of this substance (interviews with Jovanović 2021 and Radošević 2020). What is more, the smeltery was built in a depression, which means that its chimney is at the level of the buildings; the polluting particles, therefore, reach city dwellers directly (interview with Jovanović 2021).

New trouble could be on the horizon. Zijin did not limit its ambitions to the pre-existing mining activities: in 2019, the company expanded excavations to a new location, 5 km south of Bor (Ralev 2020). This new mining area, called Čukaru Peki, has been touted as one of the biggest unexploited copper and gold deposits in the world (B92 2017). The preparatory activities for the opening of the new pit have already created a natural disaster in the neighbouring villages of Metovnica, Brestovac and Slatina. Given that there is no running water in this area, the only source of water is from a system of underground wells, which have been drying up since the underground mining started. Furthermore, the explosions have damaged several houses in the aforementioned villages. Some villagers are expected to be relocated (N1 2020).

The activists’ fight in Bor continues. There are signs that it may not have been in vain: in January 2021, pollution had decreased, although it still often surpassed the limits allowed by law. An important document, furthermore, signalled a way forward. Activists managed to obtain the minutes of a Zijin Bor Copper meeting, from which it appeared that the Chinese managers – and not the Serbian ones – insisted upon the swift resolution of the problems causing high pollution, including the toning down of production in the periods considered of highest risk. The Chinese managers are quoted as saying: “In regard to the protection of the environment, the green transition needs to be speeded up”, and “what happened in September, that the pollution limits were overtaken so glaringly, and that I was not informed about it immediately, this is something I am very unhappy about. I hope it will not happen again”.

The minutes furthermore indicate that the media pressure had worked: as stated by the Chinese managers, the attention on this issue ‘brought damage to the Peoples’ Republic of China’. Irena Živković has no doubts: the reaction from the international organisations and the foreign media that have spoken out about this problem are to thank. “I hope that the pressure on the Chinese investors and on our institutions will continue”, she says. “It is clear that, after all that was attempted by the citizens, this is the route that gives the best results. In the meantime, we still await the new [more ecologically suitable] plant, and hope that our workers will keep their jobs” (Interview with Živković 2021).

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6 Measurements made by the Institute of Metallurgy in Bor found 4.771 ng/m<sup>3</sup> of arsenic in the air in December 2019, while this value has been 600 times over the legal limit of 6 ng/m<sup>3</sup> on some days in 2018. The alarm has been sounded by several experts and engineers that work in RTB Bor, but for now nobody is willing to step out of the shadows and publicly state where the arsenic comes from.

# Smederevo: Red rain, black dust

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In June 2016, citizens of Smederevo greeted Xi Jinping with a grand welcome, while holding large effigies of China's president in their hands (Ruptly 2016). But soon enough, the situation would drastically change, as the takeover by the new owners went hand in hand with a progressive deterioration of environmental conditions in the city (Pantović 2020; Todorović 2020). As in the case of Bor (and as will be explained in more detail in the following sections), government pollution data are unreliable. Formally, there is no hard proof that pollution has increased considerably over the past half decade: a halt in the air pollution measurement over the course of three years, 2015-2017 means that it is very

difficult to draw precise historical pollution data (interview with Jovanović).

However, activists point to a situation that is both extremely troubling in terms of long-standing problems, and getting even worse. The disconnect between the line pushed by the government in relation to the investments coming from China – one of economic development over everything else (RTS 2015; Prelec 2020b) – and the lived experience of Smederevo inhabitants is now conspicuous. As put by one of the activists: "We can't keep talking about profit, day in and day out, while we are dying like rats here" (Marka Žvaka & Pokret Tvrdava 2020).

## Smederevo's steel century: from Austria-Hungary to China

As in the case of Bor's mine, Smederevo's steel production goes long back in time – by almost a century. In 1913, the Austro-Hungarian company STEG acquired a mining concession in Eastern Serbia, founding the Kingdom of Serbia's first steel plant. The steel mill, which was then named SARTID, remained majority-owned by foreign capital until the end of World War II. With the arrival of socialism, the company was nationalised in December 1946 (Vreme 2012). The plant then remained state-owned until 2003, when it was acquired by the American company US Steel for \$23 million (Tavernise 2003). Between 2008-2010, US Steel invested in ecological improvements; the main chimney was reconstructed and sludge presses installed (Stevanovic 2020).

In the years spanning 2003 to 2012 – when US Steel left Serbia due to the drop in global steel prices, selling the steel mill back to the state for \$1 – the industrial complex in Smederevo was the biggest exporter in the country. The new owners, furthermore, funded the modernization of two stations for the measurement of air quality in the local communities of Radinac and Rajla, in cooperation with the Serbian Ministry of the Environment (Jovicic 2016). The

2012-2016 state-run period, by contrast, was marked by utter neglect. Five thousand workers were put on leave, the furnaces were shut down, scheduled maintenance was allegedly being skipped and various tenders annulled.

In April 2016, the Serbian government declared they had finally found a suitable partner in the Chinese company Hesteel Group, which was known as HBIS until that year (Dragojlo 2016). The Chinese firm acquired a 98% stake in the Smederevo steel mill for EUR 46 million, promising to invest EUR 300 million over the following 2 years. In a manner typical of large deals concluded by the Serbian state over the past decade (Pavlović 2016), the 1170-page-long contract between Serbia and Hesteel Group was shrouded by intransparency and included clauses favourable to the investor and detrimental to the Serbian state coffers. The Chinese investor was allowed to choose which parts of the company it would take on board; Hesteel acquired all of the company's assets but left its debts in a sister company which is, at the time of writing, still owned by the state (Teleskovic 2017).

## The environmental damage and the response: red & black dust

Nikola 'Kolja' Krstić is fond of his 'no filter' badge. "This is one of the problems we are fighting against", he explains, "the lack of filters in the steel plant". That for him the local grievances had become national, and the private political, is all too clear. When we spoke for the first time, in spring 2020, our conversation was interrupted mid-way by the

spirited sound of clanging pots and pans – the anti-government protests that took place during the first coronavirus lockdown, each evening at 20:05, in which he, as many other environmental activists, took part in without fail.



Krstić, the leader of the local eco grassroots movement 'Tvrđava' (Fortress), explained that Smederevo activists were among the first to raise the issue of environmental degradation in Serbia. Starting in 2018, they have been organising a series of actions that receive considerable media coverage, such as the blocking of the railroad in front of the steel mill (Mondo 2018) or the 'masked ball' with protective masks in pre-coronavirus times (RTS 2018). As he explained: "Our association of citizens was funded with the aim to improve the quality of life in our community, but also as a defence barrier and a controlling mechanism to the local authorities. One of the main topics that profiled themselves is air pollution, due to it being incredibly high in Smederevo: it is enough to look around and observe the heavy cloak of red dust on houses, cars, and people" (interview with Krstić 2020).

The actions had limited success, but they nevertheless pushed authorities to react. Initially, eco-activists in Smederevo had three main demands: installing proper filters in the steel mill; stopping the illegal deposit of slag in the city; and ensuring the proper measurement of air pollution (Mondo 2018). After the 2018 mobilisation, the director of Serbia's Agency for the protection of the environment contacted the local activists and proceeded to install a new air pollution measurement station – a first small victory.

This was followed by meetings with Hesteel itself and with the Ministry of Energy in early 2019. By threatening to organise more protests, the activists persuaded the steel mill owners and the authorities to take part in a series of other meetings, again with limited concrete outcomes. At one of the latest of such instances, activist Vladimir Milić started the conversation by putting on the table three different kinds of heavy metal that he had collected from his garden and his windowsill that morning (Pokret Tvrđava 2020). Consultations, however, did not produce any concrete results, "mostly ending with empty promises" (interview with Krstić, 2020).

Things were about to get even worse. In July 2020, Smederevo was covered by thick black dust. While occurrences of 'red dust' and 'red rain' have been relatively

common in Smederevo for a long time (Marka Žvaka & Pokret Tvrđava 2020; N1 2019), it is the first time that the black particles enveloped the city. "The worst is that, while we know that it comes from the steel mill, we do not know exactly what it is made of", explains Krstić, "but it is very important for people to understand that this is not just 'normal' dust: what we are talking about here is the by-product of steel melting activity" (interview with Krstić, 2021).

Such problems are especially vicious in the context of the Covid19 crisis: people living in areas affected by heavy air pollution have been found to be much more vulnerable to the effects of the virus, increasing mortality by up to 11% (Carrington 2020; Wu et al. 2020; Pozzer et al. 2020).

The unavailability of reliable data complicates matters. While it is well known, and scientifically proven, that the rise of illnesses – including cancer – is closely connected with the activity of the steel mill (Slobodan Miladinović et al. 2013), the mid-2010s are a period that is very scarcely covered by data points. As already mentioned, air pollution measurement stations were not active in the period 2015-2017 (interview with Jovanović). Data regarding the incidence of malign illnesses is equally difficult to come by. "We asked the local hospital (Dom Zdravlja) to deliver this information to us, but they declared themselves not responsible in this matter. We asked other institutions and are still waiting for an answer", Krstić explained in January 2011.

The frustration and the anger of Smederevo dwellers, therefore, is directed much more against the institutions – which allow these abuses to occur, and seem to go to great lengths to obscure and mystify pollution data – than against the new Chinese owners. In the absence of clear measurement data, it is very difficult to estimate the gravity of the problems and to assign blame. It is, however, very likely that the incessant campaigning work by Smederevo activists is a real thorn in the side of the company managers, who cannot fail to entertain considerations that are similar in nature to those expressed by the Chinese owners of the Bor copper mine.

# Conclusions

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In both cases examined, Bor and Smederevo, there are indications that pollution has worsened over the past few years, i.e. after the Chinese takeover. In the case of Bor, the likely over-capacity operation of the smeltery has sulphur pollution as a consequence; and there are well-founded suspicions that there are high levels of arsenic in the concentrate. In the case of Smederevo, the pre-existent red dust and red rain were recently joined by even more worrying occurrences of black dust. While there is no denying that pollution was a significant problem in those cities in earlier years, the lived experiences of the citizens examined in this paper show that concern with the quality of the air that surrounded them has grown significantly.

The role of the Serbian government in allowing for dubious and intransparent practices by the new owners is front and centre. The Chinese investors were promised that they could increase production in the factories they took over: the increase in production has had deleterious effects on the environment and on the health of those living in proximity to these plants, and even further afield. As explained by the experts interviewed, given that the operations are shrouded by a thick veil of secrecy and we thus do not know almost anything about what the new owners have committed themselves to, there are worries that some of their practices are leading to very dangerous consequences. What is more, local authorities have neglected at best, and actively sabotaged at worst, the availability of reliable pollution measurement data. Both the unavailability of data and the marginalisation or firing of experts from relevant agencies are extremely troubling occurrences.

Spontaneous civic activism has arisen in response to this environmental and health hazard, especially in the period since 2018. These movements have created networks and have already organised coordinated actions in several cities at once. The perverse harmony of an investor looking to maximise its interests and a government that allows its citizens' health to suffer in return for economic gain has sparked widespread anger among the population. This helps explain why, in all the cases examined, environmental activism is joined with anti-government sentiment: the voices of the activists analysed here are not neutral, nor they could be, as the two are interlinked. The cases examined thus illustrate the issues connected with Chinese investments, but also specific modes of resistance to the dominant conception of power in Serbia.

Seen from this perspective, the stark dualism of China as a bad actor, and Western countries and companies as good actors, should be questioned and addressed with nuance. The material examined in this study indicates that the main discriminant in exploitative and environment-damaging practices occurring in such companies is the extent to which such practices are allowed by the Serbian government. This chimes with the findings of several other works focused on the Western Balkans, which point at the *demand-side*, rather than the *supply-side*, as crucial in the occurrence of malign influence from non-Western actors (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019; 2019; Maliqi 2020b).

Where does 'the West' stand in all this? So far, the economy has trumped the environment in the Serbian government's calculations, to little pushback from the EU. However, a letter from a cross-party group of concerned Members of the European Parliament from January 2021 suggests that there are actors within the EU who are able and willing to eloquently articulate these issues. But will it be enough for the EU to act on it? While the EU's increasingly tight commercial ties with China leave plenty of questions, positive synergy could come from the US. If the Biden administration is serious about tackling global corruption and kleptocracy, it cannot overlook the dynamics by which fragile democracies interact with capital coming from authoritarian countries, to the clear detriment of the health of the population.

The importance of such international pressure cannot be overestimated. The most encouraging finding of the study is that, while the activists' fight might not have convinced their national authorities to change tack, it has pushed the Chinese investors to worry about reputational risks for themselves and for their country, and adopt at least palliative measures to lower pollution. New, more environmentally friendly plants are in the works. But to have real effects, pressure must continue at a sustained pace: there is still a long way to go for Serbs to be able to catch their breath again.

*The author would like to thank: Noah Buyon, Slobodan Georgiev, Maša Perović, Miljan Radunović, Kori Udovički, Ilija Vojnović, the PSSI editors, and, most of all, the interviewees and all the other concerned citizens who have shared their time so generously.*

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## 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

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## 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

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