

WORKING PAPER

**The People's Republic of China and Bosnia and Herzegovina:
Overview of cooperation and future challenges**

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Summary

Although cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Bosnia and Herzegovina exists in all areas, it is difficult to claim it is at a satisfactory level. Although there are occasional, very rare political bilateral misunderstandings, they are not at the root of this problem. It seems that even after all the years of cooperation and diplomatic relations, there is a lack of knowledge about modern China and its achievements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including political decision makers at all levels of government. On the other hand, large Chinese companies often do not find their way in the complex political and economic system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Above all, the geopolitical aspect plays a certain negative role, especially in the context of great power relations, but also BiH's long-term path towards uncertain membership in the European Union, which does not look favorably on the growth of Chinese influence in the Balkans and BiH.

And yet, Chinese companies participate in some of the most significant infrastructure and energy projects in BiH, at different levels and in cooperation with different political parties that form the authorities at different levels of the BiH state structure, from the local community upwards. Cultural cooperation, as well as that in the area of think-tanks and the media, shows positive trends. During the epidemic, China delivered medical equipment to BiH both as a donation and on a commercial basis.

All in all, there are internal and external factors that are changeable and on which future cooperation will depend. There are comparative advantages, but there is also the danger of deterioration even in this kind of framework, which is certainly insufficient.

Keywords: *Bosnia and Herzegovina, People's Republic of China, Cooperation, "Belt and Road" Initiative, COVID-19, infrastructure, energy, culture, campaign*

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the People's Republic of China have been cooperating for a period slightly longer than a quarter of a century, since mutual recognition. China was not a complete stranger in BiH while it was an integral part of Yugoslavia, and already in the last year of the war, diplomatic relations were established. In July 1997, the first ambassador of the Republic of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Wen Xigui, handed over copies of letters of credit to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jadranko Prlić. During the reception and talks, the first Chinese ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina presented the principles of the foreign policy of the PR China towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and expressed China's readiness to help Bosnia and Herzegovina in post-war reconstruction and reconstruction (Simović, Mudrenović, 2019). There were many elements for cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the People's Republic of China, especially in the field of trade and economy, and many international agreements were already being prepared. The Agreement on economic and trade cooperation, the Agreement on the promotion and protection of investments and the Agreement on the avoidance of double taxation stand out here. The Agreement on Economic and Trade Cooperation was signed in 2000, and the Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments in 2002. (*Ibid*).

Simplifying things to the end, we can still say that the increase in China's activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina grew with the year 2012 and the establishment of the "17+1" Mechanism, and subsequently with the "Belt and Road" Initiative. This correspond with the time when China started to be more visible to the world public, including that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than before. As for "17+1", Bosnia and Herzegovina has been participating more actively since the 2015 meeting in Suzhou. BiH's active contribution to the "17+1" mechanism is also visible at meetings in Budapest (Borić, 2020). The epidemic brought a *new normal* and changed the dynamics in many structures, including that of the "17+1" Initiative. The extremely positive trends that BiH recorded as a result of high-quality bilateral relations with China - such as the exponential growth of visits by Chinese tourists to Sarajevo and BiH after the countries mutually abolished visas for citizens - have stopped and a return to the pre-pandemic state and figures is still expected. The war in Ukraine, in which Russia and the countries of the European Union and the United States of America are directly or indirectly involved, threatens to strain the relations of European countries with China. It is a general picture in which we try to analyze the cooperation of a small European country on the periphery of the continent with a superpower in the far east of Asia.

As in some previous texts on the topic of cooperation between China and BiH, we will analytically observe the cooperation from several perspectives. First of all, we will provide an

overview of the ongoing and finished infrastructure projects. Based on these insights, we will try to project future trends in China's cooperation with BiH on construction, primarily in roads and energy. Then we will look at culture and education, a segment of cooperation in which significant progress has been made compared to the situation five or ten years ago, although there are certain obstacles here as well. Close field to education is cooperation in field of media, which also records positive trends, at least in terms of the presence of Chinese content in the media in BiH, which will be discussed later. Finally, we will also say something about the cooperation that took place after the outbreak of the pandemic in terms of the procurement of medical and health equipment, and the donations that came from the People's Republic of China. After a comprehensive review, we will return to considerations of the development of cooperation in the given, unfavorable geopolitical circumstances.

Infrastructure projects

When it comes to infrastructure projects, the facts is that Chinese State Owned Enterprises (SOE's) are relatively present in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They respond to public calls and submit bids for the construction of sections of the highway on the Vc corridor and other roads that are being built in BiH. Chinese SOE's are also active in the field of energy, and in some other projects in local communities.

Perhaps the most famous and so far the most successful example of cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China is the “Stanari” thermal power station (TPP). Perhaps the key to success lies in the fact that in this case it is a private investment by the company ETF “Stanari”, and not a cooperation project between two state companies, so the BiH side was motivated by the interest of private ownership. However, it cannot be said that the TPP “Stanari” construction project did not have state support, on the contrary. In order to avoid various bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, the authorities in Republic of Srpska declared the local community where the construction of the thermal power plant began to be a municipality and separated it from the previous municipality. Today, due to this project, the municipality of Stanari is one of the most prosperous local communities in the entity Republic of Srpska and the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The contractor in this project was Dongfang Electric Company, whose engineers are still present in Stanari and oversee the daily production process (EFT Stanari, 2022).

On the other hand, the construction project of Block 7 of the TPP in Tuzla, the construction of which has not yet started, can be considered as an example of how different external factors affect the cooperation of two parties, BiH and China. By coincidence rather than far-reaching plans, the General Electric (GE) company from the United States of America was also involved in the construction of

Block 7, which was supposed to supply the boiler and turbine for Block 7. However, the pandemic forced the company's management to hurry up with the company's transition, which meant, among other things, getting out of the coal business for GE. The lobbies within the European Union, which all the time pressured the BiH side to abandon the project that would mean the energy independence of BiH, got their way. And while the BiH side previously – while the American company was in the project – successfully resisted unprincipled pressures that combined ecological, economic and geopolitical factors, after the American's withdrawal they themselves retraced. Specifically, the investor – Elektroprivreda BiH does not agree to the alternative offered by the contractor, the Chinese side, and insists that the contractor fulfill the impossible conditions from the original contract (Hambo, 2022). The contractor offered alternative options, including some European and Chinese equipment suppliers, but in the investor passed the ball to the Government of the Federation of BiH, and this in turn to the Parliament of the Federation of BiH, which should vote about the continuation of the contract with the Chinese side and the way in which this project will be implemented. By the way, the investor has already paid significant money to the contractor, and it is possible that the case will have its epilogue in international courts (Mujakic, 2021). Analysts may find it very strange how the Federation so easily gave up on the "generational project", as the leaders and experts in the BiH Federation called it (Fena, 2019). A Chinese consortium consisting of the companies Gezhouba and Guangdong Electric Power Design Institute (GEDI) participates in this project, and the Chinese Export-Import Bank (EXIM) appears as the financier of the project because the project is EPC+F (Engineering, Procurement and Construction + Financing).

When it comes to road construction projects, in the entity Federation of BiH (FBiH) on the highway on Corridor Vc, which is under the jurisdiction of the Public Company "Highways of Federation of BiH", Chinese companies are engaged in two subdivisions in Herzegovina, in the southern part of the country, where they are building two lots that are located one to of the other. Sinohydro Corporation Ltd is leading a consortium of companies together with Power China and Azvirt Limited Liability Company from Azerbaijan. This consortium is building a bridge near the town of Počitelj. China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) is building a section from the town of Pocitelj to location Zvirovic. The value of the first project is 56,522,840.50 euros, while the value of the second is 28,114,889.53 euros (JP Autoceste, 2019). Chinese companies are also competing on some other sections of the highway on Corridor 5c, but these activities are still ongoing and at the time of writing, the outcome of those tenders is not known. By the way, Sinohydro is also engaged in another project of the company EFT, owner of TE "Stanari". It is the construction of the "Ulog" hydroelectric power plant in the upper stream of the Neretva river. The total investment value of the project is EUR 70 million. The start of commercial operation of HPP Ulog is expected

in 2023. (EFT Ulog, 2022)

In another BiH entity, Republic of Srpska (RS), Chinese partners are also engaged in highway construction projects. Among the projects that attracted the attention of the public but also caused numerous criticisms is the construction project of the Banja Luka - Prijedor highway, 42 kilometers long and the construction of which will cost 297 million euros. This road will be built by Chinese companies which will also charge tolls. The main contractor is the Chinese company SDHS-CSI BiH, which is registered in Banja Luka as a representative office of China Shandong International Economic & Technical Cooperation. The money for the construction of the highway was provided by a Chinese company that will collect tolls for the next 30 years. Entity authorities have guaranteed that the number of vehicles will be sufficient to collect 30 million annually from tolls, and that the rest of the money will be provided by tolls from other highways if necessary (Redzic, 2022). The contract was signed back in 2018, but the works only intensified in 2022. On the other side, at the eastern end of the RS, another Chinese company got the job of building a highway. It is about the company CSCEC, which will build the Vukosavlje-Brčko highway under a contract worth 765.7 million KM. This 33-kilometer-long highway will actually connect the RS and Serbia with a highway (Mondo, 2022).

One of the projects that is particularly under scrutiny was the reconstruction of the tram line in Sarajevo, which is being done by the already mentioned Chinese company China Shandong. The reconstruction project was initiated by the "Troika" government in Canton Sarajevo, which consists of three parties which are in the opposition in other parts of the country and at higher levels of governments, so they have a strong opposition against themselves. Also, the thorough reconstruction of the tram line through Sarajevo did not happen for more than three decades, so the citizens were additionally interested in quality solutions for something they use every day. Numerous media criticized the project because certain provisions of the contract are secret, so the public was also interested in the answers of investors and contractors. Chinese side answer to the critics open and clear, but some voices remain unhappy with answers asking details of the contract to be delivered to the public (Raport, 2022). At the time of writing this text, the works on the reconstruction of the railway are coming to an end and it is quite certain that they will be completed positively.

Among the projects outside the energy and road construction sectors, the construction of the "Holy Apostle Luka" hospital in Doboj, which is being built and equipped by the Chinese company Sinopharm, can be singled out as important (Srna, 2019). The facility worth 88.5 million KM (around 44.5 million euros) is being built according to the "turnkey" principle. The construction of the hospital in this city in central BiH, about thirty kilometers away from the TPP "Stanari", should be completed

by the end of 2022 (RTRS, 2022).

Culture, education, media

When it comes to cultural cooperation, researchers claim that it has been growing significantly since 2015, when the first Confucius Institute in BiH was opened, the one in Sarajevo. Cultural cooperation is, first of all, structurally conceived through the Confucian Institutes. There are two Confucius institutes in BiH, besides the one in the capital city, Sarajevo, there is also another one, in Banja Luka, the largest city in the RS. Both institutes operate at universities, the University of Sarajevo and the University of Banja Luka. These are the two largest public universities in BiH. With their establishment in 2015, that is, in 2017, cultural cooperation gains in content value and takes on more significant outlines. (Stević, 2020). In addition to language learning on different bases (for children, for adults, business...), Confucius Institutes organize different types of cultural events such as exhibitions, concerts, calligraphy and taiji courses. As for higher education, at the University of East Sarajevo there is a department for Chinese and English language and literature within the Faculty of Philosophy (Filozofski fakultet, 2022). It is currently the only scientific and educational institution in BiH where one can study the Chinese language. Also, at the University of Mostar, Chinese language courses were opened for all students as well as teaching staff, and the ambassador of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina visited the University and gave a lecture to the students there, encouraging them to learn the Chinese language (Sveučilište u Mostaru, 2022). Last but not least, in Trebinje, a city in the very south of Herzegovina in the RS entity, city which is located only 20 kilometers from the border with Croatia, the PRC embassy supported the opening of the first cultural center in BiH, a small space within the city library, in which he will, according to the plan, the learning of the Chinese language will also be organized (Srna, 2021)

In addition to these institutions, the "Bosnian-Chinese Friendship" Association also operates in BiH. Association acts as a kind of platform for cooperation in the broadest cultural sphere of the two countries. At the invitation of the Association, journalists and academic workers visited BiH, and the Association is also participate in various manifestations in China. One of the Association's most current projects is the "Coffee and Tea" Forum, which brought together representatives of the academic and diplomatic community and intellectuals who deal with China in their public activities or are interested in Chinese topics. "Coffee and Tea" is a symbolic name that the organizer of the forum wanted to use to emphasize the similarities and reasons that exist between European countries, including BiH, and China, but which can sit at the same table and discuss topics of common interest and importance. The special guest of the First Forum "Coffee and Tea" was the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Bosnia and Herzegovina Ji Ping, who spoke about the issue of Taiwan in front of the gathered

representatives of the intellectual and diplomatic community (Boskin, 2022).

The Center for the Promotion and Development of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, a think-tank that, as its name suggests, is primarily related to this multilateral initiative that originated in China and has spread to almost the entire world, also operates originally in BiH. The Center is active in the organization of various scientific and expert conferences in which multidisciplinary discussions are held on various aspects of the Initiative, and it is especially active in the field of media. Namely, the Center is the publisher of the magazine "Voice of China", the first Chinese magazine in the languages of the South-Slavic peoples. The magazine was launched at the end of 2020, and combines author's and editorial texts with translations of the most important topics from the Chinese media. Each issue that comes out periodically has a specific theme as a guiding thread, and the content covers topics from politics, economy, society, science and technology, ecology, culture, entertainment, sports, etc. (Pojas i put, 2020)

When it comes to media cooperation, in addition to the "Voice of China" magazine, it is worth noting several other projects that are essential. There is, first of all, the cooperation between the Public Service of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia-Herzegovina Radio-Television - BRT) and Beijing Radio-Television (BRTV). For three years now, in three seasons, BHRT has been broadcasting the series "Charming Beijing" produced by BRTV for the foreign market. Over a hundred episodes about modern Beijing were broadcast on BHRT. Using modern documentary language, the series explores and presents images and stories about the modern Chinese capital, interesting depictions of the Beijing citizens, their culture, fashion, history, technological innovations... As stated in the announcement of one of the seasons, "viewers can expect an exciting journey through modern Beijing, whose residents are living the 'Chinese dream' of rejuvenating the nation, which was contributed to by decades of strong development and opening to the world." At the same time, Beijing is a living story about China in the twentieth century, as well as about thousands of years of Chinese civilization. By getting to know Beijing and the Beijing lifestyle, viewers will get a clearer picture of today's China". The cooperation between BHRT and BRTV is one of the longest-standing cooperations of a Chinese television in this part of Europe (BHRT, 2020).

In addition to this program, which is broadcast on the public service at the state level, numerous public television stations in Bosnia and Herzegovina broadcast various types of programs about China, including the Radio-television of the RS (RTRS), the Public Institution "Television Sarajevo" (TVSA), and television stations in Una-Sana, Tuzla, Zenica-Doboj and Bosnia-Podrinje cantons (mid-level units in Federation of BiH). The series that were broadcast concerned Chinese diplomacy and the

celebration of the Chinese New Year (RTVUSK, 2020).

Finally, and not least, the New China News Agency - Xinhua has a representative office in BiH, which cooperates with public news agencies in BiH (Federation News Agency – Fena and Serbian News Agency - Srna), as well as with other media in BiH. Xinhua covers the most significant events happening in BiH, especially those related to China, whether it is about infrastructure projects or the promotion of Chinese culture in BiH (Xinhua, 2022)

Healthcare

In addition to the construction of the hospital in Doboje, activities in the health sector increased significantly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, first of all, refers to donations and purchases of medical equipment from China for BiH before the development of vaccines, and the donation and commercial procurement of vaccines. China sent aid in the form of medical masks, PRC tests and other medical equipment through the PRC Embassy but also through other Chinese non-governmental institutions and state-owned companies, which was recognized by the state authorities of BiH as aid. In particular, the help sent from their pocket money by the children from the Wuxi choir, who previously stayed in Sarajevo in the pre-pandemic period and then had an interesting collaboration with the "Princess Donut" choir from Sarajevo, should be highlighted (Faktor, 2020).

In the chaotic time of the beginning of the corona virus, the Government of the Federation of BiH purchased a hundred respirators from China company, but the whole case got its judicial dimension due to suspicions that during the process, laws such as the one on public procurement were violated, that is, that a private company was favored, then that ventilators that were purchased do not correspond to hospital treatment and that the ventilators as such were overpaid, which, again, raises suspicions of corruption. The prime minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Fadil Novalic, as well as the then director of the Civil Protection of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Fahrudin Solak, and the owner of the company "Srebrena Malina" Fikret Hodzic through which the respirators were purchased from China, are also on the dock of the BiH Court (Hercegovina, 2022).

After companies around the world started producing vaccines against the COVID-19, entity governments, through their institutions responsible for public health, procured vaccines for BiH citizens. What must be said is that there was a dominant opinion among the public of the Federation of BiH that a vaccine produced "in the West" should be obtained, while Chinese vaccines were somewhat in behind. On the other hand, the Government of RS managed to acquire Chinese vaccines

in a relatively short period of time, which was the first contingent of vaccines that arrived in this entity (Vlada RS, 2021). After the failure in the procurement of "western" vaccines, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina also opted for Chinese vaccines. (Vlada FBiH, 2021). In all this, we should not forget that the PRC through the Embassy in BiH provided a significant donation of vaccines before the commercial contract was concluded in FBiH (Zorlak, 2021).

Also, when it comes to donations, the People's Republic of China has recently provided significant donations in agricultural machinery and equipment and engineering means for the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Slobodna Evropa, 2021).

Where and how next?

When we talk about future projections, it is necessary to calculate various external and internal variables into the overall equation. External ones refer to those factors that BiH and China cannot influence because they are global trends, some of which are more objective and some more subjective. Here we talk about (a) how the world will deal with the pandemic in the near future, then (b) about the development of the conflict in Ukraine and its desired end, and related to it, (c) the intensification of the conflict between the West and China, where by "the West" we mean the United States and Europe Union. The internal factors that should be included in the equation are more directly related to BiH and China, the relationship between the two countries and the internal characteristics of that relationship or the characteristics of one of the two subjects that is important for that relationship. Here, above all, we are thinking of the (i) bureaucracy and undercapacity of BiH as a state, (ii) the diversity of legal systems and business cultures in the two countries whose relationship we are observing, (iii) the geographical and cultural distance, which is also supported by the language barrier. In the end, we should also mention one phenomenon that combines the elements of external and internal variables in a specific way, namely negative campaigns in the media on China's presence and work in BiH.

In 2019, the tourism cooperation between BiH and China recorded fantastic results. The visa-free regime between the two countries began to produce results and the small BiH recorded the number of tourists from China whose number exceeded one hundred thousand for the first time in history (Boric, 2020). Then epidemic started, and everything stopped. Although the news about the epidemic after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was pushed to the second and even the third plan in BiH and Europe in general, it is evident that the coronavirus is still among people, and, as things stand, it will not go away, in the sense that it will not be eradicated but will decrease over time to the extent of a common cold. Nevertheless, without pretending to be the experts in the field of

epidemiology, the fact is that China still insists on zero tolerance regarding COVID-19 epidemic, which still means mandatory quarantine when entering China. This has a strong impact on China's tourism potential, and as long as this is the case, BiH cannot return to the track it was on before the epidemic. Of course, other interpersonal relationships also suffer because of this: for example, today it is impossible to get on a plane from Beijing to Sarajevo (with a layover) and be at an urgent business meeting within 24 hours. Of course, online platforms and communications have largely replaced personal contact, but personal contact still remains a common feature of the two business cultures, which will be discussed more later.

Ukraine is a new war on the European continent, probably not the last one that was believed not to happen. Without going into the analyzes of the behavior of the sides before the war, or even looking for the culprits of the war, the fact is that it led to the polarization of the European Union states towards Russia, and then to a deep crisis in the European Union itself because some states do not follow majority attitudes towards Russia, nor the attitudes of the joint administration in Brussels. Radical anti-Russian positions held by, for example, Poland or the Baltic countries, hardly have anything in common with the positions of one Hungary, to take only the most obvious example. It seems that we are only at the beginning of a deep crisis in the EU, which is already spilling over to BiH, which as a country aspiring for EU membership should harmonize its foreign policy with that of the EU. To a certain extent, BiH follows the course that Brussels forms towards Moscow, but what will happen if Brussels is not united either, especially when the consequences of the energy crisis are felt more strongly? And let's not mention the internal cleavages in BiH on the pro-Russian and pro-Western political forces that, by force of circumstances and in a specific power share, must hold the authorities jointly.

Due to its attitude, which is characterized by a significant part of Western political elites as pro-Putin or at least, ambivalent, China is included as a part of the East with which Europe and the EU do not share common values. On one side are Washington, London, Brussels and Kiev, and on the other Moscow, Minsk and Beijing, says that dubious and oversimplifying ideological scheme. But it exists, and it will be more and more present as the war in Ukraine progresses, and the consequences become more and more obvious for the common man. Simply, there will be a perception that Moscow could have been forced to retreat in Ukraine if Beijing had not offered it a saving hand. It is a general picture in which the official Sarajevo, even before Budapest, can be asked to choose a side more clearly. This could be the outcome desired by a part of the political elites, a more or less open conflict of the East led by China (not Russia), with the West led by the USA, and a division on the issue of values and, let's say, a different understanding of basic concepts and concepts such as democracy and

human rights.

Even if the world's problems with the pandemic and wars and choosing sides were miraculously overcome, the problems that we have already called internal and concern the structure and dynamics of relations between China and BiH remain. There are several obstacles to optimism here. One China shares with other countries present in BiH, namely the undercapacity of the BiH state and the sluggishness of its administration in terms of responding to various demands. Let us take for example the already mentioned project of construction of Block 7 in the city Tuzla, for which the investor signed an annex to the basic contract with the contractor in 2016, and the Parliament of the FBiH approved that contract along with some other important documents such as the approval of the loan guarantee only in 2019, and the Council Ministers of BiH sent the necessary letter to Exim Bank only in 2020. Although part of the blame may lie in political disagreements that often block all processes in BiH, here we are also talking about the undercapacity of the state and state apparatus, because in the Parliament of the Federation of BiH, contracts related to Block 7 received almost unanimous support. When projects that have such support turn out to be disastrous due to multi-year procedures, what can we expect from those projects that will have loud critics?

Part of the misunderstanding that occurs when two business or social entities meet, whether state-owned or privately owned, can (and do) originate from different legal characteristics and business cultures. The legal system of BiH is among the most complicated in the world, and many person from BiH can get lost in it. What to expect from foreigners from a distant countries and different legal system such China is. Divided responsibilities between different levels of government and different interpretations of the same rules (two lawyers - three legal opinions, says a Bosnian proverb) are not conducive to quality cooperation. In addition, given the role of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the PRC, in business culture the Chinese side may get the wrong impression that politics in BiH can *by default* help better business. Unfortunately, due to the multitude of political parties with different political goals and often interests when it comes to specific projects, politics can be more of a hindrance than a help in dealings even with public companies and projects of state importance.

Furthermore, the very small number of Chinese who speak official languages in BiH, as well as the very small number of BiH citizens who speak Mandarin, is also an item that does not contribute to the deepening of business ties and the reduction of the legal and business-cultural gap that exists. Combined with the geographical distance that was a problem even before the epidemic, the language barrier represented a significant obstacle.

In the end, every project that the Chinese do, especially in infrastructure and energy, is followed by negative media campaigns. There is talk of "Chinese influence in BiH", which *a priori* is presented as something negative for BiH (Fokus, 2022). Also, in a flurry of logical gibberish, it is mentioned that the goal of Chinese companies is not to do business, but to "enter BiH" and then do "even bigger projects" (Zurnal, 2022). The media also state that hardly any project in the Balkans connected with the Chinese is "without controversy" and that "China takes over metallurgy, mining, energy and transport, and most of these projects are accompanied by allegations of corruption, exploitation and environmental damage" (Detektor, 2021).

One text talks about "colonization" and "economic slavery" that threatens the Balkan states, including BiH (Dedic, 2021).

In one text that talks about Chinese projects in BiH, we note the opening paragraph, an emblematic example of a discourse that tries to impose itself as normal, that it is necessary to transfer it here in its entirety: "Having in mind the Chinese reputation regarding capital, which is corrosive, and that their sources of financing transparency and responsibility are lacking, which is understandable because all finances originate from an authoritarian regime, it is clear that China through its companies somehow buys the favor of certain BiH politicians who favor them in posing natural resources. Already tomorrow it can be used as a means of influence in making political decisions in favor of the Chinese and their interests in BiH" (Degrimendzic, 2022).

Behind most of these texts is a campaign financed from sources outside BiH. A whole network of portals has been created that share "research" texts among themselves. As a rule, they try to impose the perception that the mere presence of a Chinese company is a sign of corruption and/or hidden intentions to achieve the political influence that Beijing has as an agenda in the Balkans (Vukic, 2022). It is not difficult to assess whose interests are behind such a narrative. It is an orientalist discourse that is full of stereotypes of corrupt, ugly, dirty and evil Chinese who come to steal *our* natural resources. They come to enslave and rob us, and in this they have the help of domestic traitors and corrupt elites. Considering the general and ongoing collapse of the media, which is irreversibly plunging into a spiral of mediocrity, and the generally low literacy and even lower critical awareness of the broad masses to whom the media addresses with this kind of content, the *deafening anti-Chinese noise* to some extent is yielding results. The continuation of this anti-Chinese campaign should be seriously counted on.

Conclusion

When all the projects and activities are collected in one place, one could get the impression that the cooperation between the two countries is at a high level. However, we appreciate that the impression is wrong. Foreign direct investment (FDA) coming from China basically does not exist (Boric, 2020). Number of active projects involving Chinese in BiH barely exceeds a single digit number. The number of Chinese living in BiH is negligible compared to the entire population, as well as the number of BiH citizens who speak Chinese or work with Chinese companies in any way (import, export, contracts, etc.). This is the result of a combination of internal and external factors that we talked about in this text.

How is it possible to fix the situation? There are several proposals that may sound like generalities rather than sophisticated *know-how*, but the intention of this text does not go in the direction of solving all existing problems in the relations between the two states. First of all, we appreciate that (1) more media content adapted to the European audience would be needed. It is necessary to establish appropriate channels of cooperation with both public and commercial television, which remains the number one media among the widest audience in BiH. As an aid to the marketing of media content, television can always use its channels on social networks in order to reach a younger audience that is relatively less burdened by oriental discourses that are marketed about China. One should certainly think about (2) new models and connections. Here we do not mean only online conferences with an official sign, but also different types of forums, short courses and introductory presentations on topics that interest different categories of people, from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to the application of new technologies. Institutions such as the Confucius Institutes and the Bosnia-China Friendship Association can be involved with official institutions in BiH and China in the organization of the Chinese Culture Day in BiH and *vice versa*, where the promotion of gastronomy, music and other content that is receptive and challenging could be organized in interested local communities. Local communities (3) natural beauty and investment opportunities can be presented at such offline events. All this could lead to healthy relationships that are not burdened by ideological or any other prejudices.

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