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## Serbia's Accession to the EU and China's Presence in the Balkans

### *Abstract*

As a barrier to the European Union and the land bridge of Eurasia, the Western Balkans have been in the focus of an international power game for a long time. Among those countries, Croatia joined the European Union, successfully, in 2013, while other countries have been treating the EU accession as one of the top priorities of their national strategy. The centripetal force of regional countries has made the EU a major stakeholder in the region. With the cooperation framework of China-Central and Eastern European countries (17+1) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in this region, especially in Serbia, Chinese companies, represented by the China Road and Bridge Engineering Co., Ltd., Hebei Iron and Steel Plant and others, have achieved important commercial progresses in the local market. The current pragmatic cooperation between China and Serbia reinforced the emotional ties between the two nations and set a well-established image among their people and their governments, while China's regional influence is rising gradually. However, the encounter between China and the EU, in Serbia, has led to various speculations about the possibility of either a competition or a cooperation between China and the EU in this region. Some EU countries, represented by Germany, have openly questioned China's motives for the construction of the BRI in Serbia and other Balkan countries, and increased alertness for China's involvement in this region. Therefore, this chapter aims to unveil how China's presence in the Balkans could facilitate Serbia's EU accession and properly address the EU challenges regarding similar issues.

### *Key words:*

17+1 framework, BRI, Serbia, EU, cooperation, Serbia's EU accession

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\* The analysis of this paper is based on author's interview with people involved in related projects.

## 1. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Since the 1980s, Yugoslavia had been gradually collapsing due to the economic slowdown and intensification of inflation and ethnic conflicts. After the regional turmoil of the 1990s, Slovenia and Croatia became the regional leaders to join the EU through the accession negotiations to achieve a faster economic recovery and social development. The remaining former member states of Yugoslavia, plus Albania, and the Kosovo region which unilaterally declared independence in 2008, formed the current West Balkans. As a new term, coined by the European Union, the West Balkans not only carries the geographical connotations of the region, but also implies different distinctions between themselves and the EU countries, in the political, economic, legal and social domains.<sup>1</sup>

Compared to the Yugoslavian era, the economic and social development of the Western Balkans is still far behind. One of the common aims of the regional countries is to become widely accepted as European Union members. However, due to the regional turmoil of the 1990s and the following global financial crisis in 2008, the economic recovery of the region has relatively slowed down for a while. The main constraints regarding the economic growth in the region, identified as a monotonous market structure, capital shortage, and technological under-development, have impeded national development from the very beginning. Therefore, seeking financial and technical support, from the external markets, has become one of the primary tasks for the Western Balkans countries so as to revive their economies. It not only makes it possible for the EU to expand eastward, but also offers opportunities for other external powers, including China, to engage in regional affairs. Due to this circumstance, the ways in which various stakeholders adjust their own strategies towards Western Balkans and properly manage the relations with other stakeholders, have become key issues for regional development, and would, most probably, directly impact the prospective direction of the Western Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> Pål Kolstø (2016) 'Western Balkans' as the New Balkans: Regional Names as Tools for Stigmatisation and Exclusion", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:7, 1245–1263; Todorova, Maria (1996) *Imaging the Balkans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## 2. CHINA'S PRESENCE IN SERBIA: 17+1 AND BRI

Stable Sino-European relations are pre-requisites for the smooth progress of the BRI in Serbia, in the Western Balkans, and even Europe. In 2012, China signed the “China’s Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries”, together with 16 Central and Eastern European countries. At the same time, it launched, in Poland, a format of “16+1”, with Serbia as one of the leading participants for the first time, so as to deepen the economic cooperation, mainly in the areas of infrastructure, telecommunication and sustainable development. In 2019, the format expanded, for the first time, as Greece joined. Out of the 17 partner countries, Serbia has been a leading country in engaging this format, especially when it comes to the number of planned projects and their diversity. Consequently, Chinese companies have gradually entered the Serbian market. After years of diligently conducting operations in the local market, these Chinese enterprises have been widely recognized, by local participants, as trustworthy partners. Therefore, the construction of BRI projects, involving these Chinese enterprises, is gradually progressing and developing into diverse forms, which are based on various channels of financial support. Overall, current BRI construction projects in Serbia could be examined through these three following perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 *The political engagement*

From the political point of view, these two sides have maintained a long-standing friendly relationship ever since the Yugoslavian era. The year of 2016 marked a new stage for the bilateral relations. In June of that same year, President Xi Jinping signed a published article in the leading Serbian newspaper, *Politika*, entitled ‘*Enduring Friendship and True Partnership*’, regarding his official visit to Serbia<sup>2</sup>, where China and Serbia agreed to upgrade the ‘Strategic Partnership’ which was officially established in 2009 to a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ during Xi’ official visit. This act was supposed to demonstrate their shared commitment to developing further their cooperation, in order to gain mutual benefits. As President Xi Jinping indicated, during his official visit to Serbia, ‘China and Serbia

<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping, *Enduring Friendship and True Partnership*, June 16, 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitree/2016-06/16/content\\_25737654.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitree/2016-06/16/content_25737654.htm), accessed on December 10, 2019.

are sincere friends and important cooperation partners'.<sup>3</sup> Due to the similarities between the Taiwan and Kosovo issues, China and Serbia have firmly supported each other's sovereignty and territorial claims in the international arena. Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership has expressed their support for Serbia's accession to the EU.<sup>4</sup> And Serbia was one of the first countries which signed the MOU on joint development of the Belt and Road Initiative. The favorable political atmosphere between the two countries has set the foundation for further cooperation in economic and social domains.

## *2.2 The economic buttress*

Within the framework of 17+1 cooperation plan and the BRI, a practical cooperation in the economic domain between these two countries has yielded increasingly good results. At the early stage of the bilateral infrastructure cooperation, a large number of projects, including the Mihajlo Pupin Bridge (Zemun Bridge), the Belgrade-Budapest Railway, and the expansion and upgrade of the Kostolac Power Plant, used concessional loans with low rates and long re-payment periods, provided by the Chinese state-owned banks, such as the Export-Import Bank of China. In recent years, while responding to the host country's BOT (build-operate-transfer) and PPP (public-private-partnership) initiatives, some projects, which are currently conducted by the Chinese enterprises in Serbia, have gradually changed their financial politics from using Chinese concessional loans into direct investments. For example, the purchase of the Smederevo steel mill by the Hebei Iron and Steel Group shows that the local steel industry has not only been revitalized with the Chinese capital, but has also strictly fulfilled all the legal and environmental requirements. In August 2018, Shandong Linglong Tire planned to invest 994 million USD to build 13.62 million sets of high-performance radial tires in the Serbian Free Trade Zone, which is a perfect example of the recently emerged direct Chinese investment. CRBC has also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Serbian government, on the construction of the E763 Motorway, by using the PPP mode of payment. Additionally, Serbia's geo-economic advantages make it

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<sup>3</sup> Xinhua English, China, Serbia lift relations to comprehensive strategic partnership, June 19, 2016, <http://english.sina.com/news/2016-06-19/doc-ifxtfmrp2327200.shtml>, accessed on December 10, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping, Enduring Friendship and True Partnership, June 16, 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitee/2016-06/16/content\\_25737654.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitee/2016-06/16/content_25737654.htm), accessed on December 10, 2019.

a favorable destination for foreign capital to export products, mainly to the EU markets. More precisely, after years of adaption, Chinese firms have realized the potential and opportunities of the Serbian market.

### *2.3 The institutional and infrastructural connectivity*

Local institutions and norms have been, first and foremost, a great challenge for Chinese enterprises to get adapted to. During the process of designing and creating a budget, the construction, procurement, subcontracting and assessing Serbia's Zemun Bridge, or the acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill and the conduction of other projects, all Chinese agencies strictly complied with local, and even the EU, laws and regulations, and accepted to be supervised by the local engineering team and the owner agents. This has pushed the Chinese companies to adapt to local rules and to design their projects better. Boosting the institutional connectivity between the Chinese agencies and local markets has also been a major goal for other Chinese companies in Serbia's neighboring countries. For instance, the China Road and Bridge Corporate (hereafter CRBC) obtained the Croatian 'Peljesac Bridge' tender, by beating two European consortiums through an open bidding. This bridge was the first large-scale infrastructure project, implemented by Chinese infrastructure enterprises, in the EU market, using EU funds. CRBC has strictly been abiding by the relevant EU laws and regulations throughout the bidding process, and ultimately relied on excellent professional skills, low construction costs, advanced management experience and rich international experience so as to beat the European competitors.

From the aspect of infrastructural connectivity, a part of the BRI-related projects promoted Serbia's interconnectivity with other Western Balkan countries and its EU neighbors. The current road, bridge and railway projects, built by China in Serbian and other Western Balkans countries, have helped improve the transportation network in the region and helped them integrate into the Pan-European transportation network. Among them, the Serbian-Hungarian Railway is a branch line of the B section of the Pan-European Corridor No. 10. The Pelješac Bridge connects the two parts of Croatia divided by Bosnia and Herzegovina. The E763 Highway of the North Extension of the Montenegrin North-South Expressway is part of the Pan-European Corridor. Shanghai Electric Power and Malta Energy Company and Vision Energy Development Montenegro Mozula Wind Power Project have been put into motion, which has important practical significance for Montenegro's entry into the EU with clean and environmentally friendly

energy. It also represents a benchmark for cooperation between China, Europe and the local economy.

#### *2.4 The social influence*

Throughout the years, the people of China and Serbia have been close and had a great cooperation in the department of education, science and technology, culture, and even public health. The two countries have agreed to set up culture centers. The Chinese culture center has been completed in Belgrade, while the Serbian counterpart is located in Beijing. Culturally and educationally, Confucius Institutes have been established at the top universities of Serbia, the University of Belgrade and the University of Novi Sad, and Chinese language is now being taught, as a test trial, in more than 100 primary schools in Serbia. All this indicates the social influence both countries have on each other.

In regards to the infrastructure construction of Chinese enterprises in Serbia, it represents an important driving force for the country to approach the EU countries, when it comes to the level of economic development. At the same time, Chinese companies have trained a number of outstanding local engineering experts in management and people with exceptional technical talent, filling the gaps in the local infrastructure industry and providing a human resource base for the industry, so as to achieve sustainable development. In addition to this, Chinese enterprises invested in the construction of the Belgrade bicycle lane, while the CBRC's donation to complete the reparation of the Tara Valley Bridge in Montenegro is actively fulfilling social responsibilities and ameliorating the relations between the enterprise and the local society.

All in all, China's 17+1 framework and BRI construction, in Serbia, have had a positive impact on the local economic development, infrastructure improvement and industrial development, and have also promoted the accession process to the EU. For Chinese companies themselves, they can also use Serbia and other Western Balkan countries as a gateway to adapt to the EU market rules, gain market access, and, therefore, gain experience in EU market.

### 3. IS CHINA'S PRESENCE FACILITATING SERBIA'S ACCESSION TO THE EU? DOUBTS AND RESPONSES

The Western Balkan region, including Serbia, is the southeastern barrier of the European Union, whose stability is critical to the security of the EU countries. The EU has sent out incentive signals to the Western Balkan countries to reform their political, economic and legal domains, and has offered help to complete the institutional transformation, so as to achieve the goal of European integration. As the United States gradually retreated from the Western Balkan area, the EU has become the most influential participant and the largest stakeholder in this region. From the point of view of economy and trade, the Western Balkans is a very important market with high potential, even though the total trade volume between the EU and the Western Balkans accounts for only 1.3% of the EU's total trade volume. From the security point of view, the West Balkans are surrounded by EU countries and represent the southeastern barrier to the EU. Therefore, the stability of the region is crucial to the security of the EU countries.

However, the EU's eastward expansion has slowed down after Croatia's accession. On the one hand, the EU has to deal with many internal issues such as the European debt crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit and the rise of the right-wing populism; while on the other hand, the current reform process and ethnic relations in the Western Balkans are not satisfactory to the EU. This makes the rule-oriented Union unable to invest too much in this region, thus impeding the accession process of Serbia and Montenegro, and even some regions such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia have even experienced a stagnation in the accession process. As other international forces have been involved in the region more and more, the EU has recently re-oriented its attention to the Western Balkans, with the aim of reaffirming the EU support for the region's prospects for accession, by releasing a series of signals so as to consolidate its presence in the region. For example, in February 2018, the European Commission adopted the strategy document regarding the New West Balkans, the EU-Western Balkans Sofia Summit in May, and the Berlin Summit in London in July, which reaffirmed the EU's positive attitude of welcoming the Western Balkans to the EU. Overall, the main content of the EU's Western Balkan policy includes four aspects, namely, the normative, financial, infrastructural, and societal. The normative aspect implies that the Western Balkans region is positively influenced by and willing to comply with the EU's institutions, values and norms, which resonates with the Normative Power Europe

thesis coined by Manners.<sup>5</sup> Financially, the EU provides funds such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for regional countries, while at the same time introduces the Western Balkan Investment Framework to leverage more private investments into the region. When it comes to the infrastructure, the EU has gradually incorporated the Western Balkans into the main Trans-European Transport Network, Trans-European Energy Network and Pan-European Corridors, thus providing better opportunities for these countries to connect their transportation, telecom and energy infrastructure with the EU. As far as the society is concerned, the people-to-people exchange between the citizens of the EU and Serbia has been maintained at a positive level. Also, the EU has provided assistance to the Balkan countries in negotiating the regional trade agreement and bilateral trade agreement with the EU.

As BRI construction continues to advance in the Western Balkans, EU officials and institutions have raised a series of questions about the activities of Chinese companies in this ‘quasi-EU’ region.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the manner in which the Chinese participants respond to these concerns has become particularly important for further development of BRI in this region. The following part will address the four main concerns and the response of the Chinese side in, respectively, four dimensions.

### 3.1 *The political alertness*

First and foremost, ideological differences are highlighted at the normative and institutional levels. The research report, from MERICS, believes that China challenges the EU norms and promotes the Chinese model.<sup>7</sup> Germany’s former Foreign Minister, Gabriel, criticized Beijing for using the BRI to create values different from the Western style of freedom and democracy.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the EU has doubts about some of the tendering

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<sup>5</sup> Manners, Ian (2002) Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2):235–58.

<sup>6</sup> South China Morning Post (2018) Merkel Warns Against China’s Influence in Balkans, (22 Feb), available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134196/merkel-warns-against-chinas-influence-balkans>, accessed on December 10, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Benner, Thorsten et al. (2018) “Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe”, Global Public Policy Institute & Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin, February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Hanschke, Hannibal, “Gabriel warnt Europäer vor Spaltung durch China”, Reuters, 30 August, 2017, <https://de.reuters.com/article/deutschland-eu-china-idDEKCN1BA1XU>, accessed on December 10, 2019.



methods regarding some infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans and the possible underlying corruption.<sup>9</sup>

To respond to the abovementioned issues, normatively, the expectation of joining the EU, has driven Serbia to continuously reform its legal, political and economic systems, so as to meet EU standards. After a period of 'Europeanization', the relevant standards of infrastructure projects, in Serbia, have been largely compliant with the EU. Most Chinese companies cooperated with local legal firms, so as to keep track of the ever-changing legal system and manage the projects strictly according to both the local law and relevant EU regulations. At the same time, the supervision teams in the Serbian projects are often made up of Western European experts, who are skilled in applying local and European standards. It is fair to conclude that the EU norms and regulations have served as the benchmark for evaluating the performance of Chinese firms in Serbia. Under this circumstance, even if Chinese contractors question the host country's standards, for the most part, they communicate and discuss this with the owners, based on the scientific basis, instead of with the intention to replace them with Chinese standards. Although some Chinese-funded projects have encountered resistance in the Western Balkans, the main factor for it is not corruption and other normative disputes.

### *3.2 The economic anxiety*

The EU participants have been worried that Chinese funds entering the Western Balkans, especially Serbia, will place hurdles on the way of Serbia's accession to the EU. Even though Serbia's need for financial support is urgent and the EU has the ability to provide assistance in this regard, Serbia's willingness to join the EU has only remained 'urgent', as, currently, Serbia cannot meet all the EU standards because the reform process requires a long period of time, and the EU's determination of expansion is not completely assured. Therefore, the EU cannot invest large sums of money into this region. The entrance of the Chinese capital broke Serbia's long waiting process and indirectly weakened its need for the EU funds, which in turn weakened the EU's influence on regional affairs. In addition, MERICS reported that China's investments have political repercussions, with the aim of increasing China's influence on the EU member states, and other countries in the region, in order to differentiate the EU's attitude

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<sup>9</sup> Makocki, Michal and Zoran Nechev (2017) *Balkan Corruption: the China Connection*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Paris, July, 2017.

toward issues such as the South China Sea.<sup>10</sup> Some EU countries, especially Germany, also have similar attitudes.

Financial issues somehow emerged and have been subject to change already. In order to fulfill a number of economic pre-requisites so as to access the EU, Serbia has been, for a long time, concerned about accepting excessive external loans, including loans from China. It clearly shows that the influence of the EU in the region has not been reduced due to the involvement of Chinese capital. At the same time, in comparison to some EU funds (such as the projects of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), Chinese concessional loans in Serbia and its popularity lies in its relatively lower interest rate, longer re-payment period, and higher amount of a single loan. From this point of view, Chinese funds are complementary to, and not a substitution for the EU funds. Moreover, the Chinese side has begun to invest more directly in Serbia and other regional countries, which means that the construction method based on preferential loans has come to an end. In the future, increasing Chinese funds will enter the local markets in the form of direct investments through cooperation with European and global partners.<sup>11</sup>

### *3.3 The infrastructural concern*

By doubting the political and economic motives of Chinese activities in Serbia, the EU also questions the fact that China's loans to Serbia and other Western Balkan countries exceeded its solvency, and over-drafted the potential for future development of the region, while, also, suspecting they have set up a 'debt trap'. For example, the EU has sent out an alert regarding the level of Serbia's public debt. Apart from this, the Montenegro North-South Expressway project has, also, been in the focus of Western critics. The project needs a total of 800 million euros invested in the first phase, and 85% of funding has been China's preferential loan, which makes Montenegro's public debt accountable for more than 80% of its GDP. Even if the follow-up bidding plan is carried out in the PPP mode, some observers doubted that Montenegro's possible economic volume and the

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<sup>10</sup> Benner, Thorsten et al.(2018) "Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe", Global Public Policy Institute & Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin, February 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Bastian, Jens (2017) The Potential for Growth Through Chinese Infrastructure Investments in Central and South-Eastern Europe Along the "Balkan Silk Road", Report prepared for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Athens/London, July 2017.

North-South highway's traffic volume would be very prominent so as to meet this profit.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, the infrastructure projects undertaken by the Chinese agencies are either renovating existing projects or constructing new ones which are urgently needed in Serbia. For instance, the Serbian highway project, from Surčin to Obrenovac, is a part of the Serbian E763 highway project and the part that runs through the Pan-European Corridor. Hence, the completion of this project will help Serbia integrate into the Pan-European transport network. The acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill by Hebei Iron and Steel Group has been a great success, for both countries, and has not only revitalized the Serbian steel industry and opened numerous job opportunities for professional workers, but also potentially opened a door to turning the industry into an environmentally friendly project, based on the Chinese experience. Moreover, the wind power project operated by Shanghai Electric Power is a green environmental project which benefits the local environment and reduced the electricity price, thus improving the livelihood of local people. It has been one of the trial projects of the BRI, demonstrating its main aim of high-quality development. It is widely acknowledged by the locals that the infrastructure projects run by Chinese firms are not only in line with the official plans of the Pan-European Transport Network and the Pan-European Corridor, but are also complements to the interconnection agenda of the Berlin process. It mirrors the EU's interconnection agenda and encourages the spirit of cross-border cooperation.

### *3.4 The social effects*

At last, there are opinions in the EU that the Chinese infrastructure projects may have adverse, unsustainable effects on society and the environment. Some scholars have pointed out that China often overestimates the positive effects of infrastructure projects and underestimates their potential risks, whether economic, social or environmental.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Western measures are more transactional and take into account the economic, social

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<sup>12</sup> Barkin, Noah (2018) Chinese 'Highway to Nowhere' Haunts Montenegro, Reuters, (July 16th) available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-europe-montenegro-insi/'chinese-highway-to-nowhere-haunts-montenegro-idUSKBN1K60QX>, accessed on December 10, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Bataineh, Bushra et al (2018), How the West Surrendered Global Infrastructure Development to China, Foreign Affairs, (20 May), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-05-21/beijings-building-boom>, accessed on December 10, 2019.

and environmental consequences of specific projects. These preventive measures are in the interest of ordinary people in developing countries.

Local people are the best judges when it comes to the social effects of Chinese projects. Most of the interviewees, people either from the host institutes or randomly chosen ones, expressed a positive impression of Chinese activities in Serbia. According to most of the Chinese engineers working in Serbia, their companies managed to anticipate, during the local operation process, possible social, economic and environmental hazards of the project and take corresponding measures, so as to avoid these problems. For example, the China Road and Bridge Corporation not only strictly followed the local construction requirements, but also cultivated a group of outstanding local talents for further local industrial development. In addition, in the case of Hebei Steel Group's acquisition of the Smederevo Steel Plant, it was demonstrated that Chinese companies consider social responsibility as one of the priorities for their local operations.

In short, the encounter of China and the EU in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, has triggered various speculations regarding their possible competition or cooperation on regional affairs. By analyzing the specific practices and achievements of Chinese enterprises in constructing the BRI in Serbia, it would be suitable to conclude that the current progress of BRI construction contributes to the implementation of the EU's Western Balkan strategy as a whole and is supportive of the economic development of Serbia. Based on its own advantages in terms of capital and construction, the Chinese side has contributed to Serbia's prospects of becoming a member of the EU. Although Chinese companies may compete with European local enterprises during open bids for large-scale infrastructure projects, it does not exhaust the room for China and the EU to seek better cooperation in the region.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Against the backdrop of intensifying global protectionism, a stable China-EU relationship serves as a pre-requisite for the steady development of the BRI in Europe. When China and the EU meet in Serbia and other Balkan countries, be it whether to engage in regional competition or deepen cooperation in regional affairs, this will have a great influence on any future development of their relations. Based on an analysis of the EU's strategy towards Serbia's and China's BRI projects in the country, this paper argues that China's investment and China-financed infrastructure projects play a

positive role in driving Serbia to join the EU. Chinese funds and technologies not only promote the livelihood of the people in the region, but also help integrate the region's transport and energy networks into the existing Trans-European Networks and Pan-European Corridors. In addition, there is ample room for China and the EU to develop their cooperation in terms of rule-setting, standards, funding and planning. At this stage, the cooperation between China and the EU in the Western Balkans should be based on the 'China-Europe Platform for Interconnectivity' and effectively promote the connection between China and the EU in terms of norms, standards, funding and planning.

In short, at the current stage, a large number of infrastructure projects regarding the construction of the BRI in Serbia have made planning for the pan-European transportation network in this region a reality. It is not only a connection between the BRI and the EU strategy for regional enlargement, but also an initial practice for the China-Europe interconnectivity platform construction. It has the potential to help China and Europe jump out of zero-sum game, by thinking about and cooperating on creating a connection between Asia and Europe.

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