

The Coronavirus Pandemic Lets China Score a Win in Serbia

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With seven million citizens and a public healthcare system that is ill prepared to face the Coronavirus public-health crisis, Serbia—as other countries—has taken drastic measures to limit the damage. But, in a press conference last week, President Aleksandar Vučić caught the attention of the rest of Europe with his vocal disavowal of the EU’s policies and appeal to China. He said: “I believe in Chinese help. The only country that can help us is China. To the others, thanks a lot for nothing.”

Many observers were startled by this, coming from the government of a membership candidate. Reacting to the EU’s limits on exports of medical equipment to non-EU countries, Vučić called European solidarity a “fairytale” and appealed to President Xi Jinping—whom he called his Chinese “friend” and “brother”—for any help China could provide, including medical personnel. China flew in six doctors and donated medical masks as well as ventilators, with Vučić personally welcoming the planes flying them, alongside the Chinese ambassador to Serbia.

Vučić’s words were unsurprising to those observing the region. In recent years, the rapprochement between Serbia and China has manifested itself in infrastructure investments and increased security cooperation, with Serbia equipping itself with new AI-powered Huawei cameras and Chinese policemen conduct patrols in three Serbian cities, to assist with the recent increased influx of Chinese tourists.

Serbia, and the Balkans at large, represents an important segment of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Beijing has managed to take advantage of the EU’s apathy in the region to develop business initiatives and further its economic expansion.

The development of highways in Montenegro or the \$260 million Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge “Mihajlo Pupin” across the Danube, on which 7,000 Chinese workers were deployed and which was inaugurated in 2014 by Premier Li Keqiang, are all examples of China’s expansion in southeastern Europe. While prime minister, Vučić, lauding the construction of the bridge, wrote that “the first character in the Chinese words for Serbia and Serbian is pronounced ‘sai’. It translates as a place of strategic importance.”

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All of this—which can be described as debt-trap diplomacy—is making Serbia increasingly reliant on China, and the latter will not hesitate to use the country or the others of the “Western Balkans 6”—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—to further its presence in the region. China aims to use the Balkans as main gateway to the EU, since it sees these countries as potential EU members.

While EU members debate whether the Western Balkans 6 should be part of the union or less than fully fledged members, China has seen a window of opportunity and made them an important part of the BRI. As such, it is swiftly replacing the EU’s fragile presence in the region.

Despite manifest irritation in Brussels with Serbia’s steady pivot to China, the measures taken by the EU to assist Serbia in tackling its economic slump, its rampant brain drain, and its high level of corruption, appear rather limited. While the EU makes less corruption and increased respect for the rule of law necessary conditions to become a member state and have access to the single market, China’s demands appear easier to follow for the region’s “stabilitocrats”—leaders who promise stability to their EU counterparts while undermining democracy—as Vučić: recognition of the One China policy and backing China’s territorial claims. And in return Serbia also benefits from China not recognizing Kosovo.

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The EU’s sluggishness in the region is allowing other outside powers to seize the opportunity to increase their influence there. The WB6 countries could increasingly act as their proxies as they buy influence and take advantage of the lack of rule of law and rampant corruption to exert their soft power. This is the case, for example, with China in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, with Russia in Serbia, and with Saudi Arabia and Turkey in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The European Union has also enabled Serbia’s “stabilitocracy,” in spite of many local actors and civil society organizations calling upon member states and the EU institutions to address the gradual authoritarian shift that the country has been undergoing. This degradation is very clear in the steep decline in freedom of the media and the high number of government scandals, such as the Krušik affair that involves shady arms deals made by the father of the interior minister through a state-owned company.

While the EU is much focused on the Coronavirus pandemic and how to reinforce European solidarity, China has managed to seize this opportunity to reinforce the links it has been building in the past years with Serbia. Beijing has understood the strategic importance of Serbia and the Western Balkans and has acted quickly and efficiently while the EU, despite decades of presence in the region, has failed to address growing frustrations in the region, after years of bureaucracy-induced impasses.

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