



AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
DENMARK

# CHINA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY BEHIND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

HOW DOES IT SUPPORT CHINA'S EFFORTS IN SHAPING ITS IDENTITY AND INFLUENCING THE WAY IT IS PERCEIVED BY SERBIAN PUBLICS?

by

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree or professional qualification. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 2020



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# I Abstract

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As the most significant diplomatic project of the twenty-first century and largest coordinated infrastructure investment plan in human history, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will connect the world's largest populations in a constellation of commerce and cultural exchange in the coming decade. Although, the BRI is promoted as being beneficial to all countries, the international community is divided in their opinion about the initiative and China's intentions behind its economic expansion. The Chinese government has recognised the obstacles it has to overcome in order to gain support in the international world by shifting its foreign policy towards a more proactive approach, resulting in a change of its public diplomacy strategy combined with huge soft power packages. Although the BRI is an economic project, it also serves the purpose of positively influencing China's perception by the international world and it is therefore necessary to understand the soft power motives and public diplomacy strategies behind the implementation of the initiative.

Based on the case of Serbia, this paper is examining the attitude towards and the perception of China and how this is influenced by the projects, investments and particularly the soft power strategy embedded in the BRI. Due to the economic character of the initiative, the research is not solely based on the constructivist way of thinking but also takes the influence of economic factors on perception into account. By investigating the Sino-Serbian relationship under the initiative and the results from public opinion polls, this research shows the effectiveness of the public diplomacy strategy behind the Belt and Road in improving its image and influencing the perception of China among the Serbian public. The combined analysis on the way China conducts its public diplomacy strategy in Serbia, the media coverage on China and the BRI and finally, the economic interdependence between both countries reveals that China's attractiveness among the Serbian public is derived from the generation and distribution of norms and values through the BRI rather than the economic benefits brought by the initiative.

**KEY WORDS:** China, Serbia, Public Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, Perception, Soft Power, Identity, Social Identity Theory

## II List of abbreviations

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CCCC	China Communications Constructions Company
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CRBC	China Road and Bridge Corporation
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IR	International Relations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NDB	New Development Bank
NSR	Northern Sea Route
OEC	Observatory of Economic Complexity
SANU	Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEEDS	South East Europe Development Scoreboard
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SRF	Silk Road Fund
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organisation

# 1 INTRODUCTION

As the most important industrialised country in Asia, largest trading nation in the world and engine for global economic growth, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) has become a new contender for global leadership. From 2000 to 2010, China achieved a double-digit average in economic growth, making it the second largest economy in the world (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). In the course of its four decades of economic reforms, China transformed itself from a developing country to a middle-income country, showing an economic rise which no other country in the world has ever experienced.

In the last years, China has amazed the world with its dynamic, creativity, drive and innovation and plays now a central role in the globalised world with a significant impact on global development today. Although China has shown its capability and competence in leading global development and the West agrees on continuing the cooperation and trade with China, there is still a certain ambivalence towards China's rise and its intentions. The perception of and the attitude towards China by the international world is divided. The emergence of China Threat theories shows how far the fear of China's rise and growing influence can reach. In essence, these theories regard the BRI as China's grand strategy for power and influence, while luring developing countries into a debt trap. The Chinese government has recognised the obstacles it has to overcome in order to gain support in the international world and is adjusting its public diplomacy strategy accordingly. Since his appointment to head of state in late 2012, Xi Jinping has shifted the focus of the country's foreign policy by abandoning the state's reluctance of the past decades and calling for a more proactive approach in carrying out China's message into the world, resulting in a change in its public diplomacy strategy combined with huge soft power packages.

Part of Xi Jinping's public diplomacy strategy is carried out by the Belt and Road Initiative (hereinafter BRI), which he first introduced in 2013 in Kazakhstan, marking the starting point for China's new economic expansion. The "Economic Belt along the Silk Road" was expanded the same year in Indonesia by the announcement of the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" as the sea route of the BRI. In 2018, the "Polar Silk Road" became part of the initiative with the publication of the white paper "China's Arctic Policy" (Hielscher and Ibold 2018). As of March 2020, 138<sup>1</sup> countries have joined the BRI by signing Memorandum of Understandings (MoU)

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<sup>1</sup> For seven of those countries that are listed as having signed an MoU for the BRI, the availability of independent information is contradictory.

(The Green Belt and Road Initiative Center 2020), which covers about two-thirds of the world's population and one-third of the world's GDP (X. Li 2019). Aiming at economic cooperation and people-to-people exchange including large-scale investment and financial integration, trade facilitation, policy coordination, energy and resource supply as well as infrastructure and transportation development led by China, the BRI connects Asia with Europe, the Middle East and Africa by simultaneously enhancing economic interconnectivity (X. Li 2019) (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). The BRI promises new roads, railways, ports, airports and pipelines, as well as new trade corridors that should link China, Central Asia and Europe. The initiative functions as an integrative concept for a fair globalisation to ensure economic growth and development, beneficial not only to states and companies but also to the people. By economically invigorating cities and regions with investments in infrastructure, these cities and regions attract companies and foreign direct investments (FDI), which leads to a rise of the overall living standard, grants access to education and creates economic conditions for people to interact.

After the launch of the BRI in 2013, the relationship between China and Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter CEE) has made great strides in terms of trade and investment, a trend which is expected to be further increased by the initiative (Pavličević 2019). The region covers an important area within the BRI, since both the land and the sea route of the BRI go through CEE territory. The China-CEE cooperation, also known as the 17+1 cooperation, founded in 2012 in Budapest, Hungary, aims at encouraging the cooperation between China and the countries<sup>2</sup> of the CEE region as well as promoting the BRI and its objectives to expand trade with Europe (China Daily 2016). All 17 member states have signed memoranda and bilateral agreements with China to join the BRI (The Green Belt and Road Initiative Center 2020).

As a member of the BRI and the China-CEE cooperation, the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter Serbia) is a country of interest to further investigate in terms of its relationship with China. Although Serbia has the status of a candidate since 2012, it is not yet a member of the European Union (EU) (European Commission 2019). In recent years the country has turned to alternative sources of investment for the development of its economy. In August 2009, Serbia signed an important strategic partnership agreement with China, which includes the mutual respect of each other's territorial integrity, prospects for further trade development and exchange of culture and technology (European Commission 2019). In this context, it is interesting to examine

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<sup>2</sup> The 17 member states participating in the cooperation with China are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.



how the attitude towards and perception of China is changing as a result of the projects, investments and particularly the soft power strategy embedded in the BRI, especially in a country like Serbia, which although located in Europe, is not as integrated and connected to the EU than its member states. In addition, the research on this topic might also provide insights into how the cooperation with China under the BRI affects Serbia's relations with the EU and whether it might be more attractive for Serbia to deepen relations with China rather than continuing to negotiate with Brussels about EU accession.

While China's public reaction to the BRI is largely positive and optimistic as it constitutes an enormous potential for securing the country's further economic growth, the criticism and worries in the West seem to grow with China's expansion. Most of the CEE countries welcome the opportunities by participating in the BRI, but the EU is rather sceptical of the initiative and China's growing influence in the region. The BRI is often perceived as China's attempt to erode the international economic system by providing an alternative development model to the prevailing Western concept of globalisation and development. The origin of this perceived threat is often related to uncertainty about China's rise, its intentions in the world economy and its market capacity. Nevertheless, China's investments, purchasing power and market size represent a great opportunity for the whole world economy, which cannot be neglected (X. Li 2019). In the last four decades, China proved the effectiveness of its development model. Embedded in the BRI, the Chinese Development Model is brought to the participating countries, promising economic growth and stability, while simultaneously, the public diplomacy and soft power strategies underlying the initiative are designed to improve China's image in the participating countries.

It can be discussed whether the Chinese government's efforts in terms of their public diplomacy strategy through the BRI is an effective approach to reshape its identity and influence foreign public's perception of China. This has led to the following research question:

## 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the example of Serbia, *how does China's public diplomacy strategy behind the Belt and Road Initiative support China's efforts in shaping its identity and influencing the way the country is perceived by foreign publics?*

## 1.2 OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to analyse the effectiveness of China's public diplomacy strategy with the implementation of the BRI based on how China is perceived by the Serbian public. Although the BRI is an economic project, it also serves the purpose of positively influencing China's perception by the international world and it is therefore necessary to understand the soft power motives and public diplomacy strategies behind the implementation of the initiative. This paper seeks to uncover the strategy behind China's public diplomacy by assessing critically if the perception of China by Serbia is influenced by its diplomacy efforts embedded in the BRI. The aim is to interpret and analyse the way China and its diplomacy is perceived by Serbia and to discuss whether the BRI constitutes a tool to shape China's identity outside its borders. Although the BRI serves the purpose of promoting Chinese soft power, it also entails a strong economic component as it is primarily an economic project. In addition to norms and values, economic factors also influence the perception of a country's identity as there is a relation between the economic performance of a country and its soft power success. Hence, this paper will not be based solely on the constructivist way of thinking but will also take the influence of economic factors on perception and identity into account.

All in all, the goal of this thesis is to discover the relation between the BRI and the response within Serbia by testing the social identity theory under constructivism and explaining the phenomenon of countries turning to China despite their cultural and geographical distance.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter deals with the existing literature on the subject of the BRI to give a comprehensive summary of the previous research and contributions. The reviews will function as a basis for further research, showing the current knowledge and findings about the BRI as well as the gap, this thesis seeks to fill in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the BRI and to find answers to the given research question how China's public diplomacy strategy is shaping the country's identity and influencing the public's perception through the implementation of the BRI. The presented research on the BRI, its implications and relations to other states will find further application throughout this project.

The BRI has been studied by diverse scholars and academics from various perspectives such as economic, geopolitical and organisational points of departure and through multiple analytical lenses, providing information on the implications of the BRI. The study of emerging markets, such as Eastern European countries, in this regard has come to the fore in recent years. The book "Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative", edited by Professor Li Xing and published by Springer Nature in the International Political Economy Series in 2019 (X. Li 2019), for instance, contains chapters contributed by professors and researchers from Europe, Asia and South Africa, covering various issues about the BRI and analysing the initiative from an economic, political and security perspective on a regional and global basis. In chapter ten of the book, Dragan Pavličević focuses on China's relation with Central and Eastern European countries and the Balkans under the BRI and a possible soft power shift as a result of the collaboration (Pavličević 2019). He discusses China's possible sources for possessing and exercising leverage over CEE countries with the conclusion, that the lack of economic, political and security benefits for CEE countries through the cooperation with China prevents a possible shift from the prevailing EU-centred order towards China. Pavličević, albeit covering several countries of the CEE region in his analysis, does not take into account that different countries develop different relationships with China and therefore, the general statement about the leverage over a country can vary.

Another major contribution in the field of BRI research constitutes the volume "China's Belt and Road Initiative Changing the Rules of Globalisation", edited by Zhang Wenxian, Ilan Alon and Christoph Lattemann under the Palgrave Studies of Internationalization in Emerging Markets, which deals with the challenges and opportunities for emerging market states by the participation in the BRI (Zhang, Alon and Christoph 2018). As argued in the first chapter of the book, a uniform statement about the BRI and its impact has not been made, but a consensus on

its influence on a new era of globalisation is generally reached. The contributions in the book cover various facets of the BRI, making it a more general outlook of the initiative. The strong emphasis on the opportunities for the respective countries in participating in China's BRI presented in the book, however, does not elucidate the impact on the attitude towards China and its possible changes through the implementation of the BRI. This is where the research in this paper seeks to fit into while aiming to fill the gap in the previous research.

In chapter seven of the book, Jędrzej Górski is presenting "China's Strategy Toward Central and Eastern Europe Within the Framework of 16+1 Group: The Case of Poland", in which he gives an outline of the 16+1<sup>3</sup> cooperation with the emphasis on the recent developments in China's relations with Poland in terms of demography, territory and economy. Górski decided to focus his research on the relations of one country, namely Poland, with China by providing an in-depth overview of the background of Sino-Polish relations, discussing the economic agreement reached between the two countries and assessing the development of their cooperation under the 16+1. He also devotes a subchapter to Poland's role in the BRI as "the EU's most important BRI-related transit country" (Górski 2018). His approach of focusing on the developments of one country of the CEE region seems to be most fitting for providing a profound analysis of the developments of China's foreign relations among these countries. Therefore, this paper follows his approach in terms of focusing on one state in particular in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the possible shift in the public's perception of China through the BRI and its projects.

Most of the research in the field of the BRI and its possible impacts in Europe is related to EU member states and their collaboration with China. This raises the question about how non-EU member states or EU candidates perceive China through the influence of the BRI. Aleksandar Mitić from the Center for Strategic Alternatives in Serbia addresses this topic in his working paper for the China-CEE Institute with the title "Belt and Road Strategic Communication Resilience: Lessons from the SERBIA- BRI Frame Analysis", published in December 2017 (Mitić 2017). He analyses the case of Serbia's cooperation with China within the BRI and the 16+1 cooperation by arguing that the communication of the BRI in Serbia is rather resilient towards the negative international coverage. Through the use of a frame analysis, Mitić points out the development of the Serbian media coverage about the BRI and the 16+1 cooperation from 2014 to late 2017. Prior to his analysis, he focuses on one specific article from the New York Times

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<sup>3</sup> Now 17+1, Greece joined in April 2019 as the seventeenth member of the cooperation

from September 2017, in which the Sino-Serbian cooperation is overshadowed by rather critical opinions and negative attributes to uncover the “threat frames”, which are also used in other critical reports. Subsequently, he classified the items for the analysis into two categories; either opportunity or threat frame. Regarding his methodological approach, Mitić uses a content analysis of 120 Serbian and foreign media items during three periods determined by himself. The paper concludes that the rising media coverage on the topic, albeit portraying a negative image, is a clear sign of the international world’s acknowledgement and acceptance of China’s initiatives and cooperation and therefore, strategic communication is a useful tool for policymakers in finding support.

Mitić’s paper and its findings provide insights into the relationship between China and Serbia from the perspective of the emerging China Threat theories and the negative portrayal of China and its initiatives such as the BRI and the 17+1 cooperation, thereby providing an important contribution to the discussion chapter of this study.

As stated in the objectives, it is recognised that in order to analyse the BRI’s influence on the perception of foreign publics, the economic side of the initiative has to be taken into account as well. In his research paper “Chinese Investments in Serbia – A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road”, published in January 2017, Duško Dimitrijević from the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade, focused on researching the impact of Chinese FDI for the development of the Serbian economy and how these investments helped deepen the relationship between both countries (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). The paper starts with giving an overview of the BRI and its objective of building a new economic international system, followed by a brief chapter dealing with the Serbia’s positioning towards China before investigating the economic relations between the two countries. Dimitrijević argues that the objectives of the BRI’s strategy include the improvement of China’s position in the world’s markets and that Chinese FDI are functioning as a test for the realisation of those objectives. He analyses the development of the Sino-Serbian economic relation within the 16+1 framework by examining the projects and the agreements that have been made under the BRI. Finally, Dimitrijević concludes with a presentation of the advantages and disadvantages for Chinese investments in Serbia as central part of the BRI.

Dimitrijević’s focus on the economic side of the BRI provides a valuable contribution for analysing the economic factor of the BRI and how the Sino-Serbian economic relation influences the perception of the Serbian public.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

Before starting to investigate the presented research question through an in-depth analysis, certain methodological aspects must be taken into account and the structure of the thesis needs to be introduced. First, the choices on theories, research methods and data will be presented, followed by the analytical process, which will frame the procedure of the analysis in chapter five. Afterwards, the framework of the thesis will be given to delineate the structure and finally, the limitations on the research will outline the argumentation for the selected focus.

#### **3.1 CHOICE OF THEORIES**

When investigating the BRI, many theoretical approaches can be considered, depending on the desired field of study and approach. Given that the research question presented in 1.1 seeks to analyse the normative power and influence of the initiative and aims at investigating Serbia's public perception of China, the constructivist approach was chosen as the main theory of international relations (IR) in this paper.

In contrast to realism and liberalism, which are more focused on hard power, constructivism believes that a state's behaviour and attitude towards other states is determined by their perception of reality instead of rationality and is therefore focussing on the soft power side. Under the constructivist paradigm, the social identity theory seems to provide the necessary tools to approach the analysis of identity and to uncover the strategies that China follows to reshape its own identity outside its borders. The social identity theory, pioneered by Henri Tajfel and further elaborated and brought into a concept by John Turner, analyses the influence of identity and status on a foreign public and uncovers the adaption of a certain identity management strategy of a state to change its image and perception. Due to the fact that the social identity theory under the constructivist theory of IR is based on observation and the assumption that people construct their own understanding and knowledge through their own experiences and reflection on those experiences, the use of public opinion polls is required for the data collection. In order to assess China's approach for reshaping its identity and changing the way the country is perceived by audiences outside, this paper will apply the framework offered by the theory to understand the pursued strategy behind the BRI in terms of public diplomacy.

Due to the economic nature of the BRI, which constitutes a significant part of the initiative and the projects it entails, and the fact that China constitutes Serbia's most important trading partner in Asia, the use of an economic theory must be considered. As indicated in the objectives, it is

acknowledged that the BRI is an economic project and that the economic side of the BRI definitely constitutes a factor in influencing the perception of China. Without a strong economic performance in the international world, China would not be able to exercise soft power in other states. Therefore, it is necessary to complement the constructivist theory with an economic theory in order to find out to what extent the economic benefits brought by the BRI play a role in influencing the Serbian public's perception of China. The concept of economic interdependence provides a framework for examining whether the BRI creates dependency relations between China and Serbia. Through examining data on investment and trade between China and Serbia their level of economic interconnectivity will be discovered and put into context.

### **3.2 RESEARCH METHODS**

In order to systematically analyse the research question how the BRI could support China's public diplomacy goal of improving its image among foreign publics, various empirical methods are used for investigation. In the following, the analytical resources that will be used to evaluate the influence of China's public diplomacy strategy on the Serbian public will be outlined.

As for research methods, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data will be used, however, the main focus shall be on qualitative data as the research question seeks to understand and interpret the meaning behind the public diplomacy strategy through various sources. Primary sources such as speeches about the BRI and China's vision behind it, given by President Xi Jinping at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, the first and second Belt and Road Forum and the Communist Party Congress shall provide the necessary information to uncover how the Chinese government promotes the initiative. In addition, public opinion polls shall give insights into the foreign public's perception of the initiative and of China in this regard. The public viewpoints are taken from polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Republican Institute and from the Factor Plus Agency in collaboration with the Serbian newspaper Politika. The polls and surveys will function as empirical sources for the analysis. These sources were selected since they are derived from nonpartisan fact tanks informing about public attitudes and trends without taking policy positions. Therefore, the credibility and the dependability of the sources are ensured.

As public opinion has become faster and easier to build through the progress in communication technologies and the development of the internet, the influence of civil society actors and the media has become an important factor in opinion building. Therefore, this paper makes use of

detailed contextual analyses of secondary sources such as existing literature and academic articles from journals in the field of IR as well as media coverage on the topic of the BRI and China's image to provide further insights into the development of the way China is perceived by Serbia and its public. Media coverage from both countries, China and Serbia, will be taken into account to get a comprehensive overview on the respective countries' portrayal of the initiative and its impacts in regard to the Sino-Serbian cooperation.

Due to the economic character of the BRI, the use of qualitative data will be complemented by quantitative data such as trade and investment data to support the theory of economic interdependence between China and Serbia. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the statistics are taken from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) statistics database, the United Nations Comtrade Database and from the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The data sets will be complemented by information from the National Bank of Serbia and the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

### **3.3 CHOICE OF DATA**

Researching such a global and comprehensive topic as the BRI demands a certain limitation to ensure focusing on a specific aspect within the field of the topic.

The research question presented in chapter 1.1 limits the scope of the research to the perception of one country, namely Serbia and its attitude towards China. Focusing on only one country's perception and changing attitude allows a more in-depth research and more focused analysis. Generally studying the BRI and how it is perceived by the international world would only allow insights into the soft power efforts of the initiative but would fail to analyse its effects properly, since the international perception of China and the BRI is too diverse to be able to draw any concrete conclusions from the results of multiple countries. Thus, identifying a specific case and applying the research question to this case allows a more focused examination of the data within the given context.

Serbia, as a case to exemplify the changing attitude towards China through the implementation of the BRI was chosen for multiple reasons. First, its status as an EU candidate and not member state is of interest in this regard, as it gives insights into a country's attitude towards alternative concepts when still not being fully integrated into a certain community. End of 2009, the government of Serbia applied for membership of the EU and since March 2012, the country has officially been a candidate for accession (European Commission 2019). When looking at the research of the BRI in connection with the CEE region, a lot of studies about EU member states



and their relation to China and the initiative can be found, in particular about the EU's fear and scepticism about China's interference in EU affairs, while the research on non-EU members in this region is rather limited. Therefore, it was decided to take a closer look at a country in the Western Balkan region as less attention was paid to these countries in regard to the BRI. Second, Serbia is not only part of the BRI and signed several agreements with China to strengthen the bilateral cooperation but is also a destination of already implemented projects of the initiative. Even though the initiative was presented in 2013, many projects are still in the planning and implementation phase, while in Serbia the first infrastructure projects have already been successfully completed with several more to start in the near future. This is a vital condition for the assessment of the research question since it seeks to find out how the perception of China has developed through the implementation of BRI projects. Third, for China, the CEE region represents a gateway to Europe, whereby the Balkans, and consequently Serbia is contemplated to become a major hub for the BRI. The importance of Serbia welcoming Chinese engagement in Europe constitutes another factor for choosing the country to be investigated in regard to China's public diplomacy efforts in shaping its identity and the way it is perceived by Serbia.

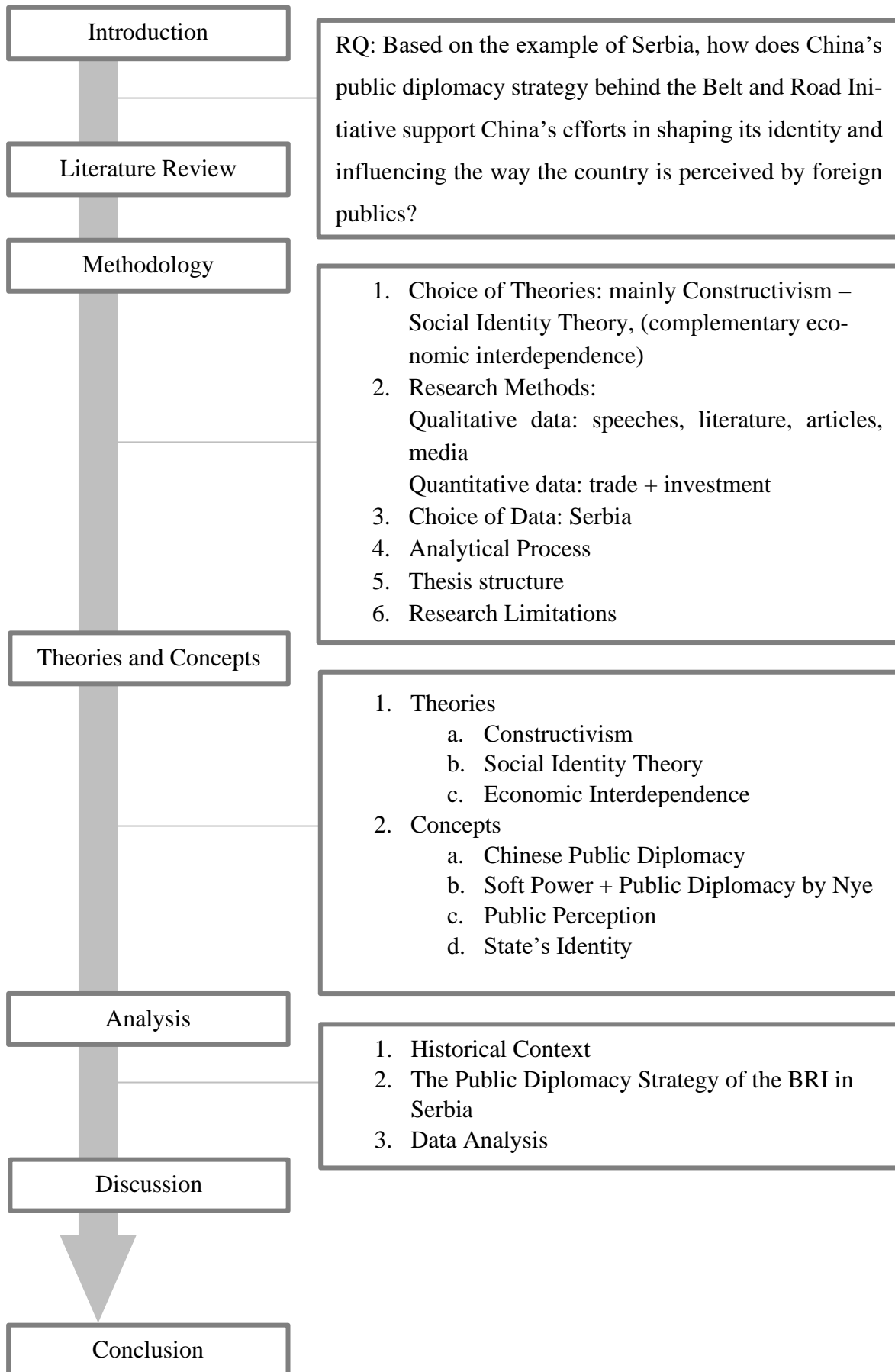
As far as the time frame is concerned, only data that was published by the end of 2019 will be considered and included in the analysis, based on the BRI's integration into China's 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year plan (2016-2020).

### 3.4 ANALYTICAL PROCESS

In order to investigate the research question how China shapes its identity and influences the Serbian public's perception through its public diplomacy and soft power efforts embedded in the BRI, a combination of applied theories and relevant data is needed. However, before analysing the research question, the central concepts and terms must be sufficiently contextualised to create a general understanding on which the analysis can be based on. Thus, the following chapter will not only present the relevant theories but also give an overview of the concepts used in this paper.

The analysis is divided into three different parts, starting with outlining the history of the Silk Road, ranging from its origins and first use up to the announced of the initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013, in order to build a foundation prior to the theoretical application and data analysis. From a constructivist perspective, aspects of IR are socially and historically constructed and thus, it is required to comprehend the history of the Silk Road in order to accentuate the factor of history in states' behaviour and the impact on its policymaking. The second part of the analysis will deal with China's pursued public diplomacy strategy behind the promotion of the BRI. The central values promoted through the BRI, as presented in the concept section of chapter four, will be applied to the case of Serbia in order to examine how the BRI is promoted to the Serbian public. Complemented by media coverage it will be assessed whether the central values of Chinese public diplomacy promoted through the BRI and the projects and efforts through which these values are distributed to the Serbian public are successful in enhancing China's image and attractiveness. The narrative in the media on China and the BRI will be critically examined in order to depict possible changes in the way the country and its initiative is portrayed and carried out to the public. Afterwards, the data of the public opinion polls are evaluated in order to identify a trend regarding the attractiveness of China among the Serbian public. This part of the analysis also takes a closer look at the projects carried out under the initiative in Serbia and the public's reaction to them. In the last step, the Sino-Serbian economic relation will be investigated using the economic interdependence theory and the data from the public opinion polls to find out to what extent the economic part of the BRI affects the public's perception. Trade and investment data will illuminate the economic interconnectivity between the two states since the implementation of the BRI. Finally, the findings of the analysis will be discussed in chapter six, before the conclusions will be presented in chapter seven.

### 3.5 THESIS STRUCTURE



### 3.6 RESEARCH LIMITATION

The following will lay out the limits of this research, which needs to be recognised before looking at the analysis in chapter five.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the perception of the initiative and the attitude towards China in the international world are very divided. The author is aware that the selected case depicts only one side of these different opinions. Serbia serves as an example to show a successful case of how China influences its perception through its public diplomacy strategies in the BRI. However, there are many countries which, despite China's efforts in portraying a positive image of itself, still perceive China as a threat towards the prevailing international system and thus, have a negative attitude towards China. In the Czech Republic, for instance, 57 percent of the public has an unfavourable opinion of China, in contrast to 27 percent who answered they have a favourable opinion of the country (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019), despite China's efforts and investments in the Czech Republic.

Furthermore, it is noted that there are other factors that influence the Serbian public's perception of China, which are not explored in detail in this thesis, such as the EU as external factor influencing the Sino-Serbian cooperation. On the one hand, China-CEE relations, hence Sino-Serbian relations, greatly depend on China's relations with the EU as the EU constitutes a greater partner than any country in the CEE region. On the other hand, Serbia's relationship with the EU determines Serbia's attitude and behaviour towards other states as well. Nevertheless, the China-EU-Serbia triangle will not be further investigated in this research due to the limited scope.

## 4 THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

The subsequent chapter will present both the main concepts and the chosen theories used throughout this paper. As already briefly outlined in the methodology chapter, this paper will follow the constructivist approach of IR while applying the social identity theory and its specific aspects applicable to states' behavior in changing its identity. Further, a conceptualization of the main terms is presented to gain a common understanding before finding answers to the research question and meeting the objectives presented in the first chapter.

### 4.1 CONSTRUCTIVISM

The failure of classical IR theories in predicting and explaining the end of the Cold War and the evolution of a bipolar system and its self-destruction in the end of the 1980s by the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave the initiative for the American political scientist Alexander Wendt to establish an alternative theory, namely constructivism or the constructivist theory of IR. In his article "Anarchy is What States Make of It" of 1992, Wendt proposed that anarchy, the state of the international system, is not the supreme determinant of the states' behaviour (Wendt 1992). Although realism and liberalism both claim that states behave in a certain way in conditions of the anarchical system, the theories differ in explaining how the states behave. While realism claims that states compete, because anarchy makes them enemies or rivals to one another, liberalism claims the opposite, that states tend to cooperate with each other in the face of anarchy as the only way for them to survive in the system. Anarchy is the nature of the international system and therefore the major drive of states' behaviour. Constructivism by Wendt disagrees with these assumptions by claiming that states choose the way they behave in the anarchical system because anarchy is an environment produced by states and not imposed on them (Wendt 1992). States' identities within the international system are divided into three different categories; enemy, friend or rival. Their own identity determines their behaviour and attitude towards other states as well as how different foreign policies are conducted towards other states. If a state is regarded as an enemy, the interest would be to destroy it by fighting a war against them, if the state is perceived as a friend other states would try to ally with them to reach collective security, and if the state seems to be a rival the others would compete with them economically and militarily (Wendt 1992). Another assumption in this context is, that international institutions have the ability to transform states' identities and their interests. In relation to China, this explains the motivation behind the establishment of the BRI and the associated multilateral

organisation and mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund (SRF) as well as the Export-Import Bank of China.

Although some assumptions such as the element of state-centrism, which means that nation states are the primary actors in the international system, and the assumption that states are agents with their own interests, needs and responsibilities are derived from neorealism, the main assumption of constructivism is that IR is a dynamic, changing concept, rather than a static, rational one, meaning that states do not always act the same way as liberalism and realism predicts (Wendt 1992). According to constructivism, IR is a social reality, not a strictly material reality, making ideas as powerful as materialistic things, which supports the argument that the public diplomacy strategy and the soft power of the BRI is able to influence the perception of the public to the same extent as its economic hard power. Further, Wendt contradicts the rational characteristic of IR, arguing that the world is more complex and unpredictable than stated in the classical IR theories. He argues that states do not act always rational and behave differently when facing similar situations in the anarchical system. The international system shapes the states' behaviours through the distribution of ideas and knowledge rather than through the distribution of power (Wendt 1992). While some states prefer to cooperate, some choose to compete in the exact same situation, regarding its own behaviour as rational (Wendt 1992). The reason behind their different approaches is because their perceptions of reality differs from one another. Since reality is social and not material, perception, as a fundamental notion in the constructivist theory, matters more than materialistic things. States do not behave according to the objective reality they are facing, but according to the social constructed reality created by themselves (Wendt 1992). Consequently, states have different perceptions and images of reality and therefore, a different understanding of reality, determined by their different history, culture, language and values. Constructivism focuses on these aspects as determining factors for the image-making of reality such as policy making processes (Wendt 1992) and thus, the analysis examines how these factors determine the influence of the BRI on the perception of the Serbian public.

## **4.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY**

In the early 1970s, the Polish-born British social psychologist Henri Tajfel conducted studies in order to investigate intergroup relations, which later developed into his concept of social identity (Tajfel, *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations* 1978) (Tajfel and Turner, *An integrative theory of intergroup conflict* 1979)

(Tajfel and Turner, The social identity theory of intergroup behavior 1986). The studies aimed at investigating the circumstances under which one perceives oneself as an individual and under which one perceives oneself as a member of a group (Tajfel, Social identity and intergroup relations 1982). Another aspect which was taken into consideration is the consequences of these different identities for individual perceptions and group behaviour (Tajfel, Social identity and intergroup relations 1982). In Tajfel's group studies the subjects were assigned to different groups and asked to assign points to each other. It was observed that the subjects tend to assign more points to members of their own group than to outsiders or members of other groups (Tajfel, Social identity and intergroup relations 1982). The study revealed that the mere act of categorising subjects into groups makes them think of themselves as members of a group instead of individuals, which results in the assumptions that being part of a group plays a role in defining oneself and it determines the behaviour towards others as well (Tajfel, Social identity and intergroup relations 1982). Although the theory was initially designed to explain intergroup relations and aimed at connecting cognitive processes with behavioural motivation, it was later expanded by Tajfel's student John Turner on how to interpret people's positions and how that influences their perception of others (Turner 1991).

The social identity theory aims at explaining how one can create and define one's place in society and there are three processes in this regard: social categorisation, social comparison, and social identification. Social categorisation refers to one's perception of oneself and others in terms of groups or social categories. Social comparison is the method of determining a relative value or social status to a group or its members within the system. Finally, social identification is referring to the conception that everyone perceives social situations differently and very subjectively. Their own perception of themselves and how they relate to others is determined by their view of others and other groups. The identity is therefore the outcome of those three processes and can be defined as one's feeling of belonging to certain groups. The distinction between one's personal and one's social identity is that the first one refers to self-knowledge combined with individual attributes while the latter refers to the identity or the feeling of belonging to groups. According to the social identity theory, the motivation and the character of someone defines their interpersonal as well as their intergroup behaviour. As a result of the social identity process, people seek to maintain a positive image of the group they belong to and for the same reason tend to focus on less favourable characteristics of non-group members or even degrade positive characteristics of them (Tajfel, Social identity and intergroup relations 1982) (Larson 2017). The favour of one group over another can influence the distribution of material resources or outcomes between two members from different groups and it

can also lead to influencing the assessment and evaluation of other groups products, performance or behaviour. It is therefore in the interest of any state to maintain the most positive image of itself in order to reach its policy goals and to secure resource exchanges and the acceptance of its products. Political scientists who are concerned with the social identity theory are Jonathan Mercer with his work “Anarchy and Identity”, in which he explores how social groups strive to achieve a positively distinctive identity (Mercer 1995), and Deborah Welch Larson with her article “Social Identity Theory: Status and Identity in International Relations”, in which she connects the social identity theory to the field of IR (Larson 2017). In her article, Larson relates the social identity theory to states’ behaviour and outlines their strategies to pursue a better image, which is the reason why her contribution will be used in the analysis of this paper.

Larson starts with stating that the social identity theory provides “means to explore the influence of identity and status concerns on foreign policy” (Larson 2017) and that groups or states are motivated to present the best possible image of themselves. As the motivation to establish a positive image presents one of the basic desires of a state due to their drive for improving their position, there are several approaches for status improvement or the achievement of social change. If a state’s identity is no longer favourable, as it is the case with China and the circulating China Threat theories, it may pursue one of several identity management strategies in order to change and improve its identity or position in the international system. The strategy of social mobility suggests an imitation of the institutions, values and practices of the dominant state with the goal of gaining admission into the elite (Larson 2017). Another strategy is the social competition strategy, which should be pursued by striving to be equal to or to surpass the dominant state (Larson 2017). Indicators for the social competition strategy are rivalry over influence or military demonstration to the point of military intervention (Larson 2017). The last strategy is called social creativity, implying that people modify their perception of the state’s image and therefore, suggests to promote a negative characteristic as a positive one or to identify an alternative dimension in which the state is superior in order to gain a favourable position on a different ranking system, while highlighting the state’s uniqueness and differences from the dominant power (Larson 2017). This can be achieved by introducing alternative concepts to the prevailing ones in order to positively distinct themselves from the other relevant groups or states. Since the end of the Cold War Chinese foreign policies have been motivated by the consistent objective to restore the country’s great power and status in the international system. By means of the social identity theory, the strategies and motives behind the pursued foreign policies can be determined. The strategy of social creativity can be found in the establishment



of various new institutions and cooperation such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the BRICS association with its New Development Bank (NDB) aiming at mobilising resources for development projects and the AIIB, founded in 2016 as a new multilateral financial institution for financial needs in Asia. All these Chinese-led multilateral institutions are indicators for the approach of the social creativity strategy. Another way to achieve the goal of social creativity is to re-evaluate the state's characteristics to enhance its perceptions by promoting new norms and values that appear attractive to other groups or non-group members (Larson 2017). To emphasise the positive image of a group, it can be useful to compare one's group with another reference group to appear more favourable. The strategy can entail the establishment of new institutions, the promotion of new norms, the advocacy of a new development model or the engagement in major diplomatic initiatives to increase the state's prestige in the international system (Larson 2017). Social creativity is characterised as a cognitive strategy due to its nature of changing people's perceptions of their group's status. Therefore, the establishment of the BRI can be seen as the ultimate expression of the social creativity strategy since the BRI, as a major diplomatic initiative, not only goes hand in hand with the establishment of new institutions but also promotes new values and alternative approaches to development in order to modify foreign public's perception of China.

### **4.3 ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in order to investigate the economic relationship between China and Serbia under the BRI and to be able to uncover the relation between economic performance and soft power, the application of an economic theory is necessary.

In a globalised world, actors such as states enter a co-dependent relationship to survive in the international system by opening their national economies to global competition for securing their demands and needs. By division and specialisation of labour, the actors of the economic system are able to obtain goods from other actors and vice versa, which results in an economic interdependence as changes on one end affects many actors within the network. The American political scientists Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye define this component of economic interdependence as *sensitivity* (Keohane and Nye 1977). According to Keohane and Nye, the extent to which a state can insulate itself from the costly events of other states constitutes another component, referred to as *vulnerability* (Keohane and Nye 1977). Hence, these two components form the cornerstone of the interdependency concept as both countries are "highly sensitive and vulnerable to each other" (McMillan 1997). As an economy develops from a manufacturing-

based economy to a service-based economy it needs to find a way to meet its demands in goods either from within its borders or to seek goods from other economies. Therefore, when advanced economies with multiple industries require goods that they cannot produce themselves, they are dependent upon economies which have the capacity to provide those goods (Gomez, Torgler and Ortego 2013). Hence, industrialisation and the advancement of an economy are the main causes for the occurrence of economic interdependence. Arguably, states with less developed economies benefit less from this kind of co-dependent relationships than states with an advanced economy as goods from less developed economies tend to cost less and labour costs are lower. However, the duality of the concept cannot be neglected as states can experience both beneficial and costly effects from economic interdependence (McMillan 1997).

Advancements in technology and communication led to an increase in international trade and capital flows and thus, increased global economic interdependence rapidly. Since the intertwining of state relations has tremendous effects not only on their but also on the world's economies, the interest in economic interdependence increased. The theory of economic interdependence is based on the assumption that states which are economically dependent upon each other through trade and investment are less likely to fight against each other due to their "mutual dependence" (Keohane and Nye 1977). The American political scientist and neorealist Kenneth Waltz disagrees by pointing out that heightened interdependence implies close relations which occasionally can lead to points of friction and may contribute to disputes between states (Waltz 1970). In fact, throughout history there is rather limited empirical evidence to support this assumption.

Key contributions to the economic interdependence theory are Edward D. Mansfield's "Power, Trade and War" of 1994 (Mansfield 1994) and Susan M. McMillan's "Interdependence and Conflict" of 1997 (McMillan 1997) as well as the aforementioned definition by Keohane and Nye in their collaboration "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition" of 1977. There are several approaches in measuring the level of interdependence between states but it is seemingly difficult to find a universal measuring approach since "the types of international ties involved in an interdependent relationship remain unclear" (McMillan 1997). The intentionally broad definitions give room for interpretations in terms of how to measure economic interdependence. As indicated in the methodology section, this paper will base its argumentation for economic interdependence on trade and investment data between China and Serbia.

#### 4.4 CHINESE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Although, the term public diplomacy is used worldwide to describe governmental efforts in communicating with foreign publics, every country operates in different ways to achieve its goals. Since this paper deals with the influence of China's public diplomacy, this subchapter will briefly outline the Chinese concept and understanding of public diplomacy by explaining the concept deductively.

The term public diplomacy was coined in the United States of America (hereinafter America) at the beginning of the 1960s by Edmund Gullion (郭 2019) and refers to the communication activities of governments aiming at shaping political, economic or cultural relationships with other international actors and publics to positively influence their own perception abroad. The concept of public diplomacy was developed during the Cold War (1947-1991) as American policymakers discovered that winning over the public was as important as winning over the governments of a country and exporting values and culture was as important as exporting capital and military force (郭 2019). By focussing on the establishment of rules, norms and values, public diplomacy can also be understood as a network-based concept, referring to diplomacy by rather than of publics (Hocking 2005).

In China, the first conference on public diplomacy was held in 2004 in Beijing, followed by the announcement of the integration of a public diplomacy office within the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (郭 2019). Since then, it operates on two levels; by enhancing the support of the domestic population for China's diplomatic work and by promoting understanding and encouraging the friendship with other states (郭 2019). In general, the Chinese public diplomacy has the same goals and interests as any other country. The overall goal of any state's public diplomacy strategy is to be able to promote its own national interest by shaping the communication around a certain topic to influence the public attitude on the formation and execution of foreign policies, while also reducing misunderstandings and misperceptions to ensure friendly and peaceful cooperation between states.

The key points of China's public diplomacy strategy can be derived historically and are increasingly used in speeches or in other means of promoting the BRI. In the new era, Chinese public diplomacy developed towards a more outgoing approach by not only relying on traditional diplomacy through diplomats but more focussing on diplomacy with the people and development of bilateral relations with states (郭 2019). The focus on **PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE EXCHANGE** has a long tradition in China and is still a key component in its foreign diplomacy (郭 2019). In

Chinese understanding, all kinds of diplomacy originally rooted from the exchange between people as well as the dissemination of values and culture caused by them (郭 2019). Although, cultural exchanges do not directly serve the diplomatic relations between the governments of two countries, it indirectly represents an important factor in the development of friendship among one another, since these exchanges promote understanding of other cultures (郭 2019). Especially in the new era of globalisation and information technologies, people play an even more important role in global affairs as they are able to express and act through different communication channels in order to help shaping policies. Therefore, it is important to not only target the governments but also its citizens in foreign policies and to strengthen the mutual understanding of all countries. The term **MUTUAL BENEFICIAL COOPERATION** is increasingly used to describe the overall goal of Chinese foreign policy. Through cooperation on cultural, economic and political levels all states can grow and develop faster and more efficient. Emphasised is the win-win character of cooperating with each other since it can secure prosperity and well-being of all people. Another key point of Chinese foreign policy is the vision of building a **HARMONIOUS WORLD**, in which states peacefully interact with each other without interfering in each other's affairs. In Chinese understanding, having mutual respect for every state's own way of governing constitutes a central element of the idea of living together in harmony. Another important concept in contemporary Chinese public diplomacy is the goal of "building a **COMMUNITY OF SHARED FUTURE** for mankind"<sup>4</sup>, which was delivered by former Chinese Communist Party general secretary Hu Jintao and advocated by the current general secretary Xi Jinping (Xiang 2018) (郭 2019). In January 2017, Xi Jinping gave a keynote speech at the United Nations (UN) Office in Geneva with the title "Work Together to Build a Community with Shared Future for Mankind" (Xiang 2018), which gained international recognition for offering a solution for global challenges. The idea behind this concept is that countries should interact with each other at eye level to build an open and inclusive community (Xiang 2018). As mentioned before, communication constitutes the key factor in achieving this goal as any disputes can be resolved through discussion instead of war. The guiding principle of this concept peaceful coexistence of all civilizations by respecting diversity and fostering mutual learning through exchanges. Since February 2017, the phrase was turned into an international consensus by incorporating it into a UN resolution (Xiang 2018). Finally, as mentioned above, the new era of Chinese public diplomacy adapted a new philosophy of pursuing a more proactive, outgoing approach. By presenting the world the **CHINESE VERSION OF**

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<sup>4</sup> Original 人类命运共同体, rénlèimìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ

**GLOBALISATION** as an alternative approach to traditional methods of promoting development, China is committed to sharing its economic development strategies in order to help as many countries as possible to achieve a comparable economic upswing.

#### **4.5 THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER BY NYE**

The American political scientist Joseph S. Nye also takes a public diplomacy approach, which he combines with his concept of soft power, a term which was popularised by Nye in his book “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” in 1990 and further developed in his work “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” of 2004.

Nye defines power as the ability to reach a desired goal or outcome either by coercion and payment or attraction and persuasion and specifies the term soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2008). Further, Nye describes soft power as an integral part of daily politics, which can be defined as the ability to create preferences through intangible assets such as an attractive personality or culture, political values or institutions (Nye 2008). “Whether a particular asset is an attractive soft power resource can be measured through polls or focus groups” (Nye 2008). In events where the minds of the public have been changed through attraction and persuasion exemplifies soft power created by culture, political values, ideas and foreign policy decisions (Nye 2008). Those factors play into the idea of soft power by, for instance, having a culture which appears attractive to other states, which can lead to other states being more willing to sympathise with one’s state’s views.

Nye claims that a state’s soft power is not necessarily crafted over time, nor does it need time to be build (Nye 2008). While culture and values are long-term propositions, policies can change rather quickly within an administration or a leader. Therefore, the regain of a state’s soft power can happen relatively fast. Moreover, Nye argues that being attractive to others or having a good reputation in the eyes of other states goes to deeper cultural and value issues that are not controlled by governments but certainly there are measures that can be undertaken by the government to work towards a better reputation. In his article “Public diplomacy and Soft Power”, Nye explains the relationship of both concepts. According to Nye, public diplomacy can be used to mobilise the resources that create soft power through methods such as cultural exchanges or broadcasting in order to communicate with foreign publics and ultimately, gain their support and assert its own interest in the long term (Nye 2008). He further emphasises, that public diplomacy can only produce soft power when the promoted culture and values also

appear attractive in the targeted country. If a state's culture is unattractive to other states, then a given cultural artefact does not produce soft power, it may produce the opposite, revulsion (Nye 2008).

With the introduction and implementation of the BRI, China presented an alternative concept for development to the world, which can be perceived as an attempt to erode the current economic system by other states. In order to reduce this *China Threat* and to promote the initiative as benefitting all countries, not only China, the government needs tools such as public diplomacy to reshape its identity perceived by other states since a good conducted public diplomacy strategy can support a state's objective to improve its image and the way it is perceived by other states. In order to do so, public diplomacy uses various instruments and methods, ranging from personal contact, publications and media interviews over the internet up to educational exchange programmes. Another important consideration when conducting public diplomacy is to focus on the way information is transmitted to the foreign publics. Since the problem of obtaining information has been eliminated due to the technological advances of the last century, the focus lies on transmitting the right volume of information at the right time. Good public diplomacy conveys information and promotes a positive image while also building long-term relationships "that create an enabling environment for government policies" (Nye 2008). Nye presents three dimensions on which public diplomacy acts in order to achieve its goals. The first one refers to *daily communication* by explaining the context of foreign policy decisions and includes a targeted and strong involvement of foreign media (Nye 2008). A well-prepared crisis management plays an important role as well, since the rapid response to crises can prevent misinterpretations. The second dimension is called *strategic communication* and includes a set of political campaigns and symbolic events to increase and steer awareness of certain issues (Nye 2008). The last dimension refers to the *development of lasting relationships* with stakeholder and key figures through seminars, conferences, access to media channels and scholarships (Nye 2008). "Each of these three dimensions of public diplomacy plays an important role in helping to create an attractive image of a country that can improve its prospects for obtaining its desired outcomes" (Nye 2008).

#### **4.6 PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

Since this paper is dealing with the perception of the Serbian public towards China, a delimitation of the term is needed. Public perception can be defined as the aggregated view of a group of people who are randomly interviewed about their opinion about a particular issue or event at a given moment in time (Dowler, et al. 2006). Individually, however, these views are just a snapshot of the current and are not necessarily representative at other times or in other contexts. But if the records of views over several years will be looked at, a tendency of public opinion can be deducted. Nevertheless, the gathering of such information always involves a risk of lacking validity or of including bias due to the fact that replies are given to specific questions (Dowler, et al. 2006). Since perception is based on beliefs, it is not the result of linear knowledge acquisition but rather the people's volition to perceive issues in a certain way as well as the product of social interaction (Dowler, et al. 2006). People's perception is influenced by their socio-cultural background, personal factors such as experiences or prejudices and is shaped by the processes of interacting with others. By expressing and discussing beliefs and getting response from outside, people's opinions are reinforced, modified and even challenged.

The necessity of taking public views into account occurs whenever officially announced events or particular circumstances causes uncertainty or fuels anxiety among citizens (Dowler, et al. 2006). Misjudging the public's expectation can lead to a crisis of faith or to rejection because the public's perception shapes their behaviour and play a vital role in shaping events and policies (Dowler, et al. 2006). Therefore, public responses can be a powerful determinant of the way policies are conducted and, if necessary, adjusted. Applied to the research question, the public's perception constitutes an important indicator in finding out whether the strategy of the BRI is successful in Serbia.

#### **4.7 STATE'S IDENTITY**

Same as perception, identity is a central term to be dealt with in this paper and therefore, it is necessary to give a more concrete definition of what is meant by identity in this paper. As already mentioned in 4.2, the social identity theory describes identity as the outcome of the three processes social categorisation, social comparison and social identification. The understanding of a state's identity is derived from this background. Same as for individuals, a state's identity is influenced by the perception of itself and of other states in the international system and determines its behaviour. States seek to maintain a positive image of themselves in order to preserve good relations with other states, since a state is dependent on good relations with other states, for example, in order to secure its needs for foreign resources. For China, as for any other state in the international system, it is therefore important to be perceived as a friend by other states as it influences their identity to the same extent as its perception of itself. Especially with regard to China's new strategy to participate more in the international world and to invest in other countries, it is imperative to have a positive image. As already mentioned in the introduction, there is a certain ambivalence towards China's intentions in the international world, which influences how its identity is perceived by other states. This paper argues that China uses the projects, opportunities and alternative values and approaches to development embedded in the BRI as strategic tools to influence other states' perception of China and to promote a more positive image of itself.



## 5 ANALYSIS

As stated in the objectives, this thesis seeks to examine how China's public diplomacy efforts through the BRI are perceived by the Serbian public by using the means provided in the theory section. This chapter starts with the historical depiction of the Ancient Silk Road, which lays the foundation for the subsequent content and empirical analysis.

### 5.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As outlined in the analytical process in 3.4, this subchapter will present the history of the Ancient Silk Road (hereinafter Silk Road) to give insights into the historical roots of the BRI. From a constructivist point of view, which this paper takes, the historical background is of utter importance as constructivism theory believes that reality is socially and historically constructed, and history has a huge impact on states' behaviour and policymaking.

The term Silk Road was coined in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, to describe the overland transportation routes between East Asia and the western civilisations (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). The first use of the trade routes between China, the Middle East and Europe were established around 2500 BC, even though the production of silk in China began 500 years prior (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). The export of silk from East to West Asia by nomadic tradespeople marked the beginning of global trade, which expanded to North Africa around 1000 BC. King Mu of Zhou, the fifth ruler of the Western Zhou, was the first head of state to recognise the Silk Road as a strategic trade route during his journey towards the West along its paths in 959 BC. It was Alexander the Great, whose realm expansion to Central Asia led to the opening of trade routes between Europe and Asia and enabled cultural and religious exchange between East and West (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). With the unification of China's territories during the Qin Dynasty under Qin Shi Huang in 221 BC, the trade became more and more standardised through the implementation of unitary systems for weight and measurements. Furthermore, he had built the Great Wall as protection for the trade routes, reaching from the capital, modern Xi'an, to the west of China (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019).

Eventually, with the beginning of the Han Dynasty, the Silk Road was officially used for silk export and trade relations between China and the Roman Empire laid the foundation for globalisation. Zhang Qian was sent to Central Asia twice as an imperial delegate to pave the way for exchanges (China Plus 2019). In the following years the Silk Road was increasingly used

for communication and cultural exchange between China and the West, which made it not only a trade but also a communication route. In 129 BC, the Parthians, whose empire counterbalanced the hegemony of the Roman Empire in the West, conquered Mesopotamia, which made them the new middlemen for the trade between China and the Greco-Roman world. Around the year 100 the Silk Road flourished due to the symbiotic trade relations between China, the Roman Empire and the Parthians and the increasing demand for silk, tea and other goods in the West and eventually, determined the economic order of that time (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). Numerous new road routes were built, which developed into new communication and trade routes. In 166 the first direct contact between China and Rome was established when the roman emperor Marc Aurel sent the first diplomat to China (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). Between 399 and 414 the Chinese Buddhist monk and translator Fa Xian travelled by foot from China to India, initiated Sino-Indian relations and brought back numerous Buddhist texts and thus created a new era of brisk cultural and philosophical exchange between China and India. In 552, the silk monopoly held by China was challenged by the Byzantine silk industry, sparking an international trade competition (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). From 629 to 645 the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang pilgrimaged more than 16,000 kilometres to India and back to China through the north and south route of the Silk Road, becoming the most famous traveller of the Silk Road. His story represents the deep cultural relationship between China and India at that time. The dynamics of this cultural integration led to a new era of philosophical discourse and exchange of discoveries, inventions and trade (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). Around the year 635 the first Christians got into China. During the Tang Dynasty, the Silk Road reached its peak which resulted in the expansion and opening of new routes. In South and East Asia, culture and art flourished through this event. In the years between 700 and 800, the trade relations between India and the West increased, spices were becoming the most traded export good from India, which led to a rivalry over spices, silk and other goods. Due to this rivalry and the increased demand of spices in the region, the “Spice Road” from India to Southeast Asia experienced an unexpected upward movement of trade (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). The Maritime Silk Road expanded to the Swahili coast, making Zanzibar the new hub of trade between South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). Around the year 1100, silk production also began in Europe.

During the Yuan Dynasty, founded by Kublai Khan in 1271, the Silk Road again became an important factor for transportation and security due to its various routes that were used to defend the empire (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). Additionally, rules for the safety and stabilisation of the Silk Road were established. A year later, Marco Polo and his father and uncle went

on a journey to China via the Silk Road. Once there, he served as the Kublai Khan's companion for the next 17 years (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). In 1279, the Mongol invasion began, in which China was conquered by Kublai Khan, the ruler of the Mongol Empire. The road systems of the Silk Road also played a particularly important role at this time when the grandchildren of Genghis Khan divided the Mongol Empire among themselves, thereby establishing the Yuan Dynasty in China, the Mughal Empire in South Asia and the Golden Horde in Russia. After the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty and the rise of the Ming Dynasty, the Silk Road lost importance as the focus shifted to national defence and the reconstruction of the Great Wall, which was partly destroyed after the Mongol invasion (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019).

During the Ming Dynasty of the fifteenth century, China experienced a cultural renaissance, in which the refinement of the porcelain and silk production as well as the expansion of trade by sea came to the fore (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). At that time, Admiral Zheng He commanded the Chinese imperial fleet on seven expeditions (X. Li 2019) and thereby established trade routes to Malaysia and Indonesia, which resulted in numerous migrations from southern Chinese provinces to Southeast Asia. With the implementation of trading papers for goods, a banking system emerged, which led Chinese trade into a new era (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019).

Through the journeys of famous seamen such as Vasco da Gama and Magellan new sea routes from Europe to Asia were discovered, which also meant that the land routes of the Silk Road were no longer used since shipping and trading by ship was less time-consuming for the transport of goods (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019). China, ruled by the Qing Dynasty from 1644 to 1912, was sealed off from the rest of the world, which not only cost China its position in the international economy but also caused international trade losses. Due to technical breakthroughs in the field of navigation and ocean-going ships, which enabled a further reduction in transport time, the Maritime Silk Road was abandoned because Chinese seafaring was overtaken by the Europeans (Naisbitt, Naisbitt and Brahm 2019).

The year 2013 marked the starting point for the revival of the Silk Road and China's economic expansion when President Xi Jinping gave one of his most significant speeches at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, in which he announced the launch of the BRI as the "Economic Belt along the Silk Road" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013), referring to the overland routes from China across Central and West Asia over the Middle East to Europe. Later the same year, he expanded the proposal for the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road", referring to the sea routes, linking China's ports to the African coast and through the Red Sea into the

Mediterranean (X. Li 2019). Xi started his speech by pointing to the long history of cooperation and cultural exchanges brought by the Silk Road (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013) and shared his vision of states cooperating once again despite their differences in race, beliefs or culture through the initiative. Xi emphasised that through “unity and mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit, mutual tolerance and learning from each other, as well as cooperation and the principle of win-win” this goal can be achieved (China Plus 2019). In March 2015, the initiative was promoted and published by the Chinese government in the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, calling for peaceful cooperation for mutual benefit (W. Li 2015). The first official name “One Belt, One Road”<sup>5</sup> was changed in 2016 into “Belt and Road Initiative” to emphasise the collaborative character of the initiative that unites countries all over the world for the goal of a fair development (Hielscher and Ibold 2018). In January 2018, “The Polar Silk Road” was added to the initiative, referring to the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as officially stated in China’s Arctic Policy (Hielscher and Ibold 2018). All three routes are complementing each other under the concept of the BRI.

The BRI is widely portrayed as a Chinese hegemonic design in the West, but from a historical perspective, the ambivalence towards China’s intentions with the revival of the Silk Road, which developed into China Threat theories, as briefly presented in the introduction, are unfounded. The history of the Silk Road has shown that China’s intentions are far from neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism. It rather shows a country which was the first to recognise the importance of globalisation through the establishment of trade routes and which encouraged cultural exchange and integration. China is historically not a colonial power and is deeply cautious about foreign entanglements in this regard, whereas obtaining foreign resources or entering foreign markets is desirable for China. Since countries of the CEE region welcome Chinese investments, several projects under the BRI have been planned and already carried out in the region. Especially for countries that were under the Soviet influence only a generation ago, to be courted with new investments and alternative approaches from China is a propitious reversal of fortune.

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<sup>5</sup> official abbreviation OBOR, Chinese 一带一路, Yīdài Yīlù

## 5.2 THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY OF THE BRI IN SERBIA

To understand how the public diplomacy within the BRI mobilises the resources or assets that create soft power to make the Serbian public more willing to sympathise with China, the methods of China's public diplomacy need to be uncovered. By looking at the central values, which are promoted through the BRI and which reflect the central elements of China's public diplomacy strategy, the following will apply those key points of China's public diplomacy strategy to the case of Serbia in order to investigate if these promoted assets are attractive to the Serbian public and if they have the ability to increase the attractiveness of China in Serbia.

### PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE EXCHANGE

Making the BRI a priority in Chinese foreign policy, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping seeks to enhance mutual trust, friendship and cooperation as well as to promote common development and prosperity for the well-being of all people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). The title of Xi's speech in Kazakhstan, "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future", reveals one of the core principles of the initiative, which is also one of the core principles of the Chinese understanding of public diplomacy. The promotion of people-to-people exchanges constitutes a key component of Chinese foreign diplomacy embedded in the BRI. In addition, the historical influence on China's foreign policy is highlighted through the concept of people-to-people exchanges as cultural exchanges represented a central characteristic even in the days of Ancient Silk Road and thus, constitute the origin of all diplomacy in Chinese understanding (郭 2019). Through exchanges along the Silk Road path, the cultural prosperity can be revived and friendships between states can be deepened, while simultaneously promoting cultural understanding among them (郭 2019).

China clearly communicated and expressed the openness of Chinese culture to other states by presenting the BRI and its inclusive character by being open for every country in the world to be part of, which proved to be effective in building soft power. The encouragement of government-sponsored exchange programmes and culture programmes are very beneficial in terms of generating and promoting soft power and contributes to the *development of lasting relationships*, the third dimension on which public diplomacy acts to create a positive image according to Nye (Nye 2008). During the last years, China has become one of the most important partners for Serbia in terms of cultural development. An article from Balkan Insight, the English-language website from the non-governmental, independent organisation Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, which provides daily news and analytical insights on key issues in Southern and Eastern Europe, highlights the increased popularity of studying in Serbia among Chinese

students under bilateral agreements and programmes of educational cooperation (Karr 2019). The reason for the influx of Chinese students is attributed to China's increasing influence in the CEE region and the strong political ties between China and Serbia. For Chinese students, Serbia's communist past is an attractive attribute as exchanges between the two countries already took place in times of Yugoslavia. Also, Serbian cultural and language centres are gaining popularity in China. In March 2019, the president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) signed a cooperation agreement in Belgrade, which aims at strengthening the academic cooperation between China and Serbia through the exchange of scientists and experts (X. Li 2019). The visa-free policy between China and Serbia constitutes another supporting factor for people-to-people exchanges in the future. In January 2017, an agreement on mutual visa free travel between China and Serbia came into force. Citizens of Serbia are allowed to enter China without a visa for a stay of 30 days, while Chinese citizens are allowed to stay in Serbia for 90 days without a visa. Besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia is the only state in the region with such an agreement. In addition, following the more proactive approach in promoting Chinese culture, Chinese language has been part of several high school curricula in Serbia since 2012 (Vladisavljev 2019).

In 2019 began the construction of another symbol of the Sino-Serbian friendship in Belgrade; the Chinese cultural center (Vladisavljev 2019). Three year prior, in 2016, Xi Jinping met with former Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic to attend the cornerstone ceremony of the center (Vladisavljev 2019), laying the foundation for further cooperation. Such symbolic events illustrate the second of Nye's three dimensions; *strategic communication* in order to win support from the public. However, the cultural exchange between the two countries is by no means one-sided. In 2018, the Serbian cultural center was opened in Beijing, named after the Serbian Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andric (Vladisavljev 2019). The center is the second one to open and the first of its kind outside of Europe. Since both countries are interested in a cooperation, this mutual increase of soft power can be considered a win-win in the spirit of the BRI.

The actors behind soft power initiatives like the BRI are not limited to state media, but also include universities, think tanks, organisations and global companies. Serbia is one of the few countries in the CEE region and the only country in the Balkans that hosts more than one Confucius Institutes (Vladisavljev 2019), which highlights the fact that Serbian people welcome Chinese culture and values. In 2006, the first Confucius Institute opened as part of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade and in May 2014, Serbia's second Confucius Institute was opened and since then, has been a valuable contribution to the development of Sino-Serbian cultural relations (Vladisavljev 2019). The opening of the Confucius Institutes in Serbia makes

Chinese culture more attractive among Serbian people, presuming that the institutes are going to enhance Chinese soft power in Serbia. Furthermore, the use of exchange programmes makes China more attractive inside Serbia, which will increase China's soft power inside Serbia as well. The level of cultural exchanges between China and Serbia reflects the great friendship between the two countries and shows the effectiveness of China's public diplomacy in promoting Chinese culture in Serbia.

### **MUTUAL BENEFICIAL COOPERATION**

The top priority of Chinese foreign policy is to develop “friendly cooperative relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013) through common development and prosperity. The openness of the BRI invites all nations to participate for jointly reaching those goals. China promotes a “win-win outcome” by emphasising that through cooperation all states can benefit and enhance the well-being of their people. In Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, he picked up the element of mutual beneficial cooperation again by emphasising the mutual benefits of exchanging capital, technology, resources, goods and people (Xi, *Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* 2017). History taught that the Silk Road brought prosperity to the regions involved and played a significant factor in their development (Xi, *Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* 2017).

When asked in 2019 what the most important problems in the South East European region would be, 35 percent of the Serbian people cited the economic situation as the reason, while 21 percent referred to unemployment as the main cause (Regional Cooperation Council 2019). Since the EU does not facilitate access to its infrastructure funds for EU candidate countries (Milic 2020), Serbia is seeking alternative partners for invigorating its economy and boosting its development. China is in this sense a warm welcomed partner as the BRI is meant to bring prosperity to the rest of the world through the Chinese Development Model, which led China to become the strong economic power it is today. 70 percent of the Serbian public believes that the entering of foreign companies into its domestic market will improve the situation for consumers (Regional Cooperation Council 2019). In fact, projects realised as part of the BRI in Serbia illustrate the win-win character of the initiative as both, China and Serbia, profited from that cooperation.

## HARMONIOUS WORLD

Further, the building of a harmonious interaction by respecting each other's domestic and foreign policies without intervention in internal affairs was highlighted by President Xi during his proposal of the BRI in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). In his speech to the Communist Party Congress in 2017, Xi stated that China's approach to foreign policy "offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence" (Xi, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* 2017). The core principles of the initiative are solely to create peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness as well as mutual learning and mutual benefit by achieving growth on both ends. Issues on major national core interests such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, domestic security or internal stability will remain untouchable by other states. Mutual trust and support are highly encouraged by the concept of the BRI without interfering in each other's affairs. However, states should join their forces in fighting the "three evil forces", referring to terrorism, separatism and extremism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

The promotion of supporting each other's territorial integrity is an element of the BRI which is highly valued by Serbia due to its own territorial dispute over the Kosovo region. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence, however, Belgrade regards its former province as Serbian territory (Russell 2019). Since 2011 the EU is functioning as a mediator between the two neighbours, leading to the establishment of the Brussels Agreement of April 2013 in which it has been made conditional that Serbia normalises relations with Kosovo in order to be admitted to the EU (Russell 2019). This condition has had a negative impact on the support of Serbs for their country's aspirations to EU membership as over 80 percent of the Serbs are still against the recognition of Kosovo's independence, even in exchange for a faster EU integration (Russell 2019). In 2018, just 29 percent of the Serbs polled expressed their support for Serbia's aspiration to EU membership (Russell 2019). The development of the cooperative relationship between Serbia and China over the last years is partially a side-effect of the dispute since China, as part of the UN Security Council, supports Serbia's intentions of preserving its territorial integrity by preventing Kosovo's membership in the United Nations (UN) (Milic 2020) and by not accepting Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (Dimitrijević, *Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road* 2017) until Belgrade is able to reach a compromise settlement with Pristina (Mu 2019). "Unlike Russia, China does not work to prevent a resolution of the Kosovo dispute or intentionally generate other obstacles to Serbia's relations with the EU and United States" (Milic 2020). In fact, China



supports Serbia's aspirations for full accession to the EU as having a close ally inside the EU would benefit China as well.

### **COMMUNITY OF SHARED FUTURE**

In official state media and in Chinese academic literature, the BRI is said to “connect the hearts and the minds of the people”<sup>6</sup> through communication, infrastructure development and people-to-people exchanges (郭 2019). Building a “community with a shared future for mankind” is a concept put forward by Xi Jinping (Zhao and Lin 2019) and which combines the values of contemporary Chinese public diplomacy as presented in 4.4. Furthermore, by promoting a community of shared future, China is creating a feeling of belonging together, which, according to the social identity theory, makes the public of participating states in the BRI more likely to favour China, as it is seen as a member of their own group.

In his speech in 2013, Xi called for the BRI to be built jointly by strengthening policy communication, communicating economic development strategies, improving road connectivity and fostering trade and investment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Through the establishment of a community with a common destiny, peace, stability and prosperity can be secured (Zhao and Lin 2019), objectives which are shared by states all over the world. China is committed to take the first step into building a community with a shared future by proposing the BRI, calling for more dialogue and exchange (Zhao and Lin 2019). In line with this concept, China strongly promotes a multilateral and pro-globalisation approach, willing to further contribute to international treaties and organisations. The theme “Belt and Road Cooperation: Shaping a Brighter Shared Future” at the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in April 2019 highlighted the importance of the concept of common destiny promoted by the BRI. At the “Leaders’ Roundtable”, Xi debated with 37 head of states, including Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vučić, as well as representatives of the UN and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over the common goal of a “peaceful world with shared future” (Lu 2019).

### **CHINESE VERSION OF GLOBALISATION**

In Xi’s keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in 2017, he addressed the philosophy of the BRI and emphasised the inclusive nature of the initiative by highlighting that the BRI is open to all nations as a concept brought from China to the world (Xi, *Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* 2017). “The initiative advocates a Chinese solution to

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<sup>6</sup> Original 民心相通, *mínxīn xiāngtōng*, freely translated by Annika Dhana Claassen

help stimulate global growth and promote prosperity for all”, said Xi Jinping at the forum (China Plus 2019). Embedded in the BRI, China offers its approach on development to the world, commonly known as the *Chinese Development Model* or *Beijing Consensus*. This informal concept is used to describe the way of achieving economic growth through a strong state role, a heavy focus on investment and an export-oriented economy (H. Li 2015), exemplified by China in the past four decades. Associated with international non-interference and national self-determination and reforms and innovation to achieve economic growth (X. Li 2019), the Beijing Consensus became popular as an alternative to the prevailing American-led system and the Washington Consensus of 1989. Whereas the liberal democratic system, promoted by America is characterised through free market capitalism including open trade, privatisation and deregulation, the Chinese model is characterised through market authoritarianism with strong state interference. Many developing countries recognise China as an alternative aid donor, investor and economic partner due to the fact that the states’ sovereignty and political system will remain untouched by the Beijing Consensus (X. Li 2019). As already mentioned, this underlines the strategy of social creativity, as the Beijing Consensus conveys alternative values and promotes alternative approaches in order to strengthen the positive perception of China among the Serbian public.

The fact that China, unlike the EU, offers Serbia cooperation regardless of its political tendency is very much welcomed by Serbia’s current government, led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which can be assigned to the sovereign, right-wing conservative and nationalist spectrum. According to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute, a nonpartisan, nongovernmental international democracy-development organisation based in Washington, D.C, 47 percent of the people surveyed stated that in their opinion Serbia has to undergo major reforms and must change its approach to everything to enter the EU and 45 percent of those do not believe that those reforms are going to happen, mainly because the society is not ready for such painful changes (International Republican Institute 2019). Although Vučić continued Serbia’s accession process to the EU, critics accuse him of ruling by authoritarianism, illiberal democracy and curtailing press freedom (Castaldo and Pinna 2018). Since Xi offers Vučić an approach for development without him changing his conservative and populist political position, it became even more attractive for Serbia to maintain good relations with China.

### 5.3 DATA ANALYSIS

As the constructivist theory can argue, that the BRI is both, an economic project that also re-generates norms and values, the following data analysis is divided into two parts. First, data on Serbia's public perception will be presented and put into context to analyse whether the assets, which were presented above, are attractive soft power resources that support China's public diplomacy goals. Second, data on the economic relationship between China and Serbia will depict their level of economic interdependence.

#### SERBIA'S PUBLIC PERCEPTION

China's soft power, more specifically the nation's natural charisma and its cultural products, has been vigorously pushed in recent years to improve its image. In 2014, one year after introducing the BRI, Xi Jinping called for an increase in China's soft power, saying China should "give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world." (Biswas and Tortajada 2018). According to Pew's Research Center's latest Global Attitude survey, conducted in Spring 2019, people in the international world are divided in their opinion about China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019). Of the 34 countries surveyed, a median of 41 percent have a negative opinion of China, compared to an average of 40 percent, who have a positive attitude towards China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019). A survey conducted from May to October 2019 shows, that albeit the majority in most countries agree that China's influence has increased, this opinion is not necessarily reflected in a positive attitude. While the opinion of China across Western Europe is unfavourable on average, the CEE countries are more divided in their opinion. Studies of the Pew Research Center found that there is a positive correlation between the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of a country and their public's unfavourable views of China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019). Publics in wealthier countries such as France (41,463.6 dollar), the United Kingdom (42,943.9 dollar) and Sweden (54,608.4 dollar) tend to have a less favourable opinion towards China, while publics in countries with a lower GDP per capita such as Nigeria (2,028.2 dollar), Ukraine (3,095.2 dollar) and Bulgaria (9,272.6 dollar)<sup>7</sup> tend to perceive China as more positive (The World Bank 2019). The relationship between GDP per capita and views of China can be confirmed by figures from Serbia. According to the World Bank data, Serbia's GDP per capita was 7,246.7 dollar in 2018, which is below the global average of 11,312.5 dollar (The World Bank 2019), while both the Serbian

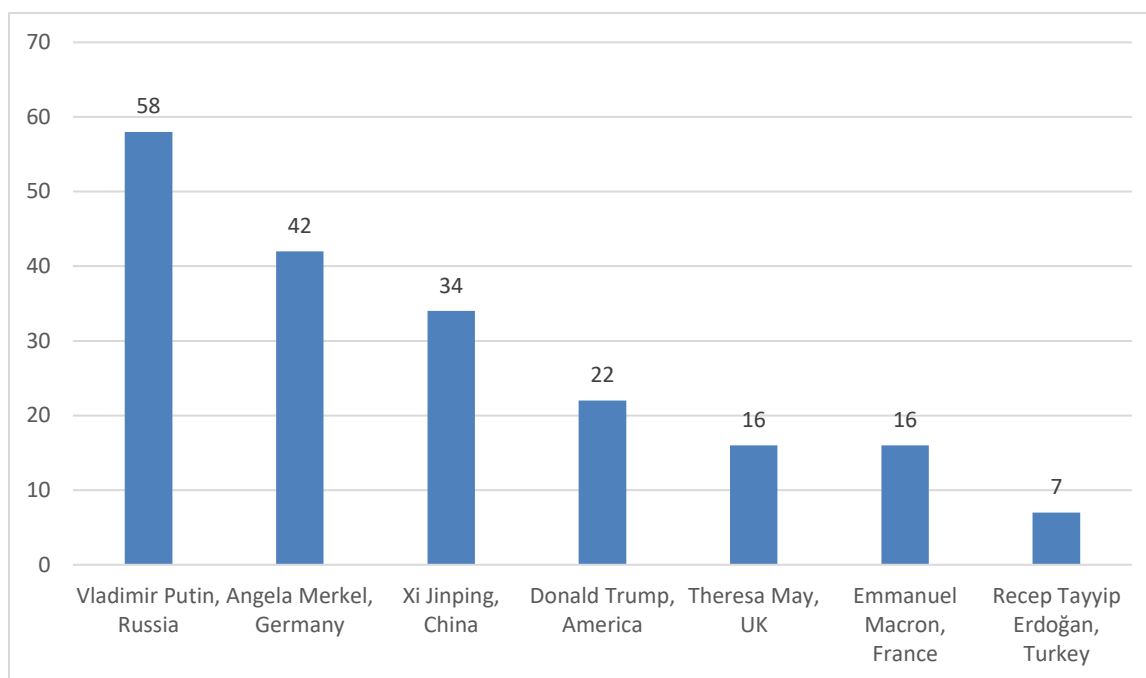
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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of comparability, all GDP per capita data are attributable to 2018.

government and the media have repeatedly stressed that China is a close ally and important partner for Serbia.

Following the friendly relations of China and the former Yugoslavia since Yugoslavia's recognition of China in 1949 and the subsequent establishment of diplomatic relations in 1955, both China and Serbia have remained on good terms, culminating in various bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Dimitrijević, *Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road* 2017). In the constructivist theory, the history of a state's relation to another state constitutes an important determinant for the perception of the other state and the behaviour towards it, which can even affect the way a state's policies are shaped towards another. In fact, China, as a global economic power and historically good friend of Serbia, constitutes one of the four major pillars of Serbia's foreign policy, together with the EU, Russia and America (Dimitrijević and Jokanović, *Chinese investments in Serbia and the New Silk Road* 2016). In August 2009, the strategic partnership between the two countries came into force, signed by their presidents Boris Tadić and Hu Jintao, paving the way for future agreements on political and economic cooperation. Their partnership deepened through a joint statement of the presidents Tomislav Nikolić and Xi Jinping in August 2013 (Dimitrijević, *Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road* 2017).

With the implementation of the BRI, China is presenting a new approach for development and by presenting a project of such volume, China is also intentionally or unintentionally, eroding the current balance of powers, throwing its leadership to the competition. Since the BRI is a Chinese-led project, China will expand its influence along the BRI, which also puts Xi Jinping more out in the open. Part of the survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, examined the opinion on Xi Jinping of different countries. 45 percent of the 34 countries surveyed answered that they lack confidence in him regarding world affairs, while only 29 percent say that they have confidence in him (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019). However, the opinion varies across regions and even from country to country. Although, half or more of the people in America, Canada and Western Europe expressed their lack of confidence in Xi (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019), Serbian people tend to assign more confidence to the Chinese president. In 2018, *Politika*, Serbian's leading newspaper, published the results of a poll conducted by the newspaper in collaboration with the Factor Plus Agency, which investigated the popularity of foreign leaders among the Serbian public on a sample of 1,200 Serbian citizens by telephone interviews (Баковић 2018). Compared to six other head of states, the Serbs ranked Xi Jinping third with 34 percent, despite the geographical and cultural distance (Баковић 2018).



**Figure 1 – public opinion poll in Serbia on foreign leaders conducted in 2017 by the Factor Plus agency and the Serbian newspaper Politika**

It is also vital to emphasise that by expressing an opinion about a head of state, people not only build their opinion based on an individual but also based on the country's global image, its position in the world as well as the relationship with one's own country. Many respondents who voted for Xi did not know his name, just referring to him as the Chinese president, which shows that the confidence given by the Serbs is not only projected on Xi as head of state but on China in general (Баковић 2018). The CEO of the Factor Plus Agency Vladimir Pejic added, that there were many respondents who did not have an opinion on Xi, which also means that those people who neither chose favourable or unfavourable, do not automatically are against Xi or do not trust him (Баковић 2018). This fact makes the result of 34 percent even more remarkable as it in turn shows, that only a small number of Serbian people disapprove of Xi (Баковић 2018).

As described in the introduction, China has been investing in overseas infrastructure and development projects such as roads, railways, communication systems, ports and energy pipelines as part of the BRI and over the past six years, since its introduction, several projects have been launched through the BRI. One of those projects was the construction of the Pupin Bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade, which was decided by China and Serbia in 2010 (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). In 2009, when Serbia signed a precontract with China, the decision was made that the construction of the bridge will be carried out by Chinese companies with Serbian companies as the sub-

contractors. 85 percent of the bridge's total sum was financed by the Exim Bank of China, while the Serbian government and the City of Belgrade provided the remaining 15 percent (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). The construction, led by the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), a subsidiary of the China Communications Constructions Company (CCCC), began in October 2011 and ended in December 2014. The opening ceremony of the bridge, attended by the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and his counterpart Aleksandar Vučić, took place during the China-CEEC 16+1 Summit in Belgrade end of 2014. The bridge became the second bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade with a length of 1507 meters (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). The successful completion of the bridge is to be followed by more projects. Plans include a port on the Danube upstream from the Pupin bridge and a road-railway bridge over the Danube at Vinča, around 15km from Belgrade. Li said the bridge symbolises the friendship between Chinese and Serbian people and represents the win-win cooperation between China and Europe (The State Council of the PRC 2019). As explained in 4.1, states can adopt the identity of a friend, an enemy or a rival, which, according to constructivism, ultimately determines their behaviour towards other states as well as how they are perceived by other states (Wendt 1992). It is therefore in the interest of China to be perceived as a friend and to maintain good relations with Serbia as the goal of every state is to form alliances with the states that are perceived as friends. This assumption combined with the constructivist thought that those identities can be transformed through international collaborations, illustrates the intention behind the establishment of the initiative, namely that the BRI serves as a tool for China to shape its identity and perception in the international community. Long before the construction even began, the project was called “Chinese bridge”<sup>8</sup> among the Serbians and in the Serbian media and was later named after the Serbian scientist Mihajlo Pupin as the bridge connects the Banat region, the birthplace of Pupin (Вукасовић 2013) (Албуновић and Спаловић 2009). Nevertheless, the name “Chinese bridge” remains in an informal usage up until today. The building of the bridge was also used as a metaphor for the friendship between China and Serbia. As bridges serve to connect two stretches of land divided by water, the “China-Serbian Friendship Bridge” should also be a symbol for connecting the two countries on a deeper level (Barlovac 2010).

As stated before, Serbia is seeking to become a member of the EU since December 2009, when it formerly applied for membership and was granted EU candidate status in March 2012

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<sup>8</sup> Serbian: Кинески мост, Kineski most

(European Commission 2019). After that, a lot of agreements and frameworks between the EU and Serbia entered into force and the European Council opened accession negotiations with Serbia beginning of 2014. Since then, the attitudes towards Serbia's membership in the EU has changed among its citizens as a survey conducted on behalf of the International Republican Institute shows. In October 2009, 76 percent of the citizens polled, expressed their support for Serbia's accession to the EU, while only 19 percent do not support their country's decision (International Republican Institute 2019). Six years later, in November 2015, a declining support for EU accession can be observed as only 49 percent voted in favour of Serbia's aspiration to EU membership and 44 percent against (International Republican Institute 2019). According to the Balkan Public Barometer, provided by the Regional Cooperation Council of the South East Europe Development Scoreboard (SEEDS) in 2018, only 29 percent declared themselves in favour of Serbia's EU membership (Regional Cooperation Council 2019). This dramatic drop in votes in favour of EU membership is partly due to the fact that Serbs lose their trust in the benefits of EU integration and fear that a membership will not be beneficial to their country (International Republican Institute 2019). When asked if by maintaining strong relations with China Serbia's interests were best served, 89 percent agreed (International Republican Institute 2019). In July 2016, the Sino-Serbian friendship reached the next level and let the two countries grow even closer together when China's Hesteel Group acquired Serbia's only steel mill Zelezara in Smederevo and saved numerous jobs. The steel factory, founded in 1913, went into crisis a few years ago and was on the verge of bankruptcy (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). In 2016, the HBIS Group, China's second largest steel and iron producer, acquired the mill, turning it profitable the same year and two years later, in 2018, the mill recorded its best sales in history (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). The manager of the factory emphasised that the Serbian employees were extremely grateful to the Chinese team not only for securing more than 5,000 jobs but also for their knowledge transfer in production technologies and management experience (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). The acquisition of the mill led to an overall boost of the development of Smederevo, the city where the mill is located (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). This act of China stepping in for Serbia, remains positive in people's minds and became a prominent symbol of the cooperation between China and Serbia. Since then, the two countries' leaders describe the current state of Sino-Serbian relations as a "steel friendship" (Vladisavljev 2019). After the great success of the steel mill and the positive reaction from the Serbian public about the acquisition, the Chinese Zijin Mining Group signed an agreement with the Serbian government in December 2018 to acquire the 63 percent stake held by the Serbian government in the RTB Bor mine (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). The Zijin Mining Group insured to retain the current 5,000 employees and

plans to invest an additional one billion dollar in the mine to double its capacity (Fan, Hu and Ken 2019). Once realised this project will be China's largest investment in Serbia.

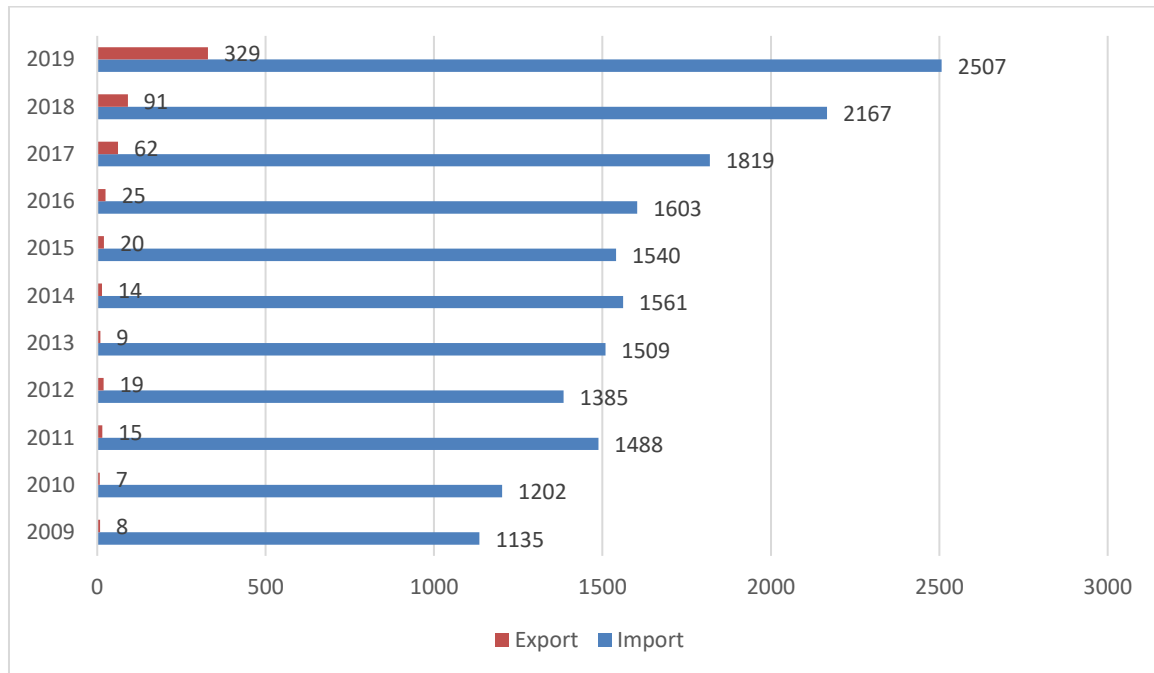
### **SINO-SERBIAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS**

In the four decades since the first economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping when China began to open up towards more market-oriented economic policies, its economy has experienced an enormous growth that many refer to as nothing short of a miracle. China, having gone from being a recipient of FDI to a net contributor in recent decades, is going to be the world's largest source of FDI in time (Lin 2016). China's influence is growing, and people have noticed that China will continue to play an important role in global affairs. The Global Attitudes survey by the Pew Research Center shows a 70 percent consensus that China plays a more important role today than it did ten years ago (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2019). The most important common economic interests pursued through the BRI are the improvement of trade and investment flows and the deepening of economic integration through greater access to the Chinese market for the participating countries and vice versa (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017), which is expected to bring prosperity to over 130 countries, including Serbia.

Since the political changes in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Serbia's economy began to recover and started to catch up with its neighbouring countries in terms of economic competitiveness. Foreign investments played a major role in accelerating economic growth and renewing industrial capacity (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017), allowing states like China to enter its market. Both countries recognise each other as important economic partners as China constitutes Serbia's most important trading partner in Asia, while Serbia, on the other hand, is one of China's key partner in the CEE region. China supports Serbia's aspirations for EU membership as the CEE region is seen as a gateway to the EU market, and therefore, having a strategic partner both located in the region and being part of the EU market would be beneficial for China (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). The economic relations between China and Serbia are characterised by mutual asymmetry caused by their difference in economic power (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017). In 2017, Serbia exported 128 million dollars to China and imported 1,41 billion dollars, resulting in a negative trade balance of 1,282 billion dollars (OEC 2017). China's imports account for 7 percent of Serbia's total import and is therefore Serbia's top third import country. In terms of export, only 0,76 percent of total exports go



to China (OEC 2017). According to the OEC, Serbia's exports to China include machinery, wood and mineral products, metals and stones and glass (OEC 2017), while China exports machines and equipment such as computers and broadcasting equipment, which takes almost half of the total export value, textiles, metals, chemical products and other manufactured goods to Serbia (OEC 2017). From 2009 to 2012, exports from Serbia to China increased slightly. With the implementation of the BRI in 2013, exports increased annually and most recently saw a three-and-a-half-fold increase from 2018 to 2019 (United Nations 2020).

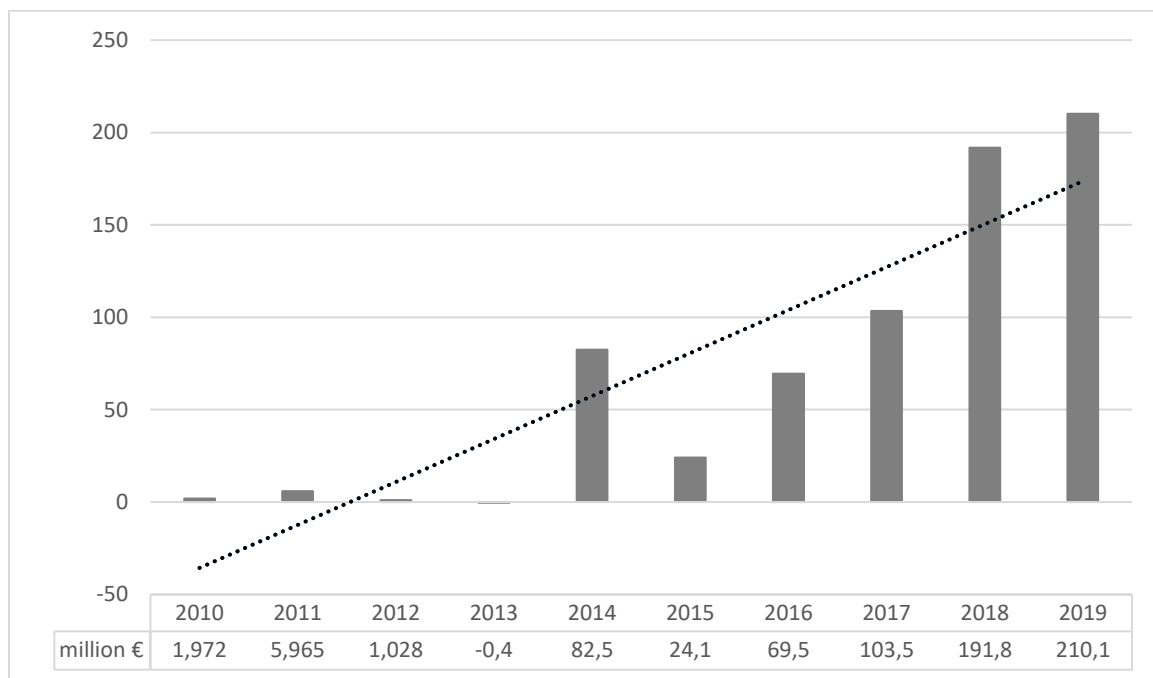


**Figure 2 – Serbia's import and export trade flow with China 2009-2019 in € million**  
own diagram based on data from the UN Comtrade Database

The graphic clearly shows the immense trade deficit in the economic relation of both countries. China's exports to Serbia have also increased steadily since 2013, which has not helped to reduce the trade deficit. In 2019, Serbia exported goods worth 329 million dollars, while importing goods from China worth 2,5 billion dollars (United Nations 2020). However, the trade numbers show Serbia's relatively low economic exchange with China, which indicates a low level of economic interdependency. According to Keohane's and Nye's definition of economic interdependence, both countries are neither highly sensitive nor highly vulnerable to each other. The loss of trade with China would not have a destructive impact on Serbia's economy since the EU and European countries are both in terms of import and export much more valuable partner for Serbia. Germany alone accounts for 13 percent of the total export and 12 percent of the total import value, which makes it both top export destination and top import origin of

Serbia (OEC 2017). The reason that the perception of China is rather positive in Serbia is therefore not derived from their flourishing trade or Serbia’s economic dependence on China as the EU and Serbia’s neighbouring countries constitute the main sources of Serbia’s trade volume.

During the years leading up to the introduction of the BRI, in the period from 2010 to 2012, the National Bank of Serbia recorded a monetary inflow from China of about 8,9 million euros (National Bank of Serbia 2020). The total net monetary inflow from China in the years after the introduction of the BRI, in the period from 2013 to 2019, amounted to 681,1 million euros (National Bank of Serbia 2020).



**Figure 3 – Chinese FDIs to Serbia 2010-2019 in € million**  
own diagram based on data from the National Bank of Serbia

Through a rise in investments, the economic ties between both countries are intended to strengthen, but despite this immense increase in investments, China is still far behind Serbia’s top investors. Although China’s economic activity in Serbia cannot be denied, its investments are mostly loans and are tied to specific projects (Milic 2020) (Barlovac 2010). The construction of the highway on Corridor 11, which will connect Belgrade to the South Adriatic in Montenegro, for example, has a total value of 337,74 million dollars, of which 301 million dollars was financed from a loan of China’s Exim Bank (Dimitrijević, Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road 2017) and the loan from China’s Exim Bank to finance the 85 percent of the Pupin Bridge has to be paid off with a fixed interest rate of three percent over a period of fifteen years (Barlovac 2010). Furthermore, Chinese FDI are made

under the condition that Chinese state-owned companies and state banks are assigned the leading role in the projects while the participation of local companies is kept relatively low. Generally, China's role in the Serbian economy can be described as modest at best and is limited to certain industries such as transportation infrastructure and the energy sector (Dimitrijević, *Chinese Investments in Serbia—A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road* 2017). The trade with China is just a bit larger than with Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country with a population of only 3.3 million people (Milic 2020). The EU, Russia and Serbia's neighbouring countries occupy the high ranks in terms of investment inflows. Serbia's trade with the EU and its neighbouring countries in the Balkans still accounts for more than 65 percent of its total trade volume (Milic 2020). This is often underlined by the media, which emphasises that despite the good relations to China, Serbia does not seek to replace the EU as its partner no matter the amount of investments coming from Beijing (Milic 2020). With being granted the candidate status for membership in the EU in March 2012, Serbia took a major step towards the integration into the European common market, which provides opportunities for Serbia's economy in terms of growth and development.

The answer to the subquestion if the trade with and investments from China could also influence how the Serbian public perceives China becomes clear. Up to this point, Serbia's economic ties with the EU are much stronger than its ties with China, which leads to the conclusion that the economic benefits brought by the BRI and its projects do not influence the Serbian public's perception of China to the same extent as the different values and alternative approaches embedded in the BRI. Seen from the perspective of constructivism, the norm diffusion of the BRI constitutes the decisive factor for China's attractiveness rather than the economic hard power brought by the initiative. The fact that the EU provides much more opportunities for the Serbian economy to grow and develop than China's investments and trade do, indicates that the element that attracts are intangible assets such as culture, values and institutions as a source for Chinese soft power.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The following chapter will interpret and describe the significance of the findings in light of what was already known. The motivation for this paper was to find out how the BRI's public diplomacy strategy is helping to improve China's image in Serbia and, as stated in the second chapter, to make a valuable contribution to the existing research on the BRI.

The findings of the analysis suggest that the intangible assets such as values, culture and institutions, mobilised by China's public diplomacy and promoted through the BRI support the goal of positively influencing the perception of China by the Serbian public. The inclusion of the theory of economic interdependence has shown that the economic incentives created by the BRI are not advantageous enough to win over the Serbian public. Previous research on Serbia in regard to the BRI either focused on the soft power side or the hard power side of the Sino-Serbian relationship but missed to research the combination of both. However, since the BRI, as a successful diplomacy tool, combines hard and soft power, as a state's goal cannot only be achieved through soft or hard power alone, it is vital to investigate both elements regarding its influence on the perception of China. The combination of the constructivist theory, which focuses on history, values and norms as determining factor of behaviour, the social identity theory, which depicts the pursued strategies of a state in order to reshape its identity and the theory of economic interdependence, which discovers the economic relationship between states, gave new insights into which factors influence the BRI's public diplomacy goal of shaping China's identity and influencing the way the country is perceived by the Serbian public. Therefore, this research contributed to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the BRI in terms of which promoted assets and public diplomacy methods are attractive enough to foreign publics to create soft power.

As stated in the introduction, the research on Serbia's perception of China might also provide insights into the influence of the BRI on Serbia's relationship with the EU and whether a partnership with China might be more attractive for Serbia than a partnership with the EU. From an economic point of view, as the analysis has shown, trading with China is not as worthwhile for Serbia as trading with the EU. On this point, the findings of the analysis agree with those of Pavličević's work on China-CEE relations as presented in the literature review. Pavličević found out that, among other factors, the lack of economic benefits for CEE countries prevents a possible soft power shift in favour of China. The analysis on Sino-Serbian economic relations and their interdependence has shown that although trade with China has increased since the BRI was implemented and is expected to further increase in the future, the EU's position in

Serbia and in the whole CEE region remains unchallenged. In this context, China has emphasised that the BRI does not intend to weaken the EU's position in the region but aims solely at a peaceful cooperation. In terms of soft power leverage, however, the findings of the analysis indicate that China has succeeded in gaining more support with the BRI than the EU. These findings contradict Pavličević's statement that apart from economic incentives, the lack of political benefits stands in the way of a possible soft power increase in the CEE region. The research has shown that especially in terms of territorial integrity and sovereignty, China and Serbia share the same viewpoint. Having China as an ally, has proven useful for Serbia, as China represents Serbia's interests in relation to the Kosovo dispute before the UN Security Council. This has clearly contributed to the fact that China is perceived by the Serbian public as a friend as the results of the public opinion polls show.

The previous research on the BRI gave insights into the developing relations between China and the CEE countries and how this could influence their relationship with the EU. However, since China, within the framework of the initiative, tends to operate at a bilateral level with the countries participating in the initiative and their cooperation does not follow a uniform pattern, it was decided to solely examine Serbia's attitude towards China in order to get the most accurate picture of the cooperation between the two countries under the initiative. As stated in the literature review, Mitić analysed the Sino-Serbian relationship from the perspective of negative media coverage of China and the BRI and came to the conclusion that although the portrayal from the media is mostly negative, the rising coverage indicates acceptance of China among the international world. However, Mitić's statement that the Sino-Serbian cooperation is overshadowed by negative opinions is based on the "threat frames" from one article in the New York Times and cannot be reconfirmed by the results of this analysis. The evaluation of Chinese and Serbian media reporting shows a positive picture of the cooperation between the two countries under the BRI. Nonetheless, that does not rule out that foreign media such as the New York Times, report on the Sino-Serbian cooperation differently. Mitić's results on the Serbian media from 2014 to 2017 confirm that Serbian media does not agree to the foreign reporting on the China Threat theories and their possible impact on Serbia, but rather choose the positive framing of the BRI.

In the current period of change and the accelerating trends of economic globalisation and multipolarisation, the research on the perception of foreign publics becomes increasingly important for emerging states like China. In the past decades, the conditions of communication in the international system have changed fundamentally. Due to globalisation, people's increasing mobility and new information and communication technologies, non-state actors such as

citizens are able to access, organise and participate in international discourses faster, easier and more comprehensive than ever (Auer, Srugies and Löffelholz 2015). Looking at today's information age and how the internet and cyber-activities have been burgeoning with their extraordinary growth, public diplomacy and soft power became decisive factors and instruments for influencing and winning over foreign publics. The access to information for the public is more open, which also means that the ability to reach the public through public diplomacy also becomes increasingly more important. The challenge for public diplomacy today is how to reach an audience and to interact with them in two-way conversations. Globalisation and the associated digitalisation have changed the possibilities of obtaining information considerably. In addition to being transparent, controlling the flood of information is particularly important, since it can lead to overload and thus have a counterproductive effect. The challenge is not only to be able to determine what type of information will be disclosed, but also the timing of releasing it. At the beginning of its development history, China largely exercised restraint in terms of carrying out its voice into the world, which led the West to ascribe an identity to the Middle Kingdom based on its projections. But now China is taking the narrative about the country, its projects and the intentions behind them into its own hand by following a more proactive approach to improve its image. This is the only way to achieve the overarching goal of gaining more support in the international arena. The launch of the BRI, not only marked the start of a huge project which may be able to revolutionize world trade, but it also marked the start of China taking its fate into its own hands. Nevertheless, China faces and will keep facing many unknown and unexpected obstacles in terms of the BRI. The EU will not be able to agree on a united opinion on China and therefore, remain sceptical and divided on this issue. Serbia only presents one successful case on the spectrum of possible outcomes of the BRI and its influence, but it also shows that the aspired goals can be achieved. Every country is different and will join or not join the initiative for its own reasons. Only the future can say whether China will ultimately be able to improve its image in more countries by implementing the initiative.

## 7 CONCLUSION

From the synthesis of both the theoretical and the empirical analysis on the Serbian perception of China and how China's public diplomacy efforts in the BRI have supported influencing those, the following conclusions have been drawn.

First, by looking at the BRI from a constructivist angle and incorporating the social identity theory it becomes clear that the generation and distribution of norms and values that appear to be attractive to Serbia, influences how the Serbian public perceives China and its identity. This result confirms both the assumption under constructivism that ideas are as powerful as materialistic things, as well as the effectiveness of the social creativity strategy, which says that that the promotion of attractive norms and values positively influence the public's perception.

The Chinese principle of non-interference in other states' domestic affairs, territorial integrity and sovereignty and cooperating with others regardless of their political tendencies are values, promoted by the BRI, that are perceived by the Serbian public as positive and attractive. In addition, the public diplomacy strategy behind the BRI mobilises resources that create soft power through various cultural development such as academic exchanges, the visa-free policy, the establishment of cultural centers and Confucius Institutes. The analysis of the media coverage on China and the attitudes of Serbian people drawn from the results of public opinion polls confirm the positive image of China among the Serbian public and indicates the positive stance about the cooperation within the BRI framework as well as Serbia's ambition to further consolidate and expand their relationship with China. Projects under the BRI, which have already been carried out in Serbia such as the Pupin Bridge, which is commonly known as the Chinese bridge among the public or referred to as the China-Serbian Friendship Bridge by the Serbian media, show that the attempt behind the BRI to shape China's identity so that it is perceived as a friend and ally is quite successful in Serbia.

Second, the findings of the analysis on the economic interdependence between China and Serbia shows that although, their economic ties have strengthened since the BRI was implemented, the attractiveness of China among the Serbian public is not derived from the possible economic benefits as the economic relations between China and Serbia are relatively low compared to the economic ties with the EU, Russia or Serbia's neighbouring countries and thus, do not influence the public's opinion to the same extent as the promoted values do. The analysis showed that the soft power, gained through the norm diffusion and the public diplomacy methods of the BRI, constitute the decisive factors in shaping the opinion about China in Serbia.

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