

“STEEL FRIENDSHIP” OF THE POLITICAL ELITES: HOW CHINA BECAME A SOFT POWER PLAYER IN SERBIA

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Abstract: In recent years, with varying degrees of success, the People’s Republic of China has been attempting to enhance its image in other countries through various public and cultural diplomacy strategies in order to increase its soft power. Notably, in the Balkans, Serbia stands out as a country where the promotion of Chinese soft power has been more successful than in other countries in the region. Indicators of this success are evident in the attitudes of Serbian citizens, with a large and stable majority holding favourable views towards China and considering it one of the most influential foreign policy actors shaping Serbia’s international position. Therefore, the question arises: How did China become such an influential soft power player in Serbia? In an effort to answer this question, we will present a set of the most significant factors that have positioned China in this manner: characteristics of political relations, economic cooperation, military and security cooperation, cultural cooperation, the conduct of the Serbian political elite, and the influence of the media. To understand the success of China’s soft power in Serbia, this paper will prioritise two key factors: the significant influence exerted by Serbian political elites in shaping a pro-Chinese narrative and favourable portrayals in the media. The first part of the paper will focus on the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the People’s Republic of China, which will serve as the primary indicator of its soft power in Serbia. The second part of the paper will use contextual analysis to present the key factors shaping China’s soft power in Serbia.

Keywords: “steel friendship”, Serbia, China, soft power, political elites.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of soft power is a fundamental aspect of China's foreign policy and a key objective in its long-term international strategy. China has long understood the significant impact of soft power in shaping global perceptions and influencing other countries (Nye, 2023, pp. 89-130; 2015; 2012, pp. 154-155). Consequently, China has committed substantial resources and efforts to enhance its soft power capabilities. That includes investing billions of dollars in various initiatives, such as promoting the Chinese language and culture through Confucius Institutes and other cultural exchange programs. China also focuses on shaping its image through international media efforts, projecting a favourable narrative of the country. Additionally, China leverages the secondary effects of its economic power, such as infrastructure investments, to bolster its soft power (Repnikova, 2022; Albert, 2018; Lai & Lu, 2012).

The strategy of expanding and strengthening Chinese soft power is also directed towards Central and Eastern European countries, including the Western Balkans (Shopov, 2021). Remarkably, China's soft power influence in Serbia surpasses that of its neighbours (Trailović, 2021, pp. 46-48). Indicators of this success are evident in the attitudes of Serbian citizens, with a significant majority holding favourable views towards China and recognising it as an important actor in shaping Serbia's international standing (Gledić, 2024, pp. 9-12; IPS, 2022; 2018; 2017; 2016).

We argue that the notable success of Chinese soft power in Serbia is not solely attributable to the standard strategies (public and cultural diplomacy) employed by the Chinese state, which are applied across various countries. Rather, a unique combination of specific factors has played a crucial role. These factors are rooted both in the bilateral relations between China and Serbia and in Serbia's domestic political context.

We examine a range of factors, including political relations, economic cooperation, military and security cooperation, cultural cooperation, the conduct of the Serbian political elite, and the role of the media (Mitrović, 2023; Kowalski et al., 2022; Vuksanovic, 2021; Jureković, 2021). However, we highlight two key factors: the instrumental role of Serbian political elites in constructing a pro-China narrative and the media's reinforcement of this perspective (Vladislavljev, 2021a). Strong historical ties (Kolaković, 2021),

aligned political interests, and close and well-developed bilateral relations have created a fertile ground for Chinese influence in Serbia. On that basis, Serbian political elites have actively cultivated a pro-China narrative, amplified by the media, shaping public opinion in favour of China.

Soft power is inherently difficult to measure, but experts often use public opinion polls to assess perceptions, with public sentiment toward a country serving as a key indicator of its soft power (Xie & Jin, 2021).

The initial section of this paper will examine Serbian public opinion towards China, utilising public opinion surveys conducted by the Institute for Political Studies (Belgrade) from 2015-2018 and in 2022 as a primary metric for assessing China's soft power in Serbia. By analysing these surveys, we aim to quantify the extent of China's positive image and the favourable sentiment it holds among the Serbian population. Focusing on the role of Serbian political elites in promoting a pro-China narrative and the media's reinforcement of this view, we explored the correlation between citizens' trust in these institutions and their attitudes towards China. The insights gained from this analysis will serve as a foundation for the subsequent section, where we will explore the selected factors that have shaped these public attitudes over time.

SURVEYS: ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHINA

About the surveys

The Institute for Political Studies (IPS) conducted a series of seven surveys, six between 2015 and 2018 and an additional one in 2022, to gauge the attitudes of the Serbian population on a range of topics.¹ The surveys employed a representative sample design, ensuring that the respondents reflected the demographic makeup of the country as a whole. Sample sizes

¹ As a contributor to the Institute for Political Studies' public opinion surveys conducted between 2015 and 2022, the author was involved in all stages of the research process. This involvement encompasses participation in sample preparation, development of instruments (survey questionnaires), organization and implementation of the surveys, training and supervision of interviewers, as well as data collection, entry, and analysis.

ranged from approximately 1,200 to 1,400 individuals, providing a statistically robust foundation for analysis.²

Data collection relied on face-to-face interviews, a method that fosters a more detailed exchange of information compared to self-administered surveys. Structured questionnaires were employed to improve data analysis efficiency. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, a stratified three-stage probability sampling design was employed. The sampling frame was based on the data from the 2011 Census. In the first stage, polling station territories were selected using a random route technique. The second stage involved a random selection of households within these designated areas. Finally, respondents were chosen randomly from the selected households.

The survey instrument encompassed a comprehensive array of topics designed to capture the citizenry's political and social viewpoints. Core areas of inquiry included trust in political institutions, voting behaviour, and national identity. The surveys also explored public opinion on foreign states and international organisations.

Regarding China, the surveys explored two key aspects of public perception. Respondents were asked to register their overall attitude towards China on a spectrum ranging from highly unfavourable to highly favourable. Additionally, they were queried about their perception of China's influence on Serbia's standing in the international community, gauging whether this influence was viewed as positive or negative.

Data and results

The surveys included questions aimed at capturing citizens' opinions on specific countries, particularly those emerging as significant poles of influence in the international system, such as China. Respondents were asked to rate

² In 2015, the survey was conducted in the period from November 16 to 26, on a sample of 1272 respondents, 2016 in the period from November 20 to 30 on a sample of 1,272, 2017/1 in the period from May 25 to June 5 on a sample of 1,272, and 2017/2 from November 20 to 30 on a sample of 1,474. In May 2018/1, the survey was conducted on a sample of 1,480 respondents and in December 2018/2 on a sample of 1,450. One survey was conducted in June 2022 on a sample of 1,200 respondents.

these countries on a scale from one to five, where one represents a very unfavourable opinion and five indicates a very favourable opinion.

Table 1 and Table 2 present the percentages for China. Table 2 shows the percentages for unfavourable and favourable opinions, which are calculated by summing the percentages of responses categorised as “very unfavourable” and “unfavourable” for the unfavourable column and “very favourable” and “favourable” for the favourable column. The average rating of China on a 5-point scale is shown in Graph 1. Table 3 displays the percentage of respondents who hold unfavourable and favourable opinions of China compared to their opinions of other countries in 2022.

Table 1. Please give your opinion on the mentioned countries—China (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018)

	Very unfavourable opinion (%)	Unfavourable opinion (%)	Neutral (%)	Favourable opinion (%)	Very favourable opinion (%)
2015	4,5	9,1	25,1	27,7	33,5
2016	4,7	9,9	23,6	28,6	33,2
2017/1	4,3	7,5	22,7	26,6	39
2017/2	5,1	9,5	27,9	28	29,5
2018/1	3,4	10,5	25,3	27,8	33
2018/2	4,1	9,5	24,7	25,6	36,1

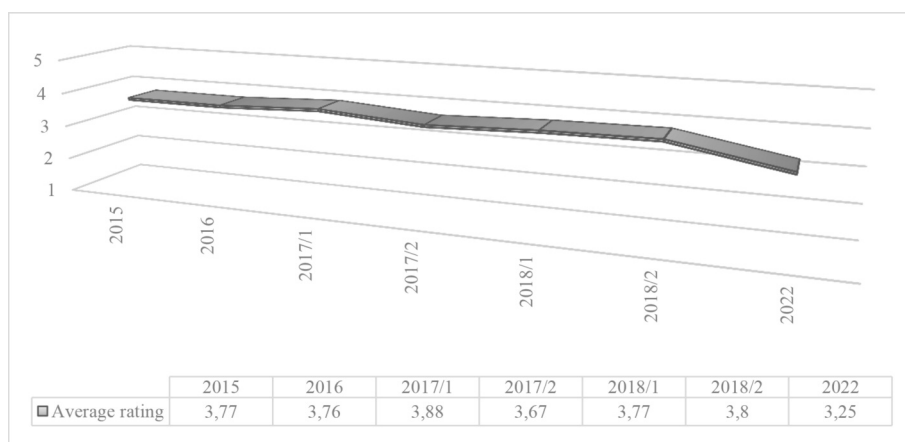
Source: IPS, 2018/1; 2018/2; 2017/1; 2017/2; 2016; 2015. Author’s calculation

Table 2. Please give your opinion on the mentioned countries—China (2022)

	Unfavourable opinion %	Neutral %	Favourable opinion %
2022	25,3	31,7	43

Source: IPS, 2022. Author’s calculation

Graph 1. Average Public Opinion Rating of China (2015–2018, 2022)



Source: IPS, 2022; 2018/1; 2018/2; 2017/1; 2017/2; 2016; 2015. Author's calculation

Table 3. Please give your opinion on the mentioned countries—China, Russia, France, Germany, and the US (2022)

	Unfavourable opinion %	Favourable opinion %
China	25,3	43
Russia	22,2	55,6
France	47,7	20,8
Germany	48,5	24,4
USA	63,1	13,6

Source: IPS, 2022. Author's calculation

Table 4 presents the results on how respondents assess China's influence on Serbia's political position in the world.

Table 4. How do you assess the influence of the listed countries and international organisations on the political position of Serbia in the world—China (2016, 2017, and 2018)

	Very negative influence %	Negative influence %	Neutral %	Positive influence %	Very positive influence %
2016	2,7	10,4	28,6	33,9	24,2
2017/1	2,9	10,8	26,3	29,8	30,2
2017//2	4,1	10,8	28,6	29,1	27,4
2018/1	2,9	12,1	29,5	26,5	29
2018/2	3,8	9,4	28,3	29,8	28,8

Source: IPS, 2018/1; 2018/2; 2017/1; 2017/2; 2016. Author's calculation

Correlation results

Given our focus on two key factors—the instrumental role of Serbian political elites in shaping a pro-China narrative and the media's reinforcement of this perspective—we examined the correlation between citizens' trust in these institutions and their attitudes towards China. The analysis utilised data from a IPS 2022 survey administered to a representative sample of Serbian citizens. Pearson correlation coefficients were employed to analyse the strength and direction of the relationships between these variables.

The findings showed the following correlations:

- Trust in Parliament and Attitude Towards China: A weak positive correlation was found, with a correlation coefficient (r) of .158 and a statistically significant p -value ($p < .001$).
- Trust in President and Attitude Towards China: A weak positive correlation was found, with a correlation coefficient (r) of .208 and a statistically significant p -value ($p < .001$).
- Trust in Government and Attitude Towards China: A weak positive correlation was identified, with a correlation coefficient (r) of .161 and a statistically significant p -value ($p < .001$).
- Trust in Media and Attitude Towards China: A very weak positive correlation emerged, with a correlation coefficient (r) of .122 and a statistically significant p -value ($p < .001$).

Interpretation and analysis

The data reflects a generally positive sentiment towards China among the Serbian public, with the majority of respondents frequently expressing favourable opinions. Despite some fluctuations, there is a general inclination towards favourable views, with the overall favourability (adding both favourable and very favourable) averaging around 60% across the years (2015-2018) and over 40% in 2022 (Tables 1 and 2). The average opinion across years is 3.7, reflecting a generally positive view of China among the respondents (Graph 1).³

The average unfavourable opinion (combining “very unfavourable” and “unfavourable” opinions) over the period 2015-2018, including the 2022 data, is approximately 15.36%.⁴

Compared to other countries, China holds a favourable position in Serbian public opinion. While China is not as highly regarded as Russia, which enjoys the most positive sentiment, it is viewed far more favourably than Western countries like France, Germany, and the US (Table 3).⁵

China’s influence on Serbia’s position in international relations, according to the Serbian public, appears to be generally positive, with an average positive influence of 57.74 across the measured periods. The most dominant sentiment throughout the period is Positive influence (Table 4).

All correlations were positive, though weak, suggesting a possible connection between trust in Serbian institutions and a more positive attitude towards China. The results suggest that individuals who have more trust in Serbian institutions (especially in the President)⁶ also tend to have a more

³ An analysis of the causes of changes in citizens’ attitudes towards China (changes in the context or sentiments) over time is not the subject of this paper. The presented data serve as an illustration of the frequently high percentage of favourable opinions towards China in Serbia.

⁴ It is important to note that there is also a certain percentage of citizens who have a negative perception of China’s engagement in Serbia, especially due to issues related to the enforcement of environmental standards and workers’ rights (Derans, 2024; Danas, 2024; Nova, 2021).

⁵ For more on Russian soft power and cultural diplomacy in Serbia, see: (Glišin & Despotović, 2022, pp. 107-131; Pejković, 2022, pp. 185-202; Atlagić, 2021, pp. 21-34).

⁶ For instance, 44.6% of respondents expressed high or relatively high trust in the President (combining ‘I have great trust’ and ‘I have trust’) in 2022 (IPS, 2022).

positive attitude towards China. Despite the limitations, these findings align with the argument that pronouncements and policies by these institutions promoting positive relations with China could influence public perception. For instance, if the President frequently emphasises the importance of the China-Serbia strategic partnership, these actions might be perceived positively by the public, leading to a more favourable view of China.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF CHINESE SOFT POWER IN SERBIA

Strong, well-developed, and positive political, economic, cultural, and military cooperation between two countries can significantly enhance the image of one country in the public opinion of the other. This, in turn, can increase the soft power of the country. Joseph Nye argues that soft power is not solely derived from culture, values, and policies; economic and military resources also play significant roles (Nye, 2012, p. 153). Economic resources can generate both soft and hard power depending on their use—aid and trade can attract and build positive relations, while sanctions can coerce. Similarly, military resources, traditionally seen as hard power, can enhance soft power. Well-organised and professional military can enhance a country's image and attractiveness. Military-to-military cooperation, such as training programs or joint exercises, can build relationships and networks that improve a country's soft power (Nye, 2012, p. 153-154).

In addition to that, according to Dams, Rühlig, and Tonchev, while China's, for example, economic power can have secondary soft power effects, these actions do not automatically constitute soft power. The investment itself is not inherently soft power. Instead, for an investment in a country to present an opportunity to boost soft power, it must be accompanied by public relations efforts and campaigns to enhance its image (Dams, Rühlig & Tonchev, 2021, pp. 6-7).

In Serbia, the situation mirrors this dynamic, with Chinese engagement being heavily promoted not only by China but also by Serbian political elites and the media.

Political relations

The current relations between China and Serbia, although rooted in their shared communist past and China's support for the Non-Aligned Movement

during the Cold War era, are decisively shaped by events from the most recent history. Key historical events include the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent political rapprochement between Serbia and China during the 1990s as a consequence of the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999, when the Chinese embassy was destroyed. These events prompted their alignment and fostered a strong bilateral partnership (Kolaković, 2021, p. 126). The incident prompted a closer alliance between the two countries based on shared opposition to Western interventionism (Jureković, 2021, p. 141).

The Sino-Serbian relationship has been developing since two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2009. The relations further deepened in 2013 and then rose to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). In 2024, during the Chinese President's visit to Serbia, China and Serbia agreed to establish a "community of Serbia and China with a shared future in the new era" as the next step in strengthening the cooperation between the two countries. In particular, the cooperation between China and Serbia takes place within the China-CEEC cooperation framework, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative (Mitrović, 2023; Vuksanović, 2021).

Important features of the political cooperation between the two countries include an intensive political dialogue, visits at the highest political level, mutual political trust, and coordination at the multilateral level.

The relationship between Serbia and China has been marked by frequent high and high-level visits and significant diplomatic engagements. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has visited China multiple times, most recently in October 2023, for the Third Belt and Road Forum, where he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. A pivotal moment in bilateral relations was the visit of President Xi to Serbia in June 2016, marking the first such visit by a Chinese president in 30 years and resulting in the signing of a Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Serbia in May 2024, marking a significant event in the relationship between the two countries. On this occasion, a new chapter has been opened in the relations between China and Serbia. The existing comprehensive strategic partnership has evolved into a community of shared future between Serbia and China in the new era. Serbia is the first country in Europe to build such a partnership with China at the level of a shared future.

Parliamentary cooperation is also strong, with reciprocal visits by top legislative officials from both countries. In June 2024, a Serbian parliamentary delegation visited China, where they met with Zhao Leji, the Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee. Serbian officials have participated in major events in China and held meetings with Chinese leaders, further strengthening their bilateral ties. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi also made official visits to Serbia, emphasising the ongoing cooperation between the two nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Thanks to strong political cooperation, China and Serbia share aligned positions on many global and national issues. Both nations firmly support the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. China's stance, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, of not recognising the unilaterally declared independence of the Serbian Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija is crucial for Serbia. Besides, China, with several other countries, voted against the UN resolution on Srebrenica in 2024. In return, Serbia officially supports the One China policy and China's policies regarding Hong Kong and Xinjiang. In 2019, Serbia signed a statement delivered by Belarus on Behalf of 54 Countries at the UN General Assembly's committee on human rights, praising China's policies in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xiao, 2019).

Economic cooperation

The Republic of Serbia bases its relations with the People's Republic of China on an established, comprehensive strategic partnership. As a result, Serbia is one of China's biggest economic partners in the Western Balkans. Serbia is also China's largest trade partner in the region and has become a key hub for Chinese investments. Through its companies and banks, China has a significant presence in Serbia. That is primarily manifested through loans, particularly for infrastructure projects such as bridges, highways, and railways. Additionally, China has made substantial investments in the metallurgy, energy, and mining sectors.

As noted, China and Serbia have established a strong bilateral trade relationship, with Serbia being China's leading trading partner in Central and Eastern Europe and China as Serbia's key trading partner in Asia. In 2023, the bilateral trade between China and Serbia reached significant levels, reflecting

the deepening economic ties between the two nations. The total trade value amounted to approximately \$6.46 billion USD. Of this, Serbia's imports from China were valued at \$4.80 billion USD, highlighting China's role as a key supplier to the Serbian market. Conversely, China's imports from Serbia were valued at \$1.66 billion USD, indicating a growing demand for Serbian goods in the Chinese market (International Trade Centre, 2024). The newly signed China-Serbia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is expected to further boost trade by liberalising the exchange of goods across various sectors.

Since the signing of the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement in 2009, China has participated in several critical infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade and the modernisation of the Kostolac thermal power plant. Between 2014 and 2022, China financed through loans several major infrastructure projects in Serbia, including high-speed railways (Belgrade-Stara Pazova and Novi Sad-Subotica), highways (Miloš Veliki and Corridor Fruška Gora), energy plants (Kostolac Thermal Power Plant), and metro systems (Belgrade Metro), with investments totalling billions of US dollars (Ivanović & Zakić, 2023, p. 78-79).

China's investment in Serbia is extensive, particularly in mining and the automotive sectors. Initiated in 2016 with the acquisition of the Železara Smederevo steel factory by the Chinese state-owned Hesteel Group, investments have grown to exceed \$3 billion by June 2022 (Ivanović & Zakić, 2023, p. 80). China has made significant acquisitions, such as the Smederevo Steel Mill and Bor mines, alongside new greenfield investments like the Čukaru Peki project. In the automotive industry, Chinese companies have invested in several key projects (Shandong Linglong, Mei Ta, Yanfeng, Xingyu, and Minth).

Military and security cooperation

In recent years, military and security cooperation between China and Serbia has grown significantly, marking a new dimension in their partnership. This collaboration extends across two key areas of Serbia's national security: the military and public security sectors (Trailović, 2020).

Sino-Serbian military cooperation has intensified since 2017, beginning with a visit by a Chinese military delegation to Serbia. The collaboration has expanded to include joint military exercises, defence technology development, and equipment donations, such as military gear. Key

agreements were concluded, including technology transfers for Serbia's defence industry and the exchange of military officers for training. The cooperation was highlighted by high-profile visits and significant donations, with plans for future joint military exercises (Trailović, 2020).

A significant sign of the deepening military cooperation between China and Serbia was the delivery of Chinese Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and surface-to-air missiles. In 2020, Serbia received six CH-92A drones and 18 FT-8C laser-guided missiles from China, along with technology transfer to help Serbia develop its own "Pegasus" drone (Knezevic, 2022; Jureković, 2021, p. 142-143). Chinese expertise was instrumental in the project's success. Additionally, Serbia acquired HQ-22 surface-to-air missile systems, delivered in 2022 (Knezevic, 2022).

According to the signed FTA, China will gradually eliminate tariffs on Serbian tanks and armoured vehicles over the next ten years, starting from a 15% tariff with an annual reduction of 1.5%. For artillery weapons and similar equipment, the current 13% tariff will be reduced by 2.6% each year over the next five years. Serbia will also eliminate tariffs on the import of Chinese weapons over the next ten to fifteen years. The current import tax on these weapons is 25% (Baletić, 2023).

China and Serbia are deepening their security cooperation, particularly in public safety, through technology transfers, such as facial recognition systems, and joint police patrols in Serbian cities (Jureković, 2021, p. 144).

Cultural cooperation

China cooperates not only with Serbia's official political institutions but increasingly with other societal institutions like universities, research institutes, and cultural organisations. These include Confucius Institutes and classrooms, academic and scientific partnerships, cultural activities organised by the Chinese Embassy, and media presence in the country.

The two countries have traditionally had good cooperation in the fields of culture and cultural activities. The Chinese Ministry of Culture and the Serbian Ministry of Culture signed and agreed on plans for cooperation, including exchanges and collaboration in various areas such as cultural festivals, literature, art, publishing, books, museums, archaeology, archives, radio, television, and film. During the official visit of the President of the

People's Republic of China to Serbia in May 2024, the Serbian Minister of Culture signed three documents aimed at further strengthening cultural cooperation and reaffirming the strong friendship between Serbia and China, according to the Ministry of Culture. The Minister of Culture and the Chinese Ambassador signed a Cultural Cooperation Programme between the two ministries for the period 2025–2028 (Vreme, 2024).

China promotes its culture through two Confucius Institutes at universities in Belgrade and Novi Sad. These institutes offer Chinese language courses, cultural events, and resources like libraries. Additionally, there are Confucius Classrooms in schools across Serbia. The construction of a Chinese Cultural Centre in Serbia, which is one of the largest of its kind in Europe, is another significant development in this cooperation. This centre aims to serve as a hub for cultural and economic exchanges between the two countries, reflecting the deepening ties and the strategic importance of cultural understanding in their bilateral relationship (Trailović, 2021, p. 56-59).

The First China-Serbia Culture Communication Forum took place in Belgrade, Serbia, in April 2024.

THE ROLE OF SERBIAN POLITICAL ELITES IN SHAPING A PRO-CHINA NARRATIVE

When discussing China's soft power in Serbia, it is important to note that this influence is not only a secondary effect of strong political, economic, cultural, and military cooperation but is also amplified by positive representation from Serbian political elites and media outlets. Simply put, China's political and economic engagement in Serbia has a positive and favourable PR campaign by the Serbian political elites.

This trend is particularly evident in the introduction of terms like "steel friendship" or "iron-clad friendship", which have become prevalent in Serbian public discourse when describing the relationship between the two nations. This notion gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, championed by the highest Serbian officials (Kolaković, 2021, p. 128). Overall, pro-Chinese messages and narratives are regularly disseminated by top Serbian representatives, who, in various addresses to the public, often describe the Chinese nation as a "brotherly nation" and President Xi Jinping as a "friend and brother" (Subotić, 2022, 2021, pp. 82-84; Stojanović, 2020; Vučić, 2020).

Additionally, the pro-Chinese narrative is increasingly promoted in Serbia's public space, with Serbian officials frequently publicising and reproducing Chinese strategic narratives, such as the "community of a shared future", "mutual benefit", and "win-win cooperation" (RTS, 2024a; RTS, 2024b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbian elites prominently showcased China's aid and vaccine donations, portraying China as a dependable partner, especially in contrast to what was perceived as a slow response from the EU. Serbian President Vučić praised China as the only reliable ally, contrasting it sharply with his critique of the EU, particularly regarding Brussels's delayed transfer of medical equipment to non-EU countries. He highlighted China's friendly assistance while accusing the EU of egoism. Senior Serbian officials and the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia personally welcomed the first Chinese medical team at Belgrade's Nikola Tesla Airport, with President Vučić kissing the PRC's flag (Kowalski & Rekšć, 2023, p. 190).

In the Joint Statement signed by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2024, the Serbian side emphasised the deep and evolving partnership between Serbia and China, highlighting the "iron-clad friendship" and comprehensive strategic cooperation between the two nations. The statement portrayed China as one of the main pillars of Serbian foreign policy and a crucial partner in Serbia's economic development, especially through initiatives like the Belt and Road and infrastructure projects. The statement reflected Serbia's appreciation for China's support in areas such as economic growth, healthcare, and regional connectivity, while also affirming Serbia's commitment to the One China policy and mutual support on key international issues. The Serbian side framed the relationship as mutually beneficial, underscoring a shared commitment to peace, development, and respect for sovereignty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

The joint statement by the presidents of Serbia and China, issued during the Chinese president's visit to Serbia in May 2024, effectively describes and summarises how Serbian political elites have portrayed China in recent years. Serbian political elites have cultivated strong diplomatic and economic ties with China, portraying the relationship as mutually beneficial. China's support for Serbia on the Kosovo* issue, particularly in international forums where China has opposed Kosovo's* independence, has been leveraged by Serbian elites to justify closer ties with Beijing. Furthermore, Chinese companies' involvement in high-profile infrastructure projects in Serbia, such as the

construction of bridges, highways, and railways, is portrayed as vital to Serbia's economic development and highlighted as evidence of a successful partnership (Vladisavljev, 2021a, p. 10). The political elites emphasise the benefits of these investments while downplaying potential negative aspects, such as environmental concerns or labour issues. Serbia's participation in the China-CEEC framework of cooperation is described as a critical aspect of Serbia's economic modernisation, reinforcing China's image as a crucial partner and saviour (Prelec, 2020, pp. 10-13).

It is important to note that positive attitudes towards China in Serbia are largely shaped by the ruling political elites. On the other hand, opposition parties portray China's role in the country differently, expressing concerns about Chinese involvement and conducting a negative representation of China. The members of certain opposition political parties emphasise that one of Serbia's foreign policy pillars is cooperation with the European Union, which requires meeting certain conditions as part of the EU accession process. Despite the extensive economic cooperation between EU countries and China, there is significant criticism from EU institutions regarding the political, economic, cultural, and security aspects of China-Serbia relations (European Parliament, 2021). Critics, including voices from the EU and parts of the Serbian opposition, highlight issues such as the lack of transparency in deals with Chinese state-owned or state-influenced companies, bypassing the EU-standard business practices, the absence of competitive tenders, and concerns over corruption. Additionally, they warn that the reliance on loans from Chinese banks for these projects may lead Serbia into a debt trap (Cvetković, 2021). Despite this approach and the criticisms from EU institutions and part of the Serbian political elite about China's "debt trap", "lack of transparency", and overall "malign influence", the outcomes continue to be favourable for China.

Media's Reinforcement of the Pro-China Narrative

The role of the media is significant in promoting a positive narrative about China in Serbia (Subotić, 2022, pp. 41-44; Vladisavljev, 2021b; Šteric & Bjeloš, 2021). An example of that is the tabloid "Informer", which set up public billboards expressing gratitude to President Xi for China's assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic with messages such as "Thank you, brother Xi" (Jureković, 2021, p. 139).

There are two main pathways for promoting a pro-China narrative in Serbia. One consists of Serbian media outlets, while the second involves Chinese media operating directly within Serbia. The favourable portrayals of China are reinforced by various Serbian broadcasters, including prominent television stations like Radio Television of Serbia (RTS).⁷ Among the Chinese media, China Radio International, which provides content in Serbian, and China Global Television Network (CGTN), available on major cable distributors, are noted as the most visible in Serbia (Vladislavljev, 2021b).

Three major Serbian media outlets and the press service of President Aleksandar Vučić signed agreements with state-owned Chinese media companies during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Belgrade in May 2024. Key figures from Serbian media, including the Director of Radio Television of Serbia, Dragan Bujosević, and the Editor-in-Chief of Politika newspaper, Marko Albinović, exchanged agreements with Shen Haixiong, a top official in the Chinese Communist Party and head of the China Media Group, to deepen cooperation. Additionally, the Serbian President's media advisor, Suzana Vasiljević, and the Director General of the news agency Tanjug, Manja Grčić, signed agreements with Chinese counterparts from the China Media Group and Xinhua news agency, respectively, to facilitate news exchange and cooperation (Stojanović, 2024).

The majority of Serbian media often portray any form of Chinese presence in Serbia, especially in the economy, positively, emphasising the benefits to the Serbian economy, job creation, and infrastructure development, which reinforces a favourable image of China. According to the CRTA media monitoring report (July 1 to August 31, 2021), coverage of China was predominantly positive, unlike the more negative coverage of the European Union and the United States. When China was reported in the context of politics, military, healthcare, economy, and Kosovo*, the reports were consistently favourable (CRTA, 2021). Another report on media monitoring in Serbia published in 2023 reveals that China was consistently portrayed in a positive light, maintaining double-digit net positive sentiment, similar to

⁷ RTS reports that since 2017, one of its channels has had a regular time slot for airing Chinese documentaries and has so far broadcasted more than 200 Chinese documentaries on the country's history, customs, cuisine, culture, traditional crafts, landmarks, and the daily lives of its people (Krstić & Bogdanović, 2024).

previous monitoring periods. According to the report, China's portrayal remained stable and positive in influential media outlets despite being mentioned less frequently than Russia or Ukraine. The report concludes that China was the most positively represented foreign actor during the observed period, standing out for its stable and favourable portrayal compared to other countries and organisations (Rašeta et al., 2023).

According to the report "Odnosi Kine i Srbije: mediji i stavovi građana", published in January 2024, in recent Serbian media coverage, the relationship between Serbia and China has also been framed positively, especially following the signing of a Free Trade Agreement. This arrangement is portrayed as a significant opportunity for Serbia to expand its market access, particularly in agriculture. China is showcased as a benevolent partner eager to support Serbia's economic growth in Southeast Europe. The report stated that China is consistently seen in most Serbian media as Serbia's most reliable and powerful ally (Rašeta et al., 2024).

Just as there is a certain percentage of Serbian citizens and members of the Serbian political elite who hold a negative opinion of China, there are also media outlets that critically assess China's role in Serbia, also portraying it negatively in certain areas. In these media outlets, China is portrayed as a country that brings "dirty investments". China and its investments are often targeted, particularly on environmental grounds and their impact on ecology. Moreover, China is frequently portrayed as a country to which Serbia is heavily indebted, with occasional references to "debt slavery" in the context of their relationship (Rašeta et al., 2023, p.7; Savić, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In Central and Eastern Europe, Serbia stands out as a country where the promotion of Chinese soft power is more successful than in other regional countries. Public surveys reveal that Serbia generally holds positive views of China, with a consistently favourable opinion over the years. China is viewed more favourably in Serbia than Western countries, and there is a positive correlation between trust in Serbian institutions and a more positive attitude towards China.

This success story is not merely a result of China's generic soft power strategies but is deeply intertwined with Serbia's domestic political dynamics.

This study highlights that the success of Chinese soft power in Serbia is not a product of a passive public easily influenced by foreign factors or only a byproduct of well-developed and positive bilateral cooperation, but rather underscores the active role of domestic forces in constructing and disseminating favourable narratives about China.

The historical and political ties between the two nations have fostered a conducive environment for Chinese influence. Serbia's positive historical associations with China and strong political relations between their governments have laid a solid foundation for cooperation and mutual trust. Serbia's domestic political context has significantly contributed to the receptivity of Chinese soft power. Serbian political elites have actively promoted a pro-Chinese narrative, viewing China as a valuable ally and partner. This endorsement from influential political figures has been instrumental in shaping public opinion and enhancing China's image within Serbia. Additionally, the Serbian media has played a vital role in reinforcing this narrative. Favourable portrayals of China in Serbian media outlets have further amplified the positive perception of China among Serbian citizens, contributing to the success of China's soft power.

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