

WORKING PAPER

Belt and Road Strategic Communication Resilience: Lessons from the SERBIA- BRI Frame Analysis

Aleksandar Mitić

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



Abstract

Rising visibility and implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have led to increased monitoring and contention within critical Western European, U.S. and Indian official, think-tank and media circles. An analysis of critical reports points to an attempt to portray BRI in “threat” frames – as “illiberal”, “disruptive”, “divisive”, “geopolitical” and “ineffective”. This paper analyzes the case of Serbia’s cooperation with China within the BRI and 16+1 contexts. It points to the existence of the same above-mentioned “threat” frames in a September 2017 “New York Times” article on Serbia-BRI cooperation. Yet, it argues that, despite negative international coverage, strategic communication of the BRI project in Serbia is showing resilience. This is due to the specifics of the Serbian context (political identity, characteristics of the public opinion, project compatibility, implementation and institutionalization), as well as to a strategic communication which involves adaptive strategic framing. A frame analysis of 120 news items related to Belt and Road cooperation in the Serbian media in three distinct periods of time – from 2014 to the fourth quarter of 2017 – points to a steady positive framing of BRI and 16+1 cooperation in the Serbian media and a predominance (87.5%) of the opportunity over the threat frames. These results are consistent despite evolution in the coverage. Over the three-year period, the coverage of the initiative has shifted from reliance on foreign news to the production of original Serbian news, as well as from focus on global aspects of BRI to the national benefits of the initiative. The results point to several aspects of Serbia-BRI strategic communication (clarity of objectives and information end-state, acknowledgement of the target audience, gaining credibility by closing the say-do gap, fitting frames into the narrative, and focusing on a long-term, flexible, adaptable and incremental approach).

These results point to several considerations of importance for the future of BRI strategic communication in the CEE context: (1) They are proof of rising BRI international, European and CEE legitimacy; (2) They underline a necessity for supportive BRI communicators and policymakers to build strategic communication resilience in the wake of contention; (3) They suggest adapting strategic communication to the realities of a “multi-speed 16+1” cooperation mechanism.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe and the 16+1 platform have produced a series of positive developments in 2016-2017, which has not gone unnoticed in international circles. During president Xi Jinping’s 2016 visits to Europe, Serbia and Poland upgraded their relations with China to a comprehensive strategic partnership (with Hungary following suit in 2017), while Prague and Beijing signed an agreement on strategic partnership. The prime ministers of Hungary and Poland, and the presidents of Serbia and the

Czech Republic attended the 2017 Belt and Road summit in Beijing. Dozens of infrastructure projects started, including those aiming to link the BRI land and sea routes; CEE partners became more proactive, investments in the region increased as did air traffic connectivity with China, while the network of 16+1 platforms in the region became more dense, moving beyond just economic cooperation into cultural, academic, intellectual navigation.

The increased visibility and clout of BRI resulted in increasing attention, monitoring and analysis on BRI from expert and diplomatic circles outside of the 16+1, in particular in Western Europe, the U.S. and India. The public reports and comments published by think-tanks and officials provide a clear indication of future challenges and hurdles for BRI, but also provide guidance for strengthening BRI resilience.

A thorough analysis of the portraying of BRI in these reports, in particular of its strategic objectives and effects to date, points to the following negative critical discourse on the initiative present in primarily Western media, think-tanks and official circles. When combined together, these negative attributes could be described as follows: BRI is “illiberal”, “disruptive”, “geopolitical”, “divisive” and “ineffective”.

“BRI IS ILLIBERAL”

In October 2017, a new project called “ChinfluenCE” was launched with the focus on analyzing the perception of China and its strategy in the Czech, Slovak and Hungarian media. The project “ChinfluenCE” is labelled as “an international project mapping Chinese political and economic influence” in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, studying through content analysis China’s image, its perception in Central Europe, key agenda-setters shaping the discourse and links among them (www.chinfluence.eu). The project is financed by the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The director of NED’s International Forum for Democratic Studies Shanthi Kalathil praises suggestions that BRI is a “direct strike at the rules-based system championed by democracies, and ultimately, at the liberal international order” and that one of the consequences could be the “replacement of the liberal international order” by a “vast, illiberal, China-centric network of states entwined economically, socially and politically under Beijing’s strategic sway” (Kalathil, 2017: 171). The author argues this is due to “today’s stronger illiberal current” in the world and that “illiberal” governments are keen to support China’s rhetoric of political non-interference (Kalathil, 2017: 171).

“BRI IS DISRUPTIVE”

In terms of character, some experts are insisting that BRI should be perceived not just as an infrastructure-trade-investment project, but also as part of China’s strategy which has for objective – through the building of complementary infrastructure – to disrupt and change global structure of value chain, and thus impact on the world economy. Carnegie’s Bruno Maçães suggests that BRI attempts “change the rules organizing the global economy” and to “create a set of political and institutional tools with which China can start to reorganize global value chains and stamp its imprint on the rules governing the global economy” (Maçães, 2016: 1-6).

“BRI IS DIVISIVE”

Some analysts are further warning that the project is accompanied by political effects, in particular those linked to key Chinese national interests in relations to Taiwan and the dispute in the South China Sea, and in this context they are accentuating the impact of BRI on the common views of ASEAN, as well as of Greece and Hungary within the EU.

Angela Stanzel of the European Council on Foreign Affairs argues that EU institutions and countries outside the 16+1 format are “concerned that the format could be used by Beijing to ‘divide and rule’ the EU, and that the cooperation of some CEE countries with China could undermine their relations with the EU institutions” (Stanzel, 2016: 2). This is, according to her, reflected in fears of both undermining EU economic guidelines and political common positions.

It is clear that the European Union does not have a common policy towards BRI. The reaction within the EU is divided, depending on the intensity of cooperation within the project. Some also estimate that China is not perceiving all European countries equally, nor all EU countries are equally relevant for BRI. A special accent is being put on countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Mediterranean, with a particular focus on Greece.

The region of CEE is viewed as particularly important for China due to its key, geostrategic position for BRI, the vicinity of the Western European markets, the highly qualified but relatively more affordable work force, open markets and positive investment environment. The intention of CEE countries to continue to work on formulating medium-term cooperation plans, deepening and strategically strengthening cooperation could, according to analysts, provoke worry, even opposition in the EU, as well as in the US.

“BRI IS GEOPOLITICAL”

The title of the October 2017 “Time” magazine report on BRI - “Ports, Pipelines and Geopolitics: China’s New Silk Road is a Challenge for Washington” (Campbell, 2017) – illustrates a growing intention to discredit China’s strategic communication promoting BRI through public diplomacy in terms of economy, development and win-win. This is precisely what China seeks to avoid, as it would put hurdles on its implementation and strengthen contending views, particularly in the West. As Mações points out, “a geopolitical reading of the initiative would set off alarm bells in Russia and the United States and create resistance from the countries along the new routes, upsetting the delicate balance that is needed to prevent a complex plan with many different connecting parts from falling apart” (Mações, 2016: 3).

“BRI IS INEFFECTIVE”

Finally, some experts are putting doubt in the effectiveness of BRI to date, judging that the practical results are still modest, and even pointing to some examples they label as unsuccessful, such as the investment in the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in Sri Lanka.

In its October 2017 report, “The Atlantic” argues that “while those who receive Chinese funds are happy to fix their power shortages and improve their roads, they may be mortgaging their futures”, and that “in contrast to most Western aid and loans, Belt and Road projects often encourage terrible governance, environmental, and human rights standards” (Manuel,

2017). “The Economist”, meanwhile, quotes unidentified “Chinese businessmen” calling BRI – “One Road, One Trap” (The Economist, 2017).

Serbia-BRI Cooperation

Quotes from the “New York Times” report, published on September 9, 2017, focusing on Belgrade’s cooperation with China in the BRI framework (Surk, 2017), illustrate how these five critical frames of BRI are translated at national level:

“ILLIBERAL”: “The BRI new norms – along with the Balkans’s old governing values – will challenge those of the European Union”;

“DISRUPTIVE”: “Chinese economic corridors and infrastructure project replicate China’s preference for state-led rather than market-based decisions, with the politicization of investment, subsidy and contract decision, rejecting the EU’s model of open and transparent bidding procedures”;

“DIVISIVE”: “China’s ambitions in the Balkan region have set up a potential clash with the European Union plans – with countries like Serbia placing themselves in the middle”;

“GEOPOLITICAL”: “There are raising fears that Beijing’s largess in the Balkans is not just about business, but also about geopolitics” (...) “Xi Jinping’s decision to extol his signature policy in Serbia was a canny move that put the initiative on a collision course with the European Union’s projects in the region. His strategy exploited the European Union’s troubled relations with the West Balkan countries seeking to join the bloc and signaled that – as the United States retreated from the world stage – China was aiming to expand its influence right into the heart of Europe”;

“INEFFECTIVE”: “Fears that Chinese investments would leave the nation deep in debt and stuck with environmentally flawed projects” (...) “Serbia is likely to be saddled with huge debts”. Despite the fact that the previous owner, U.S. Steel, had abandoned Smederevo in the middle of the European economic crisis, leaving some 5,000 jobs in danger, the “New York Times” found a steelworker at the plant who commented that “the Americans are the aristocracy of the industrial world”, that “workers were valued, well paid and respected when the Americans ran this place”, while under Chinese management “workers’ contracts are veiled in secrecy, safety standards have fallen, maintenance is at the bare minimum, and contact between the owners and the employees does not exist (...) The erosion of workers’ rights and the employers’ disregard of labor laws are troubling”.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, FRAMING AND RESILIENCE

Yet, despite this negative framing in the international media, we will argue that Serbia-BRI cooperation is showing strategic communication resilience. This resilience is due to the specific Serbian context – which we will discuss below – as well as due to a strategic communication which involved adaptive strategic framing.

We will extend to BRI the definition of resilience as the “ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks” (European Commission, 2012: 5). While BRI is a fairly new

initiative, it has succeeded in less than five years to create a series of institutional networks and platforms for cooperation. As such it has gained both organizational legitimacy and contention within the framework as well from third-party actors. Thus, increasing resilience – its capacity to resist shock and bounce back from impact – involves an adaptive strategic communication, as a „system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organizations in order to advance their missions, by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, developing and implementing ideas and attitudes which, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behavior or opinion“(Mitić, 2016: 9).

Yet a resilient, adaptive strategic communication does not mean a reactive strategy: “strategic communication has to advance the mission of an organization, not just serve as its security net. It must, thus, not lose its persuasiveness” (Mitić and Atlagić, 2017: 482).

In order to remain persuasive, strategic communication must adapt its strategic framing. Frames are a key component of strategic communication messaging, as they are an integral part of media reports and can impact on the interpretation and perception of the public. Framing refers to “selection and salience” in order “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). Strategic framing is thus an act in which communicators “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan, 2008: 4856). Successful framing requires adaptive frames, which are nonetheless in line with the strategy and information end-state.

Among others, two contributing factors are of particular importance for strategic framing in foreign policy contexts such as BRI. The first one is related to the communicator: his political status, credibility and organizational resources contribute to his strategic framing capacity (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001: 188). The second is related to the foreign news context, in which „the mainstream media generally stays within the sphere of official consensus and conflict displayed in the public statements of the key government officials who manage the policy areas and decision-making processes that make the news“ (Bennett et al, 2007: 49). Thus, it is expected that, in the case of BRI, national government support – in addition to Chinese official support – would contribute to positive frame building in the media.

SERBIA’S RESILIENCE TO BRI CONTENTION

Furthermore, strategic communication is highly dependent on context. There are several reasons why we would expect Serbian media frames to be positive and resilient to external, primarily Western critical overtones.

(1) SERBIAN (GEO)POLITICAL IDENTITY:

Serbia has a specific geopolitical orientation which is due to historic reasons and the ongoing transformation of the world order into a multilateral one. On one side, Serbia is an EU candidate country. It has proclaimed EU membership as its strategic objective and by November 2017 it had opened several negotiation chapters. On the other side, Serbia is still not an EU member country, and as such, it is not obliged to harmonize with EU member states on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Thus, it does not have to adhere to either sanctions (i.e. against Russia) or critical declarations (i.e. China). Furthermore,

Serbia has proclaimed military neutrality – it does not want to enter NATO, an organization which less than two decades ago bombed the country, including the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Serbia considers China to be – together with Russia – a backbone of support in the UN Security Council against the legalization of the unilateral secession of its Kosovo province by Albanian separatists supported by Western powers. This allows Serbia and China to share the „core interest“ related to the territorial integrity of the two countries – Belgrade thus fully supports the „One China policy“, as well as its positions on issues such as the South China Sea.

(2) CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SERBIAN PUBLIC OPINION:

The Serbian public opinion is openly anti-NATO and relatively euroskeptic. Despite advancement towards EU membership, euroskepticism has been on the rise, alike in numerous other European countries. Furthermore, support for NATO membership is well below 20% - with a median support of 12-14%, according to polls. The sentiments of the public, expressed by the media and the political elites, suggest that Serbs in large majority do not share Western geopolitical interests. Opinion polls show strong support for Russia among the Serbian public. Russia is seen as the most friendly country to Serbia, with China far behind, yet in second place.

(3) COMPATIBILITY OF ECONOMIC AND INFRASTRUCTURE INTERESTS: Serbia's geographic position – on pan-European corridors VII and X – is of strategic importance for linking BRI land and sea routes in the Balkans and in CEE. Thus, infrastructure projects are complementary. Furthermore, Serbia is the only European country with free trade agreements with the EU, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Turkey. Skilled but comparatively lower-cost labor is available, the government is subsidizing foreign investment and Serbia has introduced a visa-free regime for Chinese citizens from January 2017.

(4) IMPLEMENTATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION: Alike Poland and Hungary, Serbia has established bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership with China. It has also created original forms of institutional cooperation. In May 2017, the Serbian government established the National Council for Cooperation with Russia and China, a channeling and coordinating body for Serbia-China cooperation, headed by former Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić and including eight government ministers. Furthermore, several Chinese projects have been implemented in Serbia. The Pupin bridge in Belgrade, constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), is considered China's first big infrastructure investment in Europe. In July 2017, the Smederevo still mill plant, acquired in 2016 by HBIS Group (formerly Hesteel) became Serbia's largest exporter. The China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) is completing the Surčin-Obrenovac portion of the highway setting to link Belgrade to the Adriatic Sea. In November 2017, the Serbian government approved the agreement between CCCC and the Serbian public company Putevi Srbije (Roads of Serbia) to build the challenging Preljina-Požega E-763 road section of the Belgrade-Adriatic highway. In July 2017, the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) completed its works on desulphurization at the Kostolac thermal power plant, and continued to proceed with the construction of a 350 MW unit, due by 2020. The CCCC and the China Railway International Company are proceeding with the project of constructing the Serbian

section of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway on Corridor X. The implementation of these projects has shown a strong political will to cooperate by both Beijing and Belgrade.

Frame Analysis

The content analysis will analyze several aspects of the Serbian media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 cooperation. The results might provide an indication of existence of strategic communication aimed at a positive view and acceptance of the BRI project as a project of strategic importance for Serbia. In order to succeed, strategic communication would have to rely on adopt a targeted coherent narrative and discourse for the public, to be flexible and adaptive over time, to avoid the say-do gap by avoiding promises which cannot be fulfilled.

METHODOLOGY

We have performed a content analysis on news items which have appeared in Serbian media during the following three periods: a) Period 1: 2014 to June 2016. Period prior to Xi Jinping's historic three-day visit to Serbia, during which Serbia and China elevated their relationship to the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation level; b) Period 2: June 2016 to May 2017. Period between Xi Jinping's visit to Serbia and the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, which brought high visibility to both BRI and the characteristics of close Serbia-China cooperation; c) Period 3: May 2017 – November 2017. Period following the BRI Forum in Beijing, after which international media and think-tanks increased their interest in Serbia's cooperation with China. These three periods will allow us to track possible changes in media coverage over time.

The reports which were collected and analyzed are web versions of news reports published in Serbian media. Each item fulfilled the following criteria: (a) Each item was focused on BRI or 16+1 cooperation (these also include formulations "One Belt One Road" and the "new Silk Road"); (b) Each item was available in Serbian language; (c) Each item was published by a Serbian outlet with wide national coverage and unrestricted access. The media outlets which were analyzed include, among others, TV stations (RTS, N1, B92), newspapers (Politika, Večernje novosti, Blic, Kurir, Alo, Danas), web news portals (Telegraf, Mondo, Srbija Danas).

Our analysis will use a sample of 40 news items per each period, for a total of 120 news items.

We have codified data from the following categories: (1) Media outlet, (2) Date of news item publication, (3) Title of the news item, (4) Source of frame, (5) Frame, (6) Sentiment of the news item: positive-negative-mixed (both positive and negative frames).

The frames were selected inductively, following a sample pilot study. As a result, the following frames were selected for analysis, regrouped in two main categories: opportunity frames and threat frames.

Opportunity frames (O) included the following:

0-1: BRI is a global win-win, connective project. The frame indicates that BRI is one of the largest economic projects of the 21st century projects, bringing benefits to all participants by connecting them, garnering development and investment opportunities;

0-2: BRI is a project of great potential for the CEE countries of the 16+1 framework. The frames indicates that BRI, and the affiliated 16+1 mechanism, is an opportunity for the region, boosting infrastructure connectivity and attracting Chinese investment;

0-3: BRI is bringing concrete benefits to Serbia. The frame indicates that cooperation within BRI and 16+1 brings benefits to Serbia at economic, cultural, scientific and political levels. It focuses not only on cooperation potential, but also on completed and ongoing concrete projects.

0-4: BRI sees Serbia as one of the key actors in the CEE region. The frame indicates that Serbia is considered by Beijing, but also by other partners in the 16+1 framework, as well as by Belgrade itself, as playing one of the key roles in the initiative at the regional level.

Threat frames (T) included the following:

T-1: BRI is a geopolitical, disruptive and “illiberal” project. The frame indicates that BRI is a project which aim is the promotion of China’s geopolitical interests and its desire to change the value chain of the world economy relying extensively on cooperation with “illiberal” authorities.

T-2: BRI is a divisive project in the CEE. The frame indicates that BRI is a source of division within the CEE as well as between the CEE and the EU.

T-3: BRI is not beneficial for Serbia. The frame indicates that BRI creates more problems than benefits for Serbia – both at the political level (through increased Chinese influence) and at the economic level (through debts due to expensive infrastructure projects).

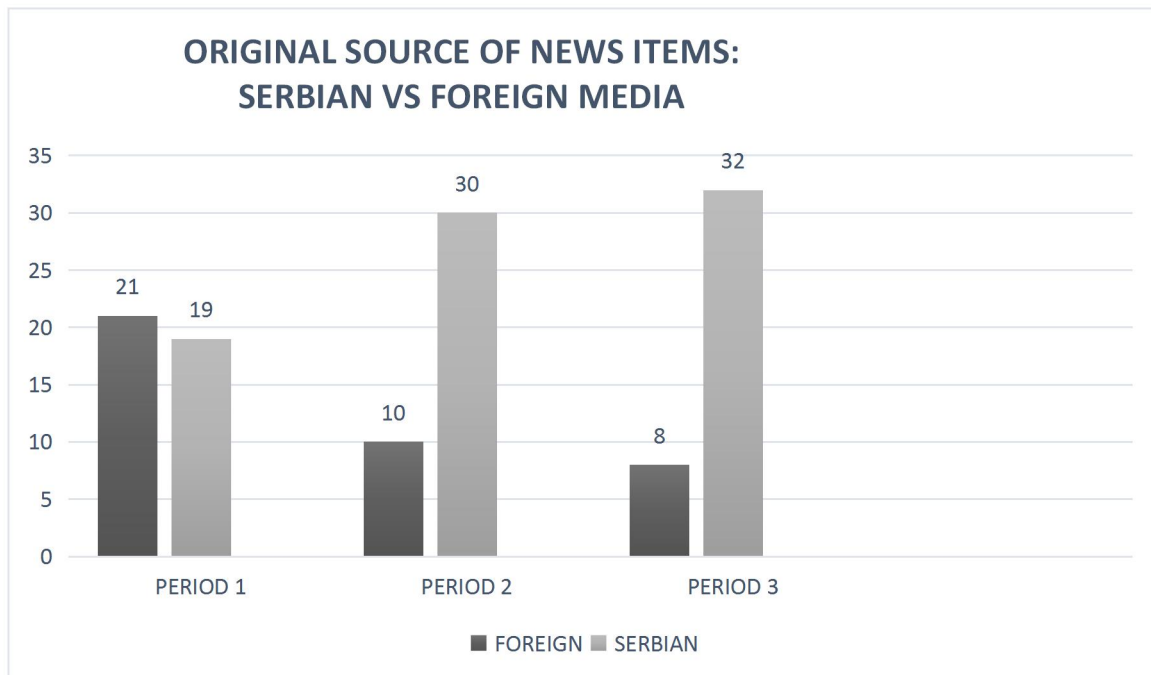
T-4: BRI is ineffective. The frame indicates that BRI is either not yielding any results or its results are detrimental.

RESULTS

The content analysis was performed on 120 news items which fulfilled the necessary criteria (40 for each period) with the following results:

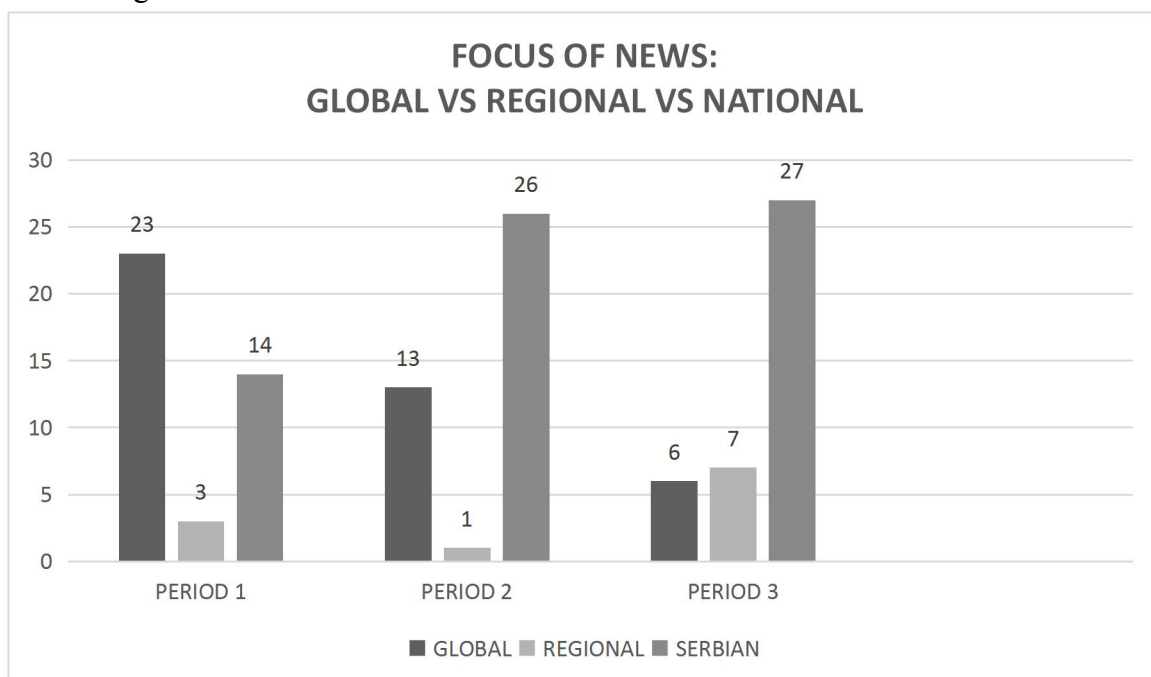
(a) SOURCE OF NEWS

We have analyzed the original sources of published news items – domestic (Serbian) or foreign media. The results show that in Period 1 the number of items originating from foreign media slightly surpassed those from Serbian media (21 foreign, 19 Serbian). However, the results changed in periods 2 and 3. In Period 2, the number of original Serbian media items was considerably higher (30 to 10), a trend which continued in Period 3 (32 to 8). Thus, we can see a clear pattern of change from reliance on foreign news on BRI to the production of original Serbian news items.



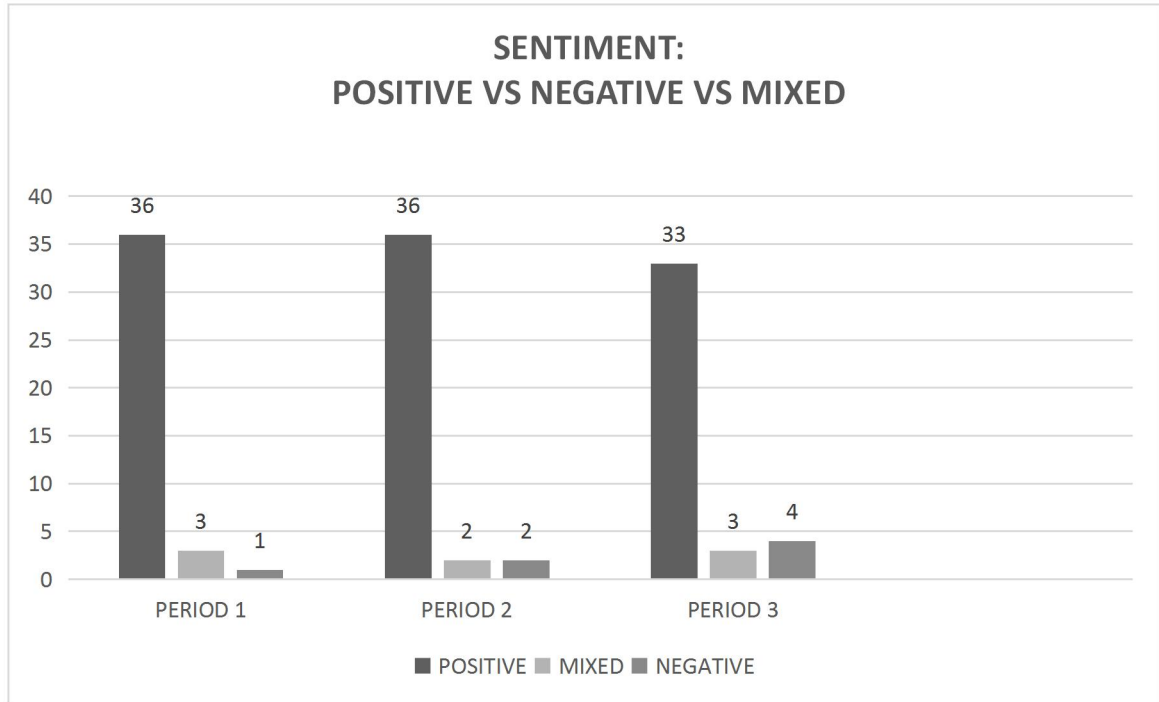
(b) FOCUS OF NEWS

We have analyzed the focus of each news story: whether it is global (focusing on BRI at the level outside of CEE), regional (focusing on the 16+1 level) or national (Serbian). The results show that after a predominant focus on the global level in Period 1 (23 global, 14 Serbian, 3 regional), the results changed in periods 2 and 3: the Serbian focus became dominant in Period 2 (26 Serbian, 13 global, 1 regional), a trend which continued in Period 3 (27 Serbian, 6 global, 7 regional). We can thus underline a clear change of focus from global to Serbian, with a slight rise in the interest in regional focus in Period 3. This change of focus could be attributed to the analysis on the original sources of news items showing a similar pattern – from global to local.



(c) SENTIMENT OF NEWS STORIES

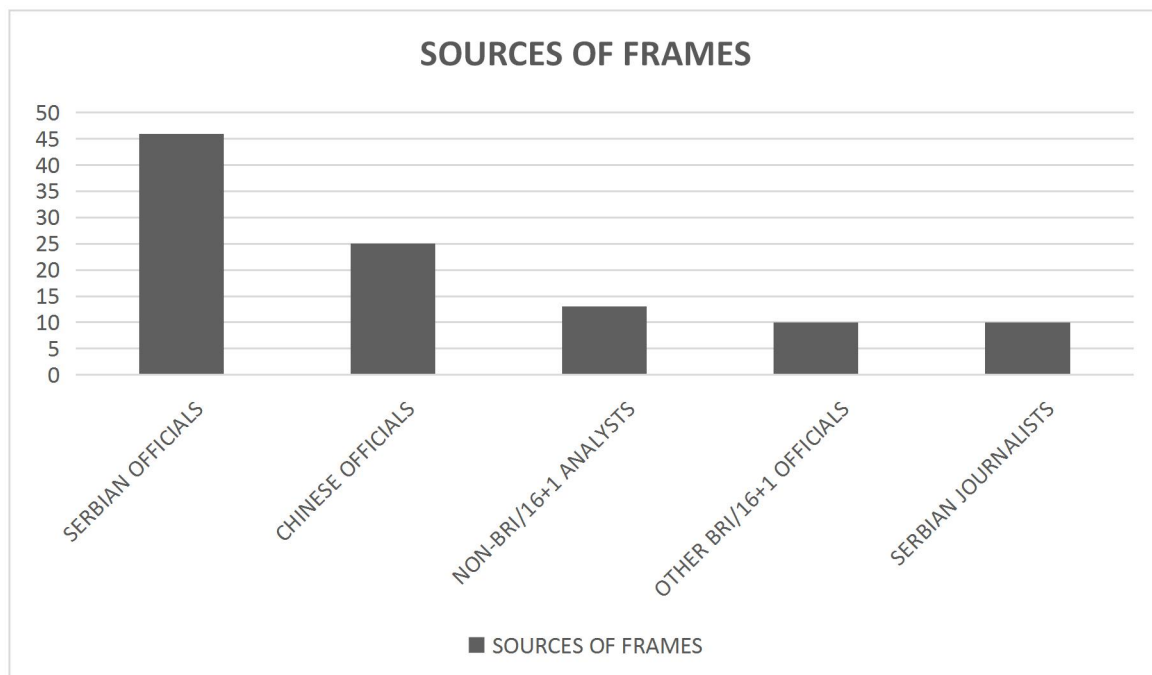
We have analyzed the sentiment of each news story: whether it contains positive, negative or mixed positive-negative frames. The results show a stable predominance of positive framing in news stories – 105 in total (87.5%). In each of the three periods, the positive framing was largely dominant, despite the fact that, as we have seen in previous two analyses, both the original source of news items and their focus had shifted from global to local.



(d) SOURCES OF FRAMES

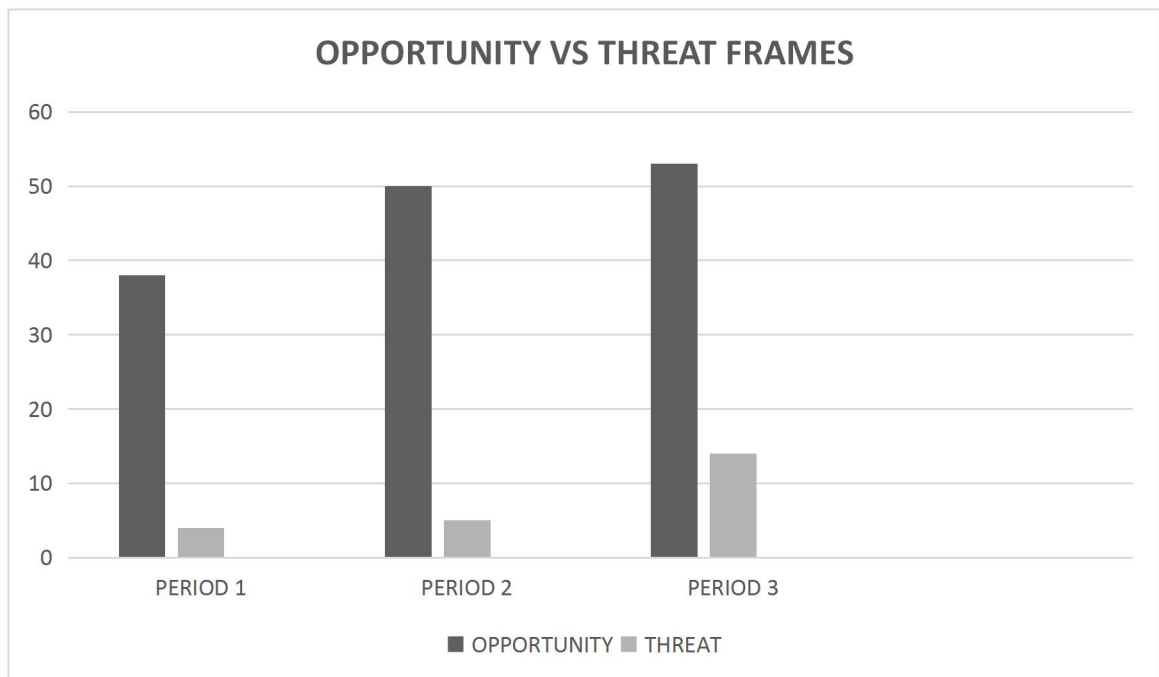
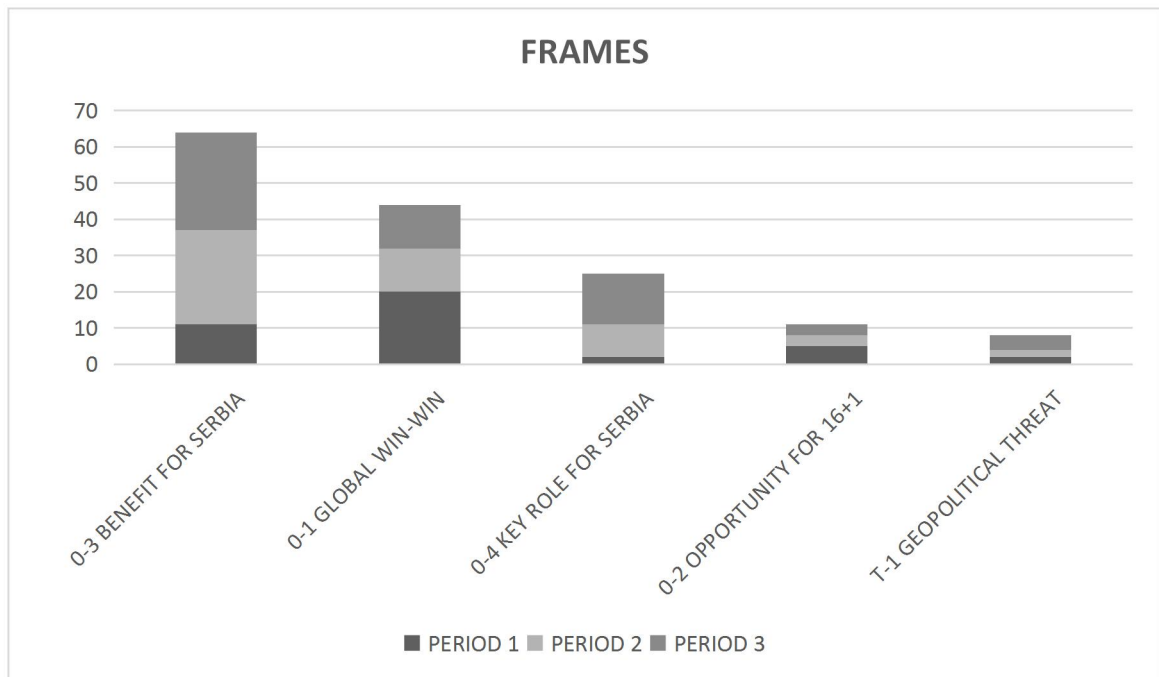
We have analyzed the sources of frames (officials, journalists, experts/analysts, other) in each news story at four levels: Chinese, Serbian, other BRI/16+1 countries, non-BRI/16+1 countries.

The five main sources of the frames were the following: (1) Serbian officials were sources of 46 frames, (2) Chinese officials of 25 frames, (3) non-BRI/16+1 analysts/experts of 13 frames, (4 and 5) other BRI/16+1 officials and Serbian journalists were authors of 10 frames each. These results show a large predominance of official sources.



(e) FRAMES

The analysis of the frames shows the large dominance of opportunity frames over the threat frames. In Period 1, the dominant frame was related to BRI as a global win-win project (0-1) – it was used 20 times, equal to the following four frames combined. In periods 2 and 3, we have seen a shift from the global opportunity frame to the Serbian opportunity frame, related to the concrete benefits of BRI/16+1 for Serbia and to the importance of Serbian role (0-3 and 0-4). In Period 2 the two were used 35 times, more than double the following three frames combined. In Period 3 they were used 41 times, again more than double than the following three combined. The total number of frames shows a dominance of the frames focused on opportunities for Serbia – benefits (64) and key role (25) – 89 out 164 frames used (54.3%). Frames on the importance of BRI at the global level also show a strong result (44 or 26.2%). While the dominance of opportunity frames is evident, it is worth noticing that there is a rise in threat frames in Period 3, emanating almost exclusively from original Western European or U.S. media sources, which is an indicator of both rising visibility and contention of BRI in their regions of origin.



Discussion

The results of the content analysis show several steady trends: a positive framing of BRI and 16+1 cooperation in the Serbian media, a predominance of the opportunity over the threat frames, as well as the substantial reliance on official – mostly Serbian and Chinese – sources of the frames depicted in the news items. These results are consistent despite evolution in the coverage. Over the three-year period, the coverage of the initiative has shifted from reliance on foreign news to the production of original news, as well as from focus on global aspects of BRI to the national benefits of the initiative. The shift is seen in the frame analysis as well:

there has been a shift from the dominance of the global opportunity frame to the steady predominance of the Serbian opportunity frame.

Such results point to several aspects of the BRI strategic communication in the Serbian case.

(1) Clear objectives and information end-state: A successful strategic communication requires subordinated messaging which is in line with clear strategy, objectives and information end-state. In the case of BRI and Serbia, we see a strategy which fits the interests of Serbian citizens at the national, regional and global level. At the national level, these interests are linked with national development and infrastructure projects (Pupin bridge, Smederevo plant, highways), at regional level with connectivity opportunities (Corridor X projects involving the port of Piraeus and the railway link Belgrade-Budapest) and at the global level with wider integration to the world's most promising economic area (connectivity with the Asian markets, the upcoming world number one economy, an investment alternative). The information end-state is clear: by participating in the BRI and 16+1 initiatives, Serbia is gaining in both economic strength and diplomatic clout.

(2) Acknowledging communication culture and target audience: While segmentation and identifying target groups have become a standard strategic communication tool in the corporate sector, applying these procedures to foreign policy issues remains a rather difficult task. Yet, in our analysis we have seen examples of well-targeted messaging. We will point to two, which are specific to Serbia's peculiar historical and geopolitical position. One of them was prominent in Period 1 of our analysis and featured stories suggesting a close collaboration of China and Russia on BRI, an important feature for Serbs, who perceive Russia as closest political ally, and both Beijing and Moscow as Serbia's key allies in the UN Security Council over issues with which Serbia is at odds with Western countries – such as the question of territorial integrity. The second, more prominent in periods 2 and 3, is related to promoting Serbia as a “key” country for BRI in the CEE context. Since Serbia is not an EU member (with possible membership years away) and has declared military neutrality (despite being largely surrounded by NATO member countries) – providing it with a key role without political conditionality is a novel and welcome feature for the Serbian public.

(3) Gaining credibility by closing the say-do-gap: One of the greatest challenges for strategic communication is closing the „say-do gap“, a gap between what an organization/initiative says and what it actually does. However, this is one of the hardest tasks for any strategic communication effort as it requires strong leadership, coordination and capacity. In the case of BRI and Serbia, the general win-win opportunity frame has been operationalized and reinforced by the concrete implementation of projects: Belgrade residents are actually driving over the Pupin bridge and Smederevo mill workers have gone back to work. Both of these cities are situated on the intersection of the pan-European corridors VII and X, key BRI transport routes, and both are set to build large industrial-innovation parks within the BRI framework.

(4) Fitting the frames in the narrative: In today's world information environment, legitimacy of a project, product or organization is dependent on a successful narrative. Yet, beyond storytelling – and BRI has a compelling story to tell with its „silk road“ references -

successful strategic communication requires successful strategic framing into the narrative. In the case of Serbia, the national, regional and global opportunity frames fit well together and represent a coherent base for the BRI narrative.

(5) Focus on long-term flexible, adaptable and incremental approach: Strategic communication requires a focus on long-term attitude change through influence and engagement, which require both patience and careful planning. The uncertainty of today's „late modernity“ requires furthermore a flexible and adaptive approach for strategic communication. The case of Serbia, as well as the regional and global approaches of BRI strategic communication, are showing signs of flexibility as they must adapt to various challenges: new regulations (EU), conflicts (Syria), sanctions (EU and US versus Russia), game-changing elections (US), contending powers (India). The incremental and adaptable approach can be seen in the Serbian case in the transformation of the opportunity frame from the global to the local focus and sourcing of news. The result is a stable positive trend for the opportunity frames.

Conclusion

A critical review by NED recently suggested that “strategic communication is one of Beijing’s preferred tactics”, but that “a cursory review of externally directed BRI strategic communication suggests however, that Beijing’s official efforts are unlikely by themselves to win over any country that has basic strategic interests at stake” (Kalathil, 2017: 173). These remarks make sense. Yet, strategic communication remains of key importance and our analysis points to several considerations.

First, a surge in interest on BRI among governments, think-tanks or media hostile to BRI is not only *a sign of BRI visibility, but also of its rising international, European and CEE legitimacy.*

Second, *building strategic communication resilience is a long-term necessity for supportive BRI communicators and policymakers alike.* Even in the case of Serbia, where strategic interests between Serbia and China coincide in the BRI context, and where concrete project have been implemented, threats lie ahead: from EU regulation hurdles, through geopolitical pressure, up to contending third-party strategic communication, as we have seen in the case of the September 9, 2017 “New York Times” article.

Third, while the Serbian case might be specific, it points nonetheless to the question of cooperation intensity and political will. It is no secret – and it is absolutely normal – that not all countries within the 16+1 framework are cooperating with equal motivation in the BRI project. Reasons are numerous and often the “laggards” are not the only ones responsible. Yet, *for BRI cooperation to succeed it needs to acknowledge the existence of a 16+1 platform at multiple speeds.* Some countries have more at stake than others. Some face greater external pressure not to cooperate. Some have reservations – ideological, (geo)political or economic. With Schengen and the Eurozone, EU members are already getting used to a form of “multi-speed Europe”, in which willing countries deepen their cooperation in certain areas without waiting for the rest of the pack. True, the EU and 16+1 mechanisms cannot compare in many

ways. Yet, a “multi-speed 16+1” mechanism is a realistic way forward. “Laggards” should not drag the initiative down. To the contrary, if the BRI and 16+1 mechanism yield results, the networking effect might push the project forward. This will require further adjustment, compromises, and further flexible strategic communication. Yet, it is a path worthwhile considering for the benefit of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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About the author

Aleksandar Mitić, PhD, Center for Strategic Alternatives, Serbia