

Serbia and China: 'Steel Friendship' in the EU's backyard

Chinese soft power and cultural diplomacy are pretty much the same in all Eastern and Central Europe, but it is magnified in Serbia by the dominant narrative of the political elite and Vucic's two-level 'game'.



Photo by Reuters

By Vedrana Maglajlija

Construction of the first Chinese COVID-19 vaccine production facility in Europe started in Serbia in September 2021. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic laid the foundation stone of a new Sinopharm vaccine factory in Belgrade. It is expected that [30 million doses a year will be produced from April next year](#).

The Sinopharm vaccine has been approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) for emergency use but still needs the approval of the European Medicines Agency. Despite that, Serbia bought [four million doses and received another 200,000 as a donation](#). This was part of what many call China's 'vaccine' diplomacy, followed by its 'mask' diplomacy at the beginning of the pandemic.

In Serbia, Chinese 'mask' diplomacy started in March 2020, when Europe faced a shortage of medical and personal protective equipment, and the European Commission decided to oblige member states to issue an authorization to export this type of product. In the Western Balkan countries, in a time of panic and fear, this decision was interpreted as a definitive ban. ["European solidarity does not exist... it is only a fairy tale on paper. Today, I sent a special letter. Because we expect a lot and have the highest hopes in the only one who can help us in this difficult situation, and that is China", said Serbian President](#)

[Aleksandar Vucic](#) during a press conference, almost with tears in his eyes, while proclaiming the state of emergency.

Medical aid from China came soon after, under the form of boxes with special messages in Chinese and Serbian language: “Steel friendship, we share good and evil” was written besides the image of the hearth, with one half filled with the Serbian flag and the other with the Chinese one. Together with the boxes, came to Serbia six medical experts from Wuhan, a Chinese province where the first cases of coronavirus were recorded. Furthermore, to express his gratitude, Vucic welcomed the help from Beijing by kissing the Chinese flag at the Belgrade airport in front of cameras. In the center of the Serbian capital a huge [billboard with the photo of the Chinese President and the message “Thank you, brother Xi” appeared](#).

Yet, the European Union quickly reversed course after limiting the export of goods in March 2020 and donated billions to the Western Balkans to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. This adds to the previous significant investments the EU made in Serbia’s healthcare, with [more than 450 million euros in aid and loans over the past 20 years, and the 93.4 million euros donation package to battle COVID-19 directly](#). Also, the EU donated Serbia [180 million euros during and after the floods in 2014, and more than 100 million euros for the migrant crisis](#). Over time, harsh criticism of the EU has been softened in Serbia’s officials’ discourse, with President Vucic and Prime Minister Ana Brnabic both thanking the EU for its help. This was however less publicly and less emotionally expressed than in the case of China. Such mutism has not gone unnoticed by the EU, as made clear by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell: [“It is very funny because I have never seen a billboard saying ‘Thanks to the EU for the help it has been providing us’. And we have been providing a lot of help to Serbia and other countries of the Balkans”](#).

The Centre for Contemporary Politics from Belgrade came to the same conclusion in its research [“Media Reporting in Serbia on the European Union 2020: Love from China and Slaps from Brussels”](#). In their study of media coverage of the EU from January 1 to October 31, 2020, these researchers reanalyzed 18 web pages with the highest readership and significant impact on public perception. They showed the presence of highly emotional pro-Chinese and anti-European narratives related to the aid. The leading source of the pro-China narrative was Vucic himself, supported by the pro-government media, that emotionally reported on Chinese aid, with headlines such as: “Serbia, do not cry, China is with you“, “Serbia must not forget this: Chinese sent messages of solidarity with Serbia which melts hearts“. In comparison, the coverage of the EU by the same pro-government media was much more negative, first on the opening and closing of the border crossings and later on the aid provided. Its headlines were about “barriers” and “ramps” that were lowered only “for Serbs” and how Brussels left the Western Balkans “in the lurch”, how the “Brussels bureaucratic imaginary was exposed” and how “The EU is fatally wounded! It would let the Serbs die!”, as well as that “the corona destroyed the European dream”.

Vaccine diplomacy

In the same manner, when China started to deliver vaccines at the beginning of 2021, a great deal of public fanfare from Serbian government was staged. In January 2021, a plane carrying one million doses of Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine arrived in Serbia, making it the first European country to receive the Chinese vaccine for mass inoculation programs. [Vucic himself welcomed the shipment at the airport and](#)

[said that the arrival of the vaccine is "proof of the great friendship between Serbia and China"](#).

Additionally, Serbian President publicly received two doses of the Sinopharm vaccine.

Even though it is fact that the vaccine donations from the East did come much faster and to a greater extent than from Western Europe, the arrival of Western vaccines has been far less publicized than those from China. Asked by journalists when Serbia can expect to receive COVAX vaccines, President Vucic said that while he would thank the EU when the vaccines arrive, ["all I can say is that I don't care, we work without them"](#).

Once again, this pro-Chinese position has alerted the European Union. At the end of March 2021, the European Parliament issued a resolution calling on Serbia to fight corruption and organized crime and work on the rule of law if it wanted to join the EU. The resolution also expressed strong concerns about Beijing's increasing influence on Serbia and the lack of transparency in Chinese investments and loans, so as on the failure of investors and lenders to carry out environmental and social impact assessments. These critics of Serbia's public health care especially irritated President Vucic. He said that the European parliamentarians are apparently ["lost in time and space", praising his own handling of the coronavirus crisis and the acquisition of vaccines](#). That same day, [Vucic met with visiting Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe](#) in Belgrade, who emphasized that "the destiny and future of Serbia and China are interlocked".

Relations with China and the EU

Many scholars recognize current Serbia as competitive authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, and a populist democracy where Vucic is an autocratic embodiment of populism, constructing a cult of personality by protecting the country against dangerous others, composed usually of enemies from the international community. Yet, the EU membership is still a strategic goal of the Serbian foreign policy as Serbia applied for it in 2009. Since then, in spite of the EU being Serbia's main economic partner, the two actors have had a difficult relationship. Tensions first arose because of Serbia's lack of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in arresting and extraditing suspected war criminals, which was one of the EU conditions for starting the process of integration. The second issue in their relationship is Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008, with many EU states recognizing the new country. Such decision created strong resentments in Serbia and was perceived even more as a betrayal than the work of the ICTY.

In contrast, Serbia and China maintain a strong relationship. Indeed, at the moment, Serbia is the only partner of China at the strategic level in the Western Balkans and the only country in the region visited by Chinese President Xi Jinping, in June 2016. In 2017, the two countries [mutually abolished visa requirements](#), with Serbia becoming the first European country to do that. Serbia is also the only country in Europe that has [bought military drones from China](#). Furthermore, China invests billions of dollars in the region in the form of low-interest loans with long maturity periods in the field of energy, mining and heavy industry, and transport infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1 framework. This proximity traces back to May 7, 1999, when, during the NATO intervention, five guided bombs hit China's embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Since then, Beijing has been supporting Serbia in the international community on matters relating to Kosovo, especially in the UN Security Council. Serbia's position has been reciprocated, with Belgrade being loyal to the One China policy.

'Steel friendship'

As China's presence in Serbia grew, the leadership of this Western Balkans country more and more promoted and glorified this cooperation, describing it often as a "steel friendship". However, some scholars agree that Chinese soft power and cultural diplomacy are pretty much the same in all Eastern and Central Europe, but it is magnified in Serbia by the dominant narrative of the political elite and [Vucic's two-level "game"](#).

One includes internal affairs, where Vucic wants to present himself to the people and potential voters as the leader who positioned this small country as an equal to a big world power such as China. The other lever is linked to Serbia's foreign policy where Vucic uses China as leverage in negotiating with the West, threatening to turn to its "Chinese friends".

Vucic's strategy seems to be the winning one. The perception of China in Serbia is extremely positive. The Belgrade Center for Security Policy conducted two surveys, in [2017](#) and [2020](#), that show extreme growth of positive attitudes towards China – in 2020 75% of respondents believed that China provided the most assistance to Serbia in the fight against the pandemic and only 3% of Serbian citizens recognized that the EU was the biggest donor. In addition, almost 90% of respondents said that the Chinese influence in the country was positive, an enormous increase of over 30 percent compared to the survey from 2017. For comparison, 72% of people said that Russia had a positive influence and 68% of them considered that the EU's influence on Serbia was negative. From these surveys, it is obvious that pessimism about the EU membership is growing and the support for the Union is declining. In the 2020 survey, a majority of 51% did not support Serbia's membership in the EU, while in 2017 35% of citizens would have voted against EU membership. These numbers raise questions of the level of information of Serbian citizens as both Belgrade and Beijing are happy with the current situation of critical information about China not being so much public, since there is not enough knowledge and experts in Serbia who could critically assess this new emerging world power in public.

This article was originally published by the Centre for European Research, Queen Mary University of London in November 2021.



CentreEuropeQMUL NEXTEUK
@CER_QMUL



Read our two new latest blog posts published in our 'Europe Matters Blog' by [@VedranaAJB](#):

- 'Serbia and China: 'Steel Friendship' in the EU's backyard'
- 'Bulgaria's veto strengthens nationalism and Euroscepticism in North Macedonia'

cer.qmul.ac.uk/europemattersb...

10:35 AM · Nov 9, 2021