



Walking on Tigtropes: The Idiosyncrasies of Albania-China Relations

Ilir Kalemaj

Universiteti New York Tirana,
Albania

Received: 10 September 2022 / Accepted: 21 October 2022 / Published: 30 November 2022
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Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv9n4s110

1. Introduction

It has been quite some time since the re-emergence of the Socialist Republic of China as one of key political and trade key partners for the former Eastern European countries. As matter of fact, China for some time has been very influential worldwide through the Belt and Road Initiative, in the Southeastern Europe through its 16+1 format, as well as specifically in Western Balkans, particularly with its major investments in industry, road construction, debt trap diplomacy, Confucius institutes and other political, economic and cultural leverages. Albania could not have been the sole exception from the rule, although it relies less on Chinese investments and direct interference as some of its Western Balkan neighbors, save for the Republic of Kosovo. However, the Albanian case has received only scant interest, both in academic circles and scholarly works as well as in mass media and other means of public communications. This has mainly been based on the assumption that Albania is naturally immune from any Chinese influences, be that in political, economic, or socio-cultural axes.

This paper seeks to address this gap in the recent literature and growing scholarship in general regarding China's continuing pervasiveness in the Western Balkans in general and Albania in particular. Among some of the most important Chinese investments that directly or indirectly impact Albania, we may mention inter alia the Blue Corridor, China Pacific Construction, the signed memorandum of understanding for the \$1,72 billion for Albania – Montenegro highway, past investments such as Tirana Airport, potential concessions such as Shëngjini port that has an already signed memorandum of understanding, the fact that China is Albania's third largest partner (for 2020) and the increased areas of cooperation, including failed attempts such as the construction of the Arbri Road by a Chinese company, the investments in mine and extraction industries etc., which are all matters of concern and interest. The same goes for the political relations, media and cultural influences, social practices and particularly and of interest to the present conference overarching topic, the investigation of security mitigated risks vis-à-vis Western Balkans and Albania in particular.

The present paper offers a deft attempt to understand the idiosyncrasies of the Albania-China relations also in the context of its historic ties, given that the two countries have their share of love-hate relationship during the second part of the 20th Century. In addition, the paper also provides a comparative framework of China's growing influence in Western Balkans. Since the security of this volatile regions is inter-connected, Albania can provide the necessary analytical framework to understand the opportunities and risks of growing dependence on Socialist Republic of China, be that in political or economic dimensions and less so with regard to social and cultural influences.

Furthermore, the paper also exposes the limits of Chinese interference as third-party actor in the Southeastern Europe and triggers a debate about the role of third-actors (particularly China's economic penetration and Russia's geopolitical tentacles) in the backyard of the European Union, which has for a long time been a headache for Brussels. By placing Albania in a comparative framework vis-à-vis the other Southeastern European countries and looking at how Chinese-Albanian relationship in the 21st Century has developed and what we can foretell for the near future, this paper

seeks to add a missing piece of empirical added value that will give a more nuanced view and complete picture of Chinese influence in the region.

2. Economic, Energy and Trade Relations Between China and Albania

Among some of the major Chinese investments in Albania we may include the China Everbright and Friedman Pacific Asset Management's (a Hong Kong-based company) acquisition of the concession rights of the Tirana International Airport (which is now under Chinese management until 2025 with a possible two-year extension) and Canadian oil company Bankers in Albania by Shanghai-based Geo-Jade Petroleum in 2016 (to the value of nearly half a billion US dollars) with full rights to develop Patos-Marinza oilfield, the largest onshore such field in Europe. Reuters reported in late 2019 that 'After investments of more than 2.5 USD billion at its Patos-Marinza oilfield, Bankers now produces 95% of Albania's crude' (Reuters 2019a; 2019b). However, not all agreed projects have gone smoothly. In 2016, the Chinese construction company withdrew from the Arber Road project, which was valued at more than 200 USD million, and then it was taken over by the Gjoka Construction Company and the government for further construction via a joint financial assistance between the private company and the state (Invest in Albania (IIA) 2017; (Markovic Khaze, 2021). Overall, Chinese investment in the Balkans is focused mostly in "fossil industries": energy (coal/gas/oil), transport (autos/airport), and mining/extraction. There is only one investment in telecoms (by Huawei) and one in metal processing (steel production) out of 21 greenfield or merger/acquisition from Chinese companies in the Balkans (Hackaj, 2019).

China is an important economic investor in Albania, having acquired equity in two key sectors: oil production and air transport. The year 2016 marked the beginning of these two major concessions: in March, Canada's Banker's Petroleum sold its exploration and drilling rights in the fields of Patos-Marinze and Kucova to China's Geo-Jade Petroleum and in October, the Hong Kong based Chinese firms, China Everbright and Friedmann Pacific Asset Management Ltd. acquired the shares in Tirana International Airport (TIA), as well as a concession license to operate the airport until 2027 (Cela 2020). Furthermore, President Meta was in Beijing in October signing deals with PowerChina, a construction conglomerate that has irrigation and other projects in Albania, while plans to construct the Bushat Hydropower plant along the Drin River in northern Albania were finalized.

On the other hand, Canada's Banker's Petroleum announced the sale of oil exploration and production rights to affiliates of China's Geo-Jade Petroleum for a price of 384.6 million euros. Banker's started to exploit the Albanian oil fields of Patos-Marinze and Kucova in 2004, and since 2014 it has been the largest foreign company in the country. A month later, China Everbright and Friedman Pacific Asset Management announced the acquisition of Tirana International Airport in a 10-year concession deal. Though a second Albanian airport is scheduled to open for service soon, Tirana will remain the most important transport hub. It is one of the fastest-growing airports in Europe, with annual passenger rates rising from 600,000 in 2005 to two million in 2015. It's China's (Rapoza 2017).

A major piece of Chinese investment is the construction of the Blue Corridor is a key project that Albania is negotiating with Chinese company Pacific Construction while other projects in the banking sector, aviation and tourism are being taken into consideration, the Albanian section of China Radio International (CRI) reported on Wednesday. The news was announced by Albanian Ambassador to China Selim Belortaja during an event held in Beijing on the 105th anniversary of Albania's Independence Day (China..., 2017). While in October 6, 2016 China Everbright Limited (CEL), an international investment and asset management company based in Hong Kong acquired all the shares of Tirana International Airport (TIA) (China..., 2016), only to re-sell them in 2020 to Kastrati Group.

Also, Albania and China concluded discussions on the construction of Arberi Road. The Albanian government approved the law on the concession by the "China State Construction" Chinese state company for the Road of Arberi infrastructural project. The agreement reached between the government and the Chinese company was discussed at the Parliament and the Ministers of the Economic Development and Infrastructure agreed that this project is the best alternative for the realization of the Eighth Corridor ambitious project, although it did not go through in the end and an Albanian investment enterprise, Gjoka Construction was awarded the construction tender. After the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in China, Albania, Montenegro and China Pacific Construction Group have signed a \$1, 72 billion agreements for the construction of Albania – Montenegro Highway (China..., 2015).

Moreover, the Albanian authorities are holding talks with China regarding giving by concession the Shengjini harbor but the agreement will not be signed during the official visit of PM Edi Rama in China since the Chinese part hasn't made public a specific offer. The agreement will be signed after the pairs agree on the technical and economic conditions. Sources from the Ministry of Transport suggest that the Albanian authorities are attempting to achieve a beneficiary agreement with China and that the Shengjini harbor may be given for use upon approval (on concession), for at least 25

years (Shengjini..., 2014).

2.1 Trade volumes between China and Albania

The total trade value between Albania and China has nearly reached 600 USD million in 2018. By 2014, China did not contribute to FDI inflow to Albania which totaled 869 USD million euros FDI in that year (China-CEE Institute 2019b). The situation slightly changed from 2015 to 2017 as Chinese FDI reached 7 USD million euros in total for three years (ibid). However, for the past three years, Chinese investors have reduced investment engagement with Albania again (Marković Khaze, 2021). Lately BRI and 16+1 CI have significantly contributed to the intensification of bilateral China – Albania relations. In 2016 China come third in the volume of exchanges with Albania (with 7.1% of the total after Italy & Germany), up from the fifth place in 2012. The weight of imports from China has continued to grow over the last five years, reaching 8.8% in 2016 from 6.4% of total imports in 2012. Exports in China have increased by 29.7% from 2012 to 2016 (ALL 5,744 to ALL 7,452), supported by the increase in exports of minerals and oil and of construction materials and metals (Hackaj, 2019).

Bilateral trade between China and Albania has had a steady increase since the start of the global financial crisis, with a total value of 284 million US\$ in 2008 going to 635 million in 2016. This is a threefold increase in less than one decade, which means that accelerated trade practices have been put in place and more and more Chinese commodities are present in the Albanian market (Musabelliu, 2019).

Albania has attracted several investments from the PR China over the past three years, but its leadership is seeking to further enhance existing cooperation. In this respect, one of Tirana's core interests is to increase exports to the Chinese market, especially the mineral products and metals that the Chinese are interested in, but also agricultural products. As individual negotiations on the export of deficient products to the PR China are proceeding very slowly and yielding barely visible results, the Albanian leadership should consider a regional approach under the "17+1" Mechanism. The Chinese government could make a list of products required by the Chinese market, where agricultural and animal products from Albania and the region would find their place (Arezina, 2020).

Overall, China ranks third among the countries with which Albania conducts the most trade exchanges. China has become the third destination of Albanian products, where we export 5% of our goods, while we provide almost 7% of imports from the distant market. We import products from industrial to agricultural, while our main export to China are chromium and copper ores (Beqiri, 2015).

Official data show that imports from China in 2019 increased by 11 percent while the Asian country ranked third in the list of Albania's top trade partners after Italy and Greece. In 2017 Albania imported 312 million dollars' worth of goods from China. On the other hand, Albania exported \$177 million worth of goods to China in 2017. It is important to point out that Albanian wine is being exported to China. The country is expected to become the world's largest wine market. The value of mineral products exported to China was \$162 million. Other exported goods are the following: textiles \$8.55 million, metals \$4.15 million, footwear and headwear \$1.86 million, as well as foodstuffs \$151k (What does Albania import from China, 2020).

Soon China will be a new market for the Albanian animal products. Albania and China have signed a memorandum regarding their collaboration about the import and export of food products and their safety. The deputy minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ermira Gjeci signed the memo. This memorandum paves the way to the export of animal products from Albania to China. The signing of the memo comes a few days after the visit of the minister of agriculture, Bledi Cuci in China to speak to the Chinese counterpart about the Protocol of Quarantine. Albania will start exporting towards China products such as milk, cheese, fish, honey, etc. (Exports..., 2018).

Regarding the type of commodities, imports from China include machinery, spare parts, construction materials, metals, textiles, and footwear. In the meantime, exports mostly consist of minerals (China..., 2017). Exports to China marked a significant increase during January-November 2017 compared to the same period of 2016. According to the official data provided by the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) the value of commodities exported to China was Lek eight billion, while the value of commodities exported during the same period of 2016 was Lek 6.1 billion. In the meantime, the value of goods and commodities imported from China was Lek 44.2 billion and it marked a slight decrease by 2.8 percent compared to 2016. According to INSTAT data China makes 6.2 percent of Albania's trade volume for January-November 2017. Regarding the types of commodities, Albania imports machinery, spare parts, metals, construction materials, textiles and shoe wear from China. Meanwhile, exports to this country consist mostly of minerals (Exports..., 2018).

Albania is achieving considerable percent increase in balance sheets regarding international trade with the region's countries and non-European countries as well. Based on the data on external trade provided by the Institute of Statistics

(INSTAT), Albania increased exports, especially with China. Furthermore, as the same report stresses "in November 2016, the countries with which Albania has had the highest increase in exports, compared to November 2015 are Italy with 12.7 %, Kosovo with 10.1 % and China with 137.8 %," INSTAT's report says (Albania..., 2016).

Trade with China is increasing continually in the past years. According to the Albanian Institute of Statistics, China is currently Albania's second trade partner in February 2016. Trade between Albania and China comprised 7,1% of Albania's trade with other countries in February 2016. Chinese exports to Albania have increased significantly, reaching the value of ALL 3, 984 million in February 2016, in annual terms. However, the amount of Albanian products sent to Chinese markets has decreased. In February 2015, Albania exported towards the Chinese markets products that reached the value of ALL 622 million while in February 2016 these exports dropped to ALL 221 million (Albania..., 2016).

Referring to INSTAT figures of the first semiannual of this year, Albania and China have enhanced economic cooperation significantly in terms of exports and imports, compared to a year ago. According to the INSTAT report, Albanian traders are strengthening their trade ties with Chinese markets, given that they are importing more from China than from regional countries. During the first six months of 2015, imports from China reached the value of ALL 21.6 billion, increasing by ALL 4.4 billion more within a year. "On July of 2015, Albania imported from China 13,3% more than in 2014, with Greece 7.2% more and with Italy only 1.7% more," cites the report. These figures are surprising given that Italy has always been Albania's closest trade partner, Greece as well (Albania..., 2016).

China now will have more impact in Albania because of the entry of the Chinese currency in the Albanian bank system, which will alleviate the trade exchanges between Albanian and Chinese businesses. The main trade partners of Albania regarding imports and exports are Italy (37,8%), Greece (7,2%), China (7,1%) and Turkey (5,8%), thus China being the third largest trade partner of Albania (China..., 2020).

3. General Cooperation Framework between PRC and Albania

The end of the Cold War, signed a new era for Albanian history. After the fall of the communist regime, the reproach of the new government toward almost all the nations of the world came in a very short period of time. The normalisation of the relations with the great powers of the international arena was the first aim of the new government established in 1992. Since with PRC the diplomatic relations were never interrupted it was easier for the Albanian new government to re-establish the ties (Musabelliu, 2019).

Until February 2018, no public works contract seems to have been awarded to any Chinese contractor in Albania. Both Rruga e Arbrit Motorway and Spitala Industrial Park procedures have not gone through (Hackaj, 2019). Back in 2009, Sali Berisha, at the time Prime Minister of Albania visits China and meets with President Hu Jintao, on the 60th anniversary of Sino-Albanian diplomatic ties. President Hu in this stance noted that Sino-Albanian relations were at a new starting point, with a new opportunity for further development and pragmatic cooperation. 48 This visit was returned in 2011 by the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi who visits Tirana and meets with the three leaders of the Albanian state at the time.

In 2017, Zhang Gaoli, Vice Premier of PRC visits Albania for a two days' visit and meets with President Bujar Nishani and Prime Minister Edi Rama. In this occasion Vice Premier Zhang highlighted the importance of Albania in being an integral part of the BRI and welcomed intensification of Albania's participation in the "16+1" cooperation.⁵⁰ It is important to notice in this stance that Edi Rama is the only Albanian Prime Minister (or number one policy-maker of the country) that has never had a one-to-one meeting with a Chinese President. The only meetings he has held are within the framework of the "16+1" with Premier Li Keqiang, yet no official state visit to Beijing for Rama.

The "17+1" cooperation mechanism has injected new impetus into the Sino-Albanian relations, this time with an ever-growing economic presence of trade and investments. In Albania the China-CEEC cooperation platform is mostly associated with investments and trade. The cases that attracted more attention in the public opinion and mass media were two: the acquisition for the controlling rights into two Albanian oilfields, from Geo Gade Petroleum (a Shanghai based company) specifically Patos-Marinzha and Kucova, which in total produces around 13.000 barrels of crude oil per day. The total amount that the Chinese company declared from the purchase of the previous Bankers Petroleum is 438.17 million US\$ 24; the second, was the taking over of the only Albanian airport, Mother Teresa, from a consortium of China Everbright (a Hong Kong based company) which will have management rights until 2025.

In 2001, Albania and the PR China signed three agreements covering financial, mortgage and technical aspects of the construction of the Bushat Hydropower Station in the northern Albania. Beijing provided support for the \$126 million preferential loan project, and the station was built by China International Water and Electricity Corp in 2008 (Arezina, 2019). In 2005, cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries began, which opened up new opportunities for

military cooperation (Poulain, 2011).

Four years later, in April 2009, the Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha visited Beijing. On that occasion, during the talks with the Chinese President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and other Chinese leaders, he expressed the political will to improve relations based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence and raise them to a higher level. The two sides signed a Joint Statement on deepening traditional friendly relations and documents on cultural and health cooperation. As one of the most important documents on Sino-Albanian relations, the Joint Statement elaborates the basic principles of bilateral relations, including the political basis and directions of development and cooperation. The four main points highlighted are: increasing the dialogue at all levels in order to become the basis for stable political relations, greater emphasis on cooperation in the field of information technologies, energy, infrastructure and mining research, expansion of cooperation in the fields of culture, health, agriculture and tourism, and strengthening coordination in the United Nations and other international organizations on the protection of the interests of developing countries and the unity of the United Nations. The basic principle of cooperation between the two countries is mutual respect, equality and reciprocity, cooperation and mutual benefit (Embassy of the PR China in the Republic of Albania, 2009).

During his stay in Tianjin, where the World Economic Forum (Summer Davos) was held 9–12 September 2014, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang held a bilateral meeting. On this occasion, the Chinese Prime Minister stressed that the 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations should be used as an opportunity to improve highlevel exchanges and promote practical cooperation in all areas. In his view, the two countries have good prospects for cooperation in the fields of energy, agriculture and infrastructure. The PR China was ready to import more agricultural and mining products from Albania, and Chinese companies that wanted to get involved in the development of infrastructure in Albania would have full government support. The forum was also used for the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the representatives of the Albanian Ministry of Energy and Industry and Power China (Invest in Albania, 2014), as well as for the conclusion of the agreement on the construction of highway between Albania and Macedonia. After that, two Prime Ministers agreed, at the Belgrade Summit in December 2014, to build the Arber highway, which should link Albania with Macedonia (The State Council of the PR China, 2011). Subsequently, in December 2014 the two Prime Ministers reached an agreement at the "17+1" Summit in Belgrade to build the Arber Highway, which is supposed to connect Albania with Macedonia (Balkan Insight, 2015). The highway would continue to Bulgaria, connecting the Albanian coast of the Ionian Sea and the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. However, the project did not come to realization due to an investigation by the Chinese authorities into corruption at China State Construction Engineering Company (CSCEC). In the same year at the "17+1" summit in Belgrade, an agreement was reached on the construction of an industrial park and the development of port infrastructure in the coastal city of Durres.

The following year, in November, a Memorandum of Understanding on the realization of the project of building the Adriatic-Ionian Highway from Trieste in Italy, through Croatia, Montenegro and Albania to Greece was signed. This project is marked as of national significance and opens the possibility for the construction of parts of the Thumane road (near Durres)–Peze-Mullet (near Tirana) and Peze (near Tirana–Dushk). Whereas, in April 2016, the Chinese company Geo-Jade Petroleum Corp. acquired the Canadian oil company Banker's Petroleum, which also operates in Albania, for 575 million dollars, which included the oil fields of Patos–Marinze and Kucova (Oil&Gas Journal, 2016). At the same time, the Chinese company Everbright Limited acquired through concession the airport Mother Teresa in Tirana until 2027 (Everbright, 2016). In addition, the Chinese company Sinomine Resource Exploration has established a daughter company in Albania, which works on the construction of mines and geological tests in cooperation with the Albanian Geological Institute. Furthermore, in 2017, China granted a relatively modest 1.5 million euros to the Albanian government to modernize the agricultural sector, and 2 million dollars for the reconstruction of the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet and the Popular Ensemble (Qori, 2017; Musabelliu, 2019).

On the other hand, the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Albania, Montenegro, and Pacific Construction was signed by Premier Edi Rama in November 2015 during the "16+1" economic summit in Suzhou, China (China..., 2017). We need to stress also that Power China company owns about 50% of the world hydroenergy market. The meeting of the Albanian delegation with executive directors of big state-owned Chinese companies was very important and promising for the increase of Chinese investments in Albania (Ministry..., 2014).

Although China's policy vis-à-vis the Southeastern European region has been that of gradual penetration through various mechanisms such as multilateralism, general understanding of China's concept of 'multi-layered multilateralism', not always has achieved its goals swiftly (Markovic, 2021). Or it has been more successful in some rather than other countries. For example, it has achieved its goals more swiftly given the sound political environment with Serbia and Hungary rather than with Albania or Kosovo.

From the Albanian side at least, there is a visible hesitation on the side of Albanian authorities to go deeper in the

cooperation with China, especially after the deteriorating relations between USA and the PRC during the Trump administration. Albania has joined the Clean Network list of countries that ban Chinese firms from entering in their digital markets for the ambitious 5G network plans (Çela, 2020).

3.1 Prominent organizations and artists in the areas of bilateral cooperation

Chinese media delivers in Albanian language through the CRI portal (<http://albanian.cri.cn/>) and Radio Ejani. There is also a sizeable Albanian alumni community that has studied in China, both during communism and recently, which constitute the membership of a few friendship associations supported by the Chinese Embassy in Tirana (Çela, 2020).

Cultural cooperation has developed significantly in recent years. In 2013, a Confucius Institute was founded in Tirana where wider public can learn Chinese. Also, Chinese is taught in secondary and elementary schools. In addition, Albania is extremely interested in developing tourism co-operation with China in order to promote country as a tourism destination: kilometers of unspoiled beaches and remarkable Roman-era historical ruins. Because of this, the Albanian government has decided to make a unilateral move as a way to show willingness to improve people-to-people aspect. In 2016, it simplified visa requirements for Chinese citizens, but even more importantly, in 2018 it has decided to introduce a partial visa-free system, which creates a six-month window for incoming tourists to visit Albania, without needing to obtain visa. But, such Albanian move has not been reciprocal, because for now Chinese have expressed their will to follow, but have not yet specified when this could happen. In a meantime, the CCP government has been trying to encourage more Chinese tourists to visit Albania. As a result, in 2018 the number of tourists increased by 60% compared to 2017 (to 17,000 tourists; Invest in Albania, 2019). Nevertheless, Chinese tourism numbers have been slow to expand, due to fears about Albania's poor public security (Arezina, 2020).

The Confucius Institute at the University of Tirana was established on November 18, 2013. This Institute was established based on the agreement that the University of Tirana has signed with the Confucius Institute Center, China (HANBAN) and the Beijing University of Foreign Languages (BFSU). The aim of the Confucius-UT Institute is to promote the Chinese language and culture. This Institute offers the opportunity for the students of the University of Tirana to learn Chinese with him.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Tirana offers inter alia: All levels of Chinese language learning; Students of the University of Tirana have two opportunities to learn Chinese, either by choosing this subject in the curricula offered by the faculty or by enrolling at the Confucius-UT Institute; Scholarships at the best universities in China, etc. The Confucius Institute is ready to make a new contribution to the deepening of Sino-Albanian friendship on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Albania (Ambasadori..., 2019).

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3.2 Chinese influence on Albanian media

According to China.org.cn, RTSH has signed an agreement with China on broadcasting Chinese programs in 2019, namely the show called "Kids of Wuzhumuqin Town" (Albania, China..., 2019). From what I could observe in the RTSH TV schedule between the 4th of October till the 8th of October there is next to no Chinese shows or shows with Chinese

propaganda. I can only name 3 shows which have some sort of Chinese connection out of dozens of shows between a multitude of channels. The first one is extreme kitchen, which presents a vast majority of Asian dishes, not specific to China but also including China. The second one being Mulan, the live action movie, which according to US media can be considered a movie with Chinese propaganda (Lowry, 2020). Thirdly, there is the show "Albania walks in the silk road". The description via RTSH writes as follows: "a television documentary that reflects the rapid development of economic cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Albania". The first two cases can be considered a long stretch to be named as Chinese propaganda while the third one can comfortably be named as Chinese propaganda. Saying this, if we look at the overall schedule of RTSH there is a shortage of Chinese shows, movies and programs if we consider that the same amount of attention or even more attention is given to Russia or India during the same time-span.

The influence of Chinese media in Albania seems to be looked a little bit more different than let's say the Turkish media influence in Albania. According to MOM (Media Ownership Monitor), the Albanian media market is controlled by a small number of powerful owners with strong political ties. Also, according to a report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Shopov, 2021) there are various agreements between China with Western Balkan counterparts to not receive negative coverage in their respective media. These outlets often appear to avoid references to information about questionable conditions attached to Chinese projects. The imperative of economic development in countries with limited media freedom allows governments in the region to control the flow of content on China and bilateral relations with the country. Overall it also has to be considered the aspect that we at this moment are in a post-pandemic "trauma" era, so there is an argument to be made that the government has limited the publishing of Chinese shows, documentaries or movies.

From a secondary source based on this article (Shopov, 2021) published in reporter.al by Nensi Bogdani, it mentions that a rapport made by the Konrad Adenauer foundation says that in Albania there are not identified nor pro-Chinese editorial media policies nor Chinese-owned medias. In the same article it mentions that China are offering a significant number of products for free. Such as documentaries on the system of government in China, like "China: Time Xi. One aspect that I personally can point out is that it seems that even online Albanian media doesn't write much on Chinese issues like the Chinese government gifting Chinese documentaries, or the agreement between China and RTSH for example. The information online considering China, especially anti-Chinese articles and news is very limited.

4. Conclusions

Socialist Republic of China has for some time been very influential worldwide through the Belt and Road Initiative, in the Southeastern Europe through its 16+1 format, as well as specifically in Western Balkans, particularly with its major investments in industry, road construction, debt trap diplomacy, Confucius institutes and other political, economic and cultural leverages. Albania could not have been the sole exception from the rule, although it relies less on Chinese investments and direct interference as some of its Western Balkan neighbors, save for the Republic of Kosovo. However, the Albanian case has received only scant interest, both in academic circles and scholarly works as well as in mass media and other means of public communications. This has mainly been based on the assumption that Albania is naturally immune from any Chinese influences, be that in political, economic, or socio-cultural axes.

The present conference paper seeks to address this gap in the recent literature and growing scholarship in general regarding China's continuing pervasiveness in the Western Balkans in general and Albania in particular. Among some of the most important Chinese investments that directly or indirectly impact Albania, we may mention *inter alia* the Blue Corridor, China Pacific Construction, the signed memorandum of understanding for the \$1,72 billion for Albania – Montenegro highway, past investments such as Tirana Airport, potential concessions such as Shëngjini port that has an already signed memorandum of understanding, the fact that China is Albania's third largest partner (for 2020) and the increased areas of cooperation, including failed attempts such as the construction of the Arbri Road by a Chinese company, the investments in mine and extraction industries etc., which are all matters of concern and interest. The same goes for the political relations, media and cultural influences, social practices and particularly and of interest to the present conference overarching topic, the investigation of security mitigated risks *vis-à-vis* Western Balkans and Albania in particular.

The present paper offers a deft attempt to understand the idiosyncrasies of the Albania-China relations also in the context of its historic ties, given that the two countries have their share of love-hate relationship during the second part of the 20th Century. In addition, the paper also provides a comparative framework of China's growing influence in Western Balkans. Since the security of this volatile regions is inter-connected, Albania can provide the necessary analytical

framework to understand the opportunities and risks of growing dependence on Socialist Republic of China, be that in political or economic dimensions and less so with regard to social and cultural influences.

Furthermore, the paper also exposes the limits of Chinese interference as third-party actor in the Southeastern Europe and triggers a debate about the role of third-actors (particularly China's economic penetration and Russia's geopolitical tentacles) in the backyard of the European Union, which has for a long time been a headache for Brussels. By placing Albania in a comparative framework vis-à-vis the other Southeastern European countries and looking at how Chinese-Albanian relationship in the 21st Century has developed and what we can foretell for the near future, this paper seeks to add a missing piece of empirical added value that will give a more nuanced view and complete picture of Chinese influence in the region.

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