

WORKING PAPER

Varying anchors, differing perceptions? Examining the representations of (China's) development in Macedonia

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16+1 Initiative in China-EU Relations: 'Golden Opportunity' or 'Divide and Rule'

Abstract

The question of perception is one which depends on the subject, the object under perception, as well as the interpretative networks between the two. Therefore, in order to understand the social perceptions (representations) that circulate in a specific social context, it is necessary to understand how they are embedded in particular organisational and institutionalised cultures, social histories and ideological relations. In this line, the perception of China's development in the Republic of Macedonia depends on the knowledge shared in the wider society in the country over:

- The (theoretical and practical) meaning of the concept of development in the Macedonian context - the social representations of development

- The broader perception of China,
- The perception of China's development.

It is also important to acknowledge that the groups which individuals (subjects of perception) belong to, act as mediators to the knowledge transmission processes. How different group members perceive and interpret China's development, is a function of the interpretative and normative meta-systems held by different social groups (Howarth; 1986), but is also a guide of behavior towards China. Therefore, in order to examine how different groups perceive China's development, it is important to take into consideration two separate process:

1) Anchoring - what is the prior knowledge and beliefs into which objectified knowledge over China's development is anchored? In order to examine this process, the broader post-socialist context, which represents the discursive environment where perceptions on China are formed, will be outlined. In this segment, the concept of "development", as circulated and understood in the public sphere in the Republic of Macedonia, will be examined.

2) Positioning - refers to how shared knowledge is anchored in different social groups. Taking as case studies representative samples (Sample of N=10 per group) from 2 different social groups (academics and students) from the Republic of Macedonia, the study will first discern the perceptions held by individual members of the 2 different groups, as well as the group-level perceptions. It will also seek to determine the variations between intergroup beliefs and positioning in their respective perceptions over China's development.

1. Anchoring: Social Representations of 'Development' in the Macedonian context

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in the late eighties/early nineties, ushered in a period of tectonic changes across the Balkans, which markedly reshaped the geopolitical, socio-economic and symbolic landscape in the region. The Republic of Macedonia, which gained independence in 1991, entered a period of post-socialist transition marked by deep-seated reforms aimed at its transformation into a market economy and a liberal democracy. In the area of international affairs, integration into the NATO alliance and the European Union became the state's key objectives. In this context, development - understood as the process in which the country grows or changes and becomes more advanced - came to be circumscribed by these four intertwined goals:

- transformation of the economy into a market economy,
- transformation of the political system into a liberal democracy,
- membership in the NATO and
- membership in the European Union.

At the same time, this context represents the web of organisational and institutional cultures, social histories and ideological relations, in which social perceptions circulate, including those over China's development. Therefore, demarcating the dominant, domestic and post-socialist understanding of "development" between 1991-2018, is an essential step towards its juxtaposition to China's "development".

1.1 Social Representations of 'Development' in a post-socialist neoliberal context

Mainstream development thinking in the early 1990's when the Republic Macedonia entered post-socialist transition, was marked by the "Washington Consensus". According to it, what poor nations needed, was not more capital, technological capacity, infrastructure or land redistribution, but rather a better organisation. Better organisation, however, was understood as the shifting of resources away from the state sector into the private sector (Cypher & Dietz, 2009). Consistent with this, as described by Otten (2013), the proponents of neoliberalism are businesses and large commercial enterprises, which use economic arguments of self-interest to claim that trade, production, and consumption should be as minimally regulated by governments as possible in order for their business to thrive, survive, and profit.

The Balkan region has been undergoing neoliberal marketization since the 1990's (Alexander 2004; Creed 1998; Hann 2003, 2006). All five key feature of neoliberalism became pervasive as the mainstream goals on which economic development depends, in the region, as well as in Macedonia: radically free market in which competition is maximized, free trade achieved through economic deregulation, privatization of public assets, vastly diminished state responsibility over areas of social welfare, the corporatization of human services, and monetary and social policies congenial to corporations and disregardful of the consequences: poverty, rapid depletion of resources, irreparable damage to the biosphere, destruction of cultures, and erosion of liberal democratic institutions (Brown, 2003). In the process, the Southeast European region became one in which the neoliberal discourse became hegemonic, in the sense that it became the TINA doctrine - "there is no alternative", a phrase coined by Margaret Thatcher. More than merely a political and economic method through

which multinational corporations, together with international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, diffused neoliberal policies into the Balkan region, it soon became a form of “political rationality, or a political worldview, which serves not only as a justification for these neoliberal economic policies, but also as moral imperatives for remaking the social world in the image of a market, narrowly construed” (Zamora, 2015, p. 43). One of the ways through which such neoliberal mentality has been spread and later on anchored within individual and societal psychologies (common sense) has been the dissemination and imposition of market values, such as competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and market rationality, in every aspect of human experience and existence. The language of ‘enterprise’ thus came to mark a new relation between the economic well being of the state and individual fulfillment. This relation consists of the premises that the economy is optimized through the entrepreneurial activity of autonomous individuals and that human well being is furthered if individuals are free to direct their lives as entrepreneurs all in the name of “rationality” (Sugarman, 2015).

The language of enterprise and rationality, measured by GDP and GNI indicators of economic growth thus became synonymous to the language of development. The first was seen a disconnected, proactive activities by individuals and businesses in society, which leads to growth that then trickles down to broad social prosperity. On the other hand the latter (development and the corresponding requirement of planning and involvement of the state as the manager of economic growth) came to be seen as inconsistent with the neoliberal free market and the correspondingly diminished role of the state.

1.2 Measuring economic growth in the neoliberal paradigm

One of the ways through neoliberalism has been manifested itself has been the consideration of economic growth - understood as the growth of total output or total income and measured through gross national income (GNI) and gross domestic product (GDP) - as the economy’s main objective and its ultimate end-goal. Instead of viewing development as incorporating the diverse and broad aspirations of what might be called the ‘good life’ in all its economic, social and political dimensions, it came to be replaced and completely overshadowed by economic growth narrowly construed as economic output (Cypher & Dietz, 2009). This has been the case in spite of the many limitations of the measures. For instance, it has been argued that income per capita values, are at best an imprecise measure of the actual income received by any particular person, since they are only a simple average derived by dividing the total GDP by total population (Cypher & Dietz, 2009). GDP measures do not provide any information about the dispersion of actual incomes around this mean, or the distribution of income. At the same time, GDP fails to include new production and income that adds to the level of well-being of individual, while at the same time it counts as production income that it fact does not contribute to human welfare. GDP only is a measure of goods and services which are bought and sold in the market. Home and subsistence production, destined for the use of the household producing them, is not counted in the GDP. On the other hand, the production of military goods, production processes that spew toxic wastes into the air and water and then force the society to pay for it, as well as the payment of

the health services that arise from it, do enter as contributions to GDP (p. 44, Cypher & Dietz, 2009).

Such prioritization of economic growth (measured predominantly as an increase in GDP) has manifested itself in Macedonia becoming the country with the highest Gini coefficient in Europe (Tevdovski, 2015), with an overall decline in the substantive material and moral conditions of post-socialist citizenship. As Hahn has argued, the spread of neoliberal economic principles and identity politics alongside private ownership, multi-party politics, and the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been a poor compensation for this decline (Hahn, 2006). In turn, the consequence has been the destruction of public services (health-care, education, social care) in the country and an allround increase in the precarity of the population (Clement, 2001, p. 293 in Spaskovska, 2010/11, p. 10.) A calculated 30.4 percent of people in Macedonia currently live below the poverty line.¹ The unemployment rate is the highest on the European continent, at an average of 31.88 percent in the period 1991-2017.² Average youth unemployment in the period 1991-2017 was 57.08 percent.³ Macedonia's infant mortality rate is almost three times the European average.⁴ Increasing inequality, growing poverty and the radical change from a predictable, safe existence profoundly affected the quality of life, including the physical and the mental health of the citizens of the post-communist societies, with a documented increase in suicide rates and a decrease in the average life expectancy (Holmes, 1997, in Spaskovska, 2010/11, p. 10).

1.3 A case-study: Wine industry under neoliberalism

In order to illustrate the impact of neoliberal development on a practical economic and socio-political level, a case study of its repercussions in the wine industry in the region of Tikveš in central Macedonia will be described. Otten (2013) has conducted anthropological fieldwork in the region, to assess the regional impact of post-socialist transition driven by neoliberal principles (Otten, 2013). As described in the study, the largest winery in the country - the Tikveš Winery was fully privatised in 2004 when a shareholder and multi-millionaire businessman bought a majority stake in it and took full control. Otten observed the social effect of the privatisation. He found the following key implications: “Overall, privatization has incorporated questionable business practices and dealings, characterized by a strictly for-profit motive and disregard for the livelihoods of the grape-growing communities that have produced for the wine industry for decades” (Otten, 2013). The main reasons for this he found in the delayed payments for one or more years, or a failure to pay all together to growers, combined with a laissez-faire approach to market regulation by the government and a little protection to the growers. The research further examined the impact of EU development funding in this sector. Namely, as an EU candidate country, Macedonia is eligible to funding from the EU’s Instrument for Pre-accession Access (IPA) development scheme, through which Macedonia has received over half a billion Euros since 2007. For a predominantly agricultural country, this is a highly significant support mechanism. However,

¹ https://www.theodora.com/wfbccurrent/macedonia/macedonia_economy.html

² https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Macedonia/Unemployment_rate/

³ https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Macedonia/Youth_unemployment/

⁴ <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-worried-over-high-infant-mortality-10-05-2017>

what Otten has found is that the opportunities offered by the programme, failed to be fully utilized. Firstly, the complicated procedural steps for the IPARD application (requiring documentation, permits, dependent on connections with Government with the state administration) meant that in 2011, for instance, out of 245 applications only 27 agreements and three projects were completed. Secondly, the co-funding requirement of the IPARD has meant that growers were rarely capable of generating the required co-funding capital to be able to apply. As a result, it was the region's elite who was able to match large sums of money in order to expand their business operations through the IPARD funding. In the absence of organised state support for growers, the IPARD funding had a limited impact on local development. This case has illustrated that the state bureaucracy, by failing to provide assistance and structural support, it has also failed to utilize existing opportunities for development in a regional agricultural context.

1.4 Social representation of neoliberal capitalism in Macedonia

Ideology oftentimes plays the role of legitimizing and justifying the (lack of) results in the economic development. In the context of Macedonia, following 27 years of post-socialist transition, which has notably failed to bring about economic and a social prosperity, it can hardly be said that there is a widespread political tendency for the model's reevaluation. The criticism, instead of targeting the neoliberal model or its applicability to the specific socio-cultural context, centers the blame on the corrupt political elites, and on its incorrect/incomplete application in the domestic context. Therefore, the following assertion consistent with neoliberal logic applies: if the Macedonian government would eliminate almost all regulations and constraints on market behavior, then Macedonia would forge ahead. Thus, government interventionism (and the reliance on political parties as essential mediators of business activity) is seen as the main hindrance to development. What is more, even major investments in infrastructure by government, aimed at starting off, accelerating, or pushing the process of development forward, are considered unnecessary (Cypher & Dietz, 2009, P.205).

This view is distinctly contrary to what developmental economists have long promoted. Namely, according to the developmentalists, an economy can achieve its best results with a competitive market interacting with a responsive and efficient government apparatus. For instance, economic growth can be boosted through large scale planned industrialization projects that encompass several major projects simultaneously. Based on this model, a 'big push' of concurrent industrial investments could launch a chain reaction of virtuous circles and complementary investments that would then ripple in many directions through the economic system, through synergistic interaction. According to Rosenstein-Rodan, development would have to start from a concerted and substantial 'push' from government to create, effectively, an entire industrial structure in one huge and interlocked undertaking (Cypher & Dietz, 2009, p 142).

2.The Chinese model of development

The millenium-long civilizational tradition of the Chinese culture undoubtedly contributes to its authentic and specifically characteristic approach over social ideas and

concepts for organizing the political community. In the larger part of this period it can even be argued that the economic development of the Chinese state was on a comparable level to that which had existed in Europe. However, in the 19th century Europe experienced enormous economic growth, while the Chinese economy was marked by a general downfall. In the first half of the 20th century, in spite of the formation of the Chinese Republic, foreign occupation and the accompanying political instability meant serious material poverty, meant that conditions/infrastructure for economic activity in the period did not exist. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, the present political community known as the People's Republic of China was formed. Although during this period up until the end of the 'cultural revolution', and the start of the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, intensive economic growth did not happen, it was in this period that the political fundamentals and socio-organisational capacities for the later economic development of the country were put in place. Under Deng, the strong organisational setting of the Communist Party, was directed towards adapting the socialist goals to the market economy. Through planned industrialisation and controlled foreign investments in the private economy, a huge economy was built. Usually, this period is viewed as a serious ideological turning point of the Chinese Communist Party, or its distancing from its fundamentals. However, even this argument is not exactly correct if we bare in mind that there wasn't a change over the set goals and criteria over the role of the Party, as much as a strategic turning point of the kind Lenin introduced with the 'new economic programme' in the early USSR. Nonetheless, the achievement of industrial development in this period was made possible exactly through the merging of growth of the public/state property in correlation with growth in the private sector and the free trade as two of Deng's strategy's most characteristic components. In this period, in spite of going through periodical and sectoral crisis the People's Republic of China, through fiscal discipline and a remarkably efficient state apparatus not only became a world economic power, but also managed to benefit from the advantages of this policy: effectively valorising the advantages and cautiously removing the negative aspects of the policies.

Through central support of the economy, in this period, China advanced its labour force, technology and competitiveness to a much higher quality level, in addition to building the infrastructure of an economy which became one of the most productive and most competitive economies in the world. The main characteristics of the model were state control over the financial system, direct support by the government over enterprises under state property, state created hard industry for domestic production, as well as high rates of saving. All these have proven to be crucial for the realisation of the dual-track approach: industrial development and economic growth. The opening up of the Chinese economy certainly meant its entry in the world economy flows, which in turn made it susceptible to the world trends of the global economy. In 2008 the chinese economy, under the influence of the world economic crisis underwent more serious blows. According to a study by the IMF and the ILO, the chinese economy by the end of the year 2009, as a result of the crisis lost over 3 million jobs (in comparison the USA lost 7 million jobs). This seemed to suggest that China led by the Communist Party better managed the global financial crisis. The so-called capitalism with chinese characteristics, which gives a central role to the state had been crucial for the

successful amortisation of the consequences of the world crisis. Planned development and the wise selection of support for different industries on behalf of the state, as well as the building of physical capacities through the plan for an internal integration of the Chinese economy, through infrastructural connections of its different geographic regions were some of the achievements. This was combined with the establishment of a link with the supply of the market and its control, which was of substantive advantage in this relative success of the Chinese model. Still, the need for control over the domestic and the foreign market became a necessity.

The dynamics with which the Chinese economic activity takes place inevitably placed China as one of the big factors for the surpassing of economic crisis in times of peace. The rise of the People's Republic of China to global economic and political prominence undoubtedly represents one of the major geopolitical events of the 21st century. Its consequences (social, economic, political and symbolic) are far-reaching and extend to territories that had previously been far beyond China's reach and influence. Since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a flagship grand strategy launched by President Xi Jinping, has meant that China's political economy has slowly but persistently started to become established on a global scale (Bastian, 2017). Encompassing a plethora of trade deals, financing agreements and investment projects, it represents a Eurasian strategy that expands China's influence westwards, from Asia across Africa to the Middle East and Europe, and sees China's role in global markets and production both increase and expand. With the rapid expansion of Chinese outbound investments, there have been growing debates over the social impacts on host countries (Zou, 2016). The Balkan region finds itself at the centre of this as Chinese banks, state-owned and private enterprises, and the government, are actively pursuing various investment projects in transport, infrastructure, energy and other sectors. The more structured presence of China in the region can be dated back to the establishment of the 16+1 mechanism for cooperation between China and Central, East and South East European countries (CESEE) in 2012. Considered to be a precursor as well as an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the 16+1 mechanism represents an institutional setting aimed at intensifying and expanding cooperation between China and 11 EU (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and 5 Balkan (EU-aspirant-) countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). The 16+1 mechanism also makes available a range of financial instruments that go hand in hand with the Chinese investment propositions. The first such fund is the China-CEEC Investment Cooperation fund established in 2012. Its two main investors are both Chinese: (i) The Export Import Bank of China (470 million dollars) and (ii) The Exim Bank Hungary (30 million dollars). In November, 2016 a second Sino-CEE Investment Cooperation fund was launched with a total volume of 11 billion USD. (The fund seeks to raise 50 billion euros in project finance for sectors such as infrastructure, high-tech manufacturing and consumer goods.) Clearly, the intensification of Chinese capital and infrastructure projects in the countries across the 16+1 represent a tempting market proposition for countries in the region, which at the same time represent a potential platform

for China to leverage its growing economic and political influence with the Central and Eastern European region, as well as the EU as a whole.

The BRI, as well as the 16+1 represent the external/global manifestation of Chinese internal development. In turn however, as a new player in the CESEE region, the perception of China's internal development, (its origin, path, organising principles and tendencies), is crucial for determining the political, symbolic and economic reception it received in the region and its various countries.

3. The perception of China's development in Macedonia

The average Macedonian citizens have vague out-dated impression of China, as a distant, backwards society. China is often associated with cheap, low quality exports, even though advanced Chinese technological brands like Huawei or Xiaomi had made their way to Macedonian consumers. Unlike other CESEE countries, in Macedonia there are very few or no Chinese migrants in the urban areas. Most of the Macedonian citizens have themselves never personally had a meaningful interaction with a Chinese person. The media is not helping to address this gap. There is rarely any original media reporting on China, although this has started to improve since the opening of the 16+1 Coordinating Centre for Culture in January 2018 in Skopje. Overall, the focus of the government is on the path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Therefore, the approach towards China, perceptions and openness towards China will depend to the extent that they are viewed as complementary or as conflicting with the country's euro-atlantic objectives. Therefore the perception of China and its development in Macedonia, is to a large extent mediated through the lens of the country's aspirations for membership in NATO and the European Union. These goals are also considered to be closely related to the country's (economic) development and broad prosperity (i.e development depends on the degree of progress in advancing the integration process) and are seen as a priority.

In order to determine the social perceptions (representations) of China's development in Macedonia, 20 qualitative interviews were conducted in Skopje in August, 2018. Half of the interviewees (N=10) belong to the academic community: Professors, Assistant Professors, Post Doctoral Students and Researchers from the social sciences. The other half consisted of students enrolled in Undergraduate studies of social sciences (N=10). The interview questions were divided into three groups: the first aimed at determining the perceptions over the development of the host country (Macedonia). The second aimed at determining levels of interests and/or awareness of Chinese society/politics and economics. The third group aimed at determining perceptions over the level of interconnection between the Chinese and the Macedonian societies and developmental trajectories.

In both the academic and the student samples, the first group of questions (regarding their perceptions over the state of development of the country) prompted similar responses. The majority of the interviewees were generally critical of the current state of development of the country. Particularly, an issue which seemed to be of concern across the board, was the political system marred by a string of political crises, the lack or inadequate quality of public services or social protection, bad air quality, healthcare/education and employment

opportunities. On questions which aimed at determining the reasons for this economic and socio-political underdevelopment, the answers were more diverse. In the sample of professors, 7 out of 10 academics attributed the reasons to a combination of factors. 6 out of the 10 academics considered the combination to be between societal corruption, state capture by political parties and party clientelism. The remaining 4 academics considered the primary reason for underdevelopment to be the neoliberal model, its inapplicability to the domestic socio-political and economic context, and the capture of the state by corrupt political parties. Amongst the students, the most frequently given reason reason for underdevelopment was nepotism:

“To get a job, it is not important what you grades are, or how skilled you are. What matter is who your father is and how well connected he is with politics or business”, said a 21 year old student of economics. Moreover, there was a notable sense of frustration with the absence of progress *“We have been candidates for both NATO and EU membership which is longer than I have been alive- 27 years”*, said one 22 year old female student of law. Unsurprisingly, 8 out of the 10 students interviewed wished to continue their education, career and lives abroad.

Greater discrepancies were observed between the academic and student groups in terms of their perceptions over China. In the academic group, 7 out 10 responded that they are aware of China’s development, and acknowledged it. Nonetheless, there was also a widespread sense of a huge cost attached to the large scale development. They quoted the pollution in China, the bad working conditions in factories, as well as the long working hours, as a negative externality to the economic development in the country. *“The chinese are very hardworking, they can work long hours, whereas our mentality is more mediterranean.”* - said a Postdoc in Public Policy.

In terms of the interconnection between China’s development, and its possible impact on Macedonia’s development, again the results were different in the academic group compared to the students group. 8 out of 10 students had never heard of the Belt and Road Initiative, and not a single one of them had heard of the 16+1 platform. Their main reference to China were “Aliexpress” and the Huawei mobile phones. Neither of them considered China as an option for continuing their studies, or a possible career location. All wished to go to Western Europe or the United States. In the academic sample, there was a greater awareness of the Belt and Road Initiative. 3 out of the 10 academics considered the BRI not only as a project for developing infrastructure beyond China, but also as a means for Chinese political and symbolic influence. The majority said that they are unsure what China’s intention may be, and inclined to think it is driven by a profit incentive: *“nowadays everyone is competing over new markets, new ways to drive profit. China is doing the same”*. In the academic sample, in 3 out of 10 interviewees the propensity to consider China as a positive new factor for development was negatively correlated to their perception of the West, the EU and the neoliberal model in the region. The more critical they were of the neoliberal, western model of development, the more likely they were to have positive inclinations (on a theoretical level) of China and its model. Nonetheless, even these 3 academics considered China as only complementary to the role of the EU in the country. Not a single one of the interviewees argued that China and its

developmental model could or should completely replace the role of the EU in the region. The predominant perspective was that Macedonia belongs to Europe, and its long awaited membership in the EU is the best path to achieving development.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the neoliberal concept of development remains a predominant one in the country. In turn the “developmental” approach is relatively neglected, largely due to an ineffective state administration, marred by corruption, clientelism and absence of meritocratic and professional processes, on which developmentalism depends. This is in stark contrast to the Chinese model of development- marked by a strong, responsive and efficient state involvement and continued interaction with the competitive market. The contrast between the two countries is both in scale and in achievement. While the Chinese state has been marked by decades-long continuity, long-term planning and a developmental process that has led the country to becoming a worldwide economic powerhouse; the Macedonian state in turn has been marked by political uncertainty in the process of transition from socialism to neoliberalism capitalism, which has seen the developmental process lag far behind. In this context, the perception of China’s development, invokes a perspective which is at odds with the neoliberal common sense for the successful functioning of the economy: namely China’s economic development has been successful, in spite of the strong state involvement in the process.

Nonetheless, following 27 years of post-socialist transition, which has notably failed to bring about economic and a social prosperity, it can hardly be said that there is a widespread political tendency for the reevaluation of the neoliberal model in Macedonia. The criticism for the economic and social stagnation centers the blame on the corrupt political elites, and/or on the incorrect/incomplete application of the neoliberal model in the domestic context. The country’s integration in the EU and NATO are considered to be the most important steps and conditions on which development depends. Thus, in addition to representing goals of the country’s international policy, the membership in the EU and NATO are also perceived as strongly intertwined to the country’s developmental requirements and aspirations. Instead of viewing China as an alternative model, it is still largely considered to be a distant model, which has little bearing on the economic and political system in the country. Those that have deeper knowledge of China’s BRI and its involvement in the region (for instance through the 16+1 platform) view the opportunities it offers as complementary to this objective. Thus, while China’s development trajectory does stretch the imagination of the possible in the realm of development, the Chinese model is still considered to be too far removed to be able to influence a paradigmatic shift in the political and economic thinking in the country.

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