



“Steel Friendship” — Forging of the Perception of China by the Serbian Political Elite

Stefan Vladislavljev

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Author: **Stefan Vladislavljev**

Proofreading: **Zack Kramer**

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

www.pssi.cz

Executive Summary

The Serbian political elite have come to perceive China as a trustworthy and beneficial partner and are portraying it as such to the wider Serbian public, generating a positive picture of the country among Serbian people. Serbia has also been an important partner of China in Central and Eastern Europe, and Serbian politicians have embraced this relationship and have endorsed it through a number of mechanisms. This budding relationship is often described by members of the Serbian political elite as a “steel friendship” between the two countries. Partnership between Serbia and China has been intensifying since 2009, with the signing of a strategic agreement on economic, technological and infrastructure cooperation between two countries, and has reached the level of strategic partnership since then.

The Chinese presence in Serbia, often exaggerated, has helped the current ruling coalition led by president Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to consolidate political power. Over the last decade,

the centralization of political power and the control of governance mechanisms have paved the way for the ruling political elite in Serbia to popularize political and economic cooperation with China, elevate it to the level of strategic partnership, and present it as such to the Serbian public. On the other side of the political spectrum, the current opposition leaders were Vučić’s predecessors in the development of relations with China, and used to present it as a “foreign policy pillar” and Serbia’s close partner. This has created a lack of criticism from opposition leaders when it comes to the rising level of cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing.

This study identifies who the main Serbian political actors promoting closer ties with Beijing are, and in what ways and by what mechanisms they utilize China to gain domestic political points. It argues that the commitment to the Sino-Serbian partnership will remain constant in the approach of the Serbian political elite, regardless of the political party and the politicians in power.



Introduction

The Chinese presence in Serbia has been steadily rising over the past decade. The increased number of infrastructural projects and financial agreements and the development of political and cultural relations have made China one of the most popular foreign policy partners for the Serbian ruling political elite.

The rising presence has created a basis for the partnership between the two countries, named the “steel friendship” by the ruling political elite in Serbia. This study focuses on the Serbian political elite, which is using China to gain political points and facilitate centralization of domestic political power through a presentation of the partnership as beneficial and positive to the Serbian public. While the Chinese outreach in the Western Balkans and Serbia has been well documented in the literature (Zweers, et al. 2020), how that outreach was utilized by the Serbian political elites for internal purposes has not until recently been a focus of researchers (see Prelec 2020).

For the past decade, the Serbian political elite, led by president Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Progressive Party, has balanced its foreign policy approach on the proclaimed “four pillars of the foreign policy” (Novaković 2013) – the European Union, Russia, the United States of America, and China. Serbia has thus seen itself as a country that tries to balance between East and West, where for a long time “East” included first and foremost Russia, a country with which Serbia has close and traditional ties (De Launey 2014). Recently, while trying to maintain working and amicable relations with all of the four pillars, the meaning of “cooperation with the East” changed as decision-makers

in Belgrade have increasingly relied on cooperation with China, and less on Moscow (Velebit 2020).

For this reason, this study focuses on cooperation with China, and identifies who the main Serbian actors promoting closer ties with Beijing are, and in what ways and through which mechanisms they use China to gain domestic political points. The rise of popularity of the Sino-Serbian friendship is one of the tools that the ruling political elite in Serbia is using to consolidate centralization of its decision-making process and to assure that its position of power cannot be contested. The first part of the study maps the most important mechanisms that actors in Serbia are using to foster a closer relationship with China and present it as favorable to the Serbian public. The main part of the study then identifies the most important proponents of cooperation between Serbia and China. The focus is put on the government representatives, prime-ministers, and ministers, and the most prominent members of the relevant political parties and institutions.

Research is based mainly on existing literature, publications, press releases, official and media statements by the identified actors, and other publicly available data. These are complemented by findings collected by the author through interviews with the representatives of Serbian political parties and media. The covid-19 pandemic and the parliamentary elections held in Serbia have limited the number of collected responses, but it still includes relevant representatives from different sides of the Serbian political spectrum, as well as representatives of state-owned and independent media outlets.

A front-row seat for the "steel friendship"

Serbia has become an important partner of China in Central and Eastern Europe. China has increased its presence, and has become popular among Serbian citizens. Serbian decision makers have used different mechanisms to instrumentalize the rising "steel friendship". The way that China has been presented to the Serbian public has resulted in the positive perception of their partner from the Far East among Serbian citizens. Research published by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in 2017 found that China is viewed by 52% of Serbian citizens as an actor with a positive effect on Serbia (BCSP 2017). Follow-up research, conducted by the BSCP in November 2020 showed that 16% of Serbian citizens see China as Serbia's "best friend" and partner (BCSP 2020), putting it in second place, behind Russia with 40%. Research from March 2020 published by the Institute for European Affairs shows that the positive presentation of joint projects and overall cooperation with China brings results. The research found that 40% of Serbian citizens perceive China as the biggest donor to Serbia. These perceptions have contradicted available data, as according to the Serbian Ministry of European Integration only 0.6% of total international development grants to the Republic of Serbia between 2010 and 2016 have come from China, while 59.9% have come from the countries of the European Union (Ministry of European Integration 2019). Nevertheless, the overall positive image that was created has allowed the Serbian political elite to popularize cooperation with China for their political gain.

The rise of the Chinese presence in Serbia can be traced from 2009 onwards, when a strategic agreement on economic, technological, and infrastructure cooperation was signed between the two countries. (Le Corre and Vuksanović 2019). But there are some elements of cooperation predating that year. During the 1999 NATO intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Chinese embassy was destroyed in one of the aerial attacks on Belgrade (Ponniah and Marinković 2019). This event has been perceived as a tragic moment in joint Sino-Serbian history. It is also used as a symbol of friendship, showing that Serbia and China were not enemies in the conflict, but that both sides have suffered joint casualties, as stated by the former Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić (Danas Online 2019). Commemoration of the Chinese casualties is held every year on the date of the bombing of the embassy,

and it is attended regularly by Serbian officials and the Chinese ambassador. During the commemorative event in 2020, Predrag Markovic, vice president of the Socialist Party of Serbia, said: "this day has scarred our collective history. The suffering of civilians, the indiscriminate destruction, the targeting of the innocent, and especially the attack on the embassy of a friendly nation will always be considered a crime by us" (Global Times 2020).

The second important point of understanding that predates 2009 is the fact that China and Serbia are mutually supportive of each other when it comes to territorial disputes. On one side, China has not recognized Kosovo as an independent state and it stands on the side of Serbia when it comes to the territorial integrity of Serbia in regards to the Kosovo issue (Hammond 2020). On the other side, Serbia has strongly supported the "One China" policy, with official statements coming from the highest level of Serbian officials stating that "Serbia supports the preservation of Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty, the policy of "One China" and Chinese efforts to the peaceful unification of the Country" (Vučić, Letter to the President of the People's Republic of China 2020). Serbian territorial integrity in regards to Kosovo is a hot button political issue amongst the Serbian public. A vast majority of Serbs view Kosovo as a part of Serbia and are not willing to relinquish sovereignty in exchange for EU integration (Institute for European Affairs 2020a). The fact that China, as a major power and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, is standing on Serbia's side on this issue endears China to the wider Serbian population and facilitates the positive presentation of the Sino-Serbian partnership. As Anastas Vangeli argued during the 2020 Belgrade Security Forum panel (Belgrade Security Forum 2019), one of the reasons why China is in a favorable position is the fact that it has a clean record in the region. In other words, Beijing's support on the Kosovo issue and a joint history of victimhood in the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 serve as grounds on which popular support for Sino-Serbian cooperation is built.

Joint ventures in infrastructural projects, foreign direct investment, and general economic cooperation have been the main tools for the cultivation of Sino-Serbian partnership and the display of it to Serbian citizens during the past decade. The economy has been the cornerstone

of mutual relations and has positioned China as one of the most important foreign partners for Serbia. Economic cooperation thus facilitated the development of political ties between the two countries.

One of the main features of political cooperation between the two countries are bilateral visits by senior officials. Regular bilateral visits on the highest level have been an indicator of burgeoning political ties. Those visits are promoted in the media as well and are used as opportunities to present new developments in the cooperation to the Serbian public. Each visit is used to reach new agreements on future joint projects that intensify partnership and cooperation between the two sides (TANJUG 2019a). Serbia is one of a few Eastern European countries that had a chance to welcome both the prime minister of China, Li Keqiang, and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Keqiang visited Belgrade during the summit of the 16+1 platform,¹ held in the Serbian capital in 2014 (Press release, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014), while

Xi Jinping visited Serbia on a bilateral basis in 2016 (CorD 2016). High ranking officials of the Chinese Communist party have visited Serbia on several occasions as well, and their visits have been followed by the highest-ranking Serbian officials and highlighted by Serbian media (TANJUG 2019b). Visits of Serbian officials to Beijing have increased in frequency, with the president or prime minister visiting China at least once a year.

Dedication to the preservation and development of cooperation between the two countries is also shown in official statements made by the Serbian officials. Prime ministerial keynote addresses praising cooperation and dedication to improve cooperation between two sides, official presidential letters, and media statements made by the most prominent representatives of the ruling party have been a standard in the relations of the ruling political elite with China, as will be shown in further parts of the study.

1 From 2012 – 2019 it was known as 16+1 platform for the cooperation between China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries. When Greece joined in 2019, the platform changed its name to 17+1.

Serbian ruling political elite – Fall of the old power and rise of the new

Elections for the Serbian parliament and presidential elections held in 2012 have marked the entrance of a new actor – the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, abbr. SNS)– as the leading political power, and currently the latest shift of power on the Serbian political scene.

SNS was founded in 2008 when a group of members of the Serbian Radical Party, led by the vice-president of the party Tomislav Nikolić, decided to separate and take a different political direction (KU Leuven 2020). The separation came with the shift of Nikolić's political direction from far-right, nationalist, and anti-European narrative to a more moderate, pro-European direction, closer to the center of the political spectrum. Nikolić's departure from Radicals was followed by that of Aleksandar Vučić, who joined Nikolić's faction and became a member of the newly-founded SNS.

At that time, the leading political power in Serbia was the Democratic Party, which held the majority in the Serbian parliament, forming a coalition with the Socialist Party. In addition to the parliamentary majority, the leader of the party, Boris Tadić won his second term as president of Serbia in 2008, ensuring his position until 2013.

The first parliamentary elections after the foundation of the SNS were scheduled for 2012. In an attempt to boost the result of his party, Tadić resigned from the presidency, forcing early presidential elections to be held at the same time as parliamentary ones (Bojić 2012). The results of

both parliamentary and presidential elections showed that Tadić's decision was harmful both for him and his party.

The 2012 elections were won by the SNS, which came to power by forming a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party (Kojić 2020). In addition to the parliamentary majority, the presidential candidate of the SNS, Tomislav Nikolić, won the presidential elections, over sitting president Tadić (Bilefsky 2012a).

Results of the 2012 elections meant that Serbia got a new president, as well as a new ruling majority in the national parliament. That majority was led by the SNS, but as a result of the post-election trade, Ivica Dačić, representative of the Socialist Party, was appointed as a new prime-minister (Bilefsky, 2012b).

These results thus marked “the end of an era” and the beginning of a new one, for the Serbian political scene. SNS and the Socialist Party have remained the two biggest political parties in Serbia until today. They have consolidated and centralized power, which led to the Freedom house index for Serbia dropping to the level of “partly free” in 2020 (Freedom House 2020)². The majority of the decision-making process is controlled by representatives of these two parties, who have held the most important political positions, including the position of the president and prime-minister, since 2012. The identification of the Serbian political elite responsible for the development of cooperation with China therefore largely focuses on the identification of the main actors coming from the above-mentioned parties.

2 2020 Freedom House overview for Serbia: Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations. Despite these trends, the country has continued to move toward membership in the European Union (EU).



The first phase of cooperation – Setting the stage for Sino–Serbian friendship

In many ways, the period between 2009 and 2012 can be seen as the first phase of the development of relations between Serbia and China. The main promoter of cooperation with China before 2012 was the former Serbian minister of foreign affairs, Vuk Jeremić. In his statements during the ministerial mandate, Jeremić said that “Serbia-China friendship has never been stronger” (Xinhua 2011) and that the potential for cooperation in the future for Serbia and China, based on political relations as they were at the moment was “truly boundless” (BETA, TANJUG 2011). Even after his mandate as minister of foreign affairs ended, Jeremić continued to be seen as a person close to the Chinese Communist Party (Jirous 2019). In particular, he has promoted the Chinese political agenda through his work as president of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), launched in 2013. On the official website, CIRSD is presented as a public policy think-tank registered in Belgrade and New York³, but among the members of its board of advisors is Li Wei, former high-level official of the Chinese Communist Party and emeritus president of the Development Research Center of the State Council of China.⁴ CIRSD participated

in the organization of the Silk Road Forum in 2018 (CIRSD 2018), and is a publisher of Horizons magazine (CIRSD n.d.) that contains many affirmative and positive articles about Chinese global outreach and Chinese policies.

Although Tadić’s administration set the stage for cooperation with China, which was not much developed before 2012, and concluded the first infrastructural projects agreements, it lost power before the first concrete results of the Sino-Serbian partnership were realized. An illustrative case is the first major infrastructural agreement, the construction of the Mihailo Pupin bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade, which was reached based on the framework agreement on infrastructure cooperation in 2009. Its construction started in 2010 (Beta 2010), but the bridge, also known as the Serbia-China friendship bridge (Vučić 2014), was officially opened only in 2014. That gave the SNS and prime minister Vučić the chance to reap the benefits of the finalization of the first joint project between Serbia and China, though it was arranged by their predecessors.

3 CIRSD official website: <https://www.cirsd.org/en/>.

4 Li Wei’s biography: <https://www.cirsd.org/en/leadership/board/he-mr-li-wei>.



The era of Tomislav Nikolić – Embracing Chinese presence

Unlike the previous government led by the Democratic Party and president Tadić, the newly appointed governmental figures coming from the SNS have had a chance to present the results of the cooperation to the Serbian public because, since 2012, cooperation between Serbia and China has developed extensively (Bjeloš 2019).

“There was a man in our country 200 years ago and he was a prophet, and had never heard of China, but he said: ‘People will come from the east - yellow people and will rule the world, and drink water from the River Morava’. It is a Serbian river. Today, they drink and will drink more water and work together. We have gone farther than our prophet could have imagined” (BETA 2014).

This is a direct quote by the former president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, during the meeting with the Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang in 2014. The meeting followed the 16+1 platform summit in Belgrade and marked the first visit of the highest-level Chinese officials to Belgrade in 28 years (TANJUG 2014). Nikolić held the presidential mandate (2012-17) during a period of intensification of relations between Serbia and China, when the first major infrastructural project was finalized, the first foreign direct investment was agreed upon, and bilateral visits of Serbian officials to China, and Chinese officials to Belgrade became a regular occurrence. In addition to participation in said events, Nikolić was one of the signatories of the Joint Statement on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Press Release, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016).

Nikolić’s role in fostering cooperation with China was thus significant but not crucial, as his role in Serbian

politics became mainly symbolic after 2012. Following his election as president in 2012, Nikolić stepped down from the position of president of the SNS because the law on the president of Serbia implies that President should not hold any other public position and the fact that Tadić had remained president of the Democratic party was largely criticized by Nikolić during the opposition days (BETA 2012). That decision was a legitimate one but resulted in the loss of real political power, which was instead increasingly consolidated in the hands of Aleksandar Vučić, then newly appointed leader of the SNS (Buckley 2013).

With the end of his term in 2017, Nikolić did not run for his second mandate and withdrew from Serbian politics almost completely. The candidate of the SNS at the presidential elections became Vučić, prime minister at that time, who claimed a landslide victory and confirmed that he was the undisputed political powerhouse in Serbia (Rudić 2017).

However, even after his withdrawal from top-level national politics, Nikolić is still a relevant actor when it comes to cooperation with China, as he was appointed as a chair of the newly established National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China in May of 2017. It is a governmental institution founded to direct and coordinate the implementation of strategic partnership agreements that Serbia has signed with Russia and China.⁵ Nikolić, as a chair of the Council, participated in the bilateral meetings and has been recognized as an important actor by Chinese officials as well (Press release 2020), but his role is now more ceremonial and he does not hold real political power in his hands anymore. It is Vučić who took over effective control both over Serbian foreign and domestic policy.

5 More about the office of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China can be found at: <http://www.knsrk.gov.rs/lat/o-nama.php>.

Here comes Vučić

As previously noted, Aleksandar Vučić has been the central political figure in the Serbian political scene since 2012. He held a position of the first vice-president of the Serbian government from 2012 to 2014, then the position of the prime-minister from 2014 to 2017, and since 2017 has served as Serbian president. During this whole period, he has also been the president of the SNS (Stojanović 2019). His position as the most powerful politician in Serbia is undisputed and often supported even by high-level European officials. For example, the president of the European People's Party, Donald Tusk, endorsed the SNS led by Vučić ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2020 (EWB 2020).

The majority of the joint projects with China have been based on government-to-government agreements, which have enabled Vučić to be the "face of the cooperation" with China during the period of deepening ties between the two countries. A current member of the Serbian parliament from the SNS highlighted and acknowledged Vučić's merits in strengthening ties with China in an interview with the author, saying that Serbia has succeeded to position itself as a reliable, adequate, and a good partner to China due to the hard work of the (current) president Aleksandar Vučić.⁶ Furthermore, President Vučić has been recognized as a reliable partner by the Chinese side as well. In the official statements by the representatives of China, cooperation with Serbia, and the lead role of President Vučić has been continuously presented in an affirmative and positive tone (FoNet 2020). The uncontested position of Vučić is seen positively as it means that the agreed projects will not be challenged and questioned, that there is a certainty of domestic support.

From his place of political power, Vučić's activities that have popularized the Sino-Serbian partnership have been especially significant. Presentation of the big infrastructural projects backed by Chinese loans was a main mechanism of the promotion of cooperation with China. As Tena Prelec argues, Vučić and SNS have been using the topic of economic assistance from abroad to build and consolidate dominance on the Serbian political scene from 2012 to 2020 (Prelec 2020). The 16+1 summit was held in Belgrade in 2014 and marked the first official visit of Chinese prime-minister Li Keqiang after 28 years (Deutsche Welle 2014). At the occasion, Li Keqiang together

with Vučić also attended the opening ceremony of the Pupin bridge, the first major Sino-Serbian infrastructural project. Vučić used the opportunity to say that "that the Pupin bridge is a sign of true friendship and unity among the citizens of China and Serbia" (Press release 2014). The event started the custom of holding a large ceremony to celebrate the finalization of each joint project, during which the friendship between Serbia and China is usually praised. An example is the opening of the "Miloš the Great" highway in 2019, attended by the Chinese residing ambassador to Serbia, Chen Bo. During the ceremony, president Vučić stated that "the country in past several years came a long way from the brink of bankruptcy to the status of the most attractive investment destination globally, and noted that "much of the success was achieved in cooperation with our Chinese friends" (Xinhua 2019a).

In addition to the promotion of the infrastructural projects, foreign direct investments coming from China have received much of Vučić's attention. The purchase of the Smederevo steel mill by Chinese Hesteel in 2016 marked the first major Chinese foreign direct investment in Serbia and was showcased during the visit of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, to Serbia that year (CorD 2016). Vučić has presented it as evidence of Chinese interest in Serbian economic development, a component of comprehensive strategic partnership and confirmation of the "steel friendship" between the two countries (TANJUG 2019c).

Also, Vučić's role in promoting the Belgrade-Beijing partnership at the beginning of the 2020 Covid-19 crisis in Serbia showed that he is the most prominent Serbian actor when it comes to the fostering of the Sino-Serbian friendship, and the extremely positive presentation of that partnership to the Serbian citizens. In March of 2020, Vučić stated that the only country that can help Serbia in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic is China, and that he had asked Chinese President Xi Jinping for help and was expecting a positive response because the Chinese leader was not only a "friend of Serbian people" but also a "brother of this country" (Vladislavljev 2020). At the same time, he stated that "European solidarity does not exist and that it is a fairytale on paper" (Evans 2020), and showed that at that moment, the Serbian allegiance was closer to Beijing than to Brussels.

6 Written Interview with the member of the Serbian parliament and the member of the SNS, November 2020.



The behavior of president Vučić at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis were noticed by EU officials, and that is the main reason why the European Commission's 2020 progress report on Serbia states that "assistance provided by China at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in Serbia was particularly emphasized by Serbia's political leadership" and that the "COVID-19 crisis was marked by pro-China and EU skeptical rhetoric by high-ranking state officials" (EC 2020 report 2020). Vučić has been aware of the concerns coming from the EU and has responded to them in the past, as he did in the aftermath of the European Union – the Western Balkans Summit was hosted online by Croatia in May of 2020. On that occasion, speaking to Serbian journalists, Vučić said that Serbia was open to cooperation with anyone and maintained its autonomous foreign policy. He further stated that while it has membership in the European Union as strategic goal, Serbia would bow to no one and would not speak against China, Russia, or the United States because they were partners to Serbia and that Serbia would continue to have good relations with all of them (Vučić, Manje govoriti o perspektivi, više o proširenju 2020). Vučić also showed his devotion to the rising partnership with China with the speech he gave at the reception in the Chinese embassy organized in celebration of the 71st anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. He insisted that "Serbia vowed to maintain the 'brotherly friendship' with China, no matter what kind of pressure it takes" (CGTN 2020).

However, it must be noted that Vučić rarely uses similar rhetoric when speaking directly with the representatives of the European Union or the United States. The praise of China's presence is reserved for the domestic public and the occasions when he is speaking with Chinese officials. Also, during the Covid-19 crisis, in follow-up statements after stirring attention with his pro-Chinese acclamations, he acknowledged the help coming from the European Union, and said that it "is by far the biggest donor to Serbia".

Vučić would be the most important proponent of any other topic that should be communicated and presented to the Serbian public. Currently, China has a positive image among Serbian citizens and that makes it a good candidate for political promotion to gain political points. President Vučić is using every opportunity to do so. While keeping the facade of a pro-EU leader, Vučić is leaning closer to Beijing and intensifying relations with the Chinese autocratic regime. With that and the unclear path towards European Union membership in mind, Vučić still does not want to lose the support of Brussels. Therefore, he tends to play different characters to assure that he will still be able to gain benefits from both relationships, without deciding which foreign policy direction both him as a leader, and Serbia as a country will finally take. The political points that Vučić is gaining from the popularity of China are facilitating his undisputed position of power and further centralization of the decision-making process in Serbia.

7 Data about the European Union assistance to Serbia are available at: <http://europa.rs/eu-partnership-with-serbia-eu-best-partner-and-biggest-donor-for-20-years-and-in-the-front-line-against-covid-19/?lang=en>.

Prime-Minister and the Government – Dedicated operatives

According to the Constitution, the Serbian government should be the leading part of the executive branch with the institution of the president having a more symbolic role. In practice, however, executive power is centralized in the hands of president Vučić (Freedom House 2020), while the Serbian government, currently led by prime-minister Ana Brnabić, operates more like an extension of presidential political will (European Parliamentary Research Service 2019) than as an independent political actor. Nonetheless, the institution of government and the ministerial positions are still crucial for the operative aspects of the sectoral cooperation between Serbia and Chinese actors.

While presented as strategic and comprehensive (Xinhua 2016), cooperation between Serbia and China is developed more in some sectors than in others. Political and economic cooperation, based on infrastructural projects, foreign direct investments, trade, and energy are the cornerstones of the mutual ties. Therefore, Serbian political elites rely chiefly on these sectors to preserve the cooperation between the two countries and develop an image of beneficial cooperation for Serbia. Aside from president Vučić, members of the Serbian government in charge of said sectors have been advocating for the Sino-Serbian partnership and actively participating in the presentation of it in a positive manner. This chapter will focus on members of the Serbian government who are also a part of the Serbian political elite and are taking an active role in the process of the development and fostering of partnership between Belgrade and Beijing during the past decade.

Ana Brnabić holds the prime-ministerial position since 2017, succeeding Aleksandar Vučić, who won the presidential elections the same year. Brnabić's contribution to the development of the cooperation with China is defined by the overall foreign policy direction and decision to establish a comprehensive partnership with China. Those operative aspects have had the most prominent results in the sectors of infrastructure, energy, and mining, and trade, tourism, and telecommunication. In 2020, Brnabić started her second term as prime-minister and made it clear in her statements during reappointment that cooperation and the further development of relations with China would remain a priority for the newly formed government (Press Release, Cabinet of the prime-minister 2020). Devotion

to cooperation with China was also highlighted in Brnabić's 2020 prime ministerial keynote address, stating that Serbia would remain dedicated to comprehensive relations with China, both through bilateral relations and through cooperation within multilateral platforms like 17+1 (Keynote Address of prime minister Ana Brnabić 2020). Brnabić has been visiting Beijing regularly, meeting the highest-level Chinese officials, including president Xi Jinping. During those visits, the importance of friendship and cooperation between the two countries has been highlighted (Press Release 2019b). Prime minister Brnabić has publicly promoted Chinese presence and partnership between the two countries even outside official statements and press releases. In March 2020, she stated that she would try to put in motion a proposal to erect a monument dedicated to the cooperation between Serbia and China and "steel friendship" between the two countries (Milenković 2020).

As leader of the Serbian government, Brnabić is leading and overseeing different ministries, including the ministry of construction, transport, and infrastructure. Infrastructure projects are a major aspect of cooperation between Serbia and China and the basis on which comprehensive friendship is built. Zorana Mihajlović was appointed as minister of infrastructure for two terms, from 2014 to 2020 (N1 2016). Having one of the main aspects of cooperation between two countries in her portfolio, Mihajlović played an important role in the presentation of those projects to the broader Serbian public. In her statements, she often highlighted the significance of the joint infrastructural projects and their financial value, without mentioning that those projects are based on preferential financial agreements – Chinese loans – and that Serbia will have to repay the whole amount with interest included (Press release 2019b). By not disclosing transparent and complete information about the relative amounts of Chinese loans and of foreign direct investment, she additionally facilitated the presentation of the Sino-Serbian partnership to the domestic public and contributed to the creation of the widespread but false image that China is the largest investor and donor in Serbia. In addition to her position within the government, Minister Mihajlović is a member of the SNS presidency. Following the 2020 elections, she was appointed a Minister for Energy and Mining and will be thus still included in cooperation with partners from



China because mining and energy are important sectors in developing relations with Beijing.⁸

The predecessor of Zorana Mihajlović at her newly acquired position of Minister of Mining and Energy was Aleksandar Antić, a member and vice-president of the Socialist Party who held the ministerial position from 2014 to 2020. Joint projects in the mining and energy sector have been some of the most ambitious, received major attention from the Serbian public, and have become an essential part of the crafting of the positive image of China in Serbia. Two such projects have already been finalized, Kostolac power plant and Bor Mines. The former has been reconstructed and upgraded with the help of Chinese loans (CINS 2016) and the latter has been purchased by the Chinese Zijin company (Reuters 2018). The mining sector is especially important, given that the Zijin purchase of the Bor Mines was one of the largest Chinese foreign direct investments in Serbia so far, with the total investment amount reported to be 1.26 billion USD (AlJazeera Balkans 2018). On the Serbian side, minister Antić was the official leading the operative aspects of these projects. Additionally, Antić was an unofficial spokesperson for the relations between the two countries and the joint projects, especially in the framework of the 17+1 that he coordinated on the national level (TANJUG 2018). As part of the ruling majority and when he was speaking about cooperation between Serbia and China, he stressed the importance of president Vučić's efforts to improve cooperation between the two countries (FoNet 2019). While not being part of the SNS and as a minister that operates under prime-ministerial guidance, not presidential, Antić did not differ from the established narrative of friendship between the president of Serbia Vučić and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Although he was not appointed as a minister in the government formed after the 2020 elections, Antić remains a prominent figure of Serbian politics as a vice president of the Socialist Party, and his role in the future when it comes to the relations between Serbia and China is yet to be seen.

Another important aspect of cooperation between Serbia and China is trade, presented as a great chance for Serbia due to the large Chinese market, while disregarding the existing figures showing that there is a large imbalance between Serbian export to China and Serbian import from

China (CRI 2019). Even low export numbers are presented as a potential for Serbian companies to improve their products and place them on the Chinese market (Beta 2019). The chance for the improvement of trade relations, as well as the continuous rise of Serbian export to China, from 7.2 million USD in 2010 to 329 million in 2019,⁹ have made trade a popular topic for Serbian officials. The person in charge of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunication since 2012 was Rasim Ljajić. In many ways, he was different than any other minister in the past eight years. First of all, he is not part of the SNS or the Socialist Party but a leader of the Social Democratic Party of Serbia and he is also recognized as a leader of the Bosniak minority with its stronghold in the Sandžak region. Ljajić is considered as a staple of Serbian political life for 20 years because he held a ministerial position from 2000 to 2020. Being in charge of trade, tourism and telecommunication has positioned him as an important facilitator of the partnership between Serbia and China. In his media statements and official appearances, Ljajić frequently emphasized the importance of strategic partnership and trade relations with China (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019), and has positioned himself as the main proponent of deepening ties with China in the sphere of telecommunications. On several occasions, Ljajić stated that Serbia is more than satisfied with cooperation with China and Chinese companies in the digital sphere and that Serbia sees in China a partner for the further work on 5G network and overall digitalization of the country (B92 2019).

Participation of the government representatives in spreading the positive image of China in Serbia was defined by the heavily centralized division of power and the characteristics of the overall Sino-Serbian partnership. Prime-minister Brnabić plays an important role, but she still serves as an extension of presidential power. The ministers of infrastructure, energy or trade whose role is described above are the most visible ones because of the sectors that they have under their portfolios. It seems to be the position that defines the actor of promotion, meaning that personal changes do not impact the trend of the preservation and development of relations with China, as well as the presentation of the partnership as beneficial for Serbia. The Minister of Infrastructure, Minister of Energy, and Minister of Trade in the Serbian government will continue to follow

8 Chinese loan was used for the reconstruction of thermal power plant Kostolac B (RTS 2011), and Chinese Zijin Mining has purchased the Mining and Smelting Combine Bor in 2018 (N1 2018).

9 Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.



the official political agenda set by the center of power, president Vučić as leading part of the executive branch of power and his SNS as dominant party in the Serbian

parliament. If that agenda includes the preservation and further development of Sino-Serbian relations, they will be a part of it.

Political parties – One above all

Political parties play an important role in the Serbian political scene. Even though the centralization of power in Serbia looks like a one-man show, with Aleksandar Vučić as the main political figure, it also includes his political party and its officials. The Serbian political scene is dominated by the SNS and the 2020 Parliamentary elections have confirmed that their dominance is undisputed. President Vučić's party won the elections with an overwhelming majority, gathering more than 60% of total votes with only two more parties winning more than the 3% of total votes needed to pass the census and enter the parliament (Official election results 2020). Despite holding the majority by itself, the SNS included the Socialist Party as a partner in the newly formed government, continuing a partnership that goes back to 2012, and the first parliamentary majority formed with those two parties in charge. The following section sheds more light on the ways how the cooperation with China has been developing on a party-level.

Deepening ties with their Chinese counterpart and promoting said ties to the Serbian public is facilitated by the friendly approach of the Chinese Communist Party. In addition to the regular bilateral visits, Chinese representatives in Serbia are also taking an active role in popularizing Sino-Serbian cooperation and spreading a positive image of their country. SNS celebrated 10 years of existence in 2018. The only foreign representative that took the stage during the celebration was, at that time, Chinese ambassador Li Manchang. He spoke not only as an ambassador but as an envoy of the Chinese Communist Party, stating that "Progressives, as the biggest political party in Serbia under the leadership of Vučić, play an "immensely important role" by setting development of the country and people's interests as their priorities" (Xinhua 2018).

Of the two major ruling parties, the SNS is still leading the way when it comes to cooperation with China and further development of it. In addition to president Vučić and ministers that are part of the government, the SNS has established intense party-to-party cooperation with the Chinese communist party. During the 2019 visit of a high-ranking official of the Chinese Communist party to Belgrade, both parties pledged "all-time friendship" (Stojanović 2019). That proclamation was not surprising and followed the official visit of the SNS members to Beijing earlier that year. As reported, during the visit, officials of the SNS had a chance to learn more about the

organizational structures and practices of the Chinese Communist Party, from the local to the national level (TANJUG 2020). A friendly relationship with the Chinese ruling party has been appreciated and answered with support coming from the SNS Officials. Speaking as the vice president of the SNS, Marko Đurić has openly supported Chinese efforts to suppress the Hong Kong protests in 2019 (Xinhua 2019b). Đurić also gave assenting comments on the Chinese treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province. Speaking about this sensitive issue, Đurić stated that "the level of protection of minority rights in Xinjiang is something that many countries in my part of the world could envy" (Xinhua 2019c), expressing agreement with the official Beijing rhetoric on how this issue is being handled.

The Socialist Party of Serbia has been seen as the main promoter of and a party with close ties to Russia (Heil 2020), but some of its leading figures, such as former Minister of Mining and Energy Antić, have managed to position themselves as facilitators of the Chinese presence in Serbia. President of the party, former prime minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić has had his moments in the facilitation of the "steel friendship", most notably he was the first foreign representative that visited China in February 2020 when he traveled to Beijing to show support to China in battling the rising pandemic. (Beta 2020b). In addition to the national level, the Socialist Party has played an important role in the establishment of cooperation with China in the Serbian autonomous province Vojvodina. Member of the Socialists and provincial secretary for commerce, Ivan Đoković has been a vocal promoter of cooperation between the two countries through bilateral visits, facilitated commercial agreements, province to province cooperation between Vojvodina and interested Chinese provinces (RTV 2019).

The question is what will be the role of the Socialists in the future given that after the 2020 election the party has lost the position of Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Energy and Mining, with Ivica Dačić now taking a role of the Speaker of the Assembly and Aleksandar Antić becoming a head of "Koridori Srbije", the governmental body in charge of coordination of highway construction in Serbia. Socialists are participating in the ruling majority, but their real power is dubious (Deutsche Welle 2020) and it looks like now more than ever they are playing second fiddle to the SNS.



Even though there are reasons for concerns that the overall cooperation between the two countries could be harmful to Serbia, with some researchers arguing that Serbia is on the path of becoming a Chinese client state (Conley, et al. 2020), the Serbian opposition has not been vocal about the potentially harmful consequences and has not criticized cooperation with China at all. This situation is partly attributable to the current chaotic state of the Serbian opposition, which lacks a clear leader or an idea on how to move forward. There are, however, also other reasons that come into play. Firstly, it is not in the interest of the opposition to criticize China because it would bring them no positive points among voters and cooperation with China will be needed if and when they come to power. Secondly, the current members of the opposition were part of the government when the first agreements with China were made. Boris Tadić and Vuk Jeremić are now seen as prominent opposition politicians, but they were the decision-makers at the time when China had been starting to become a relevant actor in Serbian politics. While there is no evidence that Tadić holds connections with Chinese representatives in any way, Jeremić is still president of a think-tank that favorably presents China (CIRSD), and

there is evidence that he holds connections to the high-ranking officials of the Chinese communist party (Jirous 2019). Therefore, the lack of criticisms can be explained by the lack of concrete benefits for the opposition and the potential consequences if they come to power.

The official presentation of the Chinese presence in Serbia in a positive light by the SNS and the Socialist Party, including the appreciation shown by the president and members of the government, is the leading cause of the Chinese rise in popularity in Serbia. The hegemonic role, political power, and overall presence in Serbian political life have enabled the ruling SNS and its members to set the political agenda however they find it suitable. When it comes to the Sino-Serbian case this includes a presentation of the cooperation with China and the "steel friendship" between the two countries as solely positive, lacking any kind of critical stance. Other parties that are part of the ruling coalition are aligning their programs and policies with the program set by the strongest party, and opposition parties, burdened by their issues and challenges, are not disputing the stance taken by the ruling coalition at all.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how the Serbian political elite has been fostering the partnership with China and presenting it as positive and beneficial to the Serbian public by identifying the main actors involved and mechanisms they have been using. The study draws on existing research, interviews by the author, official and media statements from the most prominent members of the Serbian political elite, including current and past members of the Serbian government and most important political parties. Based on these sources, it has shown how economic and political cooperation, bilateral visits, common stances on political issues like territorial integrity, as well as the recent joint history of victimhood have resulted in an overall positive image of China among the Serbian public.

The positive perception of Sino-Serbian relations has enabled leading politicians and members of governing institutions to use China for their political gains, either by highlighting the existing cooperation and potential of future development or by asserting their role in the creation of the “steel friendship”. The popularity of China among Serbian citizens gives the opportunity to use the mentioned cooperation for further centralization of power of the current ruling political elite. The main actors that the study has identified are the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, certain ministers of the Serbian government led by the prime-minister Ana Brnabić, and political parties, with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) as the leading political party in Serbia.

Aleksandar Vučić is the most relevant figure in the development and promotion of the Sino-Serbian partnership in Serbia. As president of Serbia and president of the SNS, Vučić has managed to concentrate power exceeding his formal constitutional role and become undoubtedly the most powerful and popular politician in Serbia. In his efforts, Vučić continues to praise the Sino-Serbian partnership, but changes his rhetoric while speaking with European leaders, maintaining the facade of “pro-European Union” leader. Still, when he sits with his Chinese counterparts, he presents Serbia as a country open to almost any kind of cooperation. As the result of the cooperation, Vučić tends to present a partnership with China (often exaggerating the state of relations) as the most important partnership for Serbia, especially when it comes to the impact that China has on the Serbian economy. Vučić has thus become “the face” of the cooperation with China, his role in tightening mutual ties is often highlighted by

other representatives of the Serbian political elite, and he is recognized as a reliable and devoted partner from the Chinese side as well.

Due to the high concentration of power in the hands of the president, the Serbian government is a mere extension of his political will and not an autonomous actor, as it is supposed to be according to the constitutional structure of Serbia. Ana Brnabić as prime minister and the ministers in charge of the sectors important for cooperation with China seem to be contributing to the fostering of cooperation and designing of a positive image of said partnership mainly from the title of their executive position. Personal changes, therefore, do not impact the trend of the development of the cooperation with China in a specific sector. Ministers included in this publication are relevant, first and foremost, because of their political party and designated appointment coming from the center of power. They stay on good terms with Chinese counterparts while they hold the ministerial position, and new person takes their role after they step down from it.

The ties with China have been developed and fostered also on the party-to-party level, especially in the case of Vučić’s SNS which cooperates and pledges friendship with the Chinese communist party. While their role in Serbian politics is limited, neither opposition political parties criticize the development of the Sino-Serbian partnership as current opposition leaders like Boris Tadić and Vuk Jeremić have played a prominent role in the establishment of the relations between two countries before the SNS came to power and no benefits are arising from such criticism.

The Chinese presence, often exaggerated, has helped the current ruling coalition led by Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS to consolidate political power. During the past decade, the centralization of political power and the control over the governing mechanisms have enabled the ruling political elite in Serbia to popularize cooperation with China, elevate it to the level of strategic partnership, and present it as such to the Serbian public. As long as the Serbian ruling political elite led by president Vučić can benefit from the cooperation with China, it will continue to foster and promote it. He will not be contested by the opposition leaders. Current leaders of the opposition were Vučić’s predecessors in the evolution of relations with China, and have used to present China as a “pillar of the foreign



policy” and close partner of Serbia. The lack of criticism coming from opposition leaders therefore comes from the joint history of cooperation with China and the intention to keep China as a partner in the case of resurgence and coming to power again. Dedication to the Sino-Serbian partnership will remain constant in the approach of the Serbian political elite, regardless of the political party and politicians in power. As long as a partnership with China can be presented as beneficial and positive, representatives of the Serbian political elite will continue to utilize it for their personal gain.

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About the author

Stefan Vladislavljev (@Vladislavljev_S) has been program coordinator at the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (BFPE) since December 2019, focusing on international relations, security and foreign policy. He earlier worked for two years as a program assistant at the fund. Stefan is part of the team behind the Belgrade Security Forum, working as a program coordinator and leading communication with forum speakers and moderators. He is responsible for

program planning, speaker selection and analytical writing. His main expertise is on cooperation among actors in the field of international relations and foreign-actors influence, specifically cooperation between Western Balkans countries and China. He has authored a number of publications, articles, op-eds and blogs. Stefan holds an MSc degree in International Security from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade.

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.

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Project coordinators: Barbora Chrzová (chrzova@pssi.cz), Petr Čermák (cermak@pssi.cz) and Anja Grabovac (grabovac@pssi.cz)

Scientific advisor: Ioannis Armakolas

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PSSI is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI’s mission is

to build an ever-growing group of informed and security-minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

