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Bosnia and Herzegovina's Youth Perception of China-CEEC Cooperation

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Abstract

Participation in the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China CEEC or 17 + 1) initiative brings significant benefits to the countries in the Balkans. Among them is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which joined the annual meeting in Warsaw in 2012 and whose relationship with China is viewed through the broader EU-China-Western Balkans nexus. Although generally still modest, three sectors where China's presence is most visible in BiH are the energy industry, infrastructure projects and cultural diplomacy. The aim of the paper was to examine the perceptions of China-CEEC mechanism by young politicians and civil society organizations (CSO) members up to the 30 years of age. The research found that the overall perspective on the mechanism was positive and that the respondents supported greater presence of China through cultural activities and models of development offered within China-CEEC. However, respondents strictly emphasized the importance of compliance with EU environmental standards and guidelines, as well as the importance of compliance with all legal frameworks under which Chinese companies operate in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Key words: Bosnia and Herzegovina, China-CEEC, participation, youth, perspective

1. Introduction

In 2013, in a speech given in Kazakhstan, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announced the initiation of a new Silk Road named the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This modern-day Silk Road binds together almost 70 countries and 4,4 billion people from Xi'an in western China (the old imperial capital and the start of the original route), across Central Asia to the Middle East, Russia and Europe (Du, 2016, p. 31). The initiative is the final departure from Deng

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Xiaoping's idea of “hide your strength, bide your time”, which promoted non-interference and being “out of the spotlight”. With the BRI, China has become a global player and launched itself as one of leaders in the sphere of economic development and transnational connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative is defined as a route for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a path toward peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-around exchanges (L. Kong, 2015, p. 338). By initiating the "win-win" concept into its foreign policy, China has challenged the realist presumption of rational self-interest and introduced a new paradigm of mutual benefit in international relations. What enabled China to launch such an initiative was an incredible economic growth from the end of the past and the beginning of the new century. Primarily, the BRI is a development strategy aimed at the mutual development of China and other countries directly involved in the project. Therefore, in addition to its immediate neighborhood, Africa and Europe have also become important strategic points for China's objectives.

The largest initiative within the BRI concerning European countries is Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC or 17 + 1), which began in 2012 with a meeting of heads of governments in Warsaw. The so-called regional approach to deal with Central and Eastern European countries can be regarded as a breakthrough in China’s policy towards Central and Eastern European countries (T. Kong, 2015, p. 171). One of the important clusters within the mechanism consists of Western Balkan states, and because of the specific foreign policy goal of joining the European Union, the relationship with China is on the sidelines of the wider EU-China nexus. Integral part of this specific cluster is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which, like other Western Balkan countries, is trying to direct its political direction towards membership in the European Union. However, due to its internal structure, it is currently in the worst position of all remaining non-EU Western Balkan countries, even though it has begun the process of integration at the same time as others (Hirkić, 2019, p. 179). Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1995, the two countries have significantly expanded their cooperation, which has been reflected in different economic and social initiatives. The most important mechanism through which BiH and China enhance their partnership is China-CEEC, which has been the backbone of all major projects in the energy, infrastructure and cultural sectors since 2012. These three pillars are central instruments of cooperation, where several capital projects can be identified - the modernization and construction of a thermal power plant in Tuzla, the construction of motorway sections within

Corridor 5C and the push for educational content of Confucius Institutes in Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

Most texts related to the EU-China-Western Balkans triangle use the narrative of opposing parties and portray space as contested between multiple actors. However, the possibility of using multiple models of development is rarely or never mentioned in the literature, and the role of structural power in defining relationships and “sub-relationships” is rarely emphasized. Through the so-called “Sofia Guidelines”, a document adopted by the participating countries of the China-CEEC mechanism in 2018, members pledged that any form of cooperation would be “in accordance with the laws, regulations and respective competences of each other and EU standards and policies for EU member states and candidate countries” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). Because of that, Pavličević argues that the EU has achieved that the relationship between China and the Western Balkans has been now positioned as subordinate to the China-EU relationship and its further trajectory determined by the imperative of compliance with the EU’s regulations, policies, and objectives (Pavličević 2019, p. 464). On the other hand, EU officials’ concerns can be explained through a dual prism. The first deals with the expansion of China’s political influence in countries with significantly different political systems, where this influence can be exerted within the EU, once the Western Balkan countries become part of the community. The second concerns the possible over-indebtedness of potential members, where the burden of possible debt would fall on other member states. The experience so far only partly justifies these fears. Bąk believes that from the economic side, integration within the EU is still strong, and there is no indication that the 17+1 initiative has caused any reorientation of individual countries (Bąk, 2019, p. 5). Liu writes that the EU’s attitude has also gone through a positive change from an initial period of suspicion to the present willingness to collaborate with China (Z. Liu, 2017, p. 21). Nonetheless, the Belt and Road Initiative (and therefore China-CEEC) is still viewed with a great deal of skepticism and many critics label it as economically non-viable. For instance, Boucher argues that the rail link to Europe has been a great idea, but not much has started to flow yet. He also adds that China does not dominate the global infrastructure and that some aspects provide strategic benefits that are interesting, but not game changers (Boucher, 2019). Some of the criticisms leveled at BRI include the debt diplomacy, lack of transparency and environmental disinterest. China was also suggested to institutionalize the BRI, so that the project is not seen as entirely Chinese-led (Kuo, 2019).

2. Methodology

This paper is a result of a small-scale quantitative-qualitative study which explores potential future political and local BiH leaders' perception of Chinese influence in three sectors of China-CEEC mechanism - energy politics, infrastructural models and soft power. For the quantitative part, 110 young members of political parties and CSO activists who are up to 30 years of age participated in a questionnaire. The qualitative part consists of an interview conducted with a total of 10 interviewees - half being members of political parties (*SDA, PDP, DF, Platforma za progres* and *Naša stranka*) - and other half consisting of activists from different CSOs in both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The results thus obtained served for the interpretation of the data collected through the questionnaire.

3. Research results

3.1 Energy politics

Energy politics plays a significant role in China's foreign policy, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the countries that do not play a notable role in the global energy landscape. While it is able to meet domestic electricity demand (with partial exports abroad), the state is completely dependent on the Russian gas. BiH is a coal-rich country, which represents one of its most important natural resources. However, due to the commitment to the European path and alignment with the standards of the European Energy Community, it is also devoted to paying greater attention to renewable energy sources - a goal that can also be achieved through the China-CEEC mechanism. In its Europe 2020, 2030 and 2050 agendas, the EU defines its energy policies, which include environmental reforms. However, geographic features make the energy produced from thermal power plants much more extensive and therefore more attractive to investors. In addition to the energy generated from coal, the greatest potential is in the hydropower, which is unable to reach the production capacity of thermal power plants. BiH has a huge number of hydropower plants that represent "clean" energy, but these can also have a negative impact on the ecological balance. So far, several framework agreements have been signed between BiH and Chinese companies to build hydroelectric power plants in Republika Srpska entity (Todorović, 2019). However, the financing model and the starting dates have not yet been confirmed. On the other hand, there are a number of agreements and project plans signed between Chinese companies and government representatives in BiH related to the construction and modernization of thermal power plants such as those in Stanari,

Tuzla, Ugljevik, Banovići and Gacko. While some projects are frozen, the two largest ones, one of which was realized and the other on the way to realization (Stanari and Tuzla), served as central elements of the overall research. Stanari Thermal Power Plant (TPP) was the first power plant of its kind in Europe to be fully built by China's Dongfang Electric Corporation and is one of China-CEEC's early successes. In 2019, BIH was also given Chinese assurances for financial support in implementing the Tuzla Thermal Plant (Unit 7) construction project, the most significant Sino-BIH cooperation project included under 17+1 cooperation format and the biggest investment in BIH energy sector so far worth EUR 613 million (Bakota, 2019b, p. 5). After the project was formalized as part of China-CEEC cooperation, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Fadil Novalić, stated that the project was initially offered to Western partners, but the offer was declined.

This study has confirmed that there are currently two divergent narratives regarding energy production. The first marks Chinese loans as a stumbling stone in attempts to harmonize with the European Union (EU) environmental standards, and the second projects the idea of complete functionality, which is in line with EU standards and regulations. Out of 110 respondents, 59.1% support Chinese loans for the purpose of investing in the energy sector and construction of thermal power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 38.2% oppose this type of investment, and 2.7% said that they were not sufficiently familiar with the positive aspects and the downsides of such investments. Furthermore, the research showed that environmental protection is very important when constructing infrastructure projects. 85% of respondents stated that environmental protection was important, while 15% indicated that jobs were more important than environmental protection. For the local community, both power plants are primarily a significant source of employment. According to the available information, there are currently about 850 people working in the TPP, and energy is exported to European markets, primarily to Germany and Croatia (EFT Group, 2020). The commissioning of the power plant has come under criticism from EU officials, who stated that coal-based production is an outdated energy solution that can only hinder EU access and create dependency on China's technology.

Generally, Bosnia and Herzegovina has major problems with air pollution, particularly during the winter, and coal-run power plants could further aggravate the health of citizens. Therefore, opponents of the construction of thermal power plants believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina should focus on renewable energy sources (such as solar energy) because these could bring financial effectiveness, in the long run. On the other hand, contractors claim that thermal power plants are built according to all EU standards and regulations required by the

European Energy Community. Some respondents felt that coal should not be abandoned, since it is one of the region's most important resources, but that new, eco-friendly refining technologies should be used. In this way, plants could be sustainable and would not endanger the environment or people living in the surrounding areas. Moreover, advocates for the construction of Unit 7 of Tuzla power plant argue that it is important not to give up the electricity production in this region, but rather upgrade it, given that the existing technology has to be abandoned by 2027 and thus many job positions and capacities could be left unused.

3.2 Alternative infrastructural models

Bosnia and Herzegovina has alarming issues with implementation of reforms and lengthy bureaucratic procedures, which makes it difficult to attract investment and foreign capital. In this sense, China-CEEC represents a unique opportunity to connect with the region as well as Europe as a whole. However, the survey showed that 68.2% of respondents believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina still does not fully reap the benefits of participation in the mechanism. Furthermore, 82.7% of respondents indicated that they support development models such as the construction of roads, bridges, railways offered by China through the aforementioned mechanism. 89.1% of respondents believe that roads are the most needed infrastructure projects in the country, followed by hospitals (62.7%), railways (58.2%) and airports (30%). BIH has only 130 kilometers of motorway built since the end of the war and for the last five years no new motorways have been built in the full length (Bakota, 2019a, p. 4). Currently, a section of Corridor 5C with a total length of 10 kilometers is built close to Mostar by China State Construction Engineering Corporation Limited. Also, there is a plan to build a *Banja Luka-Novi Grad* highway that will be financed by the Export-Import Bank of China, and that will connect Banja Luka with the EU. Therefore, strengthening and expanding existing road networks and better connectivity with EU countries would improve the tourism sector as well as the volume of trade. In the town of Doboj, a Chinese company, China Sinopharm International Corp, is also building a new hospital in a deal worth around 45 million euros (Kovačević, 2020). Moreover, representatives from the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding for the construction of the airport in Trebinje - a city in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, due to its strategic location, could represent an important link to neighboring Dubrovnik in Croatia and the Kotor Bay in Montenegro.

By launching BRI and setting up banks and funds that could challenge Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, China has used

important soft balancing strategies. In order to obtain a loan from Western institutions, states must meet strict conditions. However, China allows loans on much more flexible terms and with less bureaucratic procedures. Although BiH is in need of infrastructural development and the Chinese projects, primarily the construction of highways and modern facilities, are more than welcome, they do involve the engagement of Chinese companies, which alongside carries a heavy load of loan policies. Also, Chinese companies use the idea of boots on the ground, where they send their workers, experts, managers and equipment to countries where projects are conducted. Most Chinese companies are now ranked in the top ten, given the unique contract clauses and predominant role in the market. Respondents who participated in the survey emphasized the importance of thorough scrutiny of companies performing works in Bosnia and Herzegovina, given the alleged corruption scandals of individual actors during the construction of projects in Africa. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), many political leaders in BiH are prone to corrupt practices and their cooperation with the similar profile of the company could significantly shake public perceptions not only of China-CEEC, but also of China. However, despite certain fears, current projections show that there is no danger of the so-called "debt-trap" that Bosnia and Herzegovina could fall into. The share of BiH public debt in gross domestic product (GDP) was 31.42% in 2019, which (at least currently) does not provide a realistic assumption for over-indebtedness (Sarajevo Times, 2019).

3.3 Soft power and "charm offensive"

In 2009, speaking on the occasion of the 11th Conference of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad, Chinese President Hu Jintao expounded on the importance of public diplomacy in Chinese foreign policy (T. Liu, 2019, p. 78). A few years later, Xi Jinping also stated that it was important to "tell China's story well". The Public Diplomacy Office was formed in 2009, to be later followed by the opening of the China Public Diplomacy Association in 2012. In the meantime, soft power and public diplomacy also began to be taught at some of the country's universities. Therefore, China has since made enormous efforts to improve its soft power, which was then projected through public diplomacy. According to the Soft Power 30 index published by Portland Communications and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy since 2015, China is currently (according to the 2019 rankings) ranked 27th. The reasons for the relatively poor ranking are the events from previous years such as: the US-China trade war, blacklisting of Huawei by the US, escalating criticism of the treatment of Uyghurs, South China Sea dispute and demonstrations in Hong Kong (Soft Power 30, 2019). On the other hand, it is

emphasized that China's main soft power strengths are its culture and education. Some of the most important cultural projects carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina include the opening of the Confucius institutes in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the introduction of Chinese language as an elective course in the entity of Republika Srpska, the Chinese film week during the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and the screening of the "Charming Beijing" series on state television.

Confucius institutes represent the centerpiece of China's cultural soft power and the leading cultural initiative. The rationale for the Confucius Institute project reflects China's recognition of language teaching as a means of building relationships, enhancing socio-cultural understanding and promoting trade and foreign investment (Pan 2013, p. 25). In addition to free language and culture learning, through active engagement and good results in competitions organized by the institute, students also have the opportunity to visit China. Speaking of Confucius institutes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the manifestation of soft power, research has shown that it is still at a modest level. There are currently two Confucius Institutes in BiH (Sarajevo and Banja Luka) and only 11.8% of respondents participated in their activities. In the past year, elective Chinese language courses were introduced in schools in the entity of Republika Srpska, which, in cooperation with the Confucius Institute in Banja Luka and the headquarters of the Confucius Institutes (Hanban) in Beijing, provides classes for students. However, generally speaking, it is noticeable that Chinese is still not perceived as relevant as European languages for private and professional developments. On a scale of 1-3, 12.7% of respondents expressed a strong desire (rated 3 on the scale) for learning Chinese, 33.6% indicated 2, and 53.6% have little or no desire to learn the language. However, the middle cluster (2) is the target group which could be further influenced and encouraged to participate in cultural projects of both the Institute and Embassy of the PRC in BiH.

When speaking about soft power, Joseph Nye, a political scientist who coined the term, stated that the proof of power lies in the ability to change the behavior of states (Nye 1990, p. 155). Moreover, Nye believes that the biggest portion of soft power is produced by civil society – everything from universities to the movie industry and pop culture – not from the government (Nye, 2013). In the context of the China-CEEC Initiative, this signifies promotional efforts that, in addition to the Embassy of the PRC in BiH, include civil society organizations (CSOs), which lobby for greater cooperation between the two countries through the mechanism. However, the "Center for Promotion and Development of the BRI", the "Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association" and *Kineski vijesnik* (Kina-danas.com) are only a handful of CSOs actively promoting China in BiH. The research confirmed a modest impact, where only 16.4% of

respondents indicated that they were following online content or were otherwise involved in the work of these actors. Furthermore, given the great rise of the Chinese film industry and promotional events such as the "Chinese Film Week" organized in 2019 in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the help of the aforementioned CSOs and the Embassy of the PRC in BiH, the study investigated the general appeal that the Chinese film and music industries have. However, out of the 110 respondents, 12.7% claimed that they were following the aforementioned industries. This indicates the full-scale market presence of Western cinema in BiH, primarily through Hollywood and European film art. Although China's soft power is currently at a modest level, majority of interviewees noted that more cultural initiatives and more pronounced presence of all China's promoters in BiH are welcome.

4. Conclusion

The foreign policy objective of establishing the BRI marked the final opening of China to the world and launched the "win-win" concept of cooperation, which challenged the core of international relations theories. Through the China-CEEC mechanism, China has been able to bring together the countries of Central, Eastern (and Southeast) Europe, and allocate a budget of several billion euros for projects in various sectors. However, throughout any narrative that includes the Western Balkans (and therefore Bosnia and Herzegovina), it is necessary to observe the individual relations of the countries within the wider EU-China nexus. Also, little or no attention is paid to the structural power of the European Union, according to whose rules and suggestions the mechanism operates. Bosnia and Herzegovina and China have significantly improved cooperation since the establishment of the China-CEEC, and the three fundamental pillars in the relationship include the energy sector, infrastructure development and cultural activities. First, there are conflicting narratives surrounding projects in the energy sector - one describing projects as a stumbling stone in attempts to harmonize with EU's energy standards and environmental protection, and the second looking at the opportunity for development and employment of more people. The research has shown a support of young politicians and CSO activists for investments in the energy sector and the construction of thermal power plants, but also a call for caution in regard to environmental protection. Respondents also emphasized the importance of greater commitment to clean and renewable energy, which could also be achieved through the China-CEEC mechanism. The second pillar consists of investments and loans in the infrastructure sector, where the research has confirmed support for development models offered by China, primarily for the construction of roads, hospitals, railways and airports.

Furthermore, respondents stressed the importance of thorough check of the contracting companies in order to avoid corruptive practices. The third pillar consists of the cultural activities and projection of the soft power of state and non-state actors. The research has shown that China's soft power projection is still at the modest level in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, respondents welcomed a number of cultural initiatives that would familiarize Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens with China, its society, culture and history.

Appendix

The questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. Are you a member of a political party?
3. Are you an active member (staff or volunteer) of a CSO?
4. Do you think that Bosnia and Herzegovina reaps the benefits of its participation in the China-CEEC (17+1) initiative?
5. Do you welcome models of development (e.g. construction of roads, bridges, railways) offered by China through China-CEEC?
6. Which infrastructure projects are most needed in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
7. Do you support Chinese loans in the energy sector and the construction of thermal power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
8. When constructing infrastructure projects, the protection of the environment is: important; important but potential jobs are more important; not important.
9. On a scale of 1-3, how much would you like to learn Chinese language?
10. Have you participated in any of the activities of the Confucius Institutes in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
11. Do you follow or engage in the content of the Chinese Embassy, the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association (Udruženje “Bosansko-kinesko prijateljstvo”), Kina-danas.com or any other promoters of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
12. Do you use Chinese products in your daily life (e.g. mobile phone, clothing, accessories or food)?
13. Are you a fan of Chinese movie or music industry?

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