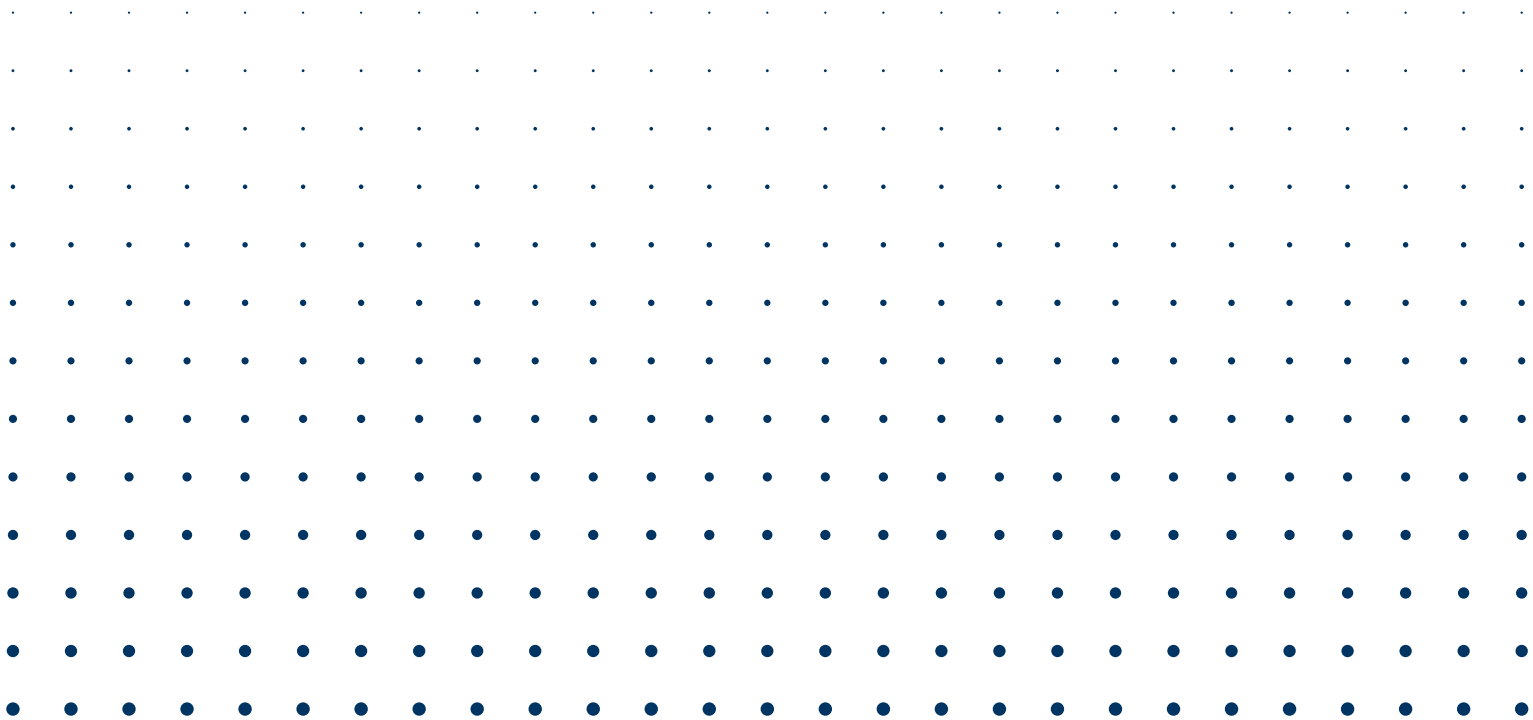
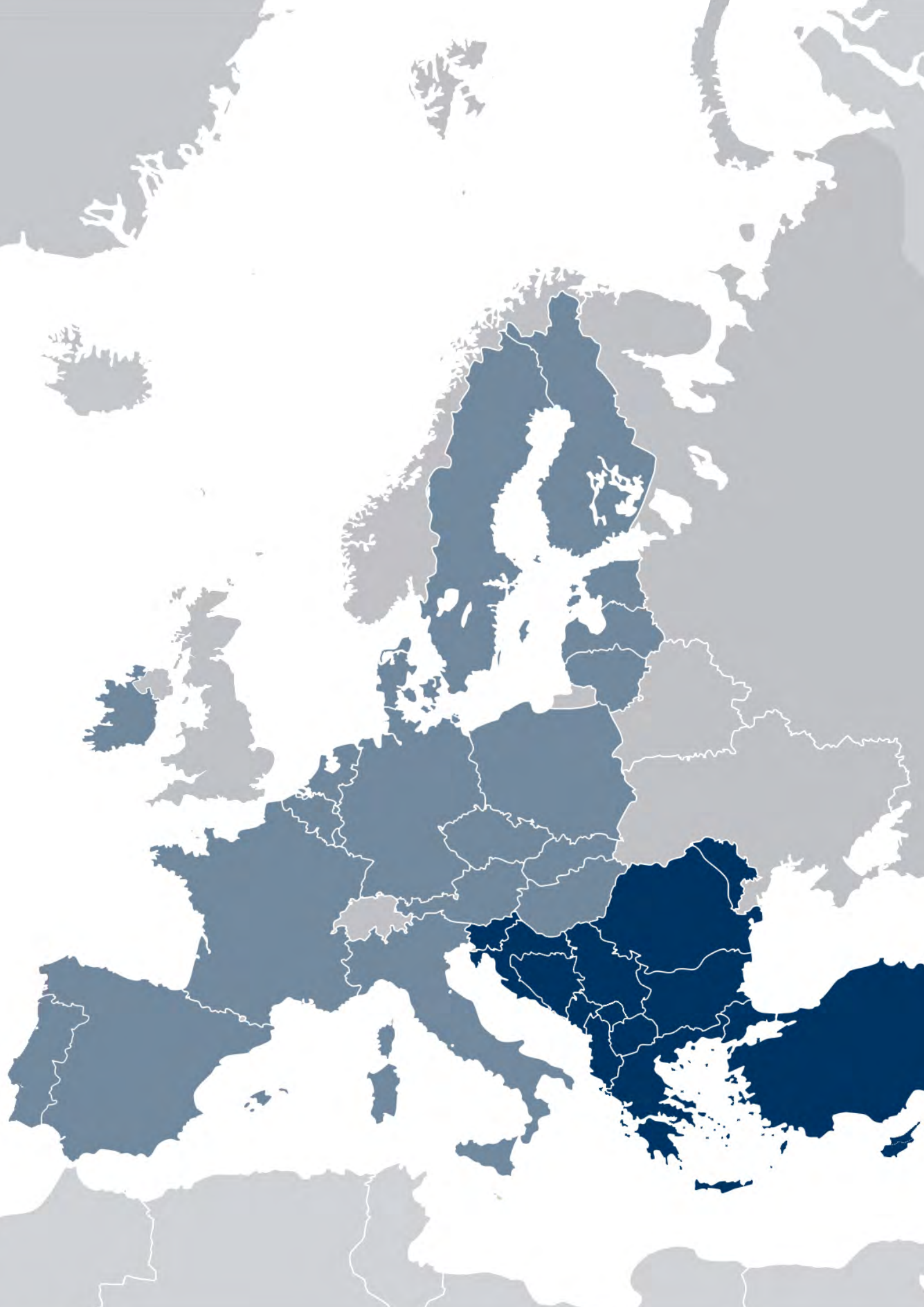




Plamen Tonchev

China's Soft Power in Southeast Europe





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Sarajevo 2020

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Executive Summary

- **Beijing's Soft-power Toolkit in Southeast Europe:** China does not seem to have a regional soft-power strategy and prefers bilateral relations with SEE countries. Institutional ties take the shape of Friendship Associations, business bodies or twinning agreements which, however, rarely live up to expectations. Scientific cooperation between numerous universities and think-tanks is of dubious quality to date and there are relatively few scholarships granted to SEE beneficiaries. Confucius Institutes and Classrooms as well as Chinese cultural centres are mushrooming across the region, though the precise number of beneficiaries is hard to verify. History is a key component of China's cultural diplomacy, but modern Chinese culture is not popular in the region. Beijing seeks to influence the media sector in several formal and less formal ways. Yet, a number of negative reports in the regional media reveal controversial contracts awarded to Chinese companies, if not outright corruption.
- **Attainment of Beijing's Objectives:** It can be inferred from the few available sources that China remains rather popular in Southeast Europe, in contrast to the increasingly acrimonious mood in other parts of the EU. At the same time, China's presence is examined in light of its complementarity to the euroatlantic aspirations of SEE nations. While the key driver of Beijing's clout in Southeast Europe is the expectation that China can help the region catch up with advanced European economies, the 17+1 platform is not well-known and the impact of the much-touted Belt and Road Initiative is not seen as being significant.
- **What Else May Be Needed in View of Future Research into China's Soft Power in the Region?** The list of possible tasks ahead includes systematic research into the long-term impact of activities undertaken by Confucius Institute and Classrooms, as well as cooperation between Chinese and national news agencies. Eurobarometer and Balkan Barometer surveys should include questions about Chinese presence in the region. Just as importantly, China's image in the region should be correlated to the degree of the EU's appeal to SEE nations.

1

Introduction

China's growing presence in Southeast Europe (SEE) has not remained unnoticed and is causing an intense debate on the nature of its influence. This paper aims to answer three key questions: What shape and form does Beijing's soft power projection take in the region? Secondly, to what extent do China's soft power efforts help it attain its objectives in Southeast Europe? Thirdly, what else may be needed in view of future research into China's soft power in the region?

The notion of 'soft co-optive power', introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990, refers to 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment'.¹ A country obtains its soft power mainly from three resources: its culture as well as its political values and foreign policies - when they are seen as being legitimate and commanding moral authority.² What is gauged here is Beijing's capability to persuade Southeast European partners to cooperate, thanks to the attractiveness of China's culture and values, international prestige and, ultimately, the country's image as a desirable partner. At the same time, there is a fine line between soft and hard power that should be kept in mind. China's trade with and investment capital provided to Southeast European nations obviously contribute to the country's reputation in the region, but in reality the Asian giant's economic prowess is in-between the realms of hard and soft power.

It was in 2007 that then-president Hu Jintao spoke about investment in China's soft power, and the current leader Xi Jinping repeated the same message in 2014.³ In an attempt to improve perceptions of China, Beijing has launched a major public relations drive in recent years, investing considerable amounts of money in bolstering its soft power around the world. There are estimates that in 2015 China must have spent roughly \$10 billion a year on *waixuan* or its 'external propaganda' apparatus.⁴ By comparison, the US spent less than \$700 million on public diplomacy in 2014.⁵

The rationale behind China's soft-power strategy is of particular interest: Beijing's official pronouncements persistently promote the image of a benign power seeking 'win-win' cooperation with all the countries within a globalised economy. Yet, some scholars have identified a significant discrepancy between China's internal policy discussions and the discourse delivered internationally. The tendency in China is to emphasize the country's national interest and the focus appears to be on gains in the international arena rather than 'win-win' outcomes. There is a record of publications by Chinese analysts and think-tanks that prioritise economic diplomacy (*jingji waijiao*) as a tool to enhance China's national economic se-

1 Nye, J. (1990) Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), p. 166,168. www.jstor.org/stable/1148580.

2 Joseph S. Nye , 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power', *Project Syndicate*, 10 July 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-07?barrier=accesspaylog>.

3 Joseph S. Nye , 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power', *Project Syndicate*, 10 July 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-07?barrier=accesspaylog>.

4 Anne Marie Brady, 'China's Foreign Propaganda Machine', *Wilson Center*, 26 October 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine>.

5 David Shambaugh, 'China's Soft-Power Push', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push>.

curity (*guojia jingji anquan*). In this sense, China's policy discourse is at odds with the official 'charm offensive' overseas.⁶

providing an initial impetus and serving as an empirical preamble to a more rigorous analysis in the future.

Methodological Note

This paper covers 11 countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in the Western Balkans (WB) as well as six EU member states, namely Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. Although Kosovo is also a member of the WB-6 group, it is not recognised by China and is therefore excluded from this research.

The set of indicators used here is by no means exhaustive nor does it constitute an authoritative analytical model. Their selection is partly driven by the availability of relevant information, which is scattered around in Southeast Europe. The key indicators relate to forms of institutional engagement at regional, national and sub-national levels; scientific cooperation; education and Chinese culture (both ancient and modern); the role of the media; China's image in the SEE region. Data have been drawn from three main types of sources: responses to specific questionnaires, interviews with beneficiaries, and reports and news items available on the web. Particular attention has been paid to Chinese sources, so that the rationale behind Beijing soft-power push is duly gauged and understood as much as possible. At the same time, due to a lack of resources the research did not cover some powerful social media, such as Instagram and YouTube.

While China's image is often assessed on a global scale⁷, its performance in Southeast Europe is less systematically recorded and analysed. The subjective nature of 'reputation' makes comparison across countries difficult by default. Furthermore, a significant limitation this research came across is the sketchy evidence of China's image in the Western Balkans. For instance, while the Pew Research Center operates globally, there are no related surveys carried out across the WB sub-region. Verifiable data drawn from independent surveys are seldom available. Some of the qualitative evidence was obtained through interviews or analyses produced by local consultants. Therefore, given the above limitations, this paper is merely an attempt at

6 Jeremy Garlick (2019), China's Economic Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case of Offensive Mercantilism?, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71:8, 1390-1414, <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/YIT4KCFJN4SKCJZVUHFF/full?target=10.1080/09668136.2019.1648764>.

7 <https://softpower30.com/country/china/>.

2

China's Soft-Power Toolkit in Southeast Europe

2.1 Formal Institutional Engagement

China does not seem to have a region-wide soft-power strategy for Southeast Europe. Rather, related activities are incorporated into the 16+1 (now 17+1) platform⁸, also known as the China and Central/Eastern European countries (CEEC) format. In parallel, Beijing promotes its relations with SEE partners on a bilateral basis. Under the first strand of this two-pronged approach, Beijing tries to make sure that nearly all the SEE countries host or are about to host a collective CEEC institution (Figure 1).

As has been aptly pointed out, China uses regional appellations to increase the Belt and Road In-

itiative (BRI) outreach, but in practice it prefers contractual bilateral relations.⁹ This is why it is mostly on this level that China engages with SEE countries, as illustrated by a long list of bilateral agreements and MoUs. Of all the CEECs, Greece and Serbia stand out as China's closest allies in the region, as they have had a comprehensive strategic partnership with Beijing since 2006 and 2009, respectively.

8 Greece joined 16+1 in April 2019.

9 Emilian Kavalski, 'China in Central and Eastern Europe: the unintended effects of identity narratives', *Asia Europe Journal*, Springer, vol. 17(4), pages 403–419.

10 Serbia has also been considered as a host to the secretariat of a prospective China-CEEC Association on Transport and Infrastructure Cooperation. <http://critcom.councilforeuropean-studies.org/161-framework-and-economic-relations-between-china-and-ceed/>.

11 Decided at the 17+1 Dubrovnik summit in April 2019.

12 Discussed at the 17+1 Dubrovnik summit in April 2019.

Figure 1: Beijing tries to make sure that nearly all the SEE countries host or are about to host a collective CEEC institution

Country	CEEC Structure
Serbia	China-CEEC Secretariat of the Higher Education Institutions Consortium ¹⁰
BiH	China-CEEC Veterinary Research Center
Montenegro	China-CEEC Environmental Protection Cooperation Mechanism
North Macedonia	China-CEEC Cultural Cooperation and Coordination Centre
Slovenia	China-CEEC Forestry Cooperation Union
Bulgaria	China-CEEC Association for the Promotion of Agriculture
Romania	China-CEEC Center for Dialogue and Cooperation on Energy Projects
Albania	China-CEEC Youth Development Center ¹¹
Croatia	China-CEEC Information and Communication Technology Coordination Mechanism ¹²

Serbia has attracted the largest amount of Chinese funding not only in Southeast Europe, but across the entire CEEC area. Four of the eight 17+1 summits held to date have been hosted by Romania (2013), Serbia (2014), Bulgaria (2018) and Croatia (2019).

The establishment of Friendship Associations in all the SEE countries is an omnipresent form of bilateral relations, though the volume and nature of their activities differ quite a bit. For instance, the Association of Bosnian-Chinese Friendship¹³ is very active and, in addition, there is a Centre for the Promotion and Development of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁴ There is a Romanian-Chinese House with over 1,000 members and 12 branches across the country.¹⁵ In Bulgaria, there has been a Bulgarian-Chinese Friendship Federation established as early as 1994 which, however, does not have a web site and is not really active. At the same time, there are no fewer than four bilateral business entities in the country: a Business Development Association, a Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a Chamber for Industrial Development and an Association on Trade and Investments. In other words, trade and investment clearly overshadow Bulgarian-Chinese cultural ties. In some cases, the Friendship Associations may branch out into spin-off bodies: thus, the Albanian-Chinese Friendship Association (*Shoqata e Miqësisë Shqipëri-Kinë*), founded in 2011, established an Albanian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce a year later.¹⁶

There are many state officials in these bodies, even if they may be non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – nominally, at least. For instance, in Romania there is a Silk Road Community Building Initiative, which centers on ‘cultural and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in areas concerning people’s livelihood’.¹⁷ Officially, the initiative was launched by the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) at the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in April 2019. However, this seemingly non-governmental organisation appears to be closely linked to the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party, one of the principle bodies involved in China’s overseas influence activities.¹⁸

13 <http://www.boskin.ba/>.

14 <http://pojasiput.ba/>.

15 <https://www.casaromanochineza.ro/despre-2/>.

16 <https://dhtshk.al/>.

17 ‘New move to promote BRI cooperation in Romania’, *Xinhua Silk Road Information Service*, 24 September 2019, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/308520.html>.

18 David Bandurski, ‘Untangling People-to-People Ties’, *Echo-wall*, 21 October 2019, <https://www.echo-wall.eu/guanxi-matters/untangling-people-people-ties>.

Another form of bilateral engagement, at sub-national level, is twinning between cities and provinces. However, the legal and practical value of this format is difficult to establish, as related documents vary from twinning agreements and memorandums of understanding (or cooperation or friendship) to protocols, letters of intent, friendship contracts, etc. Feedback from SEE interlocutors suggests that twinning agreements with Chinese partners are rarely followed through: the initial enthusiasm after signing ceremonies quickly evaporates and in most cases commitments are only valid on paper. In Bulgaria, there are no fewer than 27 twinning agreements, though it is unclear whether cooperation has got past the signature stage. As of April 2008, there were 24 twinings in Romania¹⁹ and since then their number has most probably gone up.

2.2 Scientific Cooperation

There is a very long list of direct cooperation agreements signed by Chinese and SEE universities. However, on many occasions the outcomes of scientific exchange are seen by interlocutors contacted through this research as being unsatisfactory, e.g. some university rectors in Bulgaria look at these forms of cooperation with growing distrust and qualify related visits as a form of ‘academic tourism’. Occasionally, cooperation is regulated by national authorities. Thus, there are open calls for scientific bilateral projects in North Macedonia once every two years²⁰, and the Ministry of Education and Science publishes annual calls for scholarships at bachelor, master or doctoral level.²¹ Interestingly, in some cases SEE universities are used as ‘entry points’ by Chinese companies. For instance, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University has opened an office at the Bulgarian-Chinese Centre hosted by the University of National and World Economy in Sofia and Huawei is running an IT literacy programme at public schools.²²

Another form of scientific cooperation promoted by China relates to think-tanks and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attaches great significance to this. Think tanks ‘with Chinese char-

19 List available here: <http://romanian.cri.cn/381/2009/08/26/1s100072.htm>.

20 <http://www.mon.gov.mk/index.php/konkursi/2824-2020-2021-13-09-2020>.

21 <http://www.mon.gov.mk/index.php/2014-07-23-14-03-24/vesti-i-nastani/1714-2017-2023>.

22 Rumena Filipova, ‘Chinese Influence in Bulgaria: Knocking on a Wide Open Door?’, *CHOICE*, 8 September 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/chinese-influence-in-bulgaria-knocking-on-a-wide-open-door/>.

acteristics' are seen as an 'important carrier of national soft power', which 'have an irreplaceable role in international relations' and establishing 'a fine image of Socialist China' through strengthening the 'country's international influence and international discourse power'.²³ In fact, this goal is very similar to that of the Confucius Institutes, on the basis of the concept that culture and education are part of China's *waixuan*. It is along these lines that China promotes the 17+1 Think-Tank Network, headquartered in Beijing and run by the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences (CASS). The pinnacle of this CASS campaign is the China-CEE Institute set up in Budapest, though it is not very visible in the SEE region.

2.3 Culture and Education

Culture and education are centrepieces of the governance strategy of the Communist Party of China. In 2009, the development of a culture industry was elevated to a sectoral policy.²⁴ This drive has been

23 'CCP General Office and State Council General Office Opinions concerning strengthening the construction of new types of think-tanks with Chinese characteristics', China Copyright and Media, 21 January 2015, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/ccp-general-office-and-state-council-general-office-opinions-concerning-strengthening-the-construction-of-new-types-of-think-tanks-with-chinese-characteristics/>.

24 Sebastian Heilmann and Lea Shih, 'The Rise of Industrial Poli-

cy in China, 1978–2012', Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series, p. 5.

25 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Addressing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities, Briefing Paper IV: External Influence in the Cultural and Religious Sphere', *Prague Security Studies Institute*, p. 14, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/635_briefing-paper-4-external-influence-in-the-cultural-religious-sphere.pdf.

2.3.1 Confucius Institutes

As a key tool of China's cultural diplomacy, Confucius Institutes (CIs) are tasked with upholding Beijing's positive image worldwide, and are part and parcel of Beijing's large-scale effort to construct an efficient overseas communication infrastructure. CIs are invariably set up at higher educational institutions in Southeast Europe. Typically, these structures provide courses in Chinese culture and language, and often host public events on China-related political, social and economic issues. CIs are administered by Hanban, which is part of the Ministry of Education of China. Hanban pays for operational costs of CIs, selects textbooks, recruits Chinese language teachers and sends them abroad. At present, there are 19 CIs in Southeast Europe,

Figure 2: Confucius Institutes in Southeast Europe

Country	CEEC Structure
Romania	Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca; Transilvania University, Braşov; Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu; University of Bucharest
Greece	Athens University of Economics and Business; Aristotle University, Thessaloniki; University of Thessalia, Larissa*
Serbia	University of Belgrade; University of Novi Sad
Bulgaria	Sofia University; University of Veliko Turnovo
Albania	University of Tirana
BiH	University of Sarajevo; University of Banja Luka
North Macedonia	University of Skopje
Montenegro	University of Podgorica
Croatia	University of Zagreb
Slovenia	University of Ljubljana
Cyprus	University of Cyprus

* Yet to be established.

with Romania hosting four, Greece three, and Serbia, BiH and Bulgaria two each (Figure 2). However, not all the CIs are equally active; one of them, the Banja Luka CI, is very active, but does not appear on the Hanban website.

Notably, there is the practice of the so-called 'teaching points'. These are free language classes for civil servants delivered within the premises of their institutions, as it is more convenient for people to attend language classes during or immediately after working hours, rather than rushing to a specific location. Apparently, other language providers, such as *l'Institut Français*, the *Goethe Institut*, the *Instituto Cervantes* and the *British Council*, have a similar open-door policy.

It is worth noting that the network of CI 'teaching points' in North Macedonia covers key government institutions, such as the General Secretariat, the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Interior, the Secretariat for European Affairs and government agencies. Reportedly, some 100 government officials and civil servants are currently studying Chinese. This initiative departs from the usual mandate of CIs and shows that Chinese authorities are targeting the higher echelon of political power in the country. At the same time, Hanban launches Confucius Institute Scholarships for those learning Chinese language, who are given the chance to visit China – once again, North Macedonia is a case in point.²⁶

The exact number of Confucius Institute beneficiaries in the SEE region is hard to establish. According to the Xinhua news agency, in 2018 over 10,000 students in Romania were studying Chinese in four Confucius Institutes, ten Confucius Classrooms and over 130 Chinese 'teaching points'.²⁷ Chinese languages classes are offered in several Bulgarian universities and high schools; lately, various government institutions in the country have been organising Chinese language courses for public servants. Reportedly, more than 200 people study the Chinese language annually in N. Macedonia, either through the Confucius Centre or elsewhere.²⁸

26 <http://konfucij.ukim.edu.mk/?p=1909&lang=en>.

27 'Romanian students awarded Chinese Ambassador Scholarship', *Xinhua*, 14 May 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/14/c_137176381.htm.

28 'Cè повеќе Македонци сакаат да го изучуваат кинескиот јазик' (More and more Macedonians wish to learn the Chinese language), *Nova Makedonija*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/pecateni-izdanie/%D1%81%D1%90-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%9C%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D1%83%D1%87%D1%83/>.

2.3.2 Confucius Classrooms

In addition, China promotes the creation of Confucius Classrooms at primary and secondary schools (Figure 3). Recording the number of SEE schools that host Confucius Classrooms and the estimated total number of beneficiaries across the region would amount to a large-scale exercise, but it would also help assess the possible impact of this long-term 'investment' on the part of China and deserves to be undertaken in the future.

In cooperation with the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the government of Serbia has carried out a pilot project for the introduction of the Chinese language into 31 primary and secondary schools in the country.²⁹ This joint project started in 2012 and involved about 2,500 pupils in Serbia. It was evaluated in 2016, and one of the conclusions of a public debate organised by the PRC Embassy and the Confucius Institute was that the Chinese language could become an optional or mandatory subject in Serbian schools.³⁰

The administration of Republika Srpska in BiH has plans to roll out Chinese classes in schools, in concert with Hanban which provides Chinese language teachers.³¹ In Montenegro, Chinese language courses are offered at the University of Donja Gorica³² and in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools – not only in Podgorica, but in several other towns as well and around 700 students get enrolled annually.³³ Interestingly, a private school in Iași has made the Chinese language mandatory in its curriculum.³⁴

29 Sanja Zrnić, 'Kineski raj u srpskim učionicama', *Vreme*, broj 1107, 22 March 2012, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1042266>; 'Chinese language from Monday at 32 schools in Belgrade', *Blic*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/kineski-od-ponedeljka-u-32-skole-u-srbiji/z5f0clv>.

30 'In Belgrade Chinese language is learnt by almost 3,000 pupils and students', *RTS*, 7 October 2016, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/2480521/u-srbiji-kineski-jezik-uci-oko3000-djaka-i-studenata.html>; 'In Serbian schools English dominates but one language is tightly behind', *Blic*, 6 January 2017, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/u-srpskim-skolamadinira-ucenje-engleskog-ali-jos-jedan-jezik-muse-opasno/rk02he9>.

31 Danijel Kovacević, 'Bosnian Serbs to Sign Deal on Expanding Chinese Teaching', *BalkanInsight*, 13 June 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/13/bosnian-serbs-to-sign-deal-on-expanding-chinese-teaching/>.

32 'Raspored predavanja za strane jezike za zimski semestar', University of Donja Gorica, 2018/2019, https://www.udg.edu.me/cfl/files/download/1537714273_3740.pdf.

33 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Addressing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities, Briefing Paper IV: External Influence in the Cultural and Religious Sphere', *Prague Security Studies Institute*, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/635_briefing-paper-4-external-influence-in-the-cultural-religious-sphere.pdf, p. 17.

34 Andrei Mihai, 'Școala ieșeană care are în programa obligatorie limba chineză', *Ziaruldeiasi*, 8 February 2019, <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/stiri/scoala-iesean-care-are-in-programa-obligatorie-limba-chineza—211243.html>.

Figure 3: Inauguration of a Confucius Classroom at a secondary school in Sremski Karlovci, Serbia, November 2018



Source: Xinhua

2.3.3 Cultural Centres

Apart from the China-CEEC Cultural Cooperation and Coordination Centre in Skopje, there are three bilateral Chinese cultural centres at present – in Sofia, Bucharest and Athens. A large Chinese cultural centre is being constructed in Belgrade, at the site of the former Chinese embassy demolished during the 1999 NATO bombing (Figure 4). In Albania, a decision on the creation of a Chinese Cultural Centre was made by the government in July 2018.³⁵

It is noted that Beijing pays particular attention to promoting the culture of SEE countries in China as well, possibly as a way to ingratiate partners in the region. A Romanian Cultural Institute in Beijing opened in 2015.³⁶ In November 2018, a Serbian cultural centre 'Ivo Andrić' was inaugurated in Beijing, named after the renowned Nobel Prize winner for literature. While there is no Albanian cultural centre operating in China, a Centre of Albanology at the Beijing University opened in

2017.³⁷ The modern Greek language is reportedly included in the curriculum of several Chinese universities.

Scholarships have also been one of China's public diplomacy tools, though not to the extent that they are granted to beneficiaries in Africa or developing Asia. In Southeast Europe, China offers scholarships within limited national quotas and on a bilateral basis, not as a regional 'envelope'. By comparison, many European and other western countries (incl. Australia) announce scholarships for students and scientists from the whole region. For instance, there are annual bilateral agreements with Romania: In 2018–2019 the number of scholarships for Romanian students to study in China was 24 (for bachelor, Master and PhD students), plus five scholarships for summer schools organised in China. Beijing provides 24 scholarships per year for Romania under a bilateral protocol and offers several other scholarships as well.³⁸ It does not come as a surprise that of the SEE countries Serbia has

35 <http://ata.gov.al/2018/07/04/vendoset-themelimi-i-qendres-kulturore-te-kines-ne-shqiperi/>.

36 <https://www.icr.ro/cauta/ICR+Beijing>.

37 <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=139215>.

38 'Romanian students awarded Chinese Ambassador Scholarship', *Xinhua*, 14 May 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/14/c_137176381.htm.

Figure 4: Xi Jinping and Tomislav Nikolić, Presidents of China and Serbia, laying the foundations of the Chinese Cultural Centre in Belgrade, June 2016



Source: CCTV.com

the highest number of students on scholarships in China, namely 446 in 2017.³⁹

2.3.4 Festivals and Other Cultural Activities

Chinese embassies in Southeast Europe promote a flurry of cultural activities in the form of exhibitions, concerts and festivals. In BiH, for example, China has started organising celebrations on the Chinese New Year in Sarajevo⁴⁰, the Chinese day of Love in Banja Luka⁴¹ or a summer camp of Chinese language and culture for students from the country. For several years in a row, Montenegrin cities have hosted events and artistic performances, celebrating the Chinese New Year and the Spring Festival. In 2018, the Spring Festival took place at the National Theatre in Podgorica, hosted by the Chinese

39 <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1122566.shtml>.

40 'Kineska nova godina obilježena u Sarajevu uz bogat program i vatromet', *FENA news agency*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/kineska-nova-godina-obiljezena-u-sarajevuuz-bogat-program-i-vatromet/170118147>.

41 'Konfucijev institut/U Banjoj Luci proslavljen kineski dan zaljubljenih', *Radio Sarajevo*, August 18, 2018, October 16, 2018, <https://www.radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala/teme/u-banjoj-luci-proslavljen-kineski-danzaljubljenih/309868>.

Ambassador to Montenegro.⁴² A Chinese cultural festival was held in Larnaka, Cyprus, in September 2019, ahead of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.⁴³

2.3.5 History in China's Cultural Diplomacy

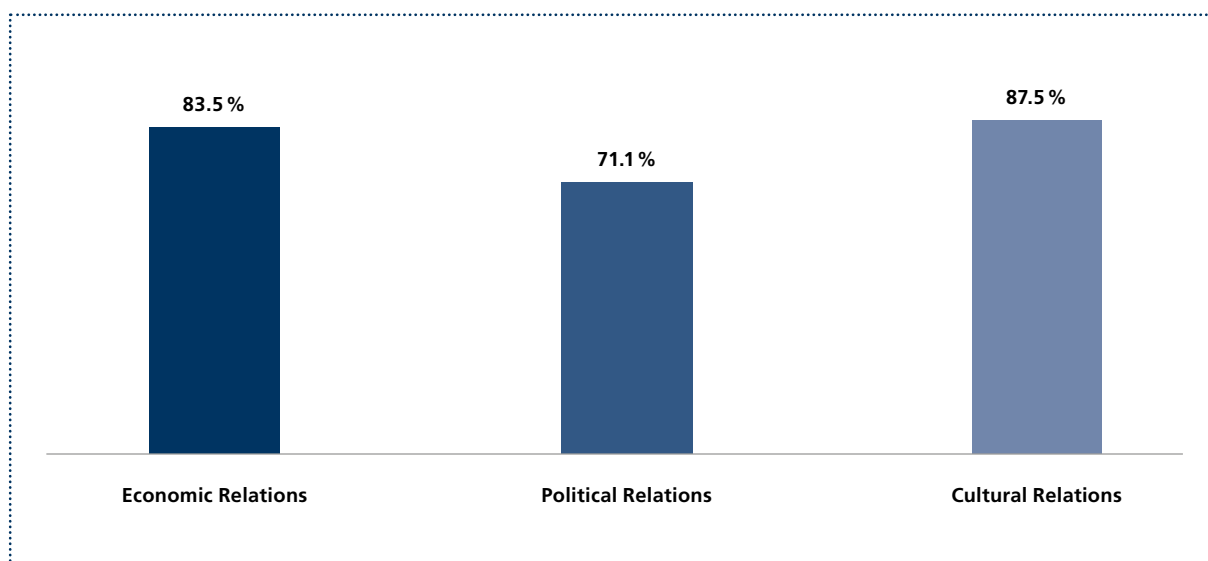
History is a steady motif in the cultural diplomacy of China, which is rightfully proud of its civilisation. It is a particularly pronounced feature of Beijing's soft-power strategy in the case of Greece. China promotes the idea of a close bond with Greece based on what is persistently touted as a shared sense of historical heritage.⁴⁴ Chinese decision-makers know that, despite obvious hype, frequent references to antiquity go down well with the Greek public. Indeed, nearly nine out of ten Greek respondents view positively the development of

42 'Pogledajte kako je bilo na proslavi Proljećnog festival', *Vijesti Online*, 5 February 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/pogledajte-kako-je-bilo-na-proslavi-proljećnog-festivala-974588>.

43 <https://in-cyprus.com/larnaca-chinese-cultural-festival/>.

44 Helena Smith, 'Xi Jinping comes to Greeks bearing gifts', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/12/xi-jinping-comes-to-greeks-bearing-gifts>.

Figure 5: Greeks in Support of Closer Relations with China
(Do you think that Greece should develop closer relations with China in the following areas?)



Source: GPO (December 2016)

closer cultural ties between their country and China (Figure 5). Although this attitude is based on a questionable perception of a cultural kinship between the two ancient civilisations, China is duly making the most of it. At Beijing's behest, in April 2017 Athens hosted the first Ministerial Conference of ten states invited to the so-called 'Ancient Civilizations Forum', more widely known as GC10.⁴⁵ By flattering the Greek side in the name of a fictitious relationship between the two glorious civilisations⁴⁶, China clearly instrumentalises cultural diplomacy for economic gains, e.g. maximising its profit from the strategically important investment in the Greek sea port of Piraeus and other projects in the country.

Intriguingly, however, it is not only Beijing that is trying to sell positive narratives anchored in history, but CEECs may also seek to curry favour with China for their individual specific aims.⁴⁷ While attempts to establish an age-old connection to China are often far-fetched, the instrumentalisation of history may have political ramifications and even lead to diplomatic incidents. Thus, Croatia has long insisted that Marco Polo was born on the small

island of Korčula in the Adriatic sea.⁴⁸ In 2011, Croatia's then president Stipe Mesić visited China and opened a Marco Polo museum in the city of Yangzhou, whose governor the 13th-century explorer is supposed to have been for a while.⁴⁹ In response to what was seed by Rome as hijacking of the Marco Polo narrative, the Italian foreign ministry called in the ambassadors of China and Croatia to seek clarifications. Because of this incident and in conjunction with a long-standing dispute over Istria, Italy even threatened to delay Croatia's accession to the EU. In the end, Croatia did join the EU, but insists on its Marco Polo narrative – prime minister Andrej Plenković reiterated it in Sofia in July 2018 in front of Chinese premier Li Keqiang.⁵⁰

Less controversially and half-jokingly, the Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borisov is on record referring to Dobromir, a well-known superhero from a children's comic book popular in the country in the early 1980s. According to the story, Dobromir was a 13th-century Bulgarian nobleman, who travelled to China, converted to Buddhism and became an expert in martial arts. Upon his return to Bulgaria, Dobromir almost single-handedly delayed the advance of the Ottoman army into the country.

45 Apart from Greece and China, the other countries represented at the conference were Bolivia, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Mexico and Peru. The second edition of this annual meeting took place in Bolivia in July 2018, 'Kotzias in Bolivia for Ancient Civilizations Forum', *Kathimerini*, 15 July 2015, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/230701/article/ekathimerini/news/kotzias-in-bolivia-for-ancient-civilizations-forum>.

46 Plamen Tonchev (ed), 'China's Image in Greece, 2008–2018', *Institute of International Economic Relations*, Athens, October 2018, p. 24, http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece_9-10-2018.pdf.

47 Emilian Kavalski, op. cit.

48 Olga Orlić, 'The curious case of Marco Polo from Korčula: An example of invented tradition', *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* (2013), 2, pp. 20–28.

49 Gian Antonio Stella, 'Croatia 'kidnaps' Marco Polo', *Corriere della Sera*, 22 April 2011, https://www.corriere.it/International/english/articoli/2011/04/22/stella-croatia-marco-polo.shtml?refresh_ce-cp.

50 Joint press conference at the end of the seventh 16+1 summit in Sofia on 7 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed2YIcVIsBA>

While this statement by Borisov was made in a humorous vein, it is also indicative of the efforts most SEE governments make to place their primarily economic relations with China in a broader, even if dubious, cultural context.⁵¹

2.4 Chinese Modern Culture

Apart from history, one may well look at modern culture, an oft-underappreciated soft-power tool, which China has not yet been able to use properly. Modern culture includes a wide array of crafts, performing arts and creative industries, but few of them are as influential as cinema.

2.4.1 Chinese Cinema as a Case Study

Awareness of Chinese cinema production is extremely limited in Southeast Europe. For instance, feedback from North Macedonia suggests that Jackie Chan movies used to be known in the past, but there is no additional knowledge of the Chinese cinema. Montenegrin interlocutors report that the best-known Chinese film in the country is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by the Taiwanese director Ang Lee (with institutions from mainland China partially involved in the production), which has been projected at festivals in the Western Balkans.⁵² Films directed by Wong Kar-Wai, a pivotal figure of Hong Kong cinema, are somewhat known in Romania, though not to the general public. Interestingly, the most successful Chinese blockbuster to date, grossing nearly \$900 million at the domestic box office, is *Wolf Warrior 2*. This is a 2017 action movie about a Chinese soldier on a special mission to an African country, where he saves innocent civilians and Chinese medical aid workers from vicious western mercenaries.⁵³ The film has not been shown in Southeast Europe due to strict control over distribution rights exercised by Chinese authorities. While *Wolf Warrior 2* conveys an undisguised nationalistic message, the fact that it was not projected in the SEE region can be seen as an opportunity missed by Beijing.

Chinese TV series are not doing any better in Southeast Europe, in a striking contrast to the suc-

cess of Turkish TV drama – over the past decade almost every television outlet in the Balkans has broadcast at least one Turkish TV drama.⁵⁴ But while Turkey is a neighbouring country and has long-established cultural links with the region, what really highlights the poor performance of Chinese modern culture is the appeal of another country from China's neighbourhood, South Korea.

The so-called K-Drama and K-Pop fever has spread on a global scale, the 2012 smash hit *Gangnam Style* being a prime example. South Korea's success can be attributed to the uninhibited creativity and unapologetically frivolous spirit of its artists, the exact opposite of the suffocating control exercised by Chinese authorities over pop culture. Unlike South Korean movies, Chinese films are seen as being dull and predictable, politically correct, glossed over, strictly toeing the CCP line and ultimately 'unwatchable'.⁵⁵ So, can China emulate Turkey's or South Korea's soft-power feat in Southeast Europe? Most probably not.

2.4.2 Regional Cinema

Faced with the lackluster performance of the Chinese cinema in Southeast Europe, Beijing has opted for an alternative strategy: film co-production with studios in the region. Thus, the Sarajevo Film Centre and Chinese film production companies have agreed to remake the Yugoslav 1969 war film *Most* (The Bridge)⁵⁶. An identical endeavour that is reportedly being discussed regards the 1972 movie *Valter Brani Sarajevo* (Walter Defends Sarajevo), Walter being the name of an anti-fascist hero in World War II.⁵⁷ Both films were known throughout China in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is even assumed that thanks to the latter movie, the number of Chinese visitors to BiH has increased lately.⁵⁸ Similarly, an entire generation of Chinese people grew up watching Albanian films until the late 1970s and is now a likely segment of Chinese tourist flows to Albania.⁵⁹

In Greece, the Chinese are eager to promote film co-production, starting from a blockbuster

51 Emilian Kavalski, 'China in Central and Eastern Europe: the unintended effects of identity narratives', *Asia Europe Journal*, Springer, vol. 17(4), pages 403-419.

52 <https://www.total-montenegro-news.com/travel/3079-chinese-culture-week>.

53 'Wolf Warrior 2: The nationalist action film storming China', *BBC News*, 4 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-40811952>.

54 'Turkish dramas shaping perceptions, history in the Balkans', *Ahval*, 19 June 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/neo-ottomanism/turkish-dramas-shaping-perceptions-history-balkans>.

55 Author's interview with a Greek beneficiary of the Athens Confucius Institute, 6 November 2019.

56 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074921/>.

57 <http://www.beijing.mfa.gov.rs/news.php>.

58 Mary Hui, 'China loves this obscure 1972 Yugoslavian movie — and Sarajevo is cashing in', *Quartz*, 13 April 2019, <https://qz.com/quartz/1589664/chinas-love-for-old-yugoslav-war-movie-fuels-balkan-tourism-boom/>.

59 <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=138465>.

about the large-scale evacuation of Chinese workers from Libya in 2011, with Greek commercial ships coming to their rescue.⁶⁰ In doing so, the Chinese studios may have been encouraged by the appeal, though mostly at home, of the action movie *Operation Red Sea* about the evaluation of Chinese nationals from war-torn Yemen in 2015. Reportedly, the one on Libya will be spiced up with a love story about a Chinese guy and a Cretan girl, so it may well look like a Sino-Greek repeat of the Hollywood blockbuster *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*.

2.5 Tourism and China's Soft Power

One of the components often included in analyses of China's soft power is tourism. Southeast European countries certainly vie for chunks of China's huge and ever-growing outbound tourism industry⁶¹ in the hope that this will contribute to their economic development.⁶² Visits to the Western Balkans, which are outside the EU, are facilitated by visa relaxation (in the case of BiH, Albania and Montenegro) or abolition altogether (Serbia). A visa-free regime is currently being discussed by China and North Macedonia. Conversely, EU member states in the SEE region cannot offer China a visa-free regime due to the constraints deriving from Schengen zone regulations.

Yet, it is argued in this paper that tourism should not be considered as part of China's soft-power toolkit. Given the expected revenue from the arrival of Chinese tourists in the region, this could well be seen as part of China's economic prowess and, therefore, an element of its hard power. Furthermore, precisely because China's outbound tourism is a huge industry, it can be used – and has been used – by Beijing as a pressure tool, e.g. in its relations with Taiwan and South Korea.⁶³

Not least of all, the growing numbers of Chinese tourists to Southeast Europe could be seen as a token of the soft power of the region, not China's. Greece attracts a large number of visitors from China thanks to its antiquities, while Croatia is also becoming very popular with Chinese tourists, not least because of Dubrovnik being one of the filming locations of the renowned TV series *Game of Thrones*. Romania, too, considers the renowned Bran Castle of Count Dracula part of its soft power. The Novak Café & Restaurant in Belgrade, owned by the world-famous tennis player Novak Djoković, is very popular with Chinese tourists visiting Serbia. Croatia's island of Korčula is clearly benefiting from the Marco Polo story and is seeing a growing number of Chinese tourists. For all these reasons, tourism should be distinguished from China's soft power and can be discussed in a separate discourse.

60 Plamen Tonchev, 'Welcome Recalibration of Sino-Greek Relations', EU-Asia Centre, 7 November 2019, http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=17&pub_id=272.

61 The volume of China's outbound tourism on a global scale is expected to amount to 166 million in 2019. Source: <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/tourism/2019statistics/>.

62 'Balkan Countries Spy Potential in Chinese Tourism', *Balkan Insight*, 21 September 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/21/china-and-the-balkans-to-boost-cooperation-in-tourism-09-20-2018/>.

63 In 2017, Beijing exerted pressure on South Korea in seeking to abort Seoul's decision to go ahead with the deployment of a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence System (THAAD). China's concern is that South Korea's new missile shield would threaten its own security. Sarah Zheng, Laura Zhou, 'Beijing is using Chinese tourists to inflict economic pain – but does it work?', *South China Morning Post*, 4 August 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3021329/beijing-using-chinese-tourists-inflict-economic-pain-does-it>.

3

Role of the Media

3.1 Patterns of Media Engagement

Unlike other parts of Central and Eastern Europe, e.g. the Czech Republic⁶⁴, there is no evidence of media outlets in the SEE region being directly owned by Chinese entities. However, there are at least five distinctive patterns in the way China seeks to influence the media sector and project its soft power in Southeast Europe.

3.1.1 Formal Cooperation with National News Agencies and Broadcasters

For instance, the Greek state news agency AMNA and Serbia's Tanjug News Agency have had cooperation agreements with China's Xinhua.⁶⁵ They provide national media outlets with Xinhua reports, which are predictably marked by a China-friendly predilection. The China Economic Information Service (CEIS), an affiliate of Xinhua, has inked deals with a number of media outlets and some 20 think-tanks in CEECs, with stress laid on tips about the Belt and Road Initiative. During the visit of Chinese president Xi Jinping to Greece in November 2019, the Greek state television and China's National Radio and Television Administration signed yet another cooperation agreement.

64 Krzysztof Dębiec, Jakub Jakóbowski, 'Chinese investments in the Czech Republic: changing the expansion model' OSW, 6 June 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-06-06/chinese-investments-czech-republic-changing-expansion-model-0>.

65 'Xinhua, Greece's AMNA sign news cooperation agreement', *Xinhua*, 20 May 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/20/c_135373144.htm.

3.1.2 Informal – and Less Transparent – Cooperation with 'Friendly' Media Outlets

A very visible illustration of this pattern is the China Today (*kina-danas.com*) portal, which is run by the Sino-Bosnian Friendship Association and displays the logo of the People's Republic of China (PRC) embassy in BiH. Notably, *Kina-Danas* is known to those interested in China across all of former Yugoslavia. Articles and op-eds published by the portal promote Beijing's positions on the BRI and the oft-reiterated concepts of 'win-win cooperation', a 'community of a shared destiny', etc. With regard to the turmoil in Hong Kong, *Kina-Danas* has hosted pieces that echo views of the Chinese government⁶⁶ as well as a statement by the PRC ambassador to BiH.⁶⁷ Similarly, some Serbian media outlets reviewed in this research tend to cover the Hong Kong clashes by using primarily pro-government sources (e.g. the Chinese daily *Global Times*).⁶⁸

66 'Hong Kong: Središnja vlada podržava glavnu upraviteljicu u rješavanju duboko ukorijenjenih problema' (Hong Kong: The central government supports the Chief Executive in solving deep-rooted problems), <http://www.kina-danas.com/hong-kong-sredisnja-vlada-podrzava-glavnu-upraviteljicu-u-rjesavanju-duboko-ukorijenjenih-problema/>. See also 'Prosvjedi u Hong Kongu: Policija upozorila na eskalaciju nasilja i obećala da će privesti sve prekršitelje pravdi' (Hong Kong protests: Police warn of escalation of violence and promise to bring all offenders to justice), <http://www.kina-danas.com/prosvjedi-u-hong-kongu-policija-upozorila-na-eskalaciju-nasilja-i-obećala-da-ce-privesti-sve-prekršitelje-pravdi/>.

67 'Ambasador NR Kine u BiH Ji Ping: Politički motiv prosvjednika u Hong Kongu je osporiti kineski suverenitet' ('PRC Ambassador to BiH Ji Ping: The political motive of Hong Kong demonstrators is to challenge Chinese sovereignty'), <http://www.kina-danas.com/ambasador-nr-kine-u-bih-jiping-politicki-motiv-prosvjednika-u-hong-kongu-je-osporiti-kineski-suverenitet/>.

68 <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.299.html:811962-Armija-Kine-sve-bliza-Hongkongu>.

As a rule, Beijing prioritises contacts with left-leaning parties and politicians.⁶⁹ Thus, there is a Bulgarian web portal with the same name as in BiH, *China Today (Kitaj Dnes)*⁷⁰. It started out several years ago as a supplement to *Zemia* (Earth), a newspaper published by the Bulgarian Socialist (former Communist) Party as a mouthpiece of the pro-Russian lobby in the country. *Kitaj Dnes* came out as a separate edition in January 2019. Apart from the website, it is also a print weekly which, in its own words, presents China's official policies. The newspaper is hosted at the headquarters of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, while the publisher is a lady who has written several books on Russia and is a vice-president of the Bulgarian Media Union.

3.1.3 Social Media

Twitter, Facebook and Google email are banned in mainland China, but are ubiquitous forms of communication used by Beijing in most other parts of the world. Lately, a growing number of PRC embassies and ambassadors have been signing on to Twitter as a way of sending message across to a wide audience.⁷¹ With regard to the SEE region, Xinhua has had a Twitter account in Romanian (@XHRomania) since 2015.

The China-CEE Institute, established in Budapest by CASS, is also present in the social media, and has a Facebook page as well as Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. The number of likes and followers on its Facebook page is anything but impressive, despite the fact that the Institute covers 18 countries, including China. Notably, the Facebook page of the Albanian-Chinese Friendship Association has a much better track record, with 659 members as of September 2019.⁷² The Facebook page of the Chinese-Romanian Association (CHINARO) is doing even better, with nearly 2,000 followers and likes as of November 2019.

69 Robert Rajczyk, 'China's Influence in Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe', *The Warsaw Institute Foundation*, 30 April 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Chinas-influence-in-Balkans-and-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-Special-Report-Warsaw-Institute.pdf>.

70 <http://www.kitajdnes.com/>.

71 'Twitter the new battleground as Chinese officials sign up', *SCMP*, 30 July 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3020700/twitter-new-battleground-chinese-officials-sign>.

72 https://www.facebook.com/groups/122577617833356/?fref=mentions&__tn__=K-R.

3.1.4 Op-eds Published in National Media Outlets

Since the outbreak of turmoil in Hong Kong in the summer of 2019, PRC embassies in Central and Eastern Europe have approached many SEE media outlets with offers to publish op-eds or interviews with embassy staff promoting the official and 'real account' of the protests. Apart from the Visegrad-4 states and Baltic countries, similar articles have been spotted in media outlets in North Macedonia⁷³, Bosnia-Herzegovina⁷⁴ and Montenegro.⁷⁵ Interestingly, some identical phrases have been found in Czech, Estonian, Latvian, North Macedonian, Polish, and Slovak articles, which points to a coordinated, CEEC-wide effort to swing the discourse towards the official Chinese narrative.⁷⁶

3.1.5 Pro-China Stance of Government Media

Another trend to be factored in relates to the gap between elites and society. A recent study carried out in Greece has established a distinctive pattern in the way China is portrayed in the national media. Pro-government media outlets tend to be friendlier to China, as they: (i) present more positive news items in relation to China; (ii) have a more positive tone in carrying China-related stories; (iii) would focus on Sino-Greek relations to a larger extent than pro-opposition media outlets (Figure 6). Notably, a very similar finding comes out of a related study in Hungary: media sources believed to be close to the government publish significantly more positive news about China, while media outlets on the opposition side carry more negative than positive stories.⁷⁷

3.2 Spoilers

Apart from scenes of the stand-off in Hong Kong, there are some other spoilers in the media that clearly affect China's image in Southeast Europe. Ironi-

73 <http://mk.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1693256.htm>.

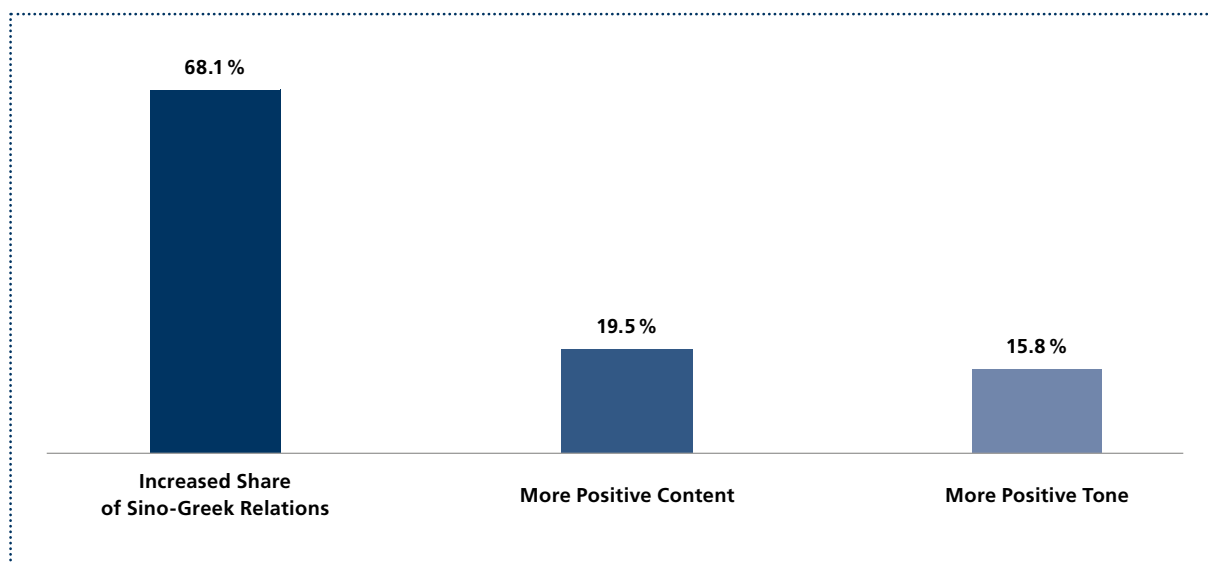
74 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/ambasador-kine-u-bih-jiping-pojedinci-pokusavaju-zloupotrebiti-hong-kong-za-sebicne-interese/190829134>.

75 <http://me.china-embassy.org/mon/tpxw/t1692714.htm>.

76 Ivana Karásková, 'How China Influences Media in Central and Eastern Europe', *The Diplomat*, 19 November 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/how-china-influences-media-in-central-and-eastern-europe/?fbclid=IwAR14AtfEIZFptQMrHGS8PThP2LWdrGrE8tEL8QHn6FEtDFL8Cec_Rm6T3k

77 Source: ChinfluenCE, <http://www.chinfluence.eu/hungarian-media-analysis/>.

Figure 6: Greek Media More Positive Towards China In Government Periods Than In Opposition Periods 2008–2018



Source: Institute of International Economic Relations, Greece

cally, China's economic weight in the region can be a two-edge sword: investment projects through Chinese funding contribute to Beijing's reputation, but the growing presence of Chinese contractors has also exposed them to scrutiny. In nearly all the WB countries there are reports about financial scandals, which have generated negative publicity in the national media. China is disingenuously exporting its heavily polluting rust-belt industries abroad, as highlighted in a recent European Commission report.⁷⁸ Coal-fired power plants in Bosnia recently constructed by Chinese companies are a case in point.

In another controversial case, an \$850 billion loan has been offered to the government of Montenegro by China's Exim Bank for the construction of a highway linking the port of Bar with the Serbian border. The project has been criticised by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Investment Bank. The list of highly controversial provisions includes the exemption of the Chinese contractor from nearly all taxes and customs duties for the import of construction materials.⁷⁹ Significantly, in case of disputes arbitration will be carried out under Chinese law and, in case of default, the Chinese contractor will have access to Montenegrin land as a collateral.⁸⁰

78 'Chinese-financed coal projects in Southeast Europe', *CEE Bankwatch Network*, 9 April 2019, <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/China-Balkans-briefing.pdf>.

79 Dušica Tomović, 'Montenegro Cuts Taxes on Chinese Highway Builders', *BalkanInsight*, 29 April 2015, <https://balkan5insight.com/2015/04/29/chinese-gain-tax-exclusion-for-montenegro-s-highway-construction/>.

80 Noah Barkin, Aleksandar Vasović, 'Chinese highway to nowhere haunts Montenegro', <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-europe-montenegro-inci/chinese-highway-to-nowhere-haunts-montenegro-idUSKBN1K60QX>.

There have been many media reports about collusion between government officials and Chinese contractors in North Macedonia. The contract awarded to a Chinese company for the construction of two highways has triggered one of the biggest controversies in the country and contributed to the fall of the Gruevski government in 2016. In a deviation from the national legislation and EU rules on public procurement, the contractor was selected from a list of Chinese state-owned enterprises.⁸¹

Cyprus is increasingly finding itself embroiled in a debate about the so-called Golden Passport scheme, which allows foreign investors to become EU citizens, after meeting certain conditions. Recently, 26 individuals were stripped of their 'golden passports', five of them being Chinese citizens.⁸² Four EU member states in the SEE region – Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia – offer Golden Visas, despite growing concerns voiced by EU institutions about possible corrupt practices and even criminal activities encouraged by these programmes.⁸³ The number of Chinese holders of Golden Visas in Greece is growing exponentially: their share of the

81 Ana Krstinovska, 'Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia', *CHOICE*, 6 November 2019, https://chinaobservers.eu/exporting-corruption-the-case-of-a-chinese-highway-project-in-north-macedonia/?fbclid=IwAR0_2AdAt4Fglh_tJGBy5aaQZMrYGJifVYPnUOo89xc8X-qPxSq803_ZQF_0.

82 'Cyprus strips 'golden' passports from 26 investors', *BBC*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50331697>.

83 'European Commission Reports on Risks of Investor Citizenship and Residence Schemes in EU', 23 January 2019, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/european-commission-reports-on-risks-of-investor-citizenship-and-residence-schemes-in-eu/>.

total exceeded 60% as of September 2019⁸⁴ and is expected to rise further, thus increasing the potential for controversy.

Sometimes spoilers can be unpredictable events, such as a spectacular heist at the Tirana international airport in April 2019. In the wake of that incident, the Albanian government accused the airport operator, the Hong Kong-based China Everbright Limited, of 'persistent irresponsibility' and failure to guarantee the security of passengers and state assets.⁸⁵

84 Nikos Roussanoglou, 'Greece's Golden Visa program proving irresistible for investors', *Ekathimerini*, 7 September 2019, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/244327/article/ekathimerini/business/greeces-golden-visa-program-proving-irresistible-for-investors>.

85 'Albania deploys army to guard capital's Chinese-operated international airport after Hollywood-style heist on runway', *South China Morning Post*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3005677/albania-deploys-army-guard-capitals-chinese-operated-airport>.

4

China's Image in Southeast Europe

4.1 Key Trends in Southeast Europe

The safest way to assess the effectiveness of China's soft-power strategy in WB countries would be a review of China's reputation, as reflected in opinion polls. This exercise is inevitably split into two parts, given that the Eurobarometer only includes EU member states and does not cover the Western Balkans. Nor is Chinese presence in the WB sub-region covered by the Regional Cooperation Council in Southeast Europe⁸⁶ or the Pew Research Center.

Eurobarometer surveys carried out in 2017 and 2018 (see Annex) show that of all the EU member states, the Southeast European countries share the most positive views of China and, in general, it is clear China is markedly more popular in the region than in other parts of EU. However, the picture is more nuanced, when specific questions are posed to respondents. Timing, too, may play a part. Thus, an IRES opinion poll in 2013 showed that 73% of Romanians polled approved of the idea of major China-financed investments in the country.⁸⁷ However, one of the findings in an Avangarde survey five years later is that only 9% of Romanians wanted their country to have close relations with China, which ranked fourth, after the US (37%), Germany (25%) and France (11%).⁸⁸

While documented evidence of China's image in the Western Balkans is hard to come by, an inkling is provided by outputs sponsored by the

China-CEE Institute. Since 2017, it has commissioned working papers and surveys⁸⁹ of the way China is perceived across the entire CEEC area. The majority of these publications contain low-quality analysis and surveys are based on samples that are either too small and can be viewed as 'focus groups' or do not have a representative structure.⁹⁰ A number of conclusions drawn in the working papers are marked by praise for China, and appear to be sponsor-driven, while criticism is often veiled and indirect at best.

Yet, although these publications do not allow for reliable quantitative outputs, some qualitative findings are of interest. A working paper produced in North Macedonia⁹¹ reveals that China's spectacular growth is duly acknowledged in society, but there are concerns about the quality of the Chinese development model, with a view to pollution, bad living conditions, long working hours, etc. Unlike western countries, China is not viewed as an option for studies or a possible career path. Most importantly, China's presence is examined by the interviewees in light of its complementarity – or not – to the euroatlantic aspirations of the country.

⁸⁶ <https://www.rcc.int/>.

⁸⁷ <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/sondaj-jumatate-dintre-romani-cred-ca-proiectele-chineze-in-romania-se-vor-realiza-doar-partial/>.

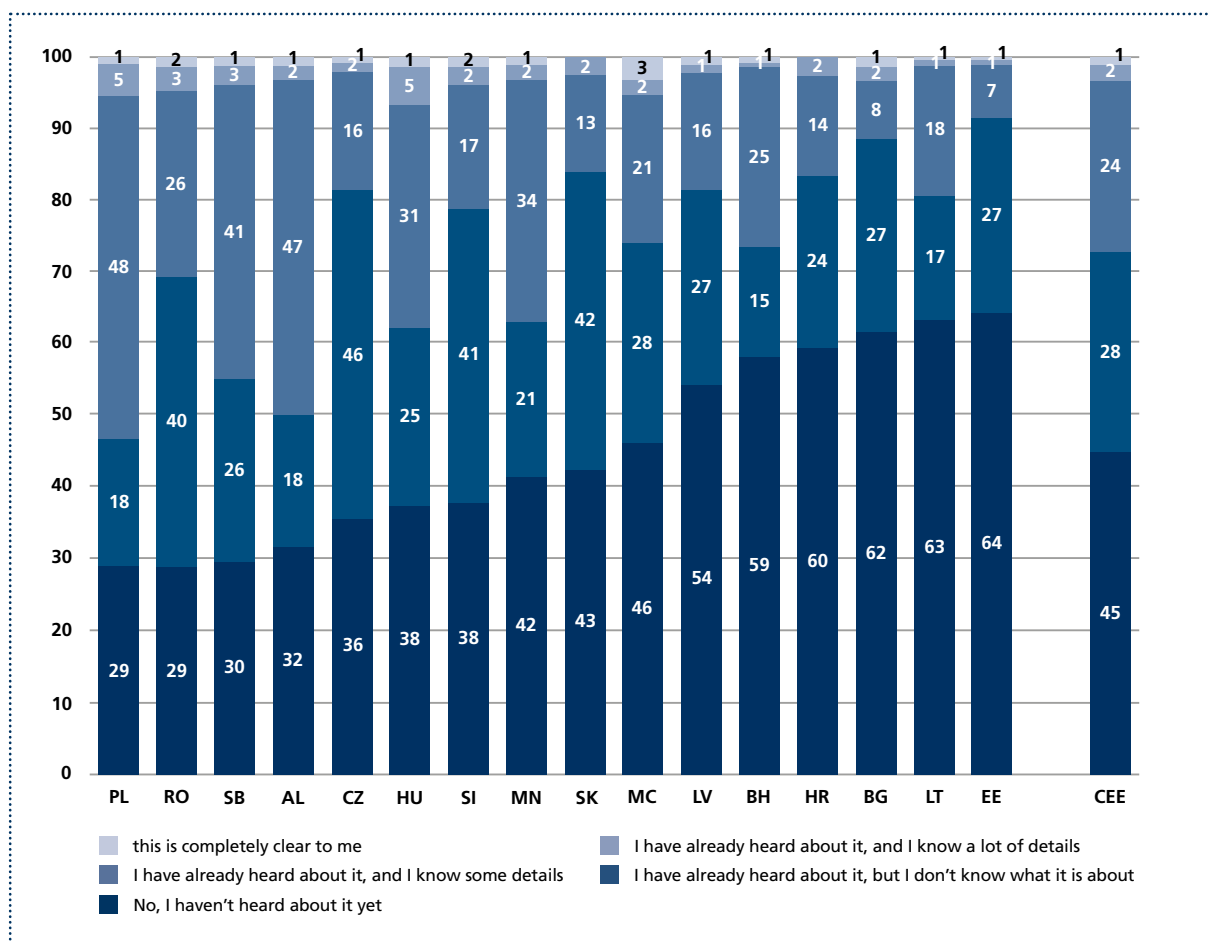
⁸⁸ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/sondaj-national-cinear-trebui-sa-fie-aliatul-cel-mai-apropiat-al-romaniei-1022062>.

⁸⁹ Available, among other working papers, on the Institute's website: <https://china-cee.eu/working-paper/>.

⁹⁰ For instance, a survey carried out in Serbia has a sample of only 130 interviewees and a questionable balance: 68% males and 32% females, and 60% of the respondents' lives in the capital city Belgrade. https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/attitudes-and-knowledge-of-young-people-in-serbia-toward-people-republic-of-chinas-development/.

⁹¹ Gjorgjioska, M. A.; Ismail, H. R., 'Varying anchors, differing perceptions? Examining the representations of (China's) development in Macedonia', *China-CEE Institute*, 22 November 2018, https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/varying-anchors-differing-perceptions-examining-the-representations-of-chinas-development-in-macedonia/.

Figure 7: Have you ever heard about the cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (16+1), in which your country participates? (in %)



Note: * Cyprus and Greece not included – Cyprus not in 17+1; Greece joined in April 2019
Source: GKI – China-CEE Institute Nonprofit Ltd. Survey

Another study in Romania commissioned by the China-CEE Institute⁹² offers interesting insights into how an EU member state in Southeast Europe views economic cooperation with Beijing. China is presented in a favourable light in the Romanian media as to its development and economic growth. At the same time, 'Romania-China economic relations are below expectations'; half the respondents express their discontent with the evolution of investment projects due to the lack of progress in negotiations. Notably, more than half the respondents consider that China's development model cannot be applied in Romania because of political differences between the two systems.

One of the very few home-grown studies of China's image in the Western Balkans comes from Albania. The research covers more than 1.000 China-related articles published in the country over a

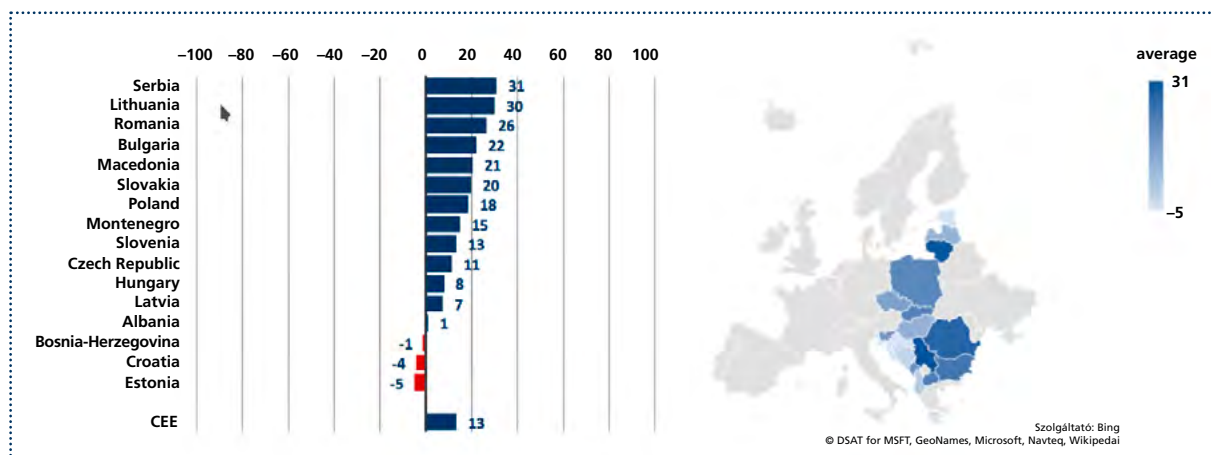
period of five years. A key finding is that some 47% of the news items portray China in a positive light, as compared to 38% which have negative connotations; 15% of the media coverage is deemed neutral.⁹³

In addition to the working papers, the China-CEE Institute has sponsored a survey of China's image in the Central and Eastern Europe, including the SEE region. Although the thematic scope of the exercise is rather narrow and anticipating a positive outcome, some of the findings are anything but encouraging for Chinese authorities and companies active in Southeast Europe. What comes out of the survey is a general lack of awareness of the 17+1 platform. Albanians appear to be the best informed nation in the region (50%), followed by Serbia (44%), Montenegro (37%), Romania (31%), North Macedonia and BiH (26%), Slovenia (21%), Croatia (16%) and Bulgaria (11%) – see Figure 7.

92 Georgiana Boboc, 'A glimpse from afar: How Romania sees China's development', *China-CEE Institute*, 22 November 2018, https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/a-glimpse-from-afar-how-romania-sees-chinas-development/.

93 Enri Hide, 'Foreign Non-Western Influences in Albania'. *FES-Tirana*, 2918.

Figure 8: How do you consider the possible impact of the new Silk Road Initiative in the next 5 years, which aims to strengthen trade and economic relations between China and your country?



Note: Cyprus and Greece not included – Cyprus not in 17+1; Greece joined in April 2019.
 Source: GKI – China-CEE Institute Nonprofit Ltd. Survey

As for expectations with regard to the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative, once again the findings are hardly impressive. Serbia stood out with 31 points of the respondents expressing positive views, followed by Romania (26), Bulgaria (22), North Macedonia (21), Montenegro (15), Slovenia (13), Albania with a meagre 1 and two countries below zero, Bosnia-Herzegovina at -1 and Croatia at -4 (Figure 8).

4.2 Serbia and Greece as Case Studies

As mentioned already, Greece and Serbia stand out as the SEE countries with particularly close relations with China. Therefore, a look at them as case studies may reveal some interesting aspects of the way China is perceived in the region. There is an interesting case to be made for both countries: that their ties with China may be attributed, partly at least, to an ambivalent attitude towards the EU. It would be worthwhile exploring exactly how these two trends may complement each other.

For instance, a survey of the image of major powers in Serbia was carried out in January 2017. It is based on a credible sample, which included some 1,400 respondents and is fairly well-balanced in terms of gender, age groups, educational and social background, etc.⁹⁴ Some evidence of the influence of major international powers is drawn from a 2013 survey, which has now become outdated. However, data recorded in January 2017 allow for some meaningful conclusions to be drawn (Figure 9): (i)

the only two-digit responses to the question on the attractiveness of the EU relate to better economic prospects and the freedom of travel; (ii) while the majority is still in favour of EU membership, perceptions of EU have clearly deteriorated. The EU's appeal is likely to be further affected after the failure of the European Council to agree on the start of pre-accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019.⁹⁵

Beijing's soft-power strategy is arguably more successful in Serbia than in other SEE countries, as a mix of economic statecraft, history and foreign policy. Although China is still seen as a 'remote' country, with a limited cultural appeal to young Serbs, who are inclined to emigrate to Western countries in their quest of job opportunities⁹⁶, the appeal of the EU clearly has been waning in Serbia.

As far as Greece is concerned, its positive attitude towards China can be attributed to two key factors. First, the protracted socio-economic crisis created a psychological detachment from the EU and led to a surge of euroscepticism in the country, which peaked in the middle of the 2000s under the radical government of Alexis Tsipras. Second, in order to recover from the crisis Greece is in need of massive foreign investment, which is why Athens relies on China as a major economic partner, among other potential sources of capital. The new Greek government, in place since July 2019, states its allegiance to the West, but China is just too powerful

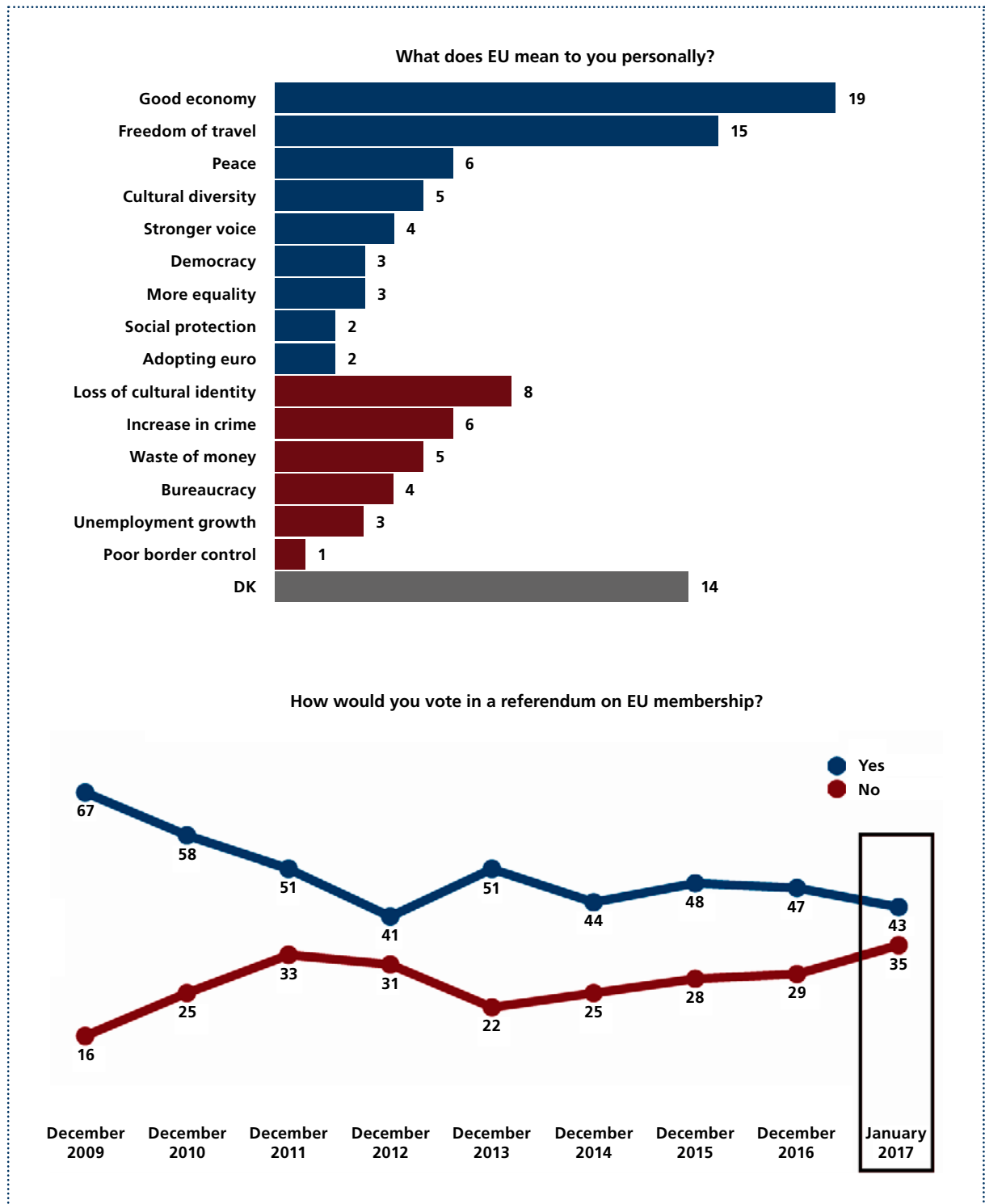
94 Miloš Popović, 'Public Perception of Serbia's Foreign Policy', *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 8 March 2017. http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/public_perception_of_serbias_foreign_policy.pdf.

95 Georgi Gotev, 'France halts EU enlargement', *Euractiv.com*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/france-halts-eu-enlargement/>.

96 Philippe Le Corre, Vuk Vuksanovic Serbia: China's Open Door to the Balkans, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/01/serbia-china-s-open-door-to-balkans-pub-78054>.

an actor to keep at bay. Hence the delicate balance that Athens seeks to strike between mending fences with the EU and other western partners, while at the same time inviting Chinese investment into the country and favouring closer ties with Beijing in the areas of culture and education.

Figure 9: Attitude Towards the EU in Serbia (in %)



Source: SEIO

5

Conclusions

Obviously, China 'sells' better in the SEE region than in other parts of Europe, where anti-Chinese sentiment is becoming more pronounced and translates into growing resentment for and even confrontation with Beijing. Outside the SEE region, tension has been building up across Europe. There have been diplomatic spats in Lithuania⁹⁷ and Estonia⁹⁸, and in Poland two individuals have been arrested on accusations of spying for Huawei.⁹⁹ In the Czech Republic, there are reports about the PRC embassy secretly sponsoring a course at the Charles University on the benefits to be drawn from the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the city of Prague and Beijing have severed their twinning relationship, and are trading bitter recriminations.¹⁰¹

97 Konstantinas Andrijauskas, 'A Diplomatic Incident in Lithuania Troubles Its Relationship with China', *CHOICE*, 17 September 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-diplomatic-incident-in-lithuania-troubles-its-relationship-with-china/?fbclid=IwAR3VGDXdyl-iUeIV8XmgjWDDqxYmlyan1MGqopXB80VtrDU-odlcgHzclkdM>.

98 'Chinese embassy in Estonia: Journalist's task to support good relations between countries', *Postimees*, 8 September 2019, <https://news.postimees.ee/6772721/chinese-embassy-in-estonia-journalist-s-task-to-support-good-relations-between-countries>.

99 'Poland arrests Huawei worker on allegations of spying for China', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/11/huawei-employee-arrested-in-poland-over-chinese-spy-allegations>.

100 Alžběta Bajerová, 'The Czech-Chinese Centre of Influence: How Chinese Embassy in Prague Secretly Funded Activities at the Top Czech University', *CHOICE*, 7 November 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-czech-chinese-centre-of-influence-how-chinese-embassy-in-prague-secretly-funded-activities-at-the-top-czech-university/?fbclid=IwAR1pgSKnHUNrfcb-n12yyuxg88IRXCPfjor65G5MqNkgrc1lrtmYj9SoNnyQ>

101 Richard Turcsányi and Manuel Eckert, 'Prague vs Beijing: Estranged Sister Cities', *CHOICE*, 10 October 2019, https://chinaobservers.eu/prague-vs-beijing-estranged-sister-cities/?fbclid=IwAR3zbPOPZ7yzvaujhZtfyxD7EMHMNj6c4n9Y8spkXk7Rb0y11RG6mj_qwm0.

In Belgium, the director of the Confucius Institute in Brussels has been accused of espionage¹⁰² and Huawei has become embroiled in a legal lawsuit in France.¹⁰³ In Sweden, several municipalities are reviewing their sister city agreements with Chinese counterparts and three out of four Confucius Institutes have shut down, with Stockholm and Beijing on the verge of a headlong collision on a long list of issues¹⁰⁴.

It is truly remarkable that, unlike the increasingly acrimonious mood in other parts of the EU, Southeast European countries treat China in a much friendlier manner. This is all the more extraordinary, given the spoilers presented above and the negative publicity in media reports. So, why is China accepted more amicably in Southeast Europe? There seem to be three key explanations for this trend.

Firstly, it is clear that Joseph Nye's definition of soft power does not fully apply to China's case, as the country's image does not match its economic weight in the global economy. As has been pointed out, China's soft power is not measured

102 Jonas Ekblom, 'Chinese academic suspected of espionage banned from Belgium', *Reuters*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-university/chinese-academic-suspected-of-espionage-banned-from-belgium-idUSKBN1X922O>.

103 'Huawei Sues Critics in France Over Remarks on China State Ties', *Financial Post*, 22 November 2019, <https://business.financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/huawei-sues-critics-in-france-over-remarks-on-china-state-ties>

104 Sweden's ties with Beijing have been strained in recent years, particularly due to the detention of Swedish citizen and bookseller Gui Minhai, who has been held in China since 2015, 'China threatens Sweden over support for jailed book publisher', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 November 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-threatens-sweden-over-support-for-jailed-book-publisher/a-51276420>.

by blockbuster films, but by the appeal of its economic achievements¹⁰⁵ and Southeast Europe is no exception. The key driver of Beijing's clout in the SEE countries has been the expectation that China can help the region crawl out of underdevelopment and catch up with advanced European economies.

While Southeast Europeans are not bewitched by Beijing's 'charm offensive', they expect significant economic help from the Asian giant. It is true that China's image in the region does not compare with the appeal of western partners in terms of lifestyle, educational and professional opportunities, and it is equally true that SEE countries prioritise European integration to a large extent. Yet, SEE nations are still in need of massive foreign investment. Therefore, extricating China's soft-power push from the country's economic diplomacy and assessing it as a separate endeavour is virtually impossible.

Secondly, governments in the Western Balkans find the lack of stringent EU rules convenient in view of attracting Chinese investment and doing business the Chinese way. A mix of weak institutions, endemic corruption and a feeble civil society clearly facilitates China's advances in the WB sub-region. It is here that China's soft-power strategy is particularly intertwined with the notion of economic gains, regardless of how transparent transactions with Chinese companies may or may not be.

Thirdly, the future of the entire region is closely linked to the EU and, yet, Southeast European nations do not have the feeling they are on a par with western and northern Europeans. The Balkans remain a synonym of backwardness and political instability, and the ambivalent attitude of EU member states towards the region dims its European prospects. It is this economic and political void in Southeast Europe that China steps into.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

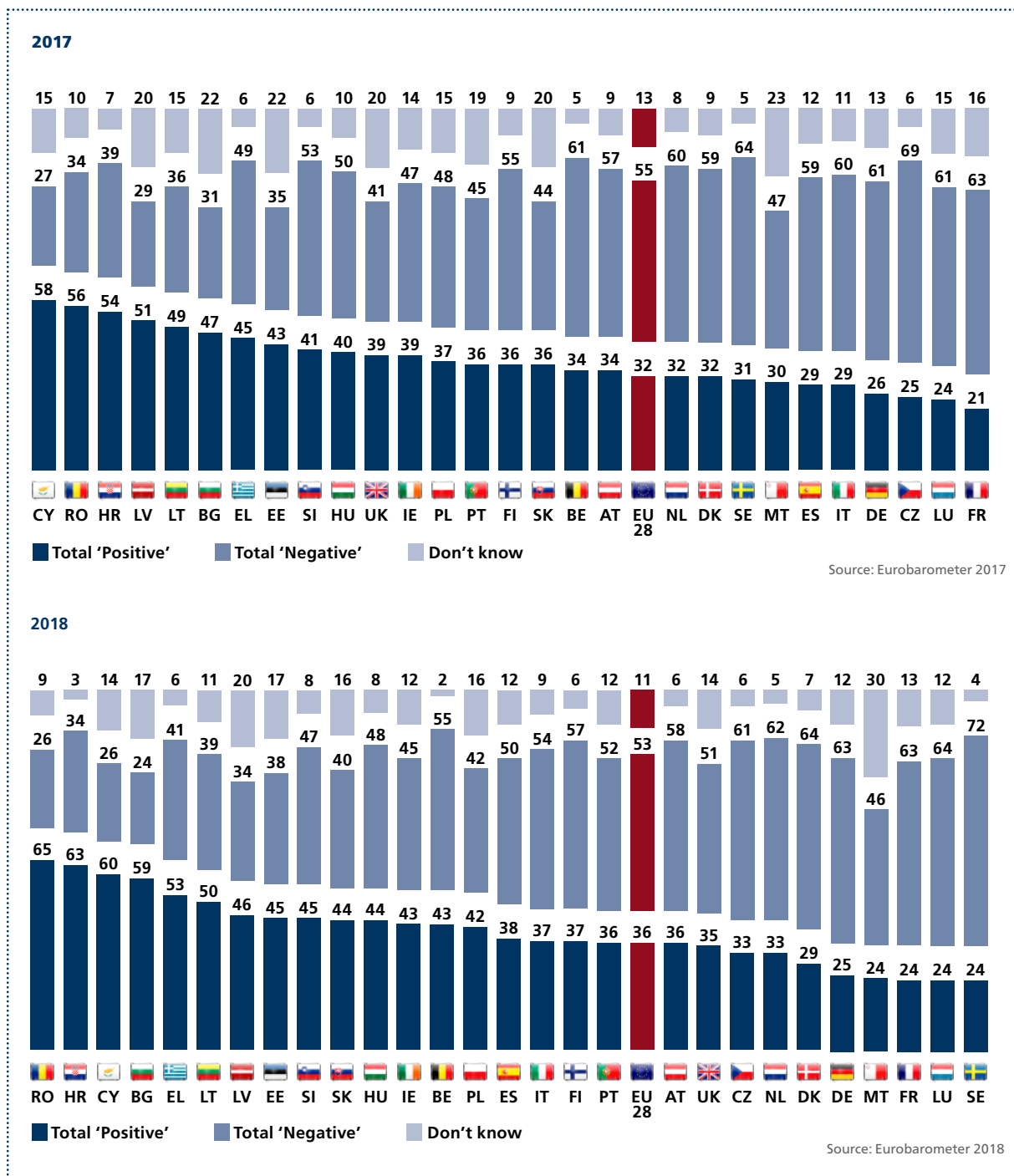
While this paper presents some key issues in relation to China's soft power in the region, it also serves as a mapping exercise in pinpointing possible tasks ahead. It would be worth exploring the prospects of:

- Systematic research into the profile and numbers of SEE beneficiaries from Confucius Institute and Classroom beneficiaries, as well as the estimated long-term impact of related activities.
- Listing all the agreements between Chinese news agencies or broadcasters and national counterparts in Southeast European countries.
- Annual Eurobarometer surveys covering the Western Balkans as well, including questions about China's presence in the region. Alternatively, the EU could consider supporting region-specific projects aiming to capture China's soft-power efforts and influence in the region.
- The Balkan Barometer commissioned by the Regional Cooperation Council should include questions about China (as well as other non-EU actors in the region).
- Research into China's soft power should be correlated to the evolution of the EU's appeal, i.e. the degree of delivery on the part of the EU.
- Influential social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, should definitely be monitored in future – and much larger – research into China's soft power in the region.

105 Thomas Barker, 'The Real Source of China's Soft Power', *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/the-real-source-of-chinas-soft-power/>.

Annex

As regards each of the following countries or group of countries, do you have a positive or negative view about it? (China, %, 2017–2018)



The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

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Publisher: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe
Kupreška 20, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
www.fes-southeasteurope.org
Orders/Contact: info@fes-soe.org

Responsible: Felix Henkel, Director, Dialogue Southeast Europe
Project coordinator: Harun Cero

Design / Typesetting: pertext, Berlin
Cover photo: philipus / stock.adobe.com

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