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The Digital Silk Road in the Balkans – A Selection of Issues

Abstract

The main objective of the article is to show how China is putting into practice the idea of the development of the Digital Silk Road in the Balkans. The influence of China in terms of digitalization and new technologies is not the same in all the countries of the region. The author's emphasis is on the fact that Serbia is the most involved in cooperation with China. Huawei, which has its regional headquarters in Belgrade, is a long-standing partner of the state-owned telecommunications company Telecom Srbija. Working with Huawei, more than a dozen Serbian cities are being equipped to become Smart Cities. The Serbs are using the latest Chinese software to monitor and analyze urban behaviour. In 2017, Huawei installed cameras in the building of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia. They tested them not only for facial recognition, but also for behaviour, collecting data that would allow them to assess whether a particular behaviour could lead to violence. The article also outlines the influence of China on the digitalization process in North Macedonia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Due to US policy and the implementation of the Clean Network principles, numerous Balkan countries have declined to engage in broader collaboration with Huawei, citing allegations of corruption and espionage practices. It is inaccurate to suggest that China has conquered the Balkans. In fact, the influence of EU countries in the region is much more significant and far-reaching than that of China. It is important to acknowledge that Beijing is adopting a highly proactive approach and is not deterred by isolated instances of failure. A significant number of industries in the Balkans are in a state of persistent financial need. Only the future will tell whether the Chinese will be able to dominate the Balkans economically, even if it does not seem possible now.

Keywords: Digital China Initiative, China, New Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI or B&R), Huawei, Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, smart cities, Surveillance and Control system

Introduction

From a global geopolitical perspective, the Balkans occupy a pivotal strategic position as a transit area, which is of particular significance due to the potential for the transfer of goods and the movement of troops in the event of conflict. The ongoing globalization processes, which favour economic cooperation between states, demonstrate that despite the



successes achieved in systemic transformation, the influence of external actors is an important factor in shaping the region's policies. It is significant to note that throughout history, the Balkans have been subject to external domination by various powers, including the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire¹. The influence of the major players in the international arena, in various spheres of life, above all in the economic and political aspects, is not diminishing in the Balkans².

From China's perspective, the Balkans occupy a distinctive position in the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road. This initiative entails the establishment of a network of transport corridors linking China with Europe³. In the context of the collaboration between the three maritime regions, the construction of ports is underway on the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas, among other locations. The investments made by the Chinese side indicate that these ports will be connected by an extensive network of roads and railways financed and built by the Chinese⁴. China's strategy in the region is primarily focused on economic cooperation with the Balkan states. However, it is also important to consider the political and cultural interactions between China and individual Balkan states⁵.

How China is implementing the idea of developing the Digital Silk Road in the Balkans is the main objective of this article. The author distinguishes the following research questions: What are the dynamics of Chinese expansion in this subject field? What are the areas of implementation? How is China gaining influence in selected Balkan countries in the area of digital technology, and what are the implications for the Balkans and Europe? What are the positive and negative aspects of global digitalization and implementing the Smart City concept regarding Chinese activities in the Balkans?

The research presented in this article is concerned with international relations and therefore draws on research methods from this discipline, supported by the methodology of political science and public administration⁶. The heuristic research method, which employs the input of experts, professionals, and non-professionals involved in solving a scientific problem, proved to be a crucial element in this process. Among the general methods, an analysis of the available literature on the subject was used, as well as specific methods, mainly: systems analysis and the comparative method. To answer the research

¹ Vide: M. Tanty, *Balkany w XX wieku. Dzieje polityczne*, Warszawa 2003; B. Jelavich, *Historia Bałkanów. Wiek XX*, vol. 2, Kraków 2005; H. Batowski, *Zagadnienia bałkańskie*, Kraków 1939; *Balkany. Kraje i narody bałkańskie*, "Etnografia Polska" 1966, vol. X; idem, *Rozpad Austro-Węgier 1914–1918 (sprawy narodowościowe i działania dyplomatyczne)*, Kraków 1982; P. Siani-Davies, S.D. Schwandner-Sievers, *International intervention in the Balkans since 1995*, London 2003; S. Nišić, *Globalna sila i bezbednost Balkana*, Beograd 2002; V. Latifi, *The Balkans in contemporary international relations*, Warszawa 2020; Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration Of Yugoslavia From The Death Of Tito To The Fall Of Milosevic*, Colorado 2002; R. Bideleux, I. Jeffries, *The Balkans: A post-communist History*, London 2006 and other studies.

² D. Gibas-Krzak, *Gra wielkich mocarstw o Balkany w XXI wieku. Studium wpływów Chin, Rosji i USA*, Opole 2024, p. 10 et passim.

³ L. Zuokui, *The risks of the Belt and Road Initiative in the construction of Eurasian Economic Corridor*, in: *The new silk road: European perspectives. Security challenges/risks within the initiative* 16+1, ed. V.N. Cvetković, Belgrade 2018, p. 10.

⁴ D. Gibas-Krzak, *Gra wielkich mocarstw o Balkany w XXI wieku...*, p. 79 et passim.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 34 et passim.

⁶ M. Sulek, *Prognozowanie i symulacje międzynarodowe*, Warszawa 2010, p. 35.

questions, they found regularities in international relations fact-finding⁷. As there are feedbacks between the system and the environment, systems analysis has allowed an interdisciplinary approach to the issue, revealing its dynamics and safety situation⁸. The comparative method has made it possible to identify differences and similarities in terms of China's digital influence on a selection of Balkan countries⁹.

While there is a wealth of literature on the Digital Silk Road, the question of its development in the Balkans has been the subject of very little attention. Some factual elements on this issue can be found in the study by Danuta Gibas-Krzak, *Gra wielkich mocarstw o Balkany w XXI wieku. Studium wpływów Chin, Rosji i USA*, Opole 2024 and in the articles: A. Haxhixhemajli, *Informacja i nadzór. Jak Chiny walczą o swoje miejsce na Balkanach Zachodnich; Serbia as China's favorite partner, China – one of the most important national partners of Serbia; China's gateway to Europe – the new Silk Road, part 2*; M. Fraser M., *Jak Chiny wykorzystują technologię do kształtowania polityki* and others. In addition, the author has drawn on the following monographs and articles, among others: *Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. J. Chinyong Liow, H. Liu, G. Xue, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, Northampton 2022; *The Belt and Road Initiative in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, ed. D. Arase, P. Miguel Amakasu, Raposo de Medeiros Carvalho, Routledge, New York 2023; *The new Silk Road: European perspectives. Security challenges/risks within the initiative 16+1*, ed. V.N. Cvetković, Belgrade 2018; K. Żukrowska, *Chiny: potencjał (gospodarczy, polityczny i militarny) jako instrument kształtowania nowego układu międzynarodowego*; M. Walkowski, *Chiński model rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego i jego potencjalna adaptacja w Europie*.

The Dynamics of Chinese Politics in the 21st Century

Thanks to the market reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the Middle Kingdom has transformed itself into a stable Asian power that works with countries on all continents¹⁰. China has reduced the importance of central planning and begun to implement mechanisms typical of a free market economy. The Chinese Communist Party proposed a new form of capitalism, called “state capitalism” (market socialism), to be implemented under the direction of the Party. An important virtue of this approach was that economic reforms were carried out without democratic reforms. The state assumed a decisive role in guiding development in successive five-year development plans. This state of affairs has continued into the 21st century. Consequently, Chinese attitudes to globalization are often called “controlled or managed globalization”¹¹. The effectiveness of Chinese policy is evidenced by the fact that Chinese methods are accompanied by a sober view of the situation,

⁷ Vide: J. Antoszkiewicz, *Metody heurystyczne. Twórcze rozwiązywanie problemów*, Warszawa 1990.

⁸ J. Kukułka, *Teoria stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 161–163.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ P. Plebaniak, *Chiny. Zrozumieć imperium*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 40–45, 150; M. Świstak, *Regional Policy in China: Development and Strategic Challenges*, Göttingen 2022, p. 125.

¹¹ M. Walkowski, *Chiński model rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego i jego potencjalna adaptacja w Europie*, doi: 10.14746/ps.2017.1.19, “Przegląd Strategiczny” 2017, no. 10, p. 343.

rapid adaptation to ever-changing circumstances, and the introduction of the rule of “meritocracy”. This is understood as the domination of a highly educated elite¹².

The “Three Represents Theory”, introduced in 2002, strengthened the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with the main objectives being to meet the needs of the productive forces, promote Chinese culture in the world, and cautiously democratize the party by opening it up to business. As a result, the protection of private property was included in the constitution two years later. In the same year, 2004, the principle of creating a “Harmonious Society” was adopted for implementation, under the leadership of a party that, according to these ideas, would: safeguard the fundamental interests of citizens, promote equality in their education, promote harmony between man and nature, while advocating that citizens benefit to the maximum extent from a developing economy¹³. Thanks to this strategy, China was hardly affected by the global economic crisis. Among many factors, the introduction of the 4 trillion yuan stimulus package (about 12% of GDP) in 2008 played an important role. In addition, the economy could be stabilized by a credit policy based on the supply management¹⁴.

In the age of globalization, the Beijing government emphasizes the active role of the state in the development of the world economy and the obligation of a “new, richer and stronger China” to share responsibility for peace and global prosperity. Beijing has rejected the “Chinese threat” thesis, proposing instead an ideology of “Chinese hope and opportunity for the world” (though these claims do not exclude the possibility of Beijing taking control of Taiwan)¹⁵. This is perhaps unsurprising given that China is now an economic giant, especially in the high-tech sector, and a growing critic of the current international system. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a policy of controlling the private sector, as exemplified by “Alibaba”, a Chinese e-commerce holding company that has been closely monitored by the authorities for some time, pushing its own strategic ideas¹⁶.

Thanks to its dynamic development, China has become one of the driving forces of the global economy, directing its expansion towards global markets, as exemplified by the creation in 2013 of a global development strategy called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), known in China as One Belt and One Road, also referred to as the New Silk Road, whose main objective is to develop infrastructure connecting countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa, mainly by building railways and maritime routes¹⁷. Over time, China has begun to

¹² X. Shen, *China to pursue digital trade expansion under new five-year plan as cross-border data flow restrictions remain in place*, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3153196/china-pursue-digital-trade-expansion-under-new-five-year-plan-cross> (date accessed: 23.06.2024), M. Świstak, *Regional Policy in China...*, p. 125.

¹³ P. Plebaniak, *Chiny. Zrozumieć imperium...*, p. 150; K. Żukrowska, *Chiny: potencjał (gospodarczy, polityczny i militarny) jako instrument kształtowania nowego układu międzynarodowego*, “Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe” 2018, no. 1, pp. 43, 44; J. Marszałek-Kawa, *Polityka zagraniczna ChRL: aspiracje, możliwości, paradoksy*, in: *Polityka zagraniczna. Aktorzy – potencjały – strategie*, ed. T. Łoś-Nowak, Warszawa 2011, pp. 111, 116, 126.

¹⁴ E. Majchrowska, *Chiny wobec światowego kryzysu gospodarczego 2007/2008+*, “Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe” 2012, no. 4, p. 223 et passim.

¹⁵ *Wojna o Tajwan między USA a Chinami? Ważny amerykański polityk nie ma dobrych wiadomości*, 30.01.2023, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/usa-i-chiny-stocza-boj-o-tajwan-amerykanski-polityk-nie-ma-zludzen/ky540xy> (date accessed: 4.01.2024).

¹⁶ B. Góraleczyk, *Nowy długi marsz. Chiny ery Xi Jinpinga*, Warszawa 2022, p. 296.

¹⁷ Vide: *The Belt and Road Initiative in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, ed. D. Arase, P. Miguel Amakasu, R. de Meireiros Carvalho, Routledge, New York 2023.

recognize projects announced or underway almost everywhere in the world as part of the BRI – around 130 countries are expected to participate in the initiative, according to the Chinese side¹⁸.

An important component of the Belt and Road is the Digital Silk Road (DSR). The DSR aims not only to promote the development of the digital services sector, such as cross-border e-commerce, smart city development, telemedicine and online finance, but also to accelerate technological progress, including data processing and the development of artificial intelligence. The Digital Silk Road, which was officially launched in 2015, initially referred to the integration of advanced technologies into the BRI. In 2017, the issue of DSR became a central element of the government's BRI strategy and was further promoted at the second BRI Forum in 2019, where it was described as an "initiative in its own right". By 2020, the DSR had become a focal point of Chinese foreign policy. The Chinese president continued to develop the idea of digital connectivity cooperation, including with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)¹⁹.

In terms of digital expansion, China is expanding its "technospheres" – the geographical areas in which it is building a data and information advantage. With this strategy, the Middle Kingdom is considered a technological powerhouse and a leading provider of digital infrastructure in Asia, Europe and beyond. Dominance in the technosphere is providing China with data that is often referred to as its "most precious commodity" or "the new oil". Digital development is broadening economic transformation and strengthening regional integration, but it can also pose privacy and data protection risks and help Beijing build a base for exercising global power²⁰. It is not surprising that the Americans are fighting against the spread of Chinese influence in this area, in particular the development of the Huawei Corporation and the Digital Silk Road. In August 2020, the US has announced its Clean Network programme, which aims to protect citizens' privacy and businesses' most sensitive information from aggressive intrusions by malicious actors such as the Chinese Communist Party²¹. The term "Clean Network" was coined by US Under Secretary of State Keith Krach, who initially led the initiative, which included officials from the Department of the Treasury (USDT), the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR), the National Security Council (NSC) and the Department of Commerce. Krach described the US initiative as a "beachhead" in a wider struggle to unite against Chinese economic pressure on everything from investment to strategic action²². However, Chinese Foreign

¹⁸ Ibidem. M. Przychodniak, *Zmiany w chińskiej inicjatywie Pasa i Szlaku*, "Biuletyn PISM", no. 157 (2778), 3.11.2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/zmiany-w-chińskiej-inicjatywie-pasa-i-szlaku> (date accessed: 4.01.2024); J.N. Miksic, *China and the Maritime Silk Road: from passive to active participant*, in: *Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. J. Chinyong Liow, H. Liu, G. Xue, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, Northampton 2022, pp. 17–22.

¹⁹ *The Digital Silk Road China's Technological Rise and the Geopolitics of Cyberspace*, ed. D. Gordon, M. Nouwens, New York–London 2022, pp. 4–6.

²⁰ P. Tomaszewska, *Realizacja chińskiej koncepcji Digital Silk Road – kazus Serbii*, "Nowa Polityka Wschodnia" 2022, no. 2 (33), p. 159.

²¹ M.R. Pompeo, *The Clean Network*, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-clean-network/> (date accessed: 12.02.2024).

²² *The Clean Network: How Keith Krach and his Clean Team Defeated China Inc. and Created a Blueprint for the World to Follow in Future Technology Competition*, <https://techdiplomacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-Clean-Network-Full-Story.pdf> (date accessed: 12.02.2024).

Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian called the Clean Network a “US surveillance network” and a “consolidation of US digital hegemony”²³.

A hyperpower like the United States is rightly concerned that the twilight of the West, as described by Zbigniew Brzeziński²⁴, is being fostered by the rise of a single, powerful entity, the Middle Kingdom. This entity seeks primacy in international relations on a global scale. The measures taken to limit its expansion could serve to build a multipolar world in which a balance of power would more fairly realize the ideas of equality and democracy.

Expansion of Digital Technology in the Face of Restrictions on Freedom

While the Digital Silk Road, as it draws an ever-widening circle in the global space, allows for the maximization of activities that are useful to people. The innovations undertaken may also have a second, more in-depth context that is difficult to assess unequivocally positively. This is because it can impose all sorts of constraints on people in terms of the need to conform to the schema of action that is set by the digital reality. The popular and increasingly implemented concept of smart cities is closely linked to the improvement of the quality of life of citizens through the creation of a diverse and functional urban infrastructure. This creates the opportunity for efficient use of space in a given agglomeration. For example, information boards at bus stops provide up-to-date information on the next timetable. Apps that allow you to track traffic in the city and plan your journey play an important role. Free parking spaces can be found using them. They facilitate renewable energy sources, city bicycles, water consumption measurement and waste disposal. They can be used to improve city lighting work, for e-payments, or for the creation of municipal budgets²⁵. As a result, even in the most developed countries, settlements of previously unimaginable size and complexity are on the rise. In Chicago, GPS sensors on snow ploughs are providing a real-time “plough tracker” map that can be accessed by anyone in the city. In Zaragoza, the Citizen’s Card provides access to free Wi-Fi throughout the city, as well as the use of bicycles, the library, and buses. In New York, a group of scientists has installed sensors in local sewers to warn when rainwater overflows the system and dumps sewage into local waterways²⁶.

In Japan, on the other hand, the Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town (SST), located about 50 km from Tokyo, is an example of a smart city. It was built on the site of a disused manufacturing plant and is now home to 600 households. The community aims to generate its own energy wherever possible. Extensive use is made of solar and other natural energy sources²⁷. The second focus is on the safety of the residents. The environment

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Z. Brzeziński, *Strategiczna wizja. Ameryka a kryzys globalnej potęgi*, Kraków 2013, pp. 13, 105 et passim.

²⁵ Vide: A.M. Townsend, *Smart Cities: Big Data, Civic Hackers, and the Quest for a New Utopia*, New York 2013; A. Korenik, *Smart Cities – Inteligentne miasta w Europie i Azji*, Warszawa 2019; *Inteligentny rozwój inteligentnych miast*, ed. J. Kaźmierczak, I. Jonek-Kowalska, Warszawa 2020.

²⁶ A.M. Townsend, *Smart Cities: Big Data, Civic Hackers...*, p. 139.

²⁷ *Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town*, 4.06.2022, <https://news.panasonic.com/global/stories/> (date accessed: 12.06.2024).

remains open and accessible to outside visitors, but the number of entrances is small and monitored by security cameras. Each property is equipped with a security system that allows the interior and exterior of the house to be monitored remotely. Mobility is another service offered to residents. Electric vehicles and bicycles are available for hire 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The estate is also designed to improve the quality of life and comfort of residents. Interaction between community members will be encouraged, promoting intergenerational living. The centrally located community centre provides health care, day care and education for local residents. Individual homes are outfitted with various health monitoring devices (unobtrusively, according to the Smart City project's contractors)²⁸.

It goes without saying that such schemes have a functional purpose: they help residents live more comfortably and, in a globalized world, encourage social interaction, thus reducing isolation. At the same time, however, such measures, which are embedded in the ideas of the smart city, can carry the risk of segregating people and subjecting them to total control. This can lead to further degeneration, such as the division of people into categories: “better” and “worse”. Suffice it to cite the example of China, which is one of the enthusiasts of this type of modern technological solution and is introducing pilot projects relating to the control and monitoring system in selected cities on its territory. China's global expansion raises the risk that the Chinese system of governance, based on surveillance and control of society, will spread to other parts of the world.

China has an Integrity Office and a social credit system is being introduced, but many myths and shortcomings have grown up around it, making it difficult to verify. The scale of its operation is often questioned by independent researchers and the media, although party documents often state that the system is not designed to exercise political oversight over individual human actions²⁹.

China's Corporate Social Credit System (CSCS) was set up in the late 1990s to prevent corporate malpractice and contract fraud, which became widespread in the Middle Kingdom after the opening of the market. The aim was therefore to establish a mechanism for helping companies that do not comply with the rules to do so, and to find “market instruments to penalize economic malpractice”³⁰.

The *Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)* was then formulated. The project involved the creation of a social assessment system based on information collected over the past decades and stored in analogue form in government archives, as well as the use of the latest technologies, including real-time data transfer technology, facial recognition technology and artificial intelligence, to create profiles of citizens and companies operating in China³¹.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ K. Drinhausen and V. Brussee, *China's social credit system in 2021. From fragmentation towards integration*, March 3, 2021, <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/MERICCS-China-Monitor67-Social-Credit-System-final-4.pdf> (date accessed: 12.06.2024).

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ G. Wojciechowska, *Social Credit System – inteligentny panoptikon z chińską charakterystyką czy sposób na zbudowanie społeczeństwa przyszłości?*, <https://instytutboyma.org/pl/social-credit-system-inteligentny-panoptikon-z-chinska-charakterystyka-czy-sposob-na-zbudowanie-spoleczenstwa-przyszlosci/> (date accessed: 12.06.2024).

Pilot schemes are already being introduced by individual provinces, but they vary widely in terms of both the scoring scale and the reward and possible sanction systems. Suzhou Province, for example, has an Osmanthus Points system that awards points on a scale of 0 to 200. In Fuzhou, the Yuming Points system awards points on a scale of 0–1000, and in Wuhu, the Leihui Points system is based on a scale of 350–1200 points. Systems operating in Suqian, Rongcheng or Weihai (Xichu Points, Rongcheng Points and Haibei Points respectively) operate on a scale of up to 1000 points. The algorithms assign citizens a category, from the lowest D to the highest A, depending on the score they receive. The system in Xiamen, or Heron Points, is even different – it uses an ordinal scale. There are five ranks, ranging from “needs improvement” to “excellent”³². The system’s algorithms allow people to be divided into four main groups: A, B, C and D, which differentiate citizens according to, among other things, their education and the performance of socially useful activities³³, e.g. for sorting rubbish, paying bills on time, charitable work, holding academic degrees – positive points, while crimes, fines, excessive use of computer games, having friends with a low ranking and other negative activities – negative points³⁴. Privileged groups with the highest rating have easier access to better education, medical care, communication, credit, etc., usually almost inaccessible to those lower ranked. Residents can check their score by entering their ID card number into an app running on the popular WeChat messenger. Their score is displayed by a virtual indicator on the dial, which is green on one side and red on the other³⁵.

To increase security in public spaces, a surveillance system has been introduced that uses facial recognition technology to identify individuals. The faces of people wearing protective masks can now also be recognized. China is gradually developing artificial intelligence and algorithms that will be responsible for recalculating and assigning credit scores

³² *Understanding China’s Social Credit System. A big-picture look at social credit as it applies to citizens, businesses and government*, Trivium China, September 2019, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/chinas-social-credit-system-current-status-role-of-data-and-surveillance-and-influence-outside-of-china/209> (date accessed: 23.06.2024).

³³ B. Góralczyk, *Nowy długi marsz...*, p. 50.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *China’s “social credit” scheme involves cajolery and sanctions*, “The Economist”, March 28, 2019, https://www.economist.com/china/2019/03/28/chinas-social-credit-scheme-involves-cajolery-and-sanctions?pp-ccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&gad_source=1&gclid=aw.ds (date accessed: 23.06.2024); S. Arsène, *Trust in Ratings: China’s Social Credit System*. Asia Global Institute, 2018. <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/-china-social-credit-system/> (date accessed: 23.06.2024); *Wytoczne Rady Państwa w sprawie ustanowienia i udoskonalenia wspólnego systemu zachęt do godnego zaufania i wspólnego karania za niegodny zaufania system w celu przyspieszenia budowy uczciwości społecznej*, Opinions on accelerating the construction of the SCS, 2016, Government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), <https://instytutboyma.org/pl/social-credit-system-inteligentny-panoptykon-z-chinska-charakterystyka-czy-sposob-na-zbudowanie-spoleczenstwa-przyszlosci/>; www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-06/12/content_5081222.htm (date accessed: 26.11.2023); *Nadchodzi społeczeństwo kredytowe, jesteś gotowy? O zakończeniu wprowadzania systemu zunifikowanych identyfikatorów kredytu społecznego*, 2021, China Credit, https://www.creditxc.gov.cn/web/cont_3876769330ca44658b7de2450b296a7c.html; <https://instytutboyma.org/pl/social-credit-system-inteligentny-panoptykon-z-chinska-charakterystyka-czy-sposob-na-zbudowanie-spoleczenstwa-przyszlosci/> (date accessed: 23.06.2024); *Practical Guide to China’s Corporate Social Credit System*, 2019, https://www.ihk-muenchen.de/Content-Repository/china/Practical_Guide_to_China_s_Corporate_Social_Credit_System_AHK_China.pdf; K. Schaefer, *China’s Corporate Social Credit System. Context, Competition, Technology and Geopolitics*. 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-corporate-social-credit-system-context-competition-technology-and-geopolitics> (date accessed: 23.06.2024).

to businesses and citizens nationwide, not just in selected cities. These algorithms are not yet widely known, although it is estimated that 20 million CCTV cameras have been installed as part of the Skynet project (which is part of the Social Credit System). Anyone who commits even the smallest of offences can be subject to, among other things, having his or her image displayed on LED screens set up in the streets and on the Internet³⁶.

Challenges for Serbia's Digital Cooperation with China

Formalized cooperation between China and the Balkan states was established in 2012 in Warsaw at the first summit of the so-called 16+1 (later 17+1) format. It covered the following countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, and Macedonia³⁷. Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a review of trade and investment dependencies in many European capitals, with the result that Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia withdrew from this form of cooperation. The main reason the Baltic states gave for their withdrawal was China's support for Russia's aggressive policy³⁸.

Serbia is currently recognized as a leader in the Balkan region in terms of cooperation with China. Beijing appreciates the geopolitical advantages of Serbia, which lies at the "crossroads" of Central Europe and the Middle East, offering both East-West and North-South transit opportunities. An important factor in facilitating political and business contacts is the fact that Serbia sees itself as a continuation of the peaceful foreign policy of socialist Yugoslavia. The government in Belgrade intends to base its policy on the experience of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). It wants to strengthen relations with countries in this format³⁹. This favours Serbian multi-vectoralism, according to which China is one of the cores (along with the EU, Russia, and the US) of the "four pillars" strategy announced by then Serbian President Boris Tadić in 2009⁴⁰. Belgrade appreciates the fact that Beijing has condemned the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. Alliance forces were then responsible for an attack on the Chinese embassy and the deaths of three Chinese journalists. In the aftermath of the bombing, China provided millions of dollars in aid to Serbian industry to help rebuild the country's destroyed infrastructure. In March 2022, the Chinese authorities organized a commemoration of the 23rd anniversary of the embassy bombing, acknowledging that the NATO attack had left a mark on the memory of the Chinese people, who had not forgotten the "barbarous" attacks on Yugoslavia⁴¹.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Greece joined this initiative in 2019.

³⁸ B. Kowalski, *14+1: Estonia i Łotwa opuszczają format 16+1*, "Monitor Chiński" 2022, no. 7/8, https://www.osa.uni.lodz.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Jednostki/Osrodek_Spraw_Azjatyckich/Monitory/Monitor_Chi%C5%84ski/2022/OSA_MONITOR_CHIN%CC%81SKI_LIPIEC_SIERPIEN%CC%81_2022.pdf (date accessed: 30.05.2024).

³⁹ D. Mierzejewski, B. Kowalski, P. Ciborek, *Aktywność gospodarcza i polityczna Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w regionie Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, Łódź 2018, p. 47.

⁴⁰ Tadić on Serbia's "four pillars of diplomacy", 30.08.2009, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.-php?yyyy=2009&mm=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454 (date accessed: 5.04.2024).

⁴¹ D. Gibas-Krzak, *Gra wielkich mocarstw o Balkany w XXI wieku...*, p. 82.

In 2009, Belgrade signed a strategic cooperation agreement with China, and in 2016 the two sides signed joint declarations on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership⁴². China became the largest single investor in Serbia in 2021, injecting over €700 million into the Serbian economy⁴³. Capital cooperation is developing dynamically: Serbian state-owned companies are acquiring Chinese loans intensively. These loans are mostly linked to subcontracting by Chinese companies. Major Chinese projects include investments in the Bor copper mining and smelting basin in eastern Serbia (the second largest in Europe, after KGHM's Polish Copper). Shandong Linlong, a car tyre manufacturer, and an ironworks in Smederevo are other successful projects⁴⁴. In addition, commercial agreements are being implemented with Chinese companies for the construction of rail and road infrastructure in Serbia. This includes the purchase of five Chinese high-speed trains to run between Belgrade and Budapest once the railway line is completed⁴⁵.

Serbia is the only Balkan country to fully open its market to China's digital and telecommunications products. It strengthens ties with Huawei, which has its regional headquarters in Belgrade and is a long-standing partner of the state-owned telecoms company Telecom Srbija. The Chinese offered Serbia the opportunity to take advantage of the latest information and communication technologies applied to the concept of creating smart cities⁴⁶. While it is true that President Vučić, under pressure from Washington, joined the Clean Network project by signing the "Washington Agreement" in September 2020, it is actually believed that there is an informal agreement between Belgrade and Beijing, and Huawei will continue to be Telecom Srbija's main partner for the installation of 5G infrastructure⁴⁷.

Chinese companies are actively supporting Serbia in the implementation of smart city assumptions. Huawei's involvement continues to be key in this regard, and Serbian local governments are often working with Chinese companies to follow global trends and adopt digital innovations that are convenient for residents. It is worth mentioning the Smart City projects that cover several Serbian cities: Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš and Novi Sad. Close Sino-Serbian cooperation in the field of digitization is also evident in the Belgrade project, which includes the installation of 1,000 surveillance cameras equipped with AI software for facial recognition⁴⁸. In the centre of Belgrade there are

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ M. Đurđević, *Kineske investicije u Srbiji: Jaz između obećanog i realizovanog*, 08.09.2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kineske-investicije-u-srbiji-obecano-i-realizovano/30826927.html> (date accessed: 5.03.2024).

⁴⁴ S. Vladislavljev, *How Did China Become the Largest Investor in Serbia?*, August 8, 2023, <https://chinaobservers.eu/how-did-china-become-the-largest-investor-in-serbia/> (date ccessed: 14.04.2023).

⁴⁵ A. Curic, A. Kálmán, *From Budapest to Belgrade: a railway line increases Chinese influence in the Balkans*, <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2021/from-budapest-to-belgrade-a-railway-line-increases-chineseinfluence-in-the-balkans/> (date accessed: 14.04.2023).

⁴⁶ *Pametni gradovi Srbije – Inovativnost i rezilijentnost lokalnih zajednica u Srbiji 2021. godine*, ed. D. Damjanović, Beograd 2021, p. 42.

⁴⁷ M. Ruge, S. Vladislavljev, *Serbia's 5G deal with Washington: The art of muddling through*, 22.09.2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_5g_deal_with_washington_the_art_of_muddling_through/ (date accessed: 11.02.2024).

⁴⁸ S. Czubkowska, *Chińczycy trzymają nas mocno. Pierwsze śledztwo o tym, jak Chiny kolonizują Europę, w tym Polskę*, Kraków 2022, pp. 306, 307.

hundreds of these video cameras, which can identify and track people. They can also do vehicle number plate recognition⁴⁹.

In 2019, the city's first "cloud" data centre will be implemented in Kragujevac. A two million dollar donation from China, it provides a state-of-the-art data centre with comprehensive systems and software solutions based on Huawei technology. It is used to centralize the entire ICT system at the level of the public sector under the jurisdiction of the city. Allows for the efficient exchange of data in a secure environment. Kragujevac is the first city in Serbia to have information about its public transport lines included in the Google Transit system. The system is linked to passenger count data so that travellers can choose which vehicle to board to avoid travelling in a crowd⁵⁰.

Since 2018, there have been projects for the installation of smart water meters, which are capable of remote reading of water consumption. The first phase of the pilot project was the installation of 619 water meters in Šumarice, a suburb of Kragujevac. The system reads the status of the water meter via a wireless network and transmits it to a software platform connected to the billing system. The eKGradanin app has also been launched – a service that allows people to report problems, questions, and suggestions via a mobile app and web portal. Problems are registered and managed by the City Council's Situation Centre. The applicant can follow the resolution of the problem and communicate with the Centre. Using electronic eKG cards, which can be personalized or non-personalized, passengers are checked in at the vehicle entrance and pay their fare with them by top-up. It is the city's intention to extend the use of the card to other city services, including access to sports, theatre, and public events. Moreover, the ability to make payments and record the use of other services that are the responsibility of the local authority⁵¹.

Kruševac is the first city in Serbia to develop a Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan. Traffic safety and public lighting management are among the smart city solutions being implemented⁵². In Niš, the first stage of the Smart City implementation has been the installation of parking space monitoring. This is expected to reduce the time it takes to find a free parking space in the city centre, thus reducing traffic congestion, pollution and improving the quality of life⁵³.

Of course, it would be difficult to compare Serbian solutions with classic smart city models operating in developed Asian countries or the US, examples of which are presented in this article. The smart city concept being implemented in Serbia is still in its early stages. It is mainly concerned with testing the interactivity of urban infrastructure and its components. However, it enjoys strong support from the authorities, with the Serbian Progressive Party introducing cutting-edge technology that is often used to spy on citizens

⁴⁹ *Serbia as China's favorite partner*, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-as-chinas-favorite-partner/a-56583379> (date accessed: 09.05.2021); *China's gateway to Europe – the new Silk Road, part 2*, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-gateway-to-europe-the-new-silk-road-part-2/a-56125793> (date accessed: 11.02.2024).

⁵⁰ *Pametnan grad*, <https://eid.rs/lat/pametnan-grad.html> (date accessed: 17.04.2024).

⁵¹ Some projects are funded by the EU, Smart City, <https://eid.rs/en/pametni-grad-eng.html> (date accessed: 09.02.2024).

⁵² S. Marković, *Pametne lokalne zajednice*, in: *Pametni gradovi Srbije...*, p. 65; *China – one of the most important national partners of Serbia*, <https://welcometosrbia.org/en/china-one-of-the-most-important-national-partners-of-serbia/> (date accessed: 09.02.2024).

⁵³ J. Stojanović, *Niš još prošle godine trebalo da postane "pametnan grad", ali realizacija projekta tek počela*, <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Nis-jos-prosle-godine-trebalo-da-postane-pametnan-grad-ali-realizacija-projekta-tek-pocela.sr.html> (date accessed: 09.02.2024).

and political rivals. However, there is a growing public resistance to such solutions, as seen, for example, in 2019 when the aforementioned Chinese-made smart cameras were installed in the city centre. It should also be noted that elements of Chinese-style ICT surveillance have emerged in the aftermath of every public protest. State surveillance has reached a high level and the Serbian Government, which is considered a “hybrid regime”, has acquired many tools to help monitor society digitally⁵⁴.

China’s Digital Influence in North Macedonia, Romania, and Bulgaria

In 2021, Romania adopted a Clean Network inspired law that sets requirements for 5G networks and includes a ban on cooperation with Huawei Corporation. North Macedonia has also opted for systematic anti-Chinese solutions. It has amended its electronic communications law to exclude Chinese companies from its domestic market⁵⁵. This does not change the fact that Chinese ICT companies are not giving up their contacts with the local business community and continue to offer their services, using soft power principles, which are usually well received in the Balkan countries.

Huawei is making a significant effort to promote a greater level of digitalization and the development of artificial intelligence in Bulgaria. The Huawei ICT Academy, established at St. Clement of Ohrid University of Sofia, has provided valuable cooperation to Bulgarians in the development of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies. There are also plans for a joint science laboratory⁵⁶. As well as developing R&D and infrastructure projects, the Chinese are also organizing education, training, and workshops for students, academic societies and industry in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the US and Bulgaria signed a joint statement on 5G security and critical infrastructure. However, China’s use of soft power remains inconsistent in its implementation. Over the past few years, Huawei has also signed scientific cooperation agreements with other universities, funded more grants and traineeships, and equipped universities with modern equipment⁵⁷. Similar measures are being taken in Croatia as well.

The Bulgarians are also working with Huawei to build their version of a “smart city” on the outskirts of Sofia, which will include exhibition centres, hotels, the largest aqua park in the Balkans, office buildings, shopping malls and numerous leisure parks⁵⁸. The main investor is the Chinese company Bulgaria Development Holding, which estimates the value of this investment to be USD 1.25 billion⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ M. Bjelos, *Social Controls: China-Style Surveillance is Coming to Serbia*, 22. 06. 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/22/social-controls-china-style-surveillance-is-coming-to-serbia/> (date accessed: 11.06.2024).

⁵⁵ I. Lidarev, *China-US competition in the Balkans: Impact, regional responses, and larger implications*, 28.11.2023, <https://lseideas.medium.com/china-us-competition-in-the-balkans-impact-regional-responses-and-larger-implications-dcab70837933> (date accessed: 11.05.2024).

⁵⁶ *Huawei and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski Sign MoU, Aim to Cooperate in AI and Other New High-end Technologies*, 2020.12.08, <https://e.huawei.com/fr/news/ebg/2020/university-of-sofia> (date accessed: 11.02.2024).

⁵⁷ A. Milenković, *Europe’s first “smart city” to land in Bulgaria*, 06.07.2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d-3d674e3463544e78457a6333566d54/share_p.html (date accessed: 11.06.2024).

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

Conclusions

Chinese companies in the ICT and electronics sectors are welcomed as efficient investors whose activities will promote innovative solutions and reduce unemployment at the same time. The Chinese offer of soft loans, support for Confucius Institutes and donations to schools and universities are all important in creating a favourable climate for the further development of Chinese investment in the Balkans. However, it is not possible to speak of a “conquest” of the Balkans by the Chinese, either politically or economically. The scope of EU countries’ influence in the region is much broader and more comprehensive. What needs to be noted, however, is that Beijing is acting extremely dynamically, not worrying about failing to act, and investing where it sees opportunities. And there are many industries in the Balkans that are in permanent need of finance. Only time will tell whether the Chinese will master the Balkans economically and digitally, even if it seems impossible today.

Nevertheless, Western countries should continue their efforts to limit China’s influence and ensure the development of a sustainable digital alternative, especially in a country like Serbia. Serbia may be vulnerable to external pressure and has been quite open to cooperation with Chinese companies. It can be argued that China has had some success in the promotion of the Digital Silk Road in this country. Not to be overlooked is the fact that those in power support the system of control and surveillance introduced in China, which, if implemented in the Balkan countries, could reinforce authoritarian tendencies.

What is important is that Beijing’s efforts in the region are being noticed and challenged by other geopolitical players. It can be observed that the Chinese digital initiative is becoming an inducement to the escalation of the global technological confrontation between the US and China. This is a phenomenon that we are also confronted with in the region of the Balkans. China could challenge US global power with its cumulative investments in digital and strategic infrastructure. The US authorities are therefore seeking to persuade key partners and allies to abandon hardware and software offered by Chinese corporations. As a result of the implementation of the Clean Network Principles and allegations of Chinese corruption and espionage practices, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have refused further cooperation with Huawei. Unfortunately, the Old Continent does not currently boast tech clusters such as America’s Silicon Valley or China’s Shenzhen, a thriving city in south-eastern China that is considered the world’s largest electronics centre. In the international arena, Beijing is arguably the biggest provider of information and surveillance in the world.

While the United States and the European Union are pressuring countries in the region to reduce cooperation with Beijing, the broader West should focus even more on providing viable alternatives to Chinese technology to help protect its interests in the Balkans. It is not enough simply to criticize the Balkan countries for the development of co-operation with China. They also need to be provided with sustainable digital security solutions. Nor should we forget the possibility that China could use the 5G technology it sells for espionage purposes. The news of the leak of data from numerous servers supplied by Huawei in African countries should make all those who work with the company particularly vigilant. The advent of digital technologies has the potential to facilitate economic transformation and reinforce regional integration. However, this progress may also give

rise to concerns pertaining to data protection and privacy, as well as the possibility of Beijing establishing a platform for exerting global influence.

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