



Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China's Engagement in Albania

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Abstract

This study delves into the multifaceted nature of China's engagement in Albania, with a focus on understanding the nuanced public perceptions surrounding this involvement. Situated within the broader context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it examines the impact of China's expanding influence in the Western Balkans, particularly through the lens of Albania's strategic geopolitical positioning and rich historical context. Furthermore, by exploring the grassroots-level reception, the research aims to uncover the economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of China's presence in Albania and assess the broader implications of such foreign engagements in smaller, strategically located nations. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study synthesizes findings from seven comprehensive surveys from three distinct sources: the Western Balkan Security Barometer, the China-Eastern European Countries (CEEC) group surveys, and the Balkan Barometer. This time-sequenced comparative perspective reveals a complex landscape of public opinion that is characterized by a shift from initially positive perceptions towards a more cautious and critical engagement with China's role in Albania. Overall, the study highlights a growing skepticism and a strategic recalibration of Albania's international alignments, evidenced by a nuanced preference for European Union integration over a deeper alliance with China. In conclusions, the findings suggest that while there is recognition of the economic opportunities presented by China's engagement, there is also an acute awareness of the potential pitfalls and complexities of such international partnerships. In this context, the paper argues for the importance of fostering an informed public discourse to navigate the challenges posed by global diplomacy and foreign influence. As Albania stands at a crossroads in its foreign policy, the evolving public perceptions underscore the need for a balanced approach that harmonizes established Western partnerships with emerging opportunities in the East. This study contributes to a richer understanding of Sino-Albanian relations and offers insights into the critical role of awareness and information in shaping the trajectory of international relations in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: Albania, Belt and Road Initiative, China, public perception, Western Balkans

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of international relations and global diplomacy, the role of China in the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania, has emerged as a subject of considerable interest and scrutiny. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted nature of China's involvement in Albania, exploring the depth and breadth of its impact at the grassroots level. This exploration is crucial in understanding not only the economic and political dimensions of China's engagement but also the nuanced public perceptions and responses that this engagement has elicited.

China's global aspirations, as part of its expansive Belt and Road Initiative, have found a distinctive echo in Albania, a nation with a rich history and strategic geopolitical positioning. The BRI's thrust into the Western Balkans, with Albania as a pivotal player, brings to the fore questions about the reception of such a deep-rooted influence by the local populace and political entities. At the heart of this investigation, lies the query: What has been the reception of China's

involvement in Albania at the grassroots level? This question is not just about quantifying the impact but also about qualitatively assessing the nuanced perceptions, attitudes, and reactions of the Albanian public and political sphere .

Furthermore, this paper seeks to address whether China's engagement in Albania has sparked notable public or political responses or backlashes. This aspect is critical in understanding the societal and political undercurrents that shape Albania's response to foreign influence. The response to China's presence is a complex tapestry, woven with threads of economic expectations, cultural exchanges, historical ties, and geopolitical alignments. Analyzing these responses provides insights into the broader implications of foreign engagements in smaller, strategically located nations. The significance of this study lies in its ability to offer a holistic view of China's engagement in Albania, shedding light on the perspectives of those directly affected by and involved in this global interaction. By exploring the grassroots-level reception, it aims to present a comprehensive picture of the current state and future trajectory of Sino-Albanian relations.

2. Methodology

A mixed-method approach to dissect and comprehend the nuances of public perceptions regarding China's engagement in Albania is adopted, intertwining qualitative and quantitative data, presenting a holistic view of the societal implications of such international interactions. To enrich the analysis, we delve into survey data from three pivotal sources: the Western Balkan Security Barometer, the China-Eastern European Countries (CEEC) group surveys, and the Balkan Barometer. This comparative, time-sequenced investigation allows to trace the trajectory of public opinions on China's influence in Albania, perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative, and views on Albania's global alignment. Guiding this inquiry are two hypotheses: Firstly, the paper posits that the public perception of China's engagement in Albania has transitioned from an initial positivity to a more nuanced and critical stance, influenced significantly by media narratives and a heightened awareness of geopolitical implications. Secondly, it hypothesizes that this shift towards caution and skepticism marks a strategic recalibration of Albania's foreign policy, with a growing preference for EU integration over deepening alliances with China.

The cornerstone of this investigation is the central research question: How have public perceptions of China's engagement in Albania evolved over time, and what factors have been pivotal in shaping this evolution? This question seeks to uncover the layers of public sentiment towards China's involvement, identifying the key drivers behind changing attitudes. Through exploring the influence of media portrayals, economic factors, and geopolitical strategies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the public's perception of China's engagement in Albania.

3. Analysis

The Western Balkan Security Barometer (2023) provide a detailed view of Albania's shifting perceptions towards China's influence in the country. These surveys reveal a nuanced and evolving landscape of public opinion, reflecting broader geopolitical and economic shifts. The Western Balkan Security Barometer's findings on the question of public perceptions regarding the influence of foreign powers on Albania revealed a varied spectrum of Albanian opinions about China's influence and a shift in attitudes from 2021 to 2022.

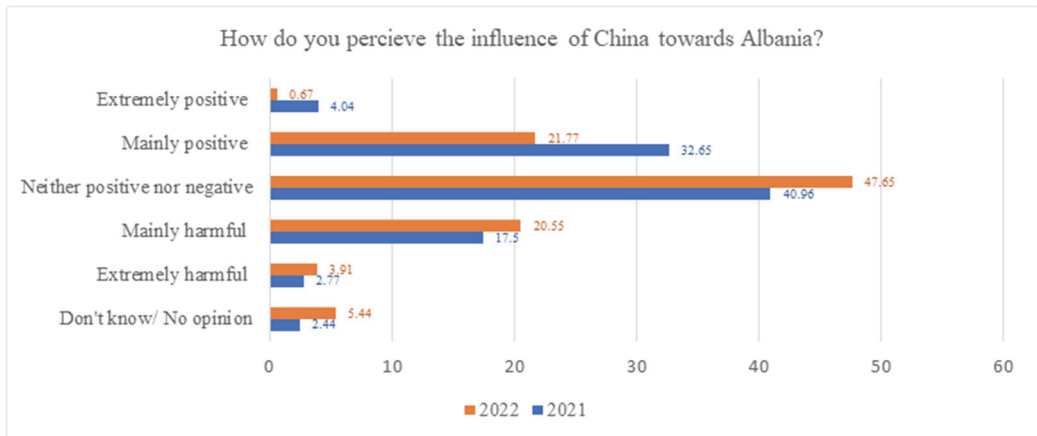


Figure 1: Public Perception on China's Influence
Source:

The majority of survey participants consistently perceived China's influence in Albania as neutral, with this view rising slightly from about 40.9% to 47.6% over time. There was also an increase in individuals who were either undecided or lacked an opinion on China's influence, moving from 2.4% to 5.4%. Moreover, there is a noticeable uptick in concerns regarding China's role in Albania. Those deeming China's influence as extremely harmful, although still in the minority, grew from approximately 2.8% to 3.9%, and those seeing it as mainly harmful rose from 17.5% to 20.5%. This trend indicates an escalating caution towards China's presence in the country. Conversely, the fraction of respondents holding a mainly positive view of China's influence diminished from 32.6% to 21.7%, with the segment expressing an extremely positive view plummeting from 4% to 0.67%.

These shifts in public opinion in Albania regarding China's influence signal an ongoing scrutiny and reevaluation. Remarkably, the share of the population viewing China's influence in a positive light—whether extremely or mainly—has reduced from over a third in 2021 to merely a fifth in 2022. This reduction is not just quantitative but reflects a deeper, emerging sentiment. The rise in those viewing China's influence as harmful, along with the decrease in those with an extremely positive perspective, indicates a growing critique of China's activities in Albania. The increase in respondents categorizing China's influence as neutral suggests a movement away from a distinctly positive appraisal towards a more guarded or skeptical viewpoint. Additionally, the heightened number of respondents expressing uncertainty or lacking an opinion in 2022 could suggest a level of ambivalence or disconnection with the issue, possibly indicating a gap in public access to information or involvement with the details of China's engagement in the country. This budding skepticism becomes especially noteworthy against the backdrop of Albanians' perceptions regarding alternatives to EU membership. When queried about alternatives to joining the European Union, 73.18% of Albanians open to alternatives cited the Open Balkan initiative as a possibility. Meanwhile, 14.62% saw a regional alliance with Turkey as an option, and 3.87% opposed any form of integration. A minor segment considered regional alliances with China (0.54%) and Russia (0.94%) as potential alternatives.

The contemplation of a strategic alliance with China by a minority of the Albanian population can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of China's substantial economic clout on a global scale. In this light, this segment of the populace may regard China as a viable economic ally, capable of catalyzing Albania's developmental agenda. Nonetheless, the scant enthusiasm for such an alliance underscores a widespread hesitation among Albanians to forge deeper connections with China. Contrarily, the predominant inclination is towards European Union membership, with a high valuation placed on the EU's integration prospects. Hence, despite a noticeable curiosity in broadening Albania's international partnerships, the prevailing mood is decidedly in favor of EU integration, aligning more closely with Albania's enduring interests and principles.

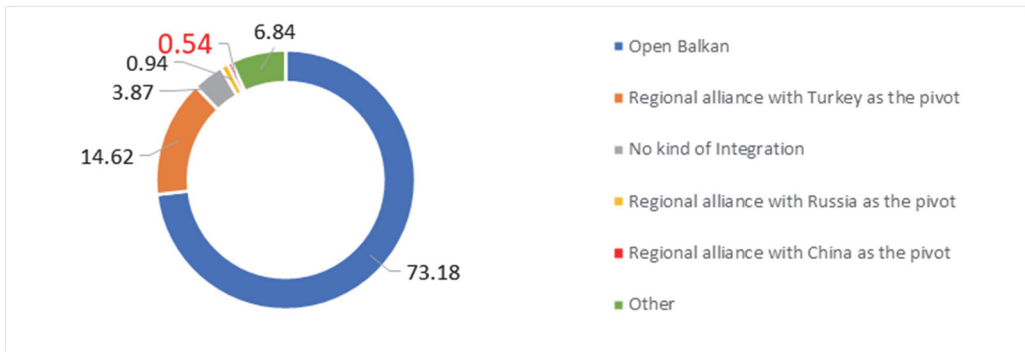


Figure 2: Public Perception on other alternatives from EU Membership (in %)
Source: Author's presentation (Western Balkan Security Barometer, 2023)

This sentiment is mirrored in the findings of the Balkan Barometer surveys from 2020, 2021, and 2022, which illustrate the European Union as the favored trading partner across most Western Balkan states, notwithstanding China's rising profile as a key economic player. The integration of questions related to China's influence in the 2020 edition of the Balkan Barometer marks a pivotal moment, signifying a heightened awareness of China's deepening economic ventures in the region and its amplified role in the Western Balkans' economic fabric from 2020 onwards. This recognition of China's intensifying economic participation highlights a transformative period in understanding the dynamics of international trade and investment within the Western Balkans and Albania specifically.

The bar graph from the Balkan Barometer surveys spanning 2020 to 2022 (figure 3) illustrates Western Balkan citizens' perceptions of trade and investment relationships with global economies. The data consistently reveals Albania's strong preference for the European Union, marking it as the top choice among the countries surveyed, with a relatively stable yet moderate interest in China. This contrasts with other Western Balkan countries, where no increasing trend towards favoring China is observed in Albania. Instead, Albania's proclivity for the EU significantly overshadows its interest in China, which remains less pronounced compared to some of its regional counterparts, reinforcing Albania's pro-European Union orientation.

Albania's commitment to the European Union as the preferred trade and investment ally is remarkably solid, maintaining an 84% approval rate among its citizens across the years surveyed. This steadfast and overwhelming support reflects a profound pro-EU sentiment embedded within the Albanian populace. On the other hand, Albania's engagement with China as a trade partner, though existent, is markedly restrained (30%), displaying fluctuations rather than a consistent uptick, especially when placed alongside the high levels of EU preference.

In the broader context of the Western Balkans, Albania's cautious interest in China stands out, especially when compared to countries like Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. These nations show a more noticeable or potentially growing openness towards China, with Serbia, for instance, displaying a consistently strong interest (47% in 2020 and 2021), likely indicative of established connections or strategic alignment with Chinese economic endeavors. The diversity in China-related interest among the Western Balkan Six (WB6) possibly mirrors each country's unique strategic approaches and the extent of China's economic engagement within their respective domains. Serbia's pronounced interest, for example, may hint at robust pre-existing ties or strategic collaboration with China. This varied landscape underscores the multifaceted nature of international trade relations within the region, with Albania's enduring preference for the European Union highlighting its strategic orientation and long-term interests.

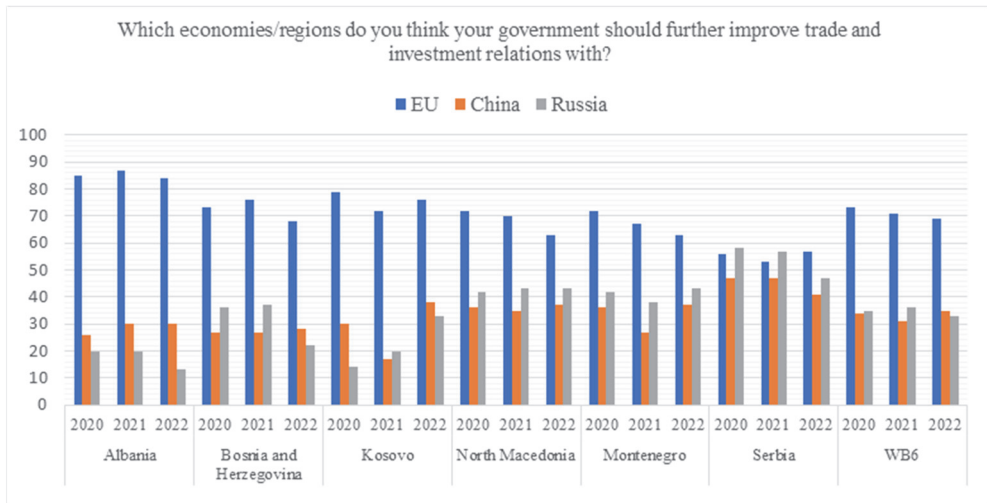


Figure 3: Public Opinion on Trade and Investment Priorities: EU, China, and Russia (2020-2022)
Source: Author's presentation (Balkan Barometer 2020; 2021; 2022)

Further, the data does not point to an emerging trend of increased interest in China within Albania, maintaining not only a consistent yet substantially lower preference than that for the EU but also lower than the WB6 average. Overall, the EU remains the leading choice for trade and investment across the Western Balkans, with the preference for China and Russia varying among countries and over time. Albania's steadfast preference for the EU. The bar chart thus reveals a complex tapestry of regional attitudes toward international trade, where the EU stands as the prominent partner for trade and investment, while preferences for China demonstrate nuanced variation within the Western Balkans.

In general terms, this ongoing assessment of public opinion is essential because it reflects the collective understanding and expectations of the populace regarding economic prosperity, as it underscores the perceived benefits of diversifying trade and investment partners. For Albania, the assessment is particularly crucial as it navigates its relationships with traditional partners in the European Union and seeks to understand the potential of deepening ties further with China. The survey's findings paint a strategic picture of Albania's global economic interactions:

Firstly, Albania's comparative standing in the Western Balkan region is underscored by its strong preference for the European Union, situating itself as pro-EU in orientation relative to its neighbors. This unanimous leaning towards the EU is a significant indicator of Albania's commitment to European economic and political systems. However, secondly, this EU-centric focus does not negate the importance of cultivating a diverse portfolio of trade partners. The presence of China signals a clear interest in broadening economic ties, as for Albania it is an opportunity to reassess and potentially expand its diplomatic and trade outreach, ensuring it doesn't limit its economic prospects to a single axis. Thirdly, strategically, Albania is presented with the challenge of balancing these preferences. With the EU as a long-standing and crucial ally, the growing interest in China represents an untapped avenue. It suggests that Albania could benefit from adopting a multi-vector foreign policy approach, harmonizing its established Western partnerships with the emerging opportunities in the East. Such a balanced approach could leverage Albania's geographic and political position, allowing it to navigate the complexities of international relations while optimizing economic benefits from diverse global players. In this context, the survey results advocate for a nuanced approach to Albania's foreign policy—one that remains open to the EU's influence while also considering the potential gains from engaging with other significant global economies.

Within the framework of assessing China's global growth and its engagement with Central and Eastern Europe, the China-CEE Institute Nonprofit Ltd. undertook detailed surveys, the results of which from 2017 and 2022 provide a valuable comparative perspective. This examination focuses particularly on Albania, offering a lens through which to understand the changing perceptions in this region. These surveys are instrumental in revealing how the economic progression of China is viewed in Albania, as well as the nature of the bilateral relationship between China and Albania. Additionally, they shed light on Albanian viewpoints regarding significant initiatives like the Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative. Figure 4 provides a detailed visual account of the changing levels of public awareness about the 16+1

initiative in Albania, over a period stretching from 2017 to 2022.

The bar chart clearly demonstrates a significant increase in the blue segment, illustrating that the level of unawareness within the population regarding the initiative nearly doubled, escalating from 32% in 2017 to 61% in 2021. This pronounced increase points to a potential deficiency in the efficacy of communication and outreach efforts related to the 16+1 cooperation, calling for an in-depth review of the methods used to relay information about the initiative to the public.

In addition, the persistent magnitude of the orange segment signals a troubling stagnation in the depth of understanding among the populace. Despite achieving a basic level of awareness, there has been a conspicuous absence of progress toward achieving a deeper, more comprehensive understanding, hinting at possible shortcomings in how information is conveyed and comprehended by the public. This issue is further exacerbated by a decline from 47% to 17% in individuals possessing a moderate understanding of the initiative, indicating not only a failure to advance knowledge but also a concerning loss of previously established moderate awareness levels.

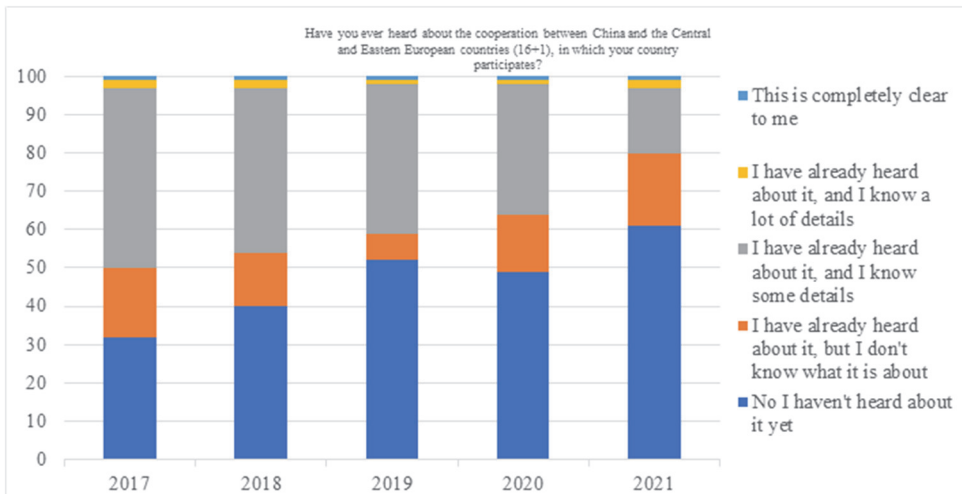


Figure 4: Awareness on Cooperation between China and Albania (in %)

Source: Author's calculation and presentation (China CEE Institute, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2022)

On the other hand, the growth of the yellow segment, especially significant in 2021, suggests a contrasting development, implying that information dissemination efforts could be making headway, or perhaps the initiative's increasing significance is piquing public curiosity and fostering a desire for deeper insight. Yet, the consistently small proportion of the dark blue segment, which represents a thorough understanding, underscores that a complete grasp of the matter still evades the majority.

Furthermore, a nuanced view of Albania's perspective on its relationship with China from 2017 through 2022, capturing opinions on three distinct but interrelated aspects is reflected by figure 5. Starting with the perception of China's global significance, Albanians initially held a moderately positive view in 2017 and 2018, as indicated by the blue bars that float above the baseline, suggesting an improvement in China's importance on the world stage. However, the following years marked a downturn in this sentiment. In 2019, the perception dipped below the neutral axis, and despite a minor recovery in the subsequent two years, the downward trajectory resumed in 2022. This pattern reveals a growing skepticism about China's role in global affairs within the Albanian public's consciousness. When it comes to the bilateral relationship between China and Albania, represented by the orange bars, the data paints a similarly complex picture. Starting slightly positive in 2017, the Albanians' outlook took a negative turn in 2018, briefly recovered in 2019, only to fall again, continuing its descent into increasingly negative territory through 2022, suggesting that the initial optimism or neutrality regarding China-Albania relations has been overshadowed by a progressively negative assessment and indicating potential disillusionment or dissatisfaction with the bilateral ties.

In addition, the gray bars, representing the anticipated impact of the Belt and Road Initiative, also signal a

challenging narrative. In 2017, expectations were neutral, but the subsequent sharp decline in 2018 and an even steeper drop in 2019 imply a significant shift towards a negative outlook on the initiative's potential benefits. Although there was a slight alleviation of this negative sentiment in 2020 and 2021, the negative perception solidified again in 2022.

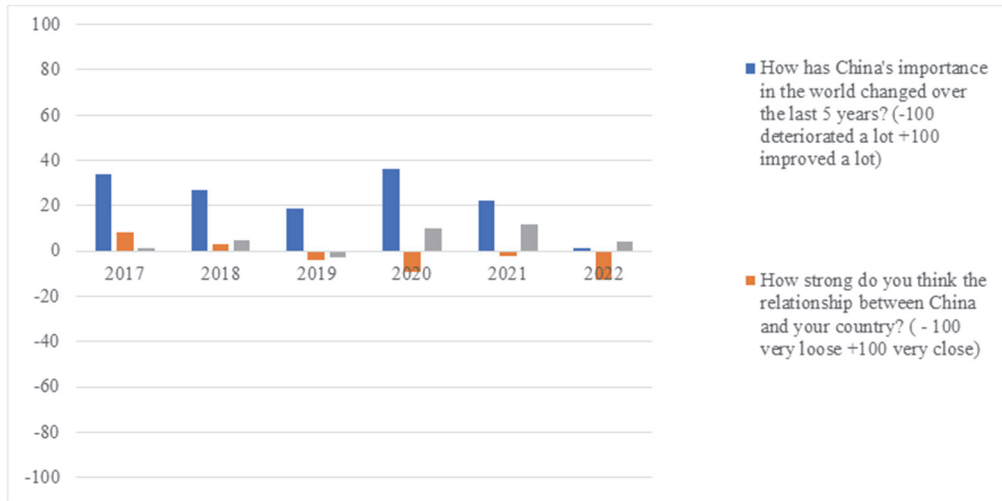


Figure 5: Albania's perspective on its relationship with China from 2017 through 2022

Source: Author's calculation and presentation (China CEE Institute, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2022)

This evolving pattern indicates a growing skepticism among Albanians regarding the actual benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative for their nation. More broadly, these findings suggest a shift from Albania's initially cautious optimism or neutral approach towards engagement with China, towards a stance that is more critical and questioning. Such a transformation in perspective may be attributed to a variety of factors, including changes in the geopolitical landscape, economic conditions, public discourse, and direct experiences with projects led by China. This shift underscores the pressing need to reassess the strategies guiding Albania and China's mutual engagement, highlighting the importance of public sentiment as a pivotal factor in shaping diplomatic and economic ties. The observed changes in public awareness concerning the 16+1 initiative and perceptions of China's global endeavors, especially the BRI, point to a dynamic shift in public attitudes. An increase in the lack of awareness about the 16+1 initiative might be lessening its perceived relevance and the appreciation of the advantages such international engagements may offer to Albania. This scenario is aggravated by a sustained superficial awareness and a reduction in deeper knowledge, possibly leading to more negative assessments of the BRI's impact. Conversely, the significant uptick in detailed understanding observed in 2021 suggests a more favorable view of China's significance and the potential advantages of the BRI among those well-informed about these matters.

In essence, the interaction between these observations implies that a widespread unawareness and lack of detailed understanding regarding China's involvement with Albania and the broader Central and Eastern European context could pave the way for more critical views of China's global role and specific initiatives like the BRI. On the flip side, promoting a more nuanced comprehension might improve the acknowledgment of the benefits these initiatives can offer, even if such informed views are limited to a minority. This emphasizes the vital role that awareness and information play in forming public opinions on international collaborations and their outcomes.

4. Conclusions

The synthesis of findings from diverse sources offers a layered perspective on Albania's relationship with China, particularly within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and the "16+1" framework, revealing a complex interplay of economic optimism, strategic caution, and a quest for deeper understanding among the Albanian public. The media narrative in Albania, characterized by both a recognition of the BRI's economic potential and a critique of potential risks

like indebtedness, mirrors a broader public ambivalence towards China's increasing influence. This duality suggests an ongoing negotiation within Albanian society, weighing the economic benefits of Chinese investments against concerns over sovereignty and long-term sustainability.

The contrasting views encapsulate this tension, highlighting the need for a nuanced interpretation of China's role in Albania. Public sentiment, as gauged by the Western Balkans Security Barometer and additional survey insights, underscores a cautious yet evolving perception of China. The growing skepticism and a discernible shift towards preferring regional collaborations, such as the Open Balkan initiative, over global engagements with China, reflect a strategic recalibration of Albania's international alignments. This recalibration is further supported by a strong pro-EU stance, as evidenced by the Balkan barometer findings, suggesting Albania's desire to balance its historical and economic ties to Europe with the opportunities presented by China. Moreover, the noted lack of comprehensive public awareness and understanding regarding the "16+1" initiative and the BRI underscores a critical need for enhanced public education and transparent dialogue about these international engagements.

The surveys highlight a paradox of widespread positive perceptions of Sino-Albanian economic cooperation against a backdrop of significant informational gaps and uncertainties about the strategic implications of these ties. This intricate mosaic of perceptions and strategic considerations suggests that Albania is at a crossroads. On one hand, there is clear recognition of the tangible benefits of engaging with China, from economic development to sector-specific impacts. On the other hand, there is an acute awareness of the complexities and potential pitfalls of such engagements, necessitating a more informed public discourse and strategic, multi-vector foreign policy approaches. The challenges posed by global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, coupled with the reliance on social media for information, highlight the urgency of addressing these informational gaps to foster a nuanced public understanding of Albania's foreign policy choices.

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