



Report

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**Transatlantic
Foundation**

China's Quiet Strategy in Bulgaria

Economic Appeal, Political Constraints

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Summary

Bulgaria presents an opportunity for China to increase its presence and pursue its strategic interests in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). China's engagement with the country is so far limited, though, compared to that with Hungary and Serbia. Sofia views China's economic footprint as key but security and soft-power dimensions are increasingly relevant. Public opinion has become more favorable toward China, not seeing it as a threat. It mixes admiration for Beijing's economic achievements and skepticism about it as an alternative to an EU orientation.

Government and business actors often take an overly uncritical approach to China, focusing on potential economic benefits from Chinese investments while neglecting associated risks. Bulgaria has repeatedly signaled its interest in intensifying cooperation. However, this has not been translated into a consistent national policy. Ministries and industry bodies have shown enthusiasm for strengthening economic ties, and business forums have been held to promote exchange and collaboration between Bulgarian and Chinese companies. Bulgaria joined China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2015 and has participated in its 14+1 Initiative with CEE countries.

China maintains relations with several political parties in Bulgaria, even if many of them are not major players. The political environment—marked by clientelism, corruption, and a hesitant geopolitical orientation—creates opportunities for Chinese companies to establish partnerships at the local level, particularly with municipalities and universities. The overlapping of Chinese and Russian influence is visible in media narratives and the alignments of parties.

China sees Bulgaria as an attractive partner because of its EU membership. Trade between them has nearly doubled since the early 2010s. But Chinese investments have not significantly impacted the economy. Many projects have resulted in financial losses and brought little benefit in terms of employment or industrial development. China's technological footprint includes "smart city" initiatives, with Huawei as a key player, though no large-scale projects have been implemented. Cultural and academic cooperation remains active, and Chinese outlets are present in the media landscape.

As an EU and NATO member, Bulgaria must balance economic opportunities with China against risks to national security, Western alliances, the rule of law, and democracy. Yet, its awareness of China's influence remains underdeveloped. To safeguard its national interest and minimize its vulnerabilities to Chinese influence, Bulgaria must develop a more transparent, structured, and EU-aligned policy toward China that mitigates economic or security risks; implement a robust investment-screening mechanism to prevent risky Chinese investments in critical sectors; keep prioritizing EU funding mechanisms and partnerships with democratic allies; enhance energy diversification through increased collaboration with the United States in nuclear energy, liquefied natural gas, and renewable energy; favor partnerships with EU and US technology providers; encourage EU and US companies complying with EU legislation and regulations to invest in its strategic sectors; facilitate more public discussions on the implications of Chinese investments, and support the media to investigate and to raise awareness about them as well as to boost transparency around them; and invest in media-literacy programs and independent research to enhance public understanding of China's actions.

Introduction

The shift in US foreign and trade policy under the new Trump administration provides an opening for China to increase the pursuit of its interest in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where its growing economic influence has mostly been manifested through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for infrastructure, trade, and investment connectivity. Beijing's relations with the countries of the region have evolved differently. It has developed strong relations with Hungary or Serbia notably, but its engagement with Bulgaria has been negligible.¹ Sofia sees economic ties as the key driver in their relationship, but the security and soft-power dimensions are becoming increasingly relevant. Politically receptive and keen for economic gains, Bulgaria represents an opportunity for China to increase its presence in the region.

Compared to Hungary, for example, Bulgaria is more cautious and is reluctant to create tensions in its relations with the EU and United States over China, and Beijing is aware of this.² China's political and economic presence in the country is relatively low-key and often unnoticed.³ Large investment projects and high-level political delegations are not major features of the relationship. Bulgaria's membership in the EU and NATO has so far deterred ambitious projects with China, but Beijing may now see potential in more engagement to further its geopolitical goals.

Public opinion in Bulgaria has grown increasingly favorable toward China. In a 2016 survey, 31% of respondents expressed a positive perception of the country and 14% a negative one. In 2022, positive sentiments were at 50%, higher than toward Russia (49%), the EU (49%), and the United States (40%).⁴ Bulgarians tend to see China more as a partner than a threat. In a 2024 survey, almost 70% said they did not perceive it as a danger to Bulgaria, while 15% expressed concern about China's increasing influence.⁵ Furthermore, Bulgarians possess the least negative perception of President Xi Jinping compared to other CEE countries⁶

Bulgarian public opinion presents a mix of admiration for China's economic achievements and skepticism toward it as a reliable alternative to an EU orientation. The political instability in recent years has not allowed for a consolidated approach toward China, but even before that the political establishment had not pursued more systematic cooperation.

This paper explores China's strategic engagement with Bulgaria, highlighting the economic opportunities and political challenges involved. It discusses the uncritical stance of government and business actors, and the limited yet significant economic ties, including Bulgaria's participation in the BRI. It also examines the political landscape, marked by clientelism and corruption, which creates opportunities for Chinese companies to establish local partnerships. The intertwined influence of China and Russia in Bulgaria is also addressed, along with the evolution of bilateral relations from Cold War-era solidarity to post-communist normalization. The paper concludes with recommendations for Bulgaria to safeguard its national interests and minimize strategic vulnerabilities to Chinese influence.

A Partnership in Progress

Government and business actors in Bulgaria tend to take an overly uncritical approach toward China.⁷ The focus on potential economic benefits from Chinese investments is rarely accompanied by an analysis of associated risks, especially in the context of the intensified geopolitical competition between China and the United States. Political figures have showed limited awareness of the strategic and economic challenges posed by China in other parts of the EU when navigating complex relations with the EU, Russia, Türkiye, and the United States. Moreover, China rarely appears in the public discourse.

Despite the frequent changes in government in the past few years, there have been repeated signals that Bulgaria would like to intensify its cooperation with China. However, there has not been a consistent policy. Different ministries and industry bodies have taken a keen interest in strengthening economic ties. In 2024, there were multiple business forums to facilitate exchange and collaboration between Bulgarian and Chinese companies.

Some politicians have shown continued openness to deeper cooperation with China.⁸ President Rosen Plevneliev visited Beijing in 2014 and President Rumen Radev did so in 2019, as did Prime Minister Boyko Borisov in 2015. China's Premier Li Keqiang, in turn, visited Bulgaria in 2018. Radev has consistently advocated deeper engagement. During his 2019 visit, he and Xi signed an agreement to establish a strategic partnership between the two countries. In 2024, Radev reaffirmed his view of Beijing as a vital strategic ally and expressed his expectation that a branch of a Chinese bank would be opened in Bulgaria. He also called for the establishment of a direct flight between Sofia and Beijing to facilitate business ties.⁹

In the murky world of Bulgarian politics, it is difficult to establish clearly which parties hold consistently pro- or anti-China stances.¹⁰ For example, there has been an assumption that progressive democratic forces are less pro-China than Borisov's populist center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), but Asen Vassilev from the liberal We Continue the Change–Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) coalition was the official representative of the now bankrupt Chinese company HNA Airport group when it attempted to negotiate a concession deal for Plovdiv airport.¹¹ In general, domestic actors more aligned with the United States' interests in the region tend to be more cautious toward China, while those skeptical or hostile toward Washington are more open to cooperation with Beijing.

China maintains ties with several political parties in Bulgaria, even if many of them are not major players. It seeks to have relationships with a wide range of actors, as they may come to positions of power one day. The leader of the pro-Russia nationalist party Revival, Kostadin Kostadinov, has actively promoted Beijing's BRI and vision of the world order.¹² In 2024, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) hosted a Chinese Communist Party delegation in Sofia to discuss investments and economic collaboration.¹³ However, maintaining a relationship with such parties is as much a liability as an asset. Revival is largely ostracized in Bulgaria; it draws a lot of attention but lacks the ability to significantly assist China as it has not so far been part of any governing coalition. While it is part of the current government, the BSP has lost support in recent years, which has significantly weakened its position. China could capitalize on some socialist solidarity with it, but there was no massive increase in cooperation with Beijing when the party was in power in the past, notably in 2005–2009.¹⁴ Meanwhile, GERB has been cautious in its approach to

China when in power throughout the years. The political actors that China seeks to cooperate with are those who are skeptical of the EU and transatlanticism, or who are nostalgic for the communist era, and thus tend to be more receptive to Chinese perspectives.¹⁵

The political landscape in Bulgaria—marked by clientelism, corruption, and a hesitant geopolitical orientation—creates opportunities for Chinese companies to build partnerships at the local level, mostly through municipalities and universities, and to solidify personal connections. Currently, 19 municipalities have cooperation agreements with Chinese ones, and municipal and regional authorities also cooperate with China through cultural and technological projects.¹⁶ For example, the mayor of Ruse has persistently sought to attract Chinese projects such as a “smart city” or cultural initiatives while maintaining close ties with the Chinese embassy.¹⁷

The intertwined nature of Chinese and Russian influence in Bulgaria is evident through media narratives and political alignment. Pro-Russia politicians and their electorate often harbor pro-China sentiments, based on a shared skepticism about or opposition to Western policies and ideologies. This alignment is prominently seen in the case of Revival, the main political channel of Russian influence, which also advocates closer ties with China. Revival delegations visited Beijing and Moscow in 2024, in an effort to strengthen relationships with the two countries.¹⁸ One cannot rule out that there might be an overlap between pro-Russia and pro-China sentiments, which would create an environment conducive to the spread of malicious influence and disinformation targeting the Western orientation of the country.

The Evolution of Relations

Relations between Bulgaria and China have evolved through multiple phases—from Cold War-era ideological solidarity to diplomatic estrangement during the Sino-Soviet Split, followed by gradual political normalization in the post-communist era. In 1949, Bulgaria was the second country in the world, after the Soviet Union, to recognize the newly established People's Republic of China. It followed the Soviet lead in supporting China's development, providing the country with expertise in various fields, including agriculture, education, and industry. The Sino-Soviet Split from the 1960s on then led to decades of estrangement and effectively a freeze of the relationship, with a sharp decline in diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchanges as Sofia followed Soviet directives and aligned itself against China in ideological disputes. The antagonism extended to intelligence and counterintelligence operations, with Bulgaria perceiving China as a threat to its strategic interests in the Balkans.¹⁹

Yet Bulgaria never formally severed diplomatic relations with China—a decision that facilitated reconciliation as global dynamics changed with the winding down of the Cold War. The visit of Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang to Bulgaria in 1987 was an important step in the warming of relations, as was the signing of a Bilateral Investment Treaty in 1989. However, there was no progress in terms of investment as Bulgaria grappled with political instability, an inflation crisis, and the total collapse of its planned economy after the fall of the communist regime that same year. Relations with China were not a priority for Bulgaria in the 1990s as it entirely focused on

Security Cooperation

Given Bulgaria's commitments to its Western allies, its possibilities for security cooperation with China are limited, yet they collaborate in mutual trainings and educational activities for officers as a part of a bilateral agreement between Bulgaria's Georgi Rakovski Military Academy and its Chinese counterpart.^a The Ministry of Interior partners with China through routine communication on matters such as migration and organized crime. It has also received Chinese delegations and equipment, including surveillance cameras, used in various law-enforcement systems.^b

As a NATO and EU member, Bulgaria is expected to maintain oversight over sensitive infrastructure, including private security networks that may interface with public systems. Chinese companies have established a strong presence in Bulgaria's private security sector, primarily in video surveillance and telecommunications. They often employ commercial strategies that involve capturing the market through bulk sales of equipment at low prices, especially in price-sensitive sectors. This presence could raise national security concerns related to surveillance or espionage due to access to national digital infrastructure.

A 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the two defense ministries established cooperation in military education, technology transfer, and officer training.^c While it may have been framed as a means of fostering bilateral ties and sharing expertise, this raises important strategic and security considerations. Given China's growing military assertiveness and its deepening alignment with Russia, including in the context of the war in Ukraine, continued military cooperation could raise questions about Bulgaria's commitments within NATO and pose risks to its broader security interests.

a Vladimir Shopov, Let a thousand contacts bloom: How China compete for influence in Bulgaria, European Council of Foreign Relations, March 10, 2022.

b Ibid.

c Yordan Baev, China and Eastern Europe: Historical Horizons, Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2023, p. 509.

joining the EU and NATO. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade, it had slowly begun to rebuild the relationship, recognizing Beijing's growing global influence. The turning point came in 1998, when President Petar Stoyanov visited China—the first high-level engagement in decades.

Since the early 2000s, diplomatic relations have grown steadily stronger and more visible. High-level visits have become more frequent, including Plevneliev's 2014 visit to Beijing and Li's visit to Sofia in 2018 mentioned above. In 2019, the two countries signed a strategic partnership declaration, facilitated by the pro-Russia and pro-China Radev as president. This signaled a mutual commitment to expanding diplomatic, cultural, and scientific exchanges. In 2024, the two countries celebrated 75 years of diplomatic relations, marking the occasion with cultural events. Also last year, China extended its visa-free travel program to Bulgaria to foster deeper people-to-people connections.

Bulgaria joined China's BRI in 2015, and since 2012 it has participated in Beijing's 14+1 (previously 16+1) Initiative to foster cooperation with CEE countries. Bulgaria is active in the 14+1: it runs the association for agricultural cooperation within the initiative and hosted the general meeting in Sofia in 2018, as well as various other meetings, such as the one at the prime-ministerial level.²⁰

While Bulgaria is formally aligned with EU policies regarding China, its engagement in the BRI 14+1 initiative raises concerns about Beijing's increased influence and its goals in the country. For example, successive governments have refrained from using language critical of China when it comes to violations of human rights. Additionally, Bulgaria does not have a screening mechanism for foreign direct investment, despite a clear EU push in this direction, making it more open to Chinese investment than many other member states.²¹

Bulgaria-Taiwan Relations

Bulgaria does not have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan; it follows a "One China" policy and recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legal government of China. This is related to the fact that when communist Bulgaria recognized the PRC in 1949, this precluded any official engagement with Taiwan, since Beijing opposes dual recognition.

However, Bulgaria and Taiwan engage in informal economic, cultural, and educational exchanges. Taiwanese businesses view Bulgaria as a strategic gateway to the European market (the EU is Taiwan's fourth-largest trading partner, with bilateral goods trade reaching almost €80 billion in 2023).^a In the European Parliament, Bulgaria's Andrey Kovachev is the vice chairman of the Taiwan friendship group, and he strongly supports enhancing EU-Taiwan relations. In a meeting with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen in 2023 he highlighted the benefits for the EU in strengthening economic and political ties and promoting a bilateral investment agreement.^b

Bulgaria and Taiwan have embarked on academic cooperation through various initiatives. In 2024, they signed an agreement aimed at enhancing mutual collaboration in talent cultivation, scientific and technological research, and industrial supply chains in key sectors.^c Bulgaria's universities and students are included in the Taiwan-Europe Connectivity Scholarship of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan's, which is designed to foster academic cooperation and exchange.^d

To make sure to maintain its good relations with China, Bulgaria is unlikely to intensify its ties with Taiwan beyond this level, even if it could benefit from doing so in areas like technology collaboration and trade.

a European Commission, [Taiwan](#), May 21, 2024.

b Office of the President Republic of China, [President Tsai meets delegation led by European Parliament-Taiwan Friendship Group First Vice-Chair Andrey Kovatchev](#), November 1, 2023.

c Taipei Representative Office in Greece, Taiwan, [Bulgaria sign pact on S AND T to open opportunities](#), December 4, 2024.

d Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China, [MOFA Taiwan-Europe Scholarship](#), 2025.

Economic Relations

China sees Bulgaria as an attractive partner due to its status as an EU member state. Its economic position in the country is that of a latecomer, faced by local companies with dominant market positions and by strong Russian interests, particularly in the energy sector. Bulgaria's state institutions have failed to develop a cohesive policy framework to pursue deeper economic cooperation. Thus, Beijing's approach has been not through its usual methods of government-to-government cooperation, but rather with a focus on more local projects, including municipalities and nongovernmental actors like agricultural research institutes and universities.²²

Their cooperation is built on several pillars.²³ One of them is the 2006 Economic Cooperation Agreement. There are several other agreements, including the 2018 memorandum of understanding on cooperation in small and medium-sized enterprises and the 2019 memorandum of cooperation between the Ministry of Economy and the Ningbo Municipal People's Government. Between 2010 and 2019, other significant arrangements were reached with Chinese entities including the Henan Provincial Department of Commerce, the Development and Reform Commission of Anhui Province, the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Commerce, the National Company Industrial Zones, and various Chinese economic development zones and high-tech parks.

The volume of trade between the two countries has nearly doubled since the early 2010s. In 2022, China was Bulgaria's seventh-largest trading partner, with imports of Chinese goods growing by almost 50% between 2021 and 2022.²⁴ Bulgaria's trade with China encompasses diverse commodity categories. Its key exports reflect the dominance of raw materials (including ores), slag, electronic and electrical devices, machinery, and organic chemicals. Its key imports are high-value-added goods, with electrical machines and equipment making up the largest share.²⁵

There has been a substantial increase in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the past decade, from €97.6 million in 2014 to €155.8 million in 2023 (see Table 1). By comparison, it ranged from less than €1 million to approximately €5 million per year between 1996 and 2010.²⁶ However, China is not among the top 20 sources of

Table 1. Chinese FDI in Bulgaria, 2014–2023.

Year	FDI (in million euros)
2014	97.6
2015	127.1
2016	107.0
2017	107.8
2018	111.5
2019	131.8
2020	126.1
2021	122.1
2022	146.1
2023	155.8

Source: Bulgarian National Bank

investment in the country.²⁷ Bulgaria's share of Chinese FDI has remained lower than 1%.²⁸ A great part of Chinese FDI is in agriculture, information technology, automotive factories, and real estate.²⁹ Huawei is the biggest Chinese investor with investments estimated to be over €13 million. It accounts for over 1,100 jobs and nearly 1% of GDP.³⁰

As noted above, unlike many European countries, Bulgaria has yet to create a mechanism to screen foreign investments, but Beijing has not fully exploited this. If its relations with the United States deteriorate, the EU may move forward with pursuing a comprehensive agreement with China on investment, in which case it is likely that Bulgaria's investment and trade ties with China will grow.³¹

Chinese investments in the automobile industry, include ones in the production of Great Wall vehicles. In 2024, Shanghai Unison Aluminum Products announced its plan to open a new factory for auto parts near Plovdiv.³² Approximately 15% of Bulgaria's photovoltaic power infrastructure is financed by Chinese investors, highlighting China's role in the renewable-energy sector.³³

Three of the largest Chinese investments in Bulgaria are in the agricultural sector (in the cultivation of corn, wheat, and other crops near the town of Parvomai and in the Dobrich region, among others).³⁴ A feed factory in Dobrich that exports its entire production to China is investing €10 million to expand its operations.³⁵ A Chinese company leases 20,000 acres in northwestern Bulgaria for corn cultivation to export to China and its investment had reached almost \$60 million by 2019.³⁶ China has long been interested in Bulgarian wine, and producers such as Svishtov Winery, Todoroff, and Katarzyna export to it. However, there are challenges to deepening ties in this sector, including limited product availability for sale in China, inconsistent quality, the absence of well-established business relationships, and extensive administrative requirements in Bulgaria, related to land use and leasing, export and import rules, and environmental and agricultural regulations.³⁷

Recent summits and business forums have been organized to foster economic ties and investments. In November 2024, a conference titled History and Prospects of Bulgarian-Chinese Relations: Politics and Economy took place in Sofia to mark 75 years of diplomatic relations.³⁸ The Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has held meetings with its Chinese counterparts and it sent a delegation to the 24th International Fair for Investments and Trade in Xiamen, China, in September 2024.³⁹ Also last year, a Bulgarian-Chinese Business Forum was held in Sofia, at which Minister of the Economy Petko Nikolov highlighted the BRI as an opportunity for Bulgaria to increase its exports to China and reaffirmed Bulgaria's role as a strategic and transportation hub between Asia and Europe.⁴⁰ In recent years, the InvestBulgaria Agency has hosted Chinese delegations. In 2023, it organized a meeting with the Ministry of Innovation and Growth, the Bulgarian Development Bank, and the Bank of China to discuss opportunities for joint investment projects.⁴¹ In 2024, Bulgaria signed a memorandum with the Shanghai International Chamber of Commerce during a business forum hosted in Sofia between China and the CEE countries, coinciding with the visit of a delegation from the Shanghai Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the Chamber of International Commerce Shanghai.⁴²

In recent years, China-oriented Bulgarian business organizations have been working to establish and to strengthen connections with Chinese companies and state institutions. The Bulgarian-Chinese Business Development Association has gained prominence as it focuses on promoting ties across multiple domains, including investment,

culture, and institutional cooperation. Two recently established entities, the Council on Economic and Diplomatic Relations and the Bulgarian-Chinese Partnership Association, also aim to develop economic, business, and investment linkages.⁴³ The Bulgaria-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry organizes and encourages Bulgarian businesses to participate in various trade fairs and exhibitions in China. It also hosts presentations, information sessions, and other events on conducting business in China, collaborating with regional business associations in cities like Haskovo, Sliven, and Stara Zagora.

Chinese companies have quietly been winning public tenders, primarily funded by EU programs, across Bulgaria. This trend has gained momentum since 2017, when the Zhengzhou Yutong Bus Company won a contract to supply electric buses for the Municipality of Sofia. Previously, the same company had won a competitive tender for diesel buses. In 2020, a municipal tender in Veliko Tarnovo was awarded to a consortium led by the Jiangsu Alfa Bus Company and Excelor Holding Group after no other competitors submitted bids. The deal resulted in the purchase of three buses for approximately €750,000. A year earlier, Jiangsu Alfa Bus had expressed interest in establishing a factory in Bulgaria, which would include the production of bus batteries. This was formalized in a memorandum of understanding in 2020, signed by the government with the company and its Chinese partner ACN Worldwide. The agreement included a €25 million investment plan for a manufacturing facility and a research and development center near Veliko Tarnovo. However, to date, there is no publicly available information on the progress of this proposed investment.

Despite these efforts and the enthusiasm from Bulgaria's institutions, Chinese investments have not had a significant impact on the economy. Many projects have resulted in financial losses and little tangible benefit in terms of employment or industrial development.⁴⁴ Several Chinese construction projects that were ambitious on paper have not materialized.

Many projects have resulted in financial losses and little tangible benefit in terms of employment or industrial development

Similarly, Chinese intentions to provide financing and construction for a nuclear-power sector project have also failed to materialize.⁴⁵ In 2023, a biomass power-generation plant in the city of Svishtov began operations with funding from China's Jinan Boiler Group,⁴⁶ but its operations continue to face issues due to a lack of raw materials.⁴⁷ Shanghai Unison Aluminium Products is expected to invest up to €150 million by 2025.⁴⁸ Last year, ZS Europe, a subsidiary of Shanghai Unison Aluminium Products, opened a plant near Plovdiv for manufacturing parts for electric vehicles. This new investment follows the unsuccessful Chinese venture in Bulgaria's automotive industry that resulted in the bankruptcy of Litex Motors in 2017.⁴⁹ In recent years, some projects, including a bid for Sofia airport and ZTE's plan to participate in a "smart city" near the capital, also failed to materialize.⁵⁰ In many cases, no further information has been available about Chinese investments after the initial announcements.

In theory, Bulgaria could play an important role in the context of the BRI as a hub between Asia and Europe. Chinese enterprises have expressed interest in participating in some large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Shipka tunnel connecting the north and south transportation networks of Bulgaria and the Black Sea highway, but they have not yet been able to secure a significant stake in any of these projects.⁵¹ Bulgaria is not among

Beijing's highest priorities for the BRI as it is not part of the key corridors connecting the Mediterranean to Central Europe. In this regard, it is not as integral to the BRI as countries like Greece, Hungary, North Macedonia, or Serbia. However, this may change should China establish a stronger foothold in the Black Sea region. In this case, the Bulgarian ports of Varna and Burgas may gain greater significance.⁵² In recent years, China has consistently

China's Technology Footprint

China's technology footprint in Bulgaria, as part of its Digital Silk Road agenda, includes projects for "smart cities", with Huawei as a key player. However, overall, there are no large-scale such projects implemented by China. Yet, even when announced projects do not materialize, they still signal China's intentions and influence local political dynamics, public discourse, and regulatory priorities. Several cities, notably Ruse, have been discussing "smart city" projects with Chinese entities. In Gabrovo, a local entrepreneur with support from the municipal authorities, has established a "smart city" framework that focuses on monitoring pollution, with plans to expand its capabilities.^a

Huawei has signed agreements with multiple universities (for example, the Technical University of Gabrovo), establishing innovation centers and providing internships and scholarships to students. Over the past five years, the company has provided scholarships to more than 500 students across nearly all Bulgarian universities.^b Huawei equipment is integrated into many "smart systems" across the country, including in city closed-circuit television, transportation, energy, urban infrastructure, and waste management.^c Different ministries partner with it to provide digital-skills training. The company supports "digital leadership" programs for women.

In the context of the transatlantic efforts in recent years to counter the penetration of Chinese providers in technology infrastructure, Bulgaria has fallen short in fulfilling its 5G commitments at the EU level and in bilateral cooperation with the United States. Approximately 65% of its 5G infrastructure is sourced from Chinese vendors, which is a potential area of concern when it comes aligning fully with the EU's security recommendations.^d Since joining Washington's Clean Network initiative and signing a related 5G security memorandum in 2020 in response to concerns regarding the security of its 5G systems and critical infrastructure, Bulgaria has taken minimal steps to uphold its pledges. Information on how this has been implemented is not available from public sources.

To make sure to maintain its good relations with China, Bulgaria is unlikely to intensify its ties with Taiwan beyond this level, even if it could benefit from doing so in areas like technology collaboration and trade.

a Vladimir Shopov, [Let a thousand contacts bloom: How China compete for influence in Bulgaria](#), European Council of Foreign Relations, March 10, 2022.

b Vladimir Shopov, [Seek deeper: Signs of China's changing strategy toward European societies](#), European Council of Foreign Relations, February 20, 2025

c Ibid.

expressed interest in investing in Varna Port.⁵³ Currently, goods shipped from China cannot reach Bulgaria directly via the northern China-Europe freight train route. Instead, the primary route involves shipping by sea to the Port of Piraeus in Greece and then transporting the goods to Bulgaria via rail and land routes.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the interests of well-established Bulgarian companies and the presence of other geopolitical actors with strong economic stakes in the country, such as Russia, Türkiye, and increasingly the United States, create obstacles for China to expand its presence in Bulgaria. For example, the China Communications Construction Company and Bulgaria's Trace Group Hold won tender rights for the Ihtiman-Kostenets railway, but the actual construction and implementation contracts were later awarded to non-Chinese consortia.⁵⁵ China Communications Construction Company aims to broaden its collaboration with Trace, targeting infrastructure projects not only in Bulgaria but also across Southeast Europe.⁵⁶ Previously, Russia's presence in Bulgaria has limited space for Chinese state companies to invest in the country's energy infrastructure. While the dependence on Russia in this sector is decreasing, China does not play a role in Bulgaria's energy diversification strategy. Meanwhile, Türkiye is a key trade partner with established commercial networks in the country in sectors such as construction and agriculture where Chinese firms are also trying to expand.

Overall, China tends to view Bulgaria as less complementary to its economic interests than other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Hungary or Serbia, which offer more interesting industrial development opportunities. While Bulgaria recognizes the potential benefits of relations with China, particularly regarding financial resources, it relies less on China, and there have been no major deals or investments that would indicate a Chinese presence as significant as in other CEE countries. This is because Bulgaria primarily relies on funding from the EU for its infrastructure projects and other needs.⁵⁷

China's Academic, Cultural, and Media Presence

China has long pursued cultural and academic cooperation and exchanges with Bulgaria, through various stages, from Cold War ideological solidarity to post-communist normalization and intensification. Ultimately, though, China and Bulgaria alike approach cultural and networking initiatives with a focus on appearances rather than tangible outcomes.⁵⁸ One milestone was the establishment of the Chinese state's Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria—coming several years after that of the Chinese philology program at Sofia University in 1991—which have significantly contributed to the promotion of Chinese language and culture.

The first Confucius Institute—one of the first in the Balkans—was established in 2006 at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. There is another one at St. Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo. Collectively, these institutes have established 60 teaching sites across 18 cities.⁵⁹ They also help multiple high schools all over the country to offer Chinese-language classes. Confucius Classrooms have been established at institutions such as South-West University Neofit Rilski in Blagoevgrad and Ruse University Angel Kanchev. According to one study, over 140 cooperation agreements have been established.⁶⁰ These predominantly concern student exchanges and research collaboration. The Chinese language can be taken as a major at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski,

studied alongside Bulgarian philology at Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski, and taken as a second language within the applied linguistics program at St. Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo.

China's media presence in Bulgaria is built on relationships and traditions established during the communist era. Recently, Beijing has invested considerable effort in maintaining and expanding these connections, leading to a substantial increase in the presence of Chinese media. The country, historically influenced by Russian political and economic ties, provides a fertile ground for Chinese state-controlled media to reinforce narratives that are pro-China and, by extension, pro-Russia. Beijing benefits from the long-standing relationship between Bulgaria and Russia as this allows it to leverage Russian influence to amplify its similar geopolitical narratives and to strengthen their strategic presence in the region.

One of the primary Chinese media actors involved is China Radio International (CRI), which broadcasts in Bulgarian. The Chinese broadcaster CGTN is also available. A major national daily newspaper—24chasa—has signed agreements with Chinese partners to publish a section devoted to China. Another national daily newspaper also publishes Chinese content on a daily basis. The Bulgarian News Agency has a partnership agreement with China's Xinhua news agency.⁶¹ A House of Chinese-Bulgarian Journalists and a Bulgarian-Chinese Media Center were established in 2023. China uses these media partnerships to promote coverage favorable to itself, to shape public opinion, and to influence political narratives. The editor-in-chief of CRI asserts that the purpose of the radio station is to present the "correct idea" of China in Bulgaria.⁶²

One notable example of how Beijing works to embed its narratives in Bulgaria's public discourse by leveraging its engagement in academic and diplomatic networks is a Chinese-sponsored book published in 2022, titled *China through the eyes of Bulgarians*. Featuring diplomats, academics, and cultural figures, it presents the country positively, while omitting critical perspectives on issues such as human rights and geopolitical tensions.⁶³ This selective representation of China, free from critique or independent analysis, aimed to stress the country's cultural richness and economic progress. Part of Beijing's influence strategy through cultural diplomacy and elite engagement, the book was an attempt to normalize pro-China perspectives within Bulgarian political and intellectual circles. The participation of figures with ties to Russia, such as former ambassador Angel Orbetsov, who studied in Moscow, suggests a deliberate selection of contributors predisposed to aligning with China's anti-West messaging. The inclusion of a former member of parliament from the nominally pro-EU GERB demonstrates China's pragmatic approach in cultivating influence among actors across various political affiliations rather than limiting its engagement to overtly pro-Russia factions. Many of Bulgaria's traditionally pro-Russia elites and political figures now advocate deeper ties with Beijing, viewing it as a strategic counterweight to Western influence in the region.⁶⁴

The Risks for Bulgaria

As a member of the EU and NATO, Bulgaria must balance economic opportunities from engagement with China with keeping to its Western strategic orientation. As economic dependencies deepen through Chinese investments

in critical infrastructure, technology, and energy, the potential for Beijing to exercise political leverage on the country increases, allowing it to influence national decisions in a way that aligns with its broader geopolitical goals. Chinese investments pose several risks to the country's national security, Western alliances, rule of law, and democracy. Concerns that China may increase its interests in Bulgaria arise mainly from geopolitical factors.

Investments in critical infrastructure and technology sectors can create dependencies that may compromise Bulgaria's national security. The experience of neighboring countries offers a lesson for Bulgarian policymakers concerning technological dependency on China and its associated risks. The Digital Silk Road is a significant vector of Beijing's influence in the region, integrating digital infrastructure investments with broader geopolitical objectives. Through telecommunications, "smart cities", and data centers, Chinese firms—most notably Huawei—have established a strong presence particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, whose governments have actively embraced digital partnerships with China. However, given that China operates one of the world's most advanced cyber espionage systems, this has raised concerns over cybersecurity, data sovereignty, and political influence.⁶⁵

The presence of CGTN and CRI in Bulgaria promotes pro-China narratives there while challenging Western influence.

Furthermore, Chinese investments often come with conditions such as demands for special treatment or regulatory exemptions, which can compromise democratic governance. The experience of countries in the region, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia contains multiple controversies surrounding projects involving China, including a lack of transparency in the terms of investments, frequent budget overruns, and the imposition of unforeseen financial burdens on national resources. Projects have involved direct contracts awarded without public procurement procedures.⁶⁶ Greater engagement with China on that basis could weaken Bulgaria's sovereignty and open the door to covert political sway, jeopardizing transparency and accountability.

In 2018, the China Development Bank entered into a €1.5 billion framework lending agreement the Bulgarian Development Bank and transferred €300 million to it. The beneficiaries of subsequent loans were not made public, but it is likely that these were made to companies with ties to the then-governing GERB and Borisov.⁶⁷

China's soft-power initiatives aim to create a favorable environment for deeper political and economic engagement, shifting perceptions to reduce resistance to its strategic ambitions in the region. They therefore warrant closer scrutiny to ensure that academic and cultural exchanges are transparent and free from undue political influence. Although China's cultural initiatives in Bulgaria have the potential to promote mutual understanding, they also raise concerns, especially that the Confucius Institutes can be used for political propaganda. Beijing's educational programs promote pro-China views just like its state-backed media do. The presence of CGTN and CRI in Bulgaria promotes pro-China narratives there while challenging Western influence. Their content focuses on economic cooperation, China's achievements, criticism of Western policies, and cultural diplomacy, reinforcing China's image as an alternative global power—and at the same time they reinforce Russian narratives, including on the war in Ukraine.⁶⁸

Bulgaria's awareness regarding China's influence remains critically underdeveloped. While the SVR defense intelligence service acknowledges Beijing's geopolitical ambitions—to reshape the international order, to challenge US dominance, and to deepen ties with Russia—the state apparatus appears unwilling to or incapable of comprehensively assessing China's activities in the country.⁶⁹ This could stem from the economic dependencies, political considerations, or an underestimation of Beijing's long-term influence strategies. Given China's expanding presence through investments, soft-power initiatives, and elite co-optation, the lack of a coordinated response leaves Bulgaria vulnerable to its influence. If the country fails to address this challenge, it risks becoming a passive actor in China's broader geopolitical strategy, with potential repercussions for its Euro-Atlantic commitments and national security.

Conclusion

China's investments in Bulgaria—particularly in infrastructure, media, and academic collaborations—serve not just its economic interests but also its goal of reshaping global influence in its favor. The overlap between pro-China and pro-Russia actors in the country mirrors Beijing's global alliances, as the Chinese Communist Party fosters relationships with Eurosceptic and anti-NATO actors that help it weaken Western unity. Bulgaria seems more cautious and hesitant than other countries in Central and Eastern Europe to engage more intensively with China. Their relations will remain stable as Sofia balances its EU and NATO commitments while maintaining diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement with Beijing. How this situation evolves will depend on two factors.

First, if the transatlantic relationship continues on its current trajectory, changes in EU policy toward China are likely. The strong pro-United States voices within Europe have weakened, and it is probable that both sides will not fully align their policies toward Beijing in the future. This may incentivize certain CEE countries to pursue deeper cooperation with China, providing it more avenues to advance its connectivity initiatives in the region. The rift in transatlantic relations may also lead the EU to consider a stronger partnership with China, or at least to normalize the possibilities for such cooperation in the public discourse. This could potentially encourage countries like Bulgaria and allow Beijing to expand its influence there if it decides to pursue a more targeted strategy toward Sofia.

Second, if China decides to prioritize CEE countries within the EU, Bulgaria's role could become more central. Bulgaria's ability to benefit from Chinese investments while protecting its national and geopolitical interests will be critical, especially given the risks of economic dependency and tensions with Western allies. It would not want to bring potential challenges to its relationship with the new US administration or the EU.

Bulgaria's deepening engagement with China, though largely out of the public eye, carries significant risks. If Beijing decides to pursue a more proactive approach in the country, the uncritical willingness across the political, business, academic, and media spheres for cooperation could enable it to establish a more deeply embedded economic and strategic foothold. This could result in a situation of economic dependency, akin to what has been observed in other countries grappling with the detrimental consequences of China's investments and loans.⁷⁰

Strengthening ties with China could create tensions with Bulgaria's Western allies. This would clash not only with the United States' tough position toward Beijing but also with that of many EU members. For instance, Sofia's interest in Chinese electric-vehicle producers could align it with countries like Slovakia or Hungary, which are integral to Beijing's strategy of circumventing EU tariffs on these vehicles entering European markets by granting them manufacturing capacity in the EU.⁷¹

As China expands its global military footprint, Bulgaria must prioritize transparency and alignment with NATO, avoiding entanglements that could undermine its strategic autonomy. Collaboration with Chinese defense institutions carries the potential for technology leakage, intelligence vulnerabilities, and undue strategic dependencies, which could be exploited by Beijing to weaken Euro-Atlantic security structures. Bulgaria's approach to China must remain adaptable, while also recognizing the unpredictability of global power shifts and developments.

Recommendations

To safeguard its national interest and to minimize its strategic vulnerabilities to Chinese influence, Bulgaria must:

- o Develop a more transparent, structured, and EU-aligned policy toward China that mitigate any potential economic or security risks. Bulgaria should work more closely with the EU institutions and EU partners to ensure a coordinated and balanced engagement. This includes aligning policies on critical infrastructure investments, technology cooperation, and trade standards.
- o Implement a robust FDI screening mechanism to prevent risky Chinese investments in critical sectors like telecommunications, energy, and ports. For this, Bulgaria can seek the assistance of the United States and EU countries. And it should coordinate with partners within the EU and NATO to develop a unified approach toward Chinese investments.
- o Seek to diversify its foreign investment portfolio and keep prioritizing EU funding mechanisms and partnerships with democratic allies to reduce economic dependencies on China or any other single external actor.
- o Enhance its energy diversification through increased collaboration with the United States in nuclear energy, liquefied natural gas, and renewable energy.
- o Favor partnerships with EU and US technology providers rather than with Chinese firms like Huawei to reduce the latter's influence. Bulgaria should reach out to other EU members and the United States for cybersecurity training, intelligence-sharing, and funding to help build a secure digital infrastructure.
- o Encourage EU and US companies complying with EU legislation and regulations to invest in its strategic sectors and foster exchanges with the United States and other EU members to strengthen economic ties.
- o Encourage and facilitate more public discussions on the implications of Chinese investments, and support the national media to investigate and to raise awareness about them, as well as to boost transparency around them.
- o Invest in media-literacy programs and independent research to enhance public understanding of China's strategic interests as they drive its engagement in Bulgaria and the potential long-term implications for the country's economy, politics, and security.

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