

EU AND CHINESE INTERESTS AT THE WESTERN BALKANS CROSSROADS: ECONOMIC CHALLENGERS OR POLITICAL AND SECURITY COMPETITORS

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the Western Balkans (WB) has increasingly become a focal point for various global powers across multiple domains. Precisely, a significant debate has emerged around the economic role of Chinese investments in the WB region, ranging from radical perspectives claiming that the economic interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are a precursor to the Chinese political and security interference in the region to more pragmatic views that suggest Chinese investments in the WB region will compete with and challenge the role of the European Union (EU), particularly in the context of the *frozen* EU integration process. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the last ten years, using deduction to determine whether Chinese economic inflows in the WB region could lead to greater influence in the political and security domains. Additionally, based on this research and through the method of prediction, the authors will provide potential answers regarding future Chinese foreign policy steps and its role in the WB region. From a theoretical perspective, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the implementation of political and security interests of so-called global players, such as China, is not always rooted in economic mechanisms and resources. From a practical perspective, the research aims to explain whether China's presence in the WB region accelerates or hinders the EU integration path for WB actors—from the normative perspective.

Keywords: Western Balkans, China, European Union, economic interests, political and security challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

The construction of modern international relations is grounded in the multi-sectoral interweaving of economic, political, and security dynamics. For an accurate understanding of current international relations, it is essential to analyse these structures through key economic, political, and security determinants that seem to be intertwined to create a mosaic of current international relations at the global, regional, and bilateral levels. Different determinants offer a clearer understanding of international dynamics, especially in the current period of international relations where national and allied-bloc interests often diverge—particularly in political and security matters—while at the same time, economic interests tend to serve as a common denominator for all factors of international relations in the process of ensuring sustainability. In this context, it is equally important to grasp the regional political, economic, and security flows shaped by both regional challenges and interactions with external actors, especially those seeking to assert their interests in a specific regional geographic area.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the Western Balkans (WB) region as a political entity and its relations with the European Union (EU) on one side and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the other, aiming to scientifically explain why this region has become an important determinant in the foreign policy activities of major international actors. The paper also seeks to analyse how this multilateral external interest in the WB region will influence the foreign policy positioning of regional political entities and their efforts to achieve economic sustainability and stability in the face of contemporary security challenges, threats, and risks. The authors focus on the relations of the WB actors with the EU and the PRC, recognising the importance of these two international actors in regional frameworks and bilateral interests—primarily in the economic and political domains, which inevitably carry long-term security implications. From an academic perspective, this work, grounded in neorealism and neoclassical realism theories, aims to enhance our understanding of how the foreign policy manoeuvring space for small international actors expands during periods of destabilised international relations. In a practical sense, it contributes to a better understanding of current regional and international relations, with a particular focus on the WB region.

NEOREALISM AND NEOCLASSICAL REALISM THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE EU AND CHINESE RELATIONS WITH THE WESTERN BALKANS

Classical realists argue that international relations are fundamentally driven by the pursuit of national or state interests. They contend that interstate cooperation is nonexistent, replaced instead by *forced* communication aimed at achieving these interests, with competition and hostility being the *natural* state of these relations. However, from today's perspective, the history of international relations suggests a shift toward a new model of understanding international relations. It brings us closer to the model of realism—neorealism, which, according to Dragan Živojinović (2008, p. 375), 'finds the main causes of events in international relations in the structure of the international system, i.e., in the analysis at the level of the international system'. Nevertheless, to build a robust theoretical foundation in this work, it is crucial not to overlook the perspective of neoclassical realism. Unlike neorealists, neoclassical realists 'find the main causes of events in international relations in human nature and the nature of states, i.e., in the analysis at the individual level and the analysis at the state level' (Živojinović, 2008, p. 375).

To better understand the relationships between the WB region and the PRC, on the one hand, and the WB and the EU, on the other, it is almost impossible to rely solely on one theoretical framework. Doing so would obscure the whole picture of these relationships—their determinants, conditioning factors, and future prospects. These are intertwined political, security, and economic relations shaped by specific events within the so-called international structure, as well as by leadership dynamics and state positions, alongside the indirect interests of involved actors. In this paper, we will demonstrate how the aforementioned theoretical approaches are interwoven and how they can be *coordinated* and applied in the practice of contemporary international relations, specifically through the example of China and the EU's relations with the WB actors.

There is little doubt that state interests today are primarily achieved through interstate cooperation. Cooperation is a minimum prerequisite for realising these state interests. However, questions arise about the extent to which this cooperation necessitates integration, both comprehensive and sectoral, to achieve these interests fully. Does comprehensive cooperation represent a logical and natural progression, or can it be effectively limited to

specific sectors? Can national interests at a given moment conflict with foreign policy goals, and how is this possible if foreign policy goals are defined by national interests? In the given context, do political entities in the WB face a certain *internal conflict* between foreign policy goals and national interests? Through the analysis of these relationships in this work, we will seek to answer these questions, contributing significantly to the theoretical understanding of contemporary international relations and the foreign policy of small political entities, using the Western Balkans as a case study.

ECONOMIC DIMENSION

The analysis of economic relations between subjects of international law has always been a crucial factor in understanding international relations and forecasting the development trajectory of these relationships. While not an absolute rule, economic indicators significantly aid in understanding comprehensive trends in international relations, given the interweaving nature of economic, political, and security relations. Therefore, a vital segment of this analysis is the examination of economic relations between the EU and the WB region, on the one hand, and between the PRC and the WB countries, on the other. This dichotomy is established to address the research questions posed in the paper, wherein the projection of political and security power and interests of both the EU and the PRC in the WB region is primarily interpreted and anticipated from an economic standpoint.

China-Western Balkans relations

The economic role of the PRC in the WB region is becoming an increasingly significant factor in its economic landscape, particularly in the infrastructure, energy, and investment sectors. Before delving into the specifics of this cooperation, it is essential to highlight the observation made by Stanojević and Zakić, who assert that ‘the Balkans (which in a geographical sense encompasses the political area of the Western Balkans) is inextricably linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, as evidenced by the establishment of the so-called Balkan Silk Road. The main objective is to connect the Greek port of Piraeus by road and railway with North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary, and subsequently with the rest of Europe’ (Станојевић и Закић,

2023, стр. 361). In this context, the Western Balkans represents an indispensable and integral part of China's economic positioning within Europe.

In 2012, Beijing initiated the Cooperation Mechanism between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), which has included all five WB countries since its inception (Mitrović, 2023, p. 78). However, as Katarina Zakić explains, research on projects initiated after 2012 reveals that most are individual projects contracted bilaterally between national governments and Beijing, with far fewer being regional projects agreed upon under the multilateral platform (Заквић, 2020, cited in Mitrović, 2023, p. 79). This is already an important determinant in attempting to understand and create a projection of China's economic presence in the WB region and, by extension, the potential political and security influence China may wield in this region. In this context, it is challenging to fully justify Dejan Pavličević's assertion that 'China's approach to the Western Balkans is perceived in Brussels and other European capitals as a strategy based on expansive geopolitical intentions, in which the engagement of economic resources attempts to increase political influence, on account of the central role that the Union plays in the region today' (Павлићевић, 2023, cited in Mitrović, 2023, p. 80).

On the other hand, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), established in 2013, aims to boost China's economic development, open new commercial routes, and enhance its global presence by investing in a network of transport infrastructure (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022, p. 3). The following tables (Table 1 and Table 2) provide a detailed view of China's financial involvement within the Western Balkans:

Table 1. Investments by the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Serbia, 2021

Serbia	Project	Worth
	Belgrade-Budapest railway	€1.4 billion
	Zelezara Smederevo by China's Hesteel Group	US\$120 million
	Zijin Mining	€ 1.260 billion
	Linglong Tire	€ 800 million
	Hbis Group	€ 466 million
	Minth Group	€ 370,9 million
	Mei Ta	€ 124,4 million
	Hisense Group	€ 101,2 million
	Johnson Electric	€ 65 million
	Xingyu Automotive	€ 60 million
	Yanfeng	€ 47,1 million
	BMTS	€ 22,5 million

Source: Vukašinović, 2024.

Table 2. Ongoing Projects by the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Serbia

Serbia – Ongoing projects	Company	Capacity	Worth
Hybrid RES plant in Bor	Shanghai Fengling Renewables	2 GW	€ 2 billion
Wind green	PowerChina and CWP Europe	300 MW	/
Agrosolar in Kula	MK Fintel Wind and PowerChina	660 MW	€ 350 million
Solar power plant in Smederevo	PowerChina and AVR Solar Park	9,95 MW	/
Solar power plant in Bela Palanka	PowerChina and AVR Solar Park	150 MW	/
A factory for the production of solar panels and a solar power plant in Paraćin	Hunan Rich Photovoltaic Science and Technology	1GW factory, 200 MW solar power plant	€ 310 million

Source: Peljto, 2024.

In the previous tables, we used Serbia as an example since it is a WB country with the most pronounced economic cooperation with China. This cooperation is strategic, bearing in mind the sectors in which Serbian-Chinese investment, economic, and financial relations have been concluded, realised, or are currently in progress. Other WB countries also exhibit increasing cooperation with China, though not to the same extent as Serbia. For instance, according to data published by the Central Bank of Montenegro in October 2020, China became the largest investor in Montenegro that year, with €70 million in direct investments. However, despite numerous warnings regarding the economic and fiscal unsustainability of the project, in 2014, the Government of Montenegro took a loan worth €809 million from the Chinese EXIM Bank for constructing the Bar-Bolja highway, which led to a dramatic increase in Montenegro's public debt (Kovačević, 2021).

China's investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) started relatively recently, amounting to approximately \$1.3 billion. The majority of these investments have been directed towards the transport sector, particularly in infrastructure development such as highways and main roads. Notably, work is currently underway on the section Banja Luka-Prijedor, a project valued at nearly \$300 million; with the Shandong Gaosu company, the Bosnian government signed a 30-year concession agreement for the use of this road section (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022, cited in Станојевић и Закић, 2023, стр. 378). Additionally, the Chinese companies China State Construction Engineering and Synohydro Power China were awarded contracts to work on the section of Corridor 5C on the Počitelj-Zvirovići section. The value of this project is €100 million (Večernji.ba, 2019, cited in Станојевић и Закић, 2023, стр. 378). It is also worth mentioning that China had already engaged in a significant project in BiH before the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative. Between 2010 and 2014, Dongfang Electric Company, in partnership with EFT Group, built Stanari—the first thermal power plant in Bosnia, which has a capacity of 300 MW; the Chinese company invested €350 million (Sadiković, 2019, cited in Станојевић и Закић, 2023, стр. 378).

Like its neighbouring countries, North Macedonia primarily imports technologically advanced products from China, including electrical machinery and appliances (computers, monitors, telephones, and switchboards). Its main export to China is iron. In 2021, China recorded a trade surplus of approximately \$436 million, which increased to \$577 million in 2022. While

these are relatively small amounts, given the scale of North Macedonia's economy, the 25% increase in one year is a significant change in the parameters. However, as shown, these parameters have reached much more dramatic growth. In the infrastructure sector, North Macedonia has agreed with China to work on the improvement of transport infrastructure, focusing on two highway sections, Miladinovci-Štip and Kičevo-Ohrid, with a total value of \$490 million. The Miladinovci-Štip section is completed, while the second section is still under construction (Станојевић и Закић, 2023, стр. 385). On the other hand, China has made two smaller investments in North Macedonia in recent years, worth €47 million (Филиповић и Игњатовић, 2021, cited in Станојевић и Закић, 2023, стр. 386).

From January 2024, China is Albania's second-largest trading partner (INSTAT, 2024, cited in Musabelliu, 2024). The import and export rates have intensified despite the distance, differences, and political implications. For instance, in 2023, the distribution of Albania's trading partners was as follows: Italy (29.2%), China (7.9%), Turkey (6.8%), and Greece (6.5%) (INSTAT, 2024, cited in Musabelliu, 2024). From an investment perspective, according to the Bank of Albania (2022), by the end of 2021, in the list of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), China ranked 31st. In 2014, it was publicly announced that one of the most important arteries of the country's routes would be built by a Chinese company. Arbri Road was considered a crucial investment to modernise the country's infrastructure. A memorandum of cooperation with the Chinese Exim Bank on opening a project site in Albania was signed in December 2014, securing Chinese financing. 'The first project that will open the beginning of a new era of cooperation between Albania and China', wrote Rama on his social media on the same day (Musabelliu, 2022). Labelled in Albania as a political saga, the run for the construction of this highway was one of the major electoral promises of Edi Rama. In 2015, the Albanian government led by Rama approved a special law, offering China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) the authority to complete the Arbri Road under a concession deal. China EXIM Bank would provide the financing for the project. However, two years later, the winner of the tender for the construction of this road was Gjoka Konstruksion, an Albanian-run company that was the apparent winner of the government bid, facing no rivalry from two other Albanian companies disqualified for dubious reasons (Musabelliu, 2022). The other major deal that was initiated but did not go through between China and Albania was

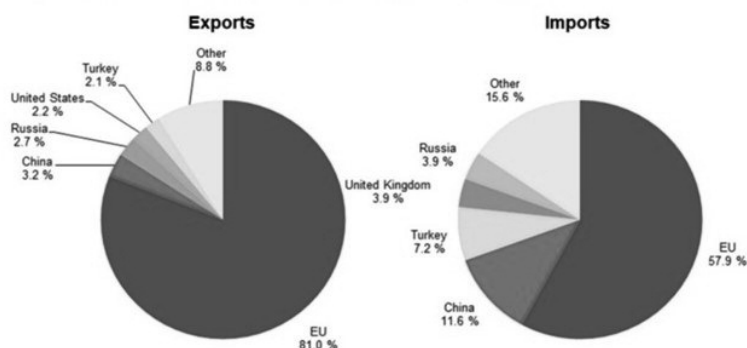
the project for the construction of the Blue Corridor motorway. This project aimed to connect the entire eastern shore of the Adriatic and Ionian Sea—from Trieste in Italy to Greece via Croatia, Montenegro, and Albania (Musabelliu, 2022). The only *stronghold* left is Bankers Petroleum, a fully-owned subsidiary of Geo-Jade Petroleum, the dominant oil operator in Albania. Shanghai-listed Geo-Jade Petroleum bought Bankers Petroleum in 2016 in a \$381 million deal. Patos-Marinza is the largest oil deposit in Albania and one of the largest onshore fields in Europe. According to their official statements, \$3.5 billion was spent on the Patos-Marinza Oilfield; \$587 million in royalties was paid to the Albanian State Budget. The company counts 2,000 employees, 530 direct employees, and 1,470 subcontractor employees. Over time, it has become one of the biggest contributors to the Albanian economy. Over the last 15 years, the company has paid more than \$740 million in taxes in Albania (Musabelliu, 2022).

Overall, from the perspective of the WB as a whole, when it comes to investments, China ranked 4th in total investment stock in the WB region, with €4.369 billion at the end of 2022. However, as Ana Krstinovska (2024) explains, €4 billion, or the quasi-totality of the investments, is concentrated in Serbia, while in other WB countries, China does not even rank among the top 10 investors.

EU-Western Balkans relations

The economic relations between the WB countries and the EU cannot be viewed solely through the lens of economics, finance, or investment. These relations are deeply intertwined with political and security dynamics, shaped by bilateral integration processes—specifically, the EU’s enlargement agenda and the shared foreign policy objective of EU accession among the WB countries. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the interconnected nature of these political, economic, and security relations when analysing the ties between the EU and the WB.

Figure 1. Trade relations of Western Balkans actors with main partners



Source: Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022, p. 2.

The table shows that over four-fifths of the WB's exports are directed to the EU. It is a clear indicator of the intensity of economic relations at the EU and the WB levels. From 2011 to 2021, EU trade with the WB region grew by nearly 130%. In the same period, WB's exports to the EU increased by 207% (EEAS, 2022a).

In contrast, this is not the case with other external economic partners of the WB. The EU stands as the largest financial donor in this region. Through the IPA II funds, aimed at pre-accession assistance in the European integration process, almost €4 billion was allocated to individual partners in the WB, with an additional €3 billion from funds for several countries from 2014 to 2020 (EEAS, 2019).

Furthermore, in terms of direct investment, EU companies accounted for over 65% of foreign direct investment in the WB in 2018, positioning EU businesses as the leading investors in the region. The *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021-2027* further underscores the EU's commitment to the region, focusing on three pillars:

1. *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)*: Up to €9 billion in EU funding, aimed at supporting economic convergence with the EU, competitiveness and inclusive growth, sustainable connectivity, twin green, and digital transition.

2. *Western Balkans Guarantee Facility*: Up to €20 billion in investments, designed to reduce the cost of financing for public and private investments and mitigate the risk for investors.
3. *COVID-19 EU Support Package*: Up to €3.3 billion, directed towards supporting the health sector, businesses, and public sector socio-economic recovery, as well as the transport of equipment.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

The relationships between political entities in the WB and various foreign actors are mainly determined by the interests of *external and larger actors* instead of the strategic foreign policy positioning of the WB as a whole. The WB as a whole exists in the political vocabulary of the EU. In fact, the political dictionary of the EU coined the term *Western Balkans*, which refers to the political entities in the post-Yugoslav region that are not yet EU members, including Albania. It is a clumsy geographical term with a precise political meaning. In today's circumstances, we are talking about political entities that declaratively set membership in the European Union as their strategic foreign policy goal. However, the factual situation both on the side of these actors and on the side of official Brussels does not testify to *two-way steps* towards that foreign policy commitment. Simultaneously, there has been a noticeable increase in political cooperation with other major *external actors* interested in establishing their influence in this region.

China-Western Balkans relations

Local media report that 'economic underdevelopment and reduced democratic capacities, as well as the reserved and insufficient presence of the European Union and the United States of America, have enabled China to position itself as an important factor in the Western Balkans' (Durović, 2022). The Digital Forensic Centre (DFC, 2023) states that 'China's modus operandi is clearly profiled primarily through cooperation within infrastructure projects and by offering cheaper services compared to American or European competitors, which as a result provides Chinese cooperation with the countries of the region'.

On the other hand, despite its significant economic presence across the Balkans, China's influence is limited for now due to the lack of strong political support. That was particularly evident in Albania and Montenegro, where the Chinese presence was significantly reduced. Also, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West is more focused on the traditionally unstable WB, which further complicates China's efforts in the region. The exception is Serbia, where the ruling structures and the media close to them represent an important lever of Chinese influence.

Furthermore, it remains challenging for China to properly establish a strong political influence in the WB region despite the huge investment cycles carried out by Chinese companies. The foreign policy goals of the region's political entities have not changed. Beijing does not publicly oppose the potential for political and economic integration of the WB with the EU, apart from the existing disagreements between Brussels and Beijing regarding the status of Kosovo and Metohija. While Beijing insists on a dialogue based on the principles of international law, Brussels declaratively maintains a status-neutral dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, which, still not officially, is interpreted as acceptance of the unilateral independence of Pristina by Serbia within the European framework. The status of Kosovo and Metohija is actually a point of divergence in the understanding of regional political conditions by China on the one hand and the EU on the other.

The political relations of the People's Republic of China in the Western Balkans are most prominently manifested in its relationship with Belgrade. At the same time, Serbia is a most valuable economic partner of China in the region and, equally important, a political ally. This political partnership is currently grounded in the principles of international law, particularly the respect for territorial integrity, as evident by the relations between Serbia and China regarding the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija. While a number of the countries have recognised the unilateral declaration of independence by the institutions in Pristina, the People's Republic of China firmly supports the principles and norms of international law and thus the position of Serbia, i.e., that Kosovo and Metohija, in the form of a province, is an integral part of the integrity of the territory of Serbia. Besides common positions on the Kosovo and Metohija issue, Belgrade and Beijing, in the context of ongoing international developments, including the Ukrainian war, destabilisation in the Middle East, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, have

reached new momentum in their political relations. The recent official visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Serbia was used as an opportunity to enhance political ties between these two countries, from a strategic partnership to a common future in the upcoming era, which is a concept promoted by the Chinese president at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in 2013. This concept emphasises the pursuit of permanent peace as an ultimate goal, achieved through dialogue, consultation, and common security, alongside progress based on universal cooperation. Additionally, it encompasses the exchange of scientific achievements, including student exchanges and a shared commitment to environmental protection. Notably, Serbia is the first European country to sign such a joint statement with Chinese officials (Draškić, 2024).

EU-Western Balkans relations

Considering the EU's cooperation with political entities in the WB, it is important to point out that it is primarily defined by the *Stabilisation and Association Agreement* as a basic document and then by numerous concrete agreements, including pre-accession and accession processes. Currently, it seems that the political relations of the WB countries are the most intense precisely with the EU, and they are regarded as a *fait accompli* on both sides even though the current political tendencies do not go in that direction. The fact is that political relations between the EU and the WB as a whole are stable but also notably uneven, especially in the context of the Ukrainian conflict.

In 2003, in Thessaloniki, a city in the north of Greece, the leaders of the EU declared for the first time that the countries of the WB would one day become EU members. They had, as Brussels said, a "European perspective". Twenty-one years later, the stance that the region has a European perspective is still present, but it is also emphasised that the EU must strengthen its engagement with the countries there. Much can be inferred from the context of the *necessity of additional EU engagement in the Western Balkans*. With a skilled diplomatic dictionary, it was determined that there is a certain problem in relations between the WB and the EU. In that context, a question remains open: what is missing to restore the so-called Thessaloniki momentum when the EU was set to become a main foreign policy partner of this region? The latest concrete step on that path is the *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*.

It foresees a total of €6 billion for the WB countries from 2024 to 2027—€2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans (Evropska unija, 2024, p. 1). It is based on four pillars, namely 1) strengthening economic integration with the single market of the EU; 2) strengthening economic integration within the WB region through a common regional market; 3) accelerating fundamental reforms; and 4) increasing financial aid (Evropska unija, 2024, p. 1). However, the conditions for using these grants and loans are directly related to the reform process, so it is stated:

1. The release of all funds will depend on progress in the implementation of measures from the Reform Agenda.
2. In case the payment conditions are not met, the European Commission will suspend or deduct the corresponding amount from the payment. The WB partners will have 1-2 years to fulfil all the conditions. Otherwise, the amount will be redistributed to others in subsequent years (Evropska unija, 2024, p. 3).

It seems that the EU has not abandoned the integration of the WB region, but it has not given up on the reform preconditions either. It is difficult to predict how the process will unfold, bearing in mind the internal challenges faced by Brussels and the *traditional* institutional, political, security, and economic challenges in the WB region. However, it is almost certain that it will be difficult to reinstate the Thessaloniki momentum in the current decade, as well as the attractiveness of the Union itself in the WB as it was at the beginning of the 21st century. The essence of understanding the current relations between the European Union and the Western Balkans lies not only in the contemporary challenges on the international and European stage but also in the uneven approach Brussels has taken in the enlargement process over the past two decades. That is particularly evident in the case of North Macedonia, where the country's European trajectory has been largely determined by political disputes with neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria rather than being based on key accession criteria. An even more complex scenario is the European integration of Serbia, where official Belgrade is required to normalise relations with the self-proclaimed authorities in Pristina. This requirement persists, although Kosovo and Metohija, which unilaterally declared independence in violation of established international principles and norms, remain integral parts of Serbia's territorial integrity. From this perspective, it is important to point out that the relations between the EU

and the Western Balkans are not merely a *two-way street*. They are rather complex *intersections* shaped by numerous *input-output* determinants, giving rise to a new form of these relations.

SECURITY DIMENSION

China's security engagement in the WB region has been increasing over the years, especially as these countries remain in *the EU waiting room*. Considering that EU membership is a strategic goal for the WB countries, the EU's role in the region's security is potentially crucial. Therefore, this section of the paper explores the security-related relations of the WB countries with both China and the EU.

China-Western Balkans relations

Besides Serbia, most WB countries do not maintain military, defence, or security ties with China. The reason their collaboration with China in the security realm is limited or nonexistent lies in their NATO membership. As NATO members, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are bound by alliance policies that oppose China's actions in the region. Regarding the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo and Metohija, China firmly supports the territorial integrity of Serbia and does not have diplomatic ties with *independent Kosovo*. Another factor is the EU membership and accession, requiring the WB countries to comply with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Therefore, they chose not to engage with China in the defence and security realms to avoid complicating their standings and accession processes. However, Serbia, which maintains military neutrality and seeks to pursue independent foreign and security policy, does not follow this pattern.

Serbia has extensive and growing cooperation with China in the security field, including military donations, the procurement of military equipment, joint drills and training, police cooperation and patrols, and the purchase of surveillance cameras. In 2009, former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Serbia and proposed deepening the Belgrade-Beijing relationship through a strategic partnership. During President Xi Jinping's visit to Belgrade in 2016, this partnership was elevated to a comprehensive strategic

partnership. In the aftermath of President Xi's first visit to Serbia, high-ranking military officials from Serbia and China met in Beijing, where they outlined key cooperation areas further strengthening military-to-military collaboration, such as joint drills, exchanges, military medicine, and anti-terrorism activities (Global Times, 2016). Since 2017, there have been several significant meetings between Serbian and Chinese high-ranking military officers, resulting in agreements on joint military training and officers' exchanges, military technology transfers, as well as joint participation in the UN peacekeeping missions (Траиловић, 2020).

In that regard, a steady increase in defence and security collaboration is visible during the analysed period, both quantitatively and qualitatively: what started with military donations is lately being upgraded with the purchases of advanced weapons and military equipment. Between 2008 and 2020, China's donations to the Serbian Ministry of Defence increased significantly (for a detailed list of contracts, see Траиловић, 2020, стр. 134-135). In 2023, China became the largest military donor in Serbia, surpassing all donations from the US for that year (Petaković, 2024). Purchases of military equipment and weapons, such as drones (CH-92A) and air defence missile systems (FK-3), illustrate how the China-Serbia comprehensive strategic partnership has expanded into the security domain. Serbia is currently the only European country that has bought Chinese weapons and armament (Reuters, 2022). Further strengthening of military cooperation is anticipated under the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Serbia and China. The FTA will allow for a gradual reduction in tariffs on Chinese weapons over the next 15 years (Bjeloš, Resare & Wang, 2023). This arrangement can help bolster Serbia's military capabilities and deepen its reliance on Chinese military equipment and technology, which can have broader implications for Serbia's geopolitical positioning in the WB region and Europe.

In addition to growing military cooperation, the public security domain has been another area of interest for the two countries in deepening their relations. For instance, to assist Chinese tourists in Serbia, joint police patrols with Chinese officers were carried out in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Smederevo (Čarnić, 2023), alongside joint law enforcement exercises focused on releasing hostages and neutralising terrorists, conducted at the Železara Smederevo facility in 2019 (N1 Beograd, 2019). However, the project *Safe City* has attracted significant attention from the Serbian public, neighbouring

countries, and the international community. It was considered a *backdoor* entry for Chinese security technology into the EU security market. Serbia and Chinese Huawei signed a contract to install over 1,000 high-definition surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition software at 800 locations in Belgrade (Stojkovski, 2019). Another WB country that agreed with Huawei was Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018 (Sarajevo Times, 2018), but there have been no further actions since. In contrast to Serbia's openness to collaborating with Chinese companies, other WB countries opted to support the ban on Huawei and other *untrusted vendors*, such as Chinese ZTE, thus sidelining the EU and the US on this matter (see Vladislavjević, 2021).

One of the reasons behind China's growing security presence in the region, facilitated by Serbia, is the obvious need to protect its investments, particularly as the vital corridor from the port of Piraeus to Central Europe passes near disputed Kosovo and Metohija (Митић, 2022, стр. 26). As Mitić (2022, стр. 20) notices, new and evolving threats to China's expanding economic footprint and constant broadening of its *interest frontiers* require constant 'transformation and expansion of foreign policy and security activities'. While safeguarding Chinese capital is significant, it is not the sole motive for extending its military and security presence. Many scholars argue that Serbia serves as its *wild card* for entering the European defence and security market and bypassing restrictions (Митић, 2022; Trailović, 2020; Vukosavljević & Ejduš, 2023). Although President Xi's first visit to Belgrade in 2016 was primarily focused on economic issues, his second visit on May 7, 2024, marking the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, carried a strong symbolic significance and was mainly political, bringing new opportunities in the security realm as well. President Xi and President Vučić signed a *Joint Statement on Deepening and Elevating the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Building a China-Serbia Community with a Shared Future in the New Era*, whose aims are, *inter alia*, long-lasting peace and common security. The statement underscored Serbia's readiness to take active steps in developing and implementing Chinese global initiatives, including the Global Security Initiative (GSI), further highlighting the mutual support of the two countries when it comes to vital interests, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty (MFA RS, 2024). The *iron-clad friendship* between Serbia and China has been upgraded from a comprehensive strategic partnership to a *community of shared future*, making Serbia the first European country to have such a partnership with China. As Trailović (2020)

observes, military and security cooperation in Serbia could serve as a case study for China's new role in Europe, announcing its extended engagement. Given this development, it is clear that Serbia remains a priority on China's agenda, with Sino-Serbian bilateral relations deepening across various domains, including defence and security matters. Serbian President Vučić described it as 'a new milestone in the history of this bilateral relationship' (Xinhua, 2024). Considering these developments, we can anticipate a greater security role for China in the region in the coming years.

EU-Western Balkans relations

According to the Austrian Foreign Minister Schallenberg, 'the Western Balkans are not Europe's backyard, as they are sometimes mistakenly called. Rather, it is the inner courtyard, the patio. Therefore, we must come closer together and firmly anchor the region in our European family' (Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria for European and International Affairs, 2024). This statement underscores the strategic importance of the WB region to the EU and emphasises that the stability and security of the WB are integral to the overall European security architecture; the WB stability directly impacts European security due to the region's proximity—it is a critical region where security challenges, like organised crime, migration flows, and external influence (e.g., from China and Russia) can have significant implications for Europe. Hence a need to *bring it closer* through integration to ensure long-term peace and security. Furthermore, this statement also reflects the EU's strategic interest in preventing the WB countries from becoming the sphere of influence for non-European powers. In the context of our analysis, fear of such external influence in the WB could be regarded in light of China's expanding influence in the region. It should be noted that China has been perceived as a country that challenges EU values and the Western *rules-based order*, thus being designated as 'an economic competitor and a systemic rival' in the EU's threat-based document titled *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (March 2022) (Janković & Mitić, 2024, p. 119).

The driving force behind security cooperation in the WB is the prospect of EU membership. Through its enlargement policy, the EU has significantly influenced security matters in the region, particularly through the required reform process and alignment of countries' foreign and security policies with

EU regulations. However, the EU enlargement policy and accession conditions in the WB region have been heavily influenced by security reasons and the EU's involvement in internal political issues of candidate countries, requiring stability before integration (Петровић, Ковачевић и Радић Милосављевић, 2023, стр. 96-97). In 2018, the European Commission adopted the *Western Balkans Strategy* to enhance and strengthen the cooperation between the EU and the WB countries. This Strategy aims to 'expand and deepen CFSP/CSDP dialogues, increase Western Balkans contributions to EU missions and operations, and further develop cooperation on hybrid threats, intelligence, space issues, and defence and security sector reform' (EEAS, 2022b). An important requirement is resolving bilateral disputes, including border disputes, with *normalisation* between Belgrade and Pristina being a key step for Serbia to continue its EU path. This normalisation has a significant security dimension, especially considering recent escalations. However, as normalisation implies official recognition of Kosovo and Metohija independence—a condition unacceptable for Serbia—it becomes a *stumbling block* for Serbia. That consequently influences its strategic decisions, such as forging closer ties with China and Russia on security issues.

As cooperation under CFSP/CSDP is one of the priorities, alongside comprehensive security sector reforms and alignment with restrictive measures, the WB countries are increasingly meeting EU demands to contribute to EU-led missions aimed at promoting peace, security, and stability, focusing on crisis management, peacekeeping, and conflict prevention. The WB countries have demonstrated their commitment by participating in various EU-led missions and operations under the CSDP. For instance, Serbia has engaged in four EU missions—EUNAVFOR Somalia Operation ATALANTA, EUTM Somalia, EUTM RCA, and EUTM Mozambique—within a broader EU security framework (MFA RS, n.d.; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Similarly, Albania and North Macedonia are involved in regional security initiatives through their participation in the EULEX Mission in Kosovo and Metohija and the EUFOR Operation ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EEAS, 2022b). Beyond these missions, the EU and the WB countries are collaborating on a wide range of security challenges, such as irregular migration, organised crime, small arms trafficking, and counter-terrorism. Serbia and other WB countries continue implementing the *EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans*, adopted in December 2022, for managing mixed migration flows (European Commission, 2023). This

multidimensional cooperation on security matters underscores the broader EU approach to security in the region, which stands in sharp contrast with China's current reach in this domain. However, we should look at the other side of the coin as well. While the EU aspires to be an important security actor in the WB region, its real capabilities and security policies are (overly) dependent on US interests through NATO, which serves as the primary security provider for the EU countries. Therefore, challenges the EU faced in the security realm constrain its capabilities in the WB as well. Hence, there is a discrepancy between the EU's ambitions and the practical outcomes of its missions under CDSP. Therefore, Janković and Mitić (2024) aptly question the success and effectiveness of the EU missions by highlighting their shortcomings and failure in practice.

As defence remains within the domain of national competence and sovereignty, defence procurements, such as arms acquisitions, are largely driven by national preferences. Many EU members and candidate countries continue to source arms and equipment from non-EU countries, including Turkey, the US, Israel, China, and Russia. Regarding the arms acquisitions between the EU members and WB countries, France and Germany are the primary suppliers to WB countries, especially Serbia and Albania, while Italy, Austria, and Ireland also play significant roles, particularly in Montenegro and North Macedonia; the US maintains a traditional presence in the region's arms acquisitions, and Turkey has steadily increased its foothold by providing arms to most WB countries, especially Albania and so-called Kosovo (Vulović, 2023). Serbia remains the only country in the region purchasing arms from Russia and China. In April 2024, during his state visit to Paris, Serbian President Vučić announced a potential deal with France for the purchase of Rafale fighter jets, which would represent the largest financial procurement for the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) (Laurent, 2024). While this move might be a strategic attempt by the Serbian *elite* to balance relations between the East and the West, it could also signal a switch to Western technology. However, suppliers might bring their own interests to the forefront to influence and shape political alignments. For instance, France has reportedly set geopolitical conditions for the purchase of Rafale fighter jets, i.e., 'confirmation on the political evolution of the country', given Serbia's close ties to Russia and China, as well as 'the need to ease tensions in relations with Kosovo' (Laurent, 2024). So, it is evident that Serbia is under pressure to distance itself from China and Russia and *normalise* its relations with Pristina. The deal worth 3 billion euros

was finalised during French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to Belgrade in August 2024. According to a French official, the procurement is 'part of a larger strategy of "bringing Serbia closer to the EU", with the Rafale being a "strategic choice"' for Belgrade's fleet upgrade (Stojanovic, 2024). The exact conditions of the deal and Serbia's acceptance of them remain to be seen. Despite Serbia's engagement in arms trade with Western countries like the US, Germany, and France, its military purchases from *the East* have drawn significant EU scrutiny and criticism. This further highlights the ongoing competition for influence in the region.

EU candidates are expected to gradually conform to the EU foreign and security policy, which is both a prerequisite and a sign of their commitment to the process. In that regard, it is noteworthy to mention that North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro are fully aligned with the CFSP (EEAS, 2022b). In contrast, Serbia has consistently demonstrated a lack of alignment, particularly regarding sanctions on Russia and declarations and restrictive measures related to China's sensitive security issues, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the rights of Uyghurs. As a result, Serbia faces heavy pressure to align with EU policies. Its current alignment is limited and moderate; it is estimated to be around 46% in 2022 and 51% in 2023 compared to other WB countries that are fully compliant (European Commission, 2023). In that light, the EU has expressed concerns that Serbia's close relationship with China 'raises questions about the country's strategic direction' (Bjeloš, Resare & Wang, 2023). Besides the issues of Kosovo and Metohija, *the China factor* strongly influences the dynamics of Serbia's relations with the EU. In that context, Serbia-China relations are often viewed through a highly securitised lens within the EU, framing China's influence as *malign* and potentially *destabilising* EU integration efforts, and 'undermining regional stability' (Bergreen, 2024). In that regard, Serbia's acquisition of Chinese defence and military equipment has attracted significant international scrutiny, raising concerns and criticism from neighbouring countries, with the EU being quite sceptical about the motives behind these procurements. It is suggested that Serbia's advanced military build-up with China's assistance may heighten regional tensions, and 'the military cooperation with China might push Serbia to adopt a more assertive behaviour *vis à vis* its unfriendly neighbours' (Knezevic, 2022). As noticed by Vukšanović and Ejđus (2023), the fact that Serbia became the largest drone operator in the region raised fears among neighbouring countries, who followed suit with their purchases of drones

from Turkey and Israel. Furthermore, the China-Serbia FTA would lead to 'further distancing the Balkan nation from the rest of Europe' while allowing sanctioned Chinese defence companies to operate in Serbia (Bjeloš, Resare & Wang, 2023). Likewise, Serbia's collaboration with Huawei on surveillance cameras has faced severe scrutiny from the EU because that is not in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This collaboration raises significant concerns regarding data protection, human rights, and the privacy of Serbian citizens due to its intrusiveness (Krstinovska et al., 2023; Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022). One common misconception is that Beijing opposes Belgrade's EU path. In reality, China would benefit from Serbia's EU membership by gaining easier access to the European (defence and security) market. The real issues stem from the EU standards and regulations that clash with China's interests and business practices. Furthermore, the EU aims to keep the region on a Euro-Atlantic trajectory and counter foreign influence from China and Russia, which is why deepening security cooperation with the WB countries is seen as a strategic move to assert its influence.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has explored the economic, political, and security dimensions of Western Balkans relations with the European Union and China, underscoring the contrasting roles and influences of these two external partners in the region.

From an economic perspective, the EU is a significantly more comprehensive, concrete, and committed partner in the WB region than other external actors, including the PRC, which we analysed as a case study. Since Beijing is an important economic, trade, and investment partner, it would be inadequate to equate China's relationship with the WB to that of the EU. There are certain advantages in economic and financial relations with China, particularly given the political and security dimensions shaping the region's ties with the EU. However, a comprehensive and strategic analysis reveals that Brussels' role is more attractive for pragmatic economic policies aimed at strategic growth and long-term sustainability aligned with emerging political, economic, security, and energy trends. However, this does not mean that the People's Republic of China is an unreliable economic partner for the Western Balkans. Rather, it suggests that economic logic favours stronger and

more intense cooperation in geographically proximate areas, which is also understandable from a logistic perspective within the context of modern global economic and trade flows grounded in the principles of capitalism and market economy.

In the political framework of the WB region, the EU clearly takes the lead, especially when contrasted with the political role of the PRC in this part of Europe. Official Brussels, along with the EU member states, is deeply involved in numerous and fundamentally important political processes, making its political role more pronounced. Bearing in mind the position of Brussels as a formal mediator in solving essential internal and regional open issues and disputes, the fact is, along with the existing economic mechanisms on the side of European investors, that the EU still represents a generator of political processes in this part of Europe. However, the role of China should not be overlooked, particularly when considering its investments in strategic sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and mining. These investments position China as a *challenger* to the implementation of European policy in the Western Balkans in the medium term. The positioning of the People's Republic of China as a challenger does not necessarily imply the opposition to Brussels' policies towards the Western Balkans. Instead, China's role in this politically defined region can be interpreted as a comparative advantage in EU-Western Balkans relations and a *reminder* to leaders in Brussels of the critical importance of fully integrating the Western Balkans into European infrastructure, which is essential for building a stable, developing, and sustainable European Union in contemporary political circumstances.

When it comes to the security dimension, China lacks a regional approach to the WB countries compared to the EU. Given that EU membership is a strategic objective for the WB countries and that the rest of the region is compliant with EU policies and demands, the EU's role remains dominant, especially in comparison to China's current position. The EU efforts are driven by the overarching goal of integrating the WB region into the European security architecture. That requires normative and legal alignment across many areas, thus giving its impact a broader scope than China's. However, it is important to consider the growing *trend* of the EU's dependence on NATO and, in particular, the United States for security matters, which significantly shapes its policies, limits its autonomous actions, and constrains its capabilities in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, Serbia stands out as China's

main partner in the region, with military and security ties to other WB countries limited or nonexistent due to their NATO membership. Nevertheless, China's security and defence initiatives in Serbia offer chances for the country to gradually gain more clout and a substantial presence in the area. China has already been involved in regional security dynamics, and it shows a clear intention to become an important security player in the region over time, particularly through Serbia's engagement in implementing the GSI. However, for now, its security reach is limited. To date, Belgrade has not aligned with the EU's CFSP/CSDP regarding declarations or restrictive measures on China and Russia. Instead, despite facing Western pressures and severe criticism, Serbia has affirmed its respect for China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The issue of Kosovo and Metohija is probably the most prominent reason for Serbia's non-alignment with EU policies concerning China and Russia since these Security Council permanent members strongly support its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Since Serbia is often described as an *outlier*, this misalignment could impact its EU accession process.

While the European Union remains the dominant actor in shaping the region's economic, political, and security landscape, China's growing influence, particularly through its high-level partnership with Serbia, suggests that its role could expand in the future, potentially altering the balance of power in the region. China introduces competing interests and challenges alignment with EU policies, which, in the case of Serbia, might complicate and potentially slow down its accession process. However, we are primarily talking about mid-term assumptions, largely based on the current marginalisation of the European Union's enlargement policy concerning the Western Balkans. From an academic perspective, given the ongoing unstable political and security circumstances on the European continent, it would be imprudent to predict the development of relations between the EU and the Western Balkans on the one hand and the EU and the People's Republic of China on the other. Such predictions risk creating the erroneous perception that the EU is losing its *stable* position within the Western Balkans while China's influence is simultaneously strengthening. Consequently, the key findings of the paper are as follows:

- The EU continues to lead a comprehensive approach to the Western Balkans across different sectors, including politics, economics, and security matters;

- China’s involvement in the Western Balkans is more selective, focusing on specific sectors and actors;
- The EU is currently experiencing a decline in support within Western Balkans societies, closely linked to the marginalisation of its enlargement policy;
- China is encountering a lack of regional political support, especially among NATO member states within the Western Balkans;
- Future security developments will likely determine the positions of the PRC and the EU in the Western Balkans, ranging from potential partnerships in addressing contemporary challenges to possible adversarial relations.

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