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THE EU'S CHALLENGE TO MAINTAIN ITS LINKAGE TO SERBIA



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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the challenges and complications, which the EU faces in the process of the formation and sustainment of the political linkage between them and Serbia. The thesis delves into the recently intensified influence of China as well and analyzes the possibilities of China's influence having an impact on the Serbia-EU relations.

The main point of departure for the master's thesis is based on the recent developments in Serbia's foreign relations over the past few years. At the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Serbian president made a statement, where he said that European solidarity is a fairytale, and the only true hope for Serbia is through Chinese partnership. This statement caused massive controversy and led many to believe that Serbia's path towards becoming an EU-member was canceled. This sort of bold statement, could be based on the critical situation Serbia was in at the time, but then again, Covid-19 could have caused the statement, or it just simply revealed the genuine view of Serbia.

The thesis is set to answer the question "To what extent has Serbia's behavior and China's growing influence become a challenge for the EU's sustainment of their political linkage to Serbia?"

The analytical course of action of the thesis is to analyze the EU's and China's linkage and compare how they are trying to gain influence in Serbia, and how through their gained influence they can navigate Serbia's actions and behavior by utilizing their leverage. The thesis examines the EU's way of framing and securitizing Serbia's current behavior, authoritarian tendencies, and the growing influence of China in Serbia and the Western Balkans. Via multiple reports from various EU institutions, the thesis will uncover statements, evaluations, and testimonies which voice concerns and considerations for the growing authority of China in Serbia, and in Europe as well. By analyzing the way, the EU frames the Serbia-China relations, it can then uncover different challenges to the EU in terms of maintaining and strengthening their political linkage to Serbia. Furthermore, by analyzing how the EU and China pursue their foreign relations to Serbia through the different concepts of diplomacy, it can then give a broader look into how exactly the EU and China construct their political and economic linkages, as well as showing which aspects of the different cooperation with China and the EU that seems to be more appealing for Serbia.

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Introduction

“European solidarity does not exist, it was only a fairytale on paper” (Vučić in Hopkins, 2020). These are the words from the Serbian president, a statement made back in March 2020 at a press conference. The statement was meant to publicly display Serbia’s dissatisfaction with the EU, based on the EU’s inability to provide Serbia with supplies needed for the Covid-19 crisis. When hearing a leader of a country speaking in this sort of manner about another entity, it can be associated with a partnership that has ceased to continue. This thesis delves into the linkages between the EU and Serbia, and what challenges are Serbia creating for the EU in terms of the formation and sustainment of the political linkage between the two entities. The thesis also delves into the recently intensified influence of China and analyses the possibilities of China’s influence having an impact on the Serbia-EU relations, and also if the growing influence of China, positions them as a counterpart to the EU. Furthermore, the thesis looks into the manner in which the EU frames the intensified cooperation between Serbia and China and how the development within their foreign relations can become a security threat to the EU, as their relation keeps enhancing. Moreover, by looking at the way the EU frames the growing influence of China, it can reveal certain patterns where the EU exposes the state in which the EU-Serbia linkage is in. The quote from the Serbian president serves as a point of departure, and raises a key question as to, how did it get to this point? Where the Serbian president uses such strong rhetoric about an entity that is supposed to be Serbia’s road towards prosperity. In order to gain an overview of the different roles of the EU and China and their significance in Serbia, it is crucial to look at how their relations have been developing throughout the years. More specifically, the thesis will look at the timeframe from when Serbia became an EU-candidate country in 2012 up until today in 2021, and to get an overview of the dynamics of Serbia’s foreign relations to China and the EU, the introduction will also briefly present formation and development of the different foreign relations.

Serbia-China relations

The relations between China and Serbia date back to the late 90’es, during the Kosovo war. China supported Serbia’s claim to Kosovo and opposed NATO's intervention in the conflict (Hartwell, 2021). Moreover, China kept supporting Serbia’s claim on Kosovo, when Kosovo declared itself independent from Serbia in 2008, opposed to most of the EU-countries which

almost all by now have recognized Kosovo's status as an independent state, except Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Cyprus, and Romania. China's continuous support for Serbia's claim on Kosovo is a significant factor for the strong Serbia-China relations, but more importantly, the relations between the two countries have gained much more significance, when China started to become vital for Serbia's infrastructure and different enterprises through large scale investments made by China (European Commission, 2019). Throughout the years, major foreign investments have been made by China into Serbia for projects such as the construction of the Pupin bridge in Belgrade, for which China invested over 260 million USD (Dimitrijević, 2017). Since then, China has more actively invested in major infrastructure projects in Serbia, which also includes the investment initiative for the Belgrade-Budapest railroad, (Dimitrijević, 2017). China has overall contributed to a large part of Serbian infrastructure projects, moreover, it has initiated infrastructure investments in most Eastern European and Western Balkan countries as well (Mardell, 2020).

Serbia-EU relations

The EU has been involved and building their relation to Serbia since the late 90'es, initially to support the post-war development in Serbia after the Kosovo wars and the NATO bombing of Serbia, and later on to create the notion of potential cooperation through Serbia's EU accession process (Minic (Eds.), 2015). In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), a framework for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. The framework of the SAP outlines the process of pushing Serbia into the structures of the European Union by integrating the core values of the EU, which are democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights, as well as creating optimism for economic prosperity in Serbia and the Balkan region (Minic (Eds.), 2015). In 2003 Serbia was recognized as a potential candidate for EU membership during the Thessaloniki European Council summit (Council of the European Union, 2013). In 2008, a European partnership for Serbia was adopted, setting out priorities for the country's membership application, and in 2009 Serbia formally applied to become a member of the EU and after 13 years of EU efforts and Serbia's compliance with the demands set by the EU, Serbia was granted EU candidate status in 2012. There have been more milestones regarding the EU-Serbia relations since Serbia was granted the status as a candidate country, such as the opening of multiple chapters of the *acquis*, intergovernmental conferences, and the Stabilization and

Association agreement entering into force (Minic,(Eds.) 2015). The EU-Serbia relations, based on the presented timeline, seemed like they would move towards becoming a well-functioning partnership and Serbia's wish of becoming a part of the EU would come to fruition.

However, as the situation looks like today, Serbia is far from becoming an EU member-state. Serbia has exhibited that it will not adhere to every condition presented by the EU, and the lack of admiration for the conditionality of the EU can create an unease for the EU as it is uncertain what the objectives of Serbia are. With the recent developments of Serbia's internal political structure, the EU has also raised concern in terms of Serbia's adherence to the Copenhagen criteria and the stabilization and association agreement (Russel, 2019). Recently Serbia has been bolder in their behavior in terms of not taking any sort of criticism from the EU, focusing more on developing their foreign relations to China rather than the EU. This all leads us to the research question of the thesis.

Research Question

To what extent has Serbia's behavior and China's growing influence become a challenge for the EU's sustainment of its political linkage to Serbia?

Theoretical Framework

Linkage and Leverage Theory

'Linkage and leverage' is a theoretical concept developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way in order to capture what they call the "international dimension of democratization" (Levitsky and Way, 2006 P. 379). Levitsky and Way define leverage as the vulnerability of authoritarian governments to external democratizing pressure from the West which is exercised through a variety of ways including "political conditionality and corrective sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention." (Levitsky and Way, 2005 P. 21). Linkage is defined as ties to the West, comprised of at least five key dimensions: economic, geopolitical, social, communicative, and transnational civil society (Levitsky and Way, 2005 P. 22). Within the five key dimensions, the major focus of the thesis will especially be on the political and economic linkage. Linkage can be understood as an element raising the costs of authoritarianism by creating domestic constituencies with a stake in adhering to democratic norms (Levitsky and way, 2005)

The Ideas and different usage of the linkage and leverage theory have offered various explanations of the success and failure of the promotion of democracy, but the theory has now also been applied in order to analyze the promotion of autocracy, this theory is suitable for the case of Serbia since it presents as a state that is balancing on both sides of the spectrum between democracy and autocracy, thus offers a seamless point of departure when discussing the competing external influences (China and the EU) on Serbia which is undergoing this sort of back and forth transition of democracy and autocracy.

Levitsky and Way describe western leverage as the authoritarian government's exposure to external pressure, from states who push the authoritarian governments towards democratization (Levitsky and Way, 2005). This leverage or pressure from the western countries can be applied in multiple ways, such as sanctions, diplomatic pressure, military interventions, or political conditionality (Levitsky and way, 2005). The significance of the leverage is determined by multiple factors, but the three main factors of the leverage are first, the size and military strength of the targeted country. Secondly, if there are any

competing issues on the western foreign policy agenda related to the targeted state. And lastly, if there is another alternative power that provides the targeted state with political, economic, and or military support (Levitsky and Way 2005).

The leverage on a state is most effective when it is combined with linkage to the state, the linkages are best described as structural factors based on geography, historical ties, geostrategic alliances, and processes of social and economic integration (Levitsky and Way, 2005). Linkage manifests itself in the extent of a regime's ties to the US, EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions (Levitsky and Way 2005). While Levitsky and Way offer an in-depth view of how linkage and leverage are used by western policy actors to promote democratization, they do not delve into how the concepts of linkage and leverage can be used to promote autocracy as well. In order to gain an in-depth look into how linkage and leverage are used to promote autocracy, we turn to Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger who were among the firsts to use the concepts of linkage and leverage as a tool to promote non-democratic rule. Burnell and Schlumberger suggest that there have emerged implications for international development, as well as for security-related questions in bi- and multilateral relations of other great and former superpowers with China (Burnell and Schulmberger, 2010). On the political front, for many developing countries, China's rise represents a persuasive alternative to Western democracy. The reason for the rising interest in cooperation with China could be a question about economic benefits, but perhaps, it could also be that the promotion of democracy and democracy in itself have lost international legitimacy (Burnell and Shlumberger 2010). Burnell and Schlumberger argue that the lack of legitimacy within western democracy is due to specific events such as the invasion of Iraq by the USA and Britain, the legally questionable practices in the treatment of prisoners held in places from Guantanamo Bay to Abu Ghraib, and efforts of political regime export and a style of democracy promotion that were, outside the USA, often perceived as aggressive, paternalistic and neo-imperialist (Burnell and Schlumberger,2010).

China's foreign policies are based on principles such as putting an emphasis on national sovereignty and non-interference. This is where China differs in the way it pursues its foreign relations and also a reason why China might be a more appealing country to form an alliance with. Burnell and Schlumberger describe the rise of China as a phenomenon within

linkage and leverage, because of its lack of democratic values and autocratic rule it has still positioned itself as a key factor in many countries' foreign policy agendas (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010).

A second phenomenon within linkage and leverage is the autocratic rule in Russia. The political mergers that followed a period of domestic turmoil in the 1990s and the subsequent rise due to an economic recession that only lasted decades ago for Russia. Vladimir Putin managed to install a very complex and personalized autocratic system in a short period of time, and the incumbent president seemed irrelevant to him (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010). The third autocratic phenomenon is the case of over 20 countries in the middle east and North Africa who has regained importance and attention because mineral prices reached their all-time high during the 2000s and together with Iran they are at the forefront of US-initiated acts in combatting terrorism, and that is something that makes this region unique because even though there is massive instability and multiple violent conflicts this world region has the most durable authoritarian models of governance and the middle east alone is the only world region that has over the past 40 years not experienced a single case of democratic transition(Burnell and Shlumberger 2010). These phenomena are stated in order to add a perspective to the alternatives to democratic rule and how states cooperate amongst each other without sharing the same values and views of democracy. The autocratic states have been able to have a stable autocratic rule based on their production power, resources, and internal and well as external influence with their neighboring countries (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010).

For the sake of the analysis of this thesis which will delve into how specifically the EU and China differ in terms of their foreign policy agendas, we will delve into how specifically the EU pursues its foreign relations and how China pursues it differently.

The EU from the perspective of linkage and leverage theory promotes democratization based on two factors, which are convergence and conditionality. Convergence in the sense of cooperation and EU enlargement, by influencing post autocratic states with weak economies, the EU has the opportunity to take advantage of its leverage and promote trade agreements and general economic help, in exchange for democratic reforms and acceptance of "European values" which is supposed to be the linkage factor for the EU. In terms of

conditionality, as mentioned the EU will only cooperate in return for respect for its values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights, otherwise, the EU can terminate the agreements or implement sanctions as a consequence for the given state (Levitsky and Way, 2005). This approach is also commonly referred to as “Sticks and carrots”. The most suitable example of the EU’s linkage and leverage is their enlargement of the post-communist states in Europe (Levitsky and Way, 2007). Immediately after the collapse of communism, Western linkages rapidly developed in the post-communist countries by opening trade (Levitsky and Way, 2007). Also, the former communist countries experienced a major flow of investors, media, NGOs, and businesses of multinational companies (Levitsky and Way, 2007). The EU represented a fusion of linkages and leverages which permitted democratic conditionality in the post-communist states consistently and thoroughly, within this context the integration process meant that the reform in post-communist countries would engage in all sectors of public activity and interest (Levitsky and Way, 2007). Nevertheless, over the years new state-actors have also gained influence in Europe such as Russia, Turkey, and China who have provided new alternatives to the post-communist states and have implemented new models of authoritarian governance in the East, which has over the past 10 years weakened EU’s linkages and leverages especially in Eastern Europe (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Moving further, we will look at China and its foreign relations through the lens of linkage and leverage theory. Simply put, China creates its linkage and leverage to other states via the opposite principles of the EU. China is not interested in implementing any sort of reforms or policy changes in the neighboring countries of Europe, however, they have two main objectives in order to gain influence in the region. The objectives are economic ties, and the well-known “Belt Road Initiative”. Eastern and southeastern European countries have seen a great advantage in cooperating with China. Because of China’s role as the counterpart to the EU, and because China does not interfere in the internal politics of the countries, it becomes a much more appealing entity to cooperate with, for the countries who are not willing to adhere to EU’s rules, norms and values (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010). However, China creates its leverage to the countries it cooperates with by making large investments in them, which creates a dynamic of the countries in question are indebted to China based on China’s economic support.

Linkage and leverage theory is a suitable approach to understand the dynamics of international relations and how democratization processes vary from the different states depending on their status quo meaning if the current position of the countries is weak or strong. However, the concepts can be used as well to understand how authoritarian actors gain influence in different regions based on the same principles for when the western countries are intervening in order to integrate democracy into their chosen regions. Together with securitization theory the thesis will delve into the role of the EU and China in Serbia's foreign relations and analyze how China's growing influence in Serbia, and Serbia's increasing authoritarian tendencies are based on China's strategic and pragmatic approach to pursuing foreign relations and how these developments become a concern for the EU. Securitization theory will serve as a supplementing tool in order to analyze in what ways the EU is communicating their concern for China's growing influence and to see if the growing influence has the possibility to become a security threat and if so, to what extent?

Securitization Theory

The main argument of securitization theory is that security issues emerge from the articulation and speech acts of an entity, by expressing concern about a certain topic and how it might be or have the potential to become a threat to a state's security. By using the theory of securitization, it will assist in analyzing how the EU frames and communicates Serbia's authoritarian tendencies and increased relations to China as a security issue, and which potential consequences it can have for European security.

In order to have a clear view on how securitization theory is used as an analysis tool and how the processes of securitization develop into a security issue, it is crucial to look at the different schools and perspectives on securitization and what is understood as a threat, does it change meaning after what the articulator applies it to? Before going in-depth on securitization we must first understand the meaning of a threat and how it is generally perceived, and how a threat is supposed to be understood in the context of this thesis and its topic.

Understanding threat

In the international relations literature, a threat is defined as a situation in which one agent or group has either the capability or intention to inflict a negative consequence on another agent or group. Threat can also be a situation where a state's behavior does not align with a certain agreement, and because of that raises a concern for the observing states. Threats are probabilistic because they may or may not be carried out (Rousseau, D. L., & Garcia-Retamero, R. 2007). Threats can be understood in multiple ways and can affect various areas, when talking about security threats in a political context it does not necessarily only mean a threat of war or armed conflicts, but it can mean threats to the state in the form of economic decline if for example a trade agreement gets terminated or threat to the environment if a country is investing in factories that leaves a massive carbon print, or if the internal behavior of the state violates any sort of human rights, where the threat then becomes an internal matter, but where there is then need for an intervention, which could set of a number of other threats. In this thesis, the term "threat" will be analyzed through the theory of Securitization which will analyze threat and the possibility of it within the five main areas, which are military, economic, political, environmental, and societal.

Copenhagen School of Securitization

The Copenhagen school of securitization explains the process of securitization as actors/entities who form regular issues of domestic level politics into issues of high politics that affect states on a national level (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). The Copenhagen school expresses the issues of security in different areas within international relations. It speaks on the fields of state and society, the state and the military, different levels of politics, economics, and environment, how the different fields keep changing and how it affects people and states (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). Within these fields, the Copenhagen school addresses a wide variety of issues that affect the world. Ole Wæver, a scholar closely connected to the Copenhagen school, argued that security is a speech act with distinct consequences in the context of international politics. By making use of speech acts, a state/actor tries to move a topic away from politics into an area of security concerns thereby legitimizing extraordinary means against the socially constructed threat (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). In other words, the process of securitization is intersubjective,

which means that the perception of what is a security issue or threat is not subjective or objective, instead it is a question about the audience the threat is presented to, and to what extent they are willing to accept it (Wæver, 1993).

The Copenhagen school's securitization process consists of three steps, the first step is the creation of an existential threat, this could be based on an issue or event such as climate change. This first step is the phase that is referred to as "Speech act", this could be performed by for example a political leader who voices his concern about a topic, such as illegal immigration or risks of terrorism that has the potential to become a threat to the survival of the state (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998).

The second step of the process is the initiation of special actions in an attempt to secure and protect the audience against the existential threat, in other words, it is about the necessary measures that must be taken in order to eliminate the security threat. The third and final step of the process is for the general audience to receive and accept the speech act (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998).

Securitization is not only created through literal speech acts such as public speeches but through all types of communicative tools that can assist the securitizing actor in bringing the message of a potential threat to the target audience. Examples of different tools could be written material, images, and television (McDonald, M. 2008). An example of the other securitization tools being put to use could be the publications of the Danish Muhammed cartoons, which created a massive outrage in the middle eastern countries, and also created a concern about the actions of the Muslim population in Denmark, this concern was communicated to the Danish population by using images and videos of people in the middle eastern countries burning the Danish flag (McDonald, M. 2008). By showing the burning of the Danish flag it can create the grounds of an existential threat which can become a security issue for Denmark and that can also allow Danish politicians to enable their own political agenda.

When talking about the Copenhagen school and securitization it is also crucial to mention the concept of de-securitization. De-securitization is the opposite of securitization and explains the process of how a threat or an issue has been handled in order for it to no longer be a security threat or how a previous security threat simply has been removed from the

security agenda (Wæver, 1993). This could again be a political leader removing the focus from a previous expressed security issue, an example for this could be the cold war, a constant tension between Russia and the US, and a potential risk of war that was de-securitized because of the fall of communism (Wæver, 1993).

There has been certain criticism towards the Copenhagen School's three-step process of securitization, one particular criticism is with the third step of the process as it is not within the actor's control on how the audience receives and interprets the speech act, which means that the Copenhagen school's idea of securitization is not a controlled tool which is used to push a certain agenda of security issues but it is presented as a hope for the audience to accept the speech act (Romaniuk, 2018).

Another more significant criticism towards the Copenhagen School is that it has a strong Eurocentric perspective on issues related to security and that the Copenhagen school fails to include gender (Romaniuk, 2018). Another criticism towards the Copenhagen school in terms of its analytical reach is that the Copenhagen school tends to have a narrow framework when analyzing how security threats emerge. The problem with the framework of the Copenhagen school is that it focuses entirely on the concept of "Speech act" and neglects physical measures being taken into use, which also can serve as a way of commutating a certain idea about security and what a potential threat could be (Balzacq, 2005). Another aspect of securitization within the Copenhagen school that tends to be understated, is the great importance of the contextual factors, which could be factors such as the dominant narrative of identity, which is difficult to ignore when developing a universal framework for the creation of what is perceived as a threat (Balzacq, 2005). Furthermore, a criticism from another scholar within securitization Thierry Balzacq suggests that the role of the audiences within the Copenhagen school framework is underspecified because of the reliance on the theorization of language and linguistics (Balzacq, 2005). When relying on language, the act is solely done through articulation towards the audience instead of the result of negotiations between the articulator and the audience, so the power of the speech act can be undermined by the idea that the speech act itself is only a part of the securitization process and not the ultimate factor that determines what ends up being accepted as a security threat (Balzacq, 2005).

Beyond the Copenhagen school

With the mention of Balzacq and his criticism of the Copenhagen school framework, we will take a closer look into how Balzacq views securitization and how these security threats emerge. As mentioned Balzacq challenges the Copenhagen school framework, and argues that their discursive action of security is too formal, and as a consequence of the high degree of formality their concept of securitization as a speech act approach becomes a fixed permanent code of practice and ultimately reduces the practice of securitization to a conventional procedure (Balzacq, 2005). Balzacq argues the contrary to the Copenhagen school, that securitization is better understood as a strategic and pragmatic practice, meaning that securitization is better understood as a way of communicating and dealing with a threat, sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations (Balzacq, 2005). This practice occurs as a part of an arrangement of circumstances, including taking the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience the securitization is presented for, as well as acknowledging the influence of both the speaker of the threat and the receiver of the threat. The strategic and pragmatic approach to the discourse is different from the Copenhagen school speech act on one essential factor, the strategic approach of securitization moves within the field of persuasion and uses various methods in the form of metaphors, emotions, stereotypes, gestures, and even silence and lies to reach its goal (Balzacq, 2005). Balzacq suggests rejecting the ultimate label of securitization as just a speech act, instead, he proposes to knit the different aspects of securitization into something he calls a “pragmatic act”. The pragmatic act stresses the exchanging act of achieving security by the use of words, as the pragmatic act allows to emphasize the contextual and non-linguistic clues such as physical gestures and common scene of action for social agents (Balzacq, 2005). By conceiving security as a pragmatic act it promotes the understanding of security discourse because action must be taken to restore not only the "discourse itself" but also other factors such as the ability of agents, their interactive ontology, and the social field in which the rhetorical game is played.

An important question in regards to the approach to securitization Balzacq asks is “What are the crucial underlying principles of securitization?” (Balzacq, 2005, p 179) according to the Copenhagen School the answer to this question is that securitization is a rule-governed practice, and the success of the practice does not necessarily depend on the existence of an

actual threat, moreover it depends on the discursive ability to effectively provide the development with a specific complexion. Balzacq suggests that securitization is a historical process that occurs between a series of previously influential events and their impact on the interaction; this involves concurrent behaviors that have enhanced or adverse consequences for securitization (Balzacq, 2005). Since securitization is the product of a variety of complex reasons, if other factors have a significant impact on the process, investigations into unique factors (such as the rules of speech behavior) may fail. Therefore, when analyzing the structure of the security problem, we should pay attention to the following fact: any securitization includes not only the specific persuasive power we are interested in but also all other successful and failed modification attempts. (Balzacq, 2005)

Nevertheless, keeping the Copenhagen school and Balzacq in mind, their primary focus on securitization is still within the act of speaking, speeches, and statements. The analysis of the thesis, however, will primarily consist of written material in the form of reports and letters. Because even though the theory of securitization is closely tied to speeches and how for example political leaders securitize certain decisions and threats through their speeches, the act of securitization has a much broader scope in today's landscape and the performance of securitization is also now included in written material, visual presentation such as news-media or other video clips and other forms of communicative methods (Greaves, W., & Pomerants, D. 2017).

When it comes to securitization and the emergence of security threats for the European Union within the context of Serbia's growing authoritarian tendencies and their closer relations to China, this topic will be analyzed through the lens of securitization in order to comprehend how the EU structures Serbia's enhanced relations to China as a matter of concern for the EU. This thesis will delve into the five main areas of securitization which is the social, military, political, economic, and environmental areas, and analyze how the EU and main actors within the EU voice their concerns on these areas and how China's influence in Serbia and Serbia's path towards becoming an authoritarian state affects the five different areas of securitization.

Securitization theory offers an overview of how politicians and state officials can take a certain topic and rephrase it, into becoming a threat, next we will look into the different concepts within diplomacy, which will offer an overview on how different states pursue their foreign relations and what are the main characteristics that differ China's foreign relations from the EU's

Diplomacy theory

The term diplomacy in international relations has been described as a synonym for foreign policies and state communication. The act of diplomacy is the goal of establishing cooperation between countries that share a common interest and this could be within multiple factors such as trade agreements, conflict resolution, or environmental challenges (Balzacq, Charillon, & Ramel, 2020).

The concepts within diplomacy will serve as a supporting tool for linkage and leverage theory and securitization. Within diplomacy, the thesis will delve into the fields of economic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and their connection to soft power use. Soft power in itself is also sometimes referred to as hearts and minds diplomacy. We will also look at the more niche areas of diplomacy which are the newly developed concepts such as vaccine diplomacy and debt-trap diplomacy in order to add multiple perspectives within China's and the EU's way of gaining influence and developing stronger linkages to Serbia.

By utilizing the concept of diplomacy it can offer a broader perspective on the specific approaches of China and the EU within their goals of influencing Serbia.

Economic diplomacy

Economic diplomacy offers a wide scope of how states interact with the goal of developing relations based on trade, commerce, and investments. The main objective of conducting economic diplomacy is for states to reach mutually beneficial agreements, which usually spills over into the strengthening of foreign policy relations between the states in question (Chatterjee, C. 2020).

A crucial element, when conducting economic diplomacy is to make sure that the agreements between states are mutually beneficial and secures the national economic

interest by identifying the bases for exchange between the parties concerned (Chatterjee, 2020).

“The goal of economic diplomacy is not only to create and maintain an economic and commercial relationship between the two states but also to develop “capacity building” with a view to strengthening the economic and commercial foundations including infrastructures of a country” (Chatterjee, 2020 P. 16). However mutual interest within the economic agreements between states are not always balanced, because one of the two states might have a much weaker economy, which means that the one state is not able to reciprocate in the same way as the other state, this issue occurs when one of the states is a developing country (Chatterjee, 2020).

Economic diplomacy is at its worst when it is operated on a false perception of bargaining power of the parties concerned, meaning that the negotiations for economic and trade agreements should be conducted with the utmost transparency, otherwise this can lead to one state taking advantage of the other states weak economic position (Chatterjee, 2020). When negotiating economic agreements between states, this process should eventually progress into a bilateral treaty between the two states. However, if one of the states within the agreements is a developing country the negotiation should also involve a strategy for capacity building which means the more developed state should make an effort to develop the ability, skills, processes, and resources of people, organizations, and society as a whole in order for the developing state being able to manage its affairs successfully because another significant aspect of economic diplomacy is to minimize economic dependence on developing countries, which can eventually allow them to reach a higher competitive position (Chatterjee, 2020).

Public diplomacy

Public diplomacy is the process of states engaging with one another to promote matters such as culture, values, and policies. Public diplomacy is also referred to as the driver for the promotion of Soft power (Joseph S. Nye. 2008). In international politics, the means that create soft power comes from the values a state expresses in its culture and the example it sets by showcasing its internal affairs, meaning that the state that is gaining influence

through soft power leads by showing its internal activities functioning properly. Moreover, states produce soft power through policies and the way it handles relations with other states. Public diplomacy is a tool for states to mobilize their values, policies, and culture to attract cooperation and gain influence, not only over governments but also with the general public. Public diplomacy attracts by moving attention to the state's resources and promotes them through broadcasting and cultural exports (Nye, 2008). However, if the content of a country's values, policies, and norms are not attractive for some reason, the state will be unable to produce soft power (Nye, 2008, P. 95). The reason for the focus on the appeal of the state's values and culture is in order to produce credibility because without national credibility the tools of public diplomacy will not be able to interpret the cultural resources into effective soft power, which means that, unlike economic diplomacy where you can measure the success of it by looking at the trade and how much it generates for each state, you measure the effects on public diplomacy by minds being changed, which can be seen by looking at qualitative data such as interviews, and general statements and quantitative data such as opinion polls (Nye, 2008).

Public diplomacy is not a synonym for soft power but these two concepts are intertwined within the course of action of promoting a state's values, norms, and ideas in a target country. Soft power is the goal to gain influence and assist other states to gain values that can establish the fundament for well-functioning cooperation, and public diplomacy is the tool for a state, organization, or other entity to strategically promote the cultural resources in order to produce soft power. Thus, public diplomacy is a useful instrument and requires the support of credibility and the role of the civil society, in order for a state's policies, norms, and values to be received as trustworthy if the goal is to generate resilient soft power (Nye, 2008).

Debt trap and vaccine diplomacy

The interesting aspect of debt-trap diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy is that these concepts of diplomacy have been developed recently and have been created to describe the actions of China. Debt trap diplomacy was coined in 2017 by Indian scholar Brahma Chelleaney where he specifically targets China. The theory of debt-trap diplomacy is set to describe China's lending methods where they specifically target underdeveloped countries with unsustainable loans, which then would force the underdeveloped country to surrender control of strategic assets to China (Chelleney, 2017). This theory has after its creation been pushed by western countries such as the US and has gained wide popularity to describe how China pursues its economic agreements (Rithmire and Brautigam, 2021).

However, the debt trap diplomacy has been proved to not be credible, as it is not a theory that has been proven to be true (Rithmire and Brautigam, 2021). The interesting aspect of the debt trap diplomacy theory is the attempt of 'framing' China as an international villain. Moreover, even though the theory has later been disclaimed it is still interesting to see the impact it has created on China's international image, and how the disruption of Chinese image has affected the way the west is cooperating with China.

The same goes for the concept of vaccine diplomacy, which was coined in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccine diplomacy can be described as an extension of the debt trap diplomacy as it is described as another way for China to gain influence in less developed and underdeveloped countries, where the western world has not been able to efficiently deliver the covid-19 vaccines (Leitgh, 2021)

Research Design & Methods

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis will be conducted for the purpose of achieving an in-depth look into the differences and similarities of how the EU and China gain influence in Serbia and how the actions of China might obstruct the linkages between the EU and Serbia. Through a comparative analysis, it can create a deeper understanding of different societies by placing structures and systems against each other to see where they are alike and where they differ. Comparative analysis also amplifies the knowledge of other societies, cultures, and courses of action, and thus enables the comparative analyst to contrast the knowledge on a critical level (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017). To get the full benefit of comparative analysis, it is crucial that the different entities of the analysis are compared on the basis of a common theoretical framework (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017). This will be visible within the theories of diplomacy and linkage and leverage. The theories will give a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities of the EU's and China's approaches and methods to create linkage to Serbia and utilize its relations to Serbia through leverage.

When comparing the objects or entities it involves the description of differences and similarities. By providing contextual descriptions of different foreign policies and diplomatic approaches, it enhances the understanding and the ability to interpret diverse arrangements between states (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017). Furthermore, rounded and detailed descriptions provide knowledge and initial hunches about factors that can prove to be important for explaining similarities and differences (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017). When the different aspects of the comparative analysis have been described and classified, the analysis can then move forward to the factors that can help to understand how the characteristics of the analysis objects function in the context of the theoretical framework provided. Moreover, looking into the differences and similarities, within the specific theme, can offer a wider understanding of the research question (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017).

However, a key issue when applying a comparative analysis in the research is to ensure equivalence, which means to ensure the ability to accurately collect data that are indeed comparable between different contexts and to avoid biases in measurement, instruments, and sampling (Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial when conducting the comparative analysis to be aware of and avoid the possible biases when comparing two entities, that is also the reason why it is crucial for the objects of the analysis to be compared within the same theoretical framework (Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017).

To conduct the comparative analysis of the EU and China and their approaches to creating linkage and how they utilize their leverage in Serbia, the thesis will frame the efforts of each entity within the theories and concepts of diplomacy and linkage and leverage, in order to systematically compare and explain the efforts in each of the categories. Data chosen for the comparative analysis are various reports from the European Parliament and the European Commission, to showcase the timeline of the EU's efforts in Serbia and the Western Balkan region as well.

Frame analysis

A frame analysis will be conducted in order to research how the EU securitizes and frames Serbia's relations to China and its authoritarian tendencies. Frame analysis shares a lot of similarities with a discourse analysis which in itself is a method applied in order to study and understand meanings and significance within speeches and written material and overall communication (Matthes, 2011). In contrast to discourse analysis, frame analysis does not include an analytical perspective on micro-level linguistics, which means that framing does not focus on details within speeches and text such as wording, grammar, or metaphors. Nevertheless, the concepts of the core framing tasks serve to identify the constituting building blocks of a particular frame (Matthes, 2011). Like discourse analysis, frame analysis offers an analytical tool to grasp the discursive practices of particular actors; that is, the ways particular texts are produced, distributed and consumed (Matthes, 2011). Frame analysis also deals with the framing of issues and problems and how they are outlined in order to support a certain political agenda (Matthes, 2011). Frames can be

identified and measured in the communications of all involved actors. Framing, in contrast, refers to an active process of creating, selecting, and shaping the frames (Matthes, 2011). The EU offers a large number of approaches when setting a certain agenda (Daviter, 2007) and this is also relevant for identifying frames within the EU. Different issues and concerns are discussed and processed on various levels of the EU decision making (Daviter, 2007) which offer a broad perspective on multiple topics within the challenges of the EU. the data chosen for uncovering different framing of the EU are:

- "EU-China – A Strategic outlook 12 march 2019" this report from the European Commission gives a substantial overview of the different challenges and ambitions regarding the EU's cooperation with China. This report will be a relevant tool for the analysis based on the way the EU describes its ambitions, possibilities, and concerns for the increased engagement with China, which together with the more Serbia-focused text can give a greater insight into how the EU perceives China in general.
- "Serbia at the risk of authoritarianism" which delves into the internal challenges of Serbia such as anti- and pro-government rallies spread across Serbia, media freedom in decline, excessive concentration of political power, elections that are not fully free and fair judicial reforms are lagging behind, civil society being under attack and Serbia's EU accession process. This report is interesting because even though it does not mention concerns for Serbia's relations to China it does mention a number of concerns that could be correlated to Serbia's increased relations with China, which is also what the thesis will attempt at uncovering in the analysis chapter.
- "Open letter to Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations" which states the concerns of multiple European Parliament members, and urges the commissioner for the enlargement negotiations to address the growing influence of China in Serbia and how it is causing damage to the European environment.

Litterature & analytical approach

Besides various reports from the EU, which offers us a lot of practical information about the status of the EU-Serbia relations and allows us to detect certain frames of the EU in regards to China and its influence in Serbia, there will also be a focus on secondary literature and theoretical academic articles.

- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2005). International linkage and democratization: Levitsky and Way offer an explanation to the EU's way of gaining influence and assisting other countries to move towards democracy. the point of view from Levitsky and Way can support the methods and approaches of the EU and their involvement in Serbia

- Burnell & Schlumberger. (2010) "Promoting Democracy – Promoting Autocracy: Burnell and Schlumberger, are crucial for the analysis because they offer the same as Levitsky and Way, only their angle is to explain how authoritarian states, promotes autocracy instead of democracy like the western countries. The point of view from Burnell and Schlumberger, can help to analyze the behavior and efforts of China, and also analyze the reactions of Serbia in terms of their changing internal structure.

- Mardell, J. (2020). China's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. - Mardell's report assists by giving an informational overview of China's presence in the Western Balkans, and helps us gain an in-depth understanding of how truly significant China has become in Serbia and also combined with the theory of linkage and leverage it can explain the approach of China in terms of gaining influence and utilize its leverage in the region.

- Minić, J (2015) The Challenges of Serbia's Foreign Policy: Collection of Papers, Belgrade: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: This academic article serves the same purpose as Mardell's report. Through the article by Minić who has collected multiple articles on the theme, it allows us to gain an understanding of the reasoning and idea of becoming an EU-member state and why it is a logical process to undergo for a country like Serbia. Again, combined with the theoretical standpoint from Levitsky and Way, it allows us to properly analyze and understand the methods and actions of the EU, in order to conform Serbia into a country that aligns with the European standards and at the same time, give us an insight to what sort of factors determines the actions and challenges of Serbia within the scope of their foreign relations.

The analytical approach of the thesis is to lead off by analyzing the EU's and China's linkage and how they are trying to utilize and gain influence in Serbia through the leverage they have gained. By analyzing the role China has gained in Serbia and how it has the possibility to influence the behavior of Serbia in terms of their relations to the EU, the analysis can then move further to how the EU frames and securitizes Serbia's current behavior, authoritarian tendencies and the growing influence of China in Serbia and the Western Balkans. By analyzing the way the EU frames the Serbia-China relations, it can then unveil different challenges to the EU in terms of maintaining and strengthening their political linkage to Serbia. Furthermore, by analyzing how the EU and China pursue their foreign relations to Serbia through the different concepts of diplomacy, it can then give a wider and insightful look into how exactly the EU and China construct their political and economic linkage to Serbia, and it can give a clear overview of why Serbia might lean towards the one instead of the other, or if another option for Serbia should emerge throughout the process of analysis. This at the end will bring us to the final section of the analysis where the thesis further investigates and answers to which extent Serbia's behavior and China's growing influence becomes a challenge to the EU.

Analysis

In this chapter, the theory of linkage and leverage will demonstrate how the EU and China create linkage to Serbia and how they use their leverage to influence Serbia to steer towards their desired goals. The theory will as well highlight the similarities and differences of the EU and China and their relation to Serbia, as well as adding a perspective to Serbia's overall view on the two entities trying to establish cooperation.

The EU's linkage and leverage

Like most other post-communist countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the EU was a substantial factor in Serbia's development and democratization (Minic, (Eds.), 2015). The EU accomplished to create linkage to Serbia and the rest of the western Balkan countries through the EU enlargement process. (Minic, (Eds.), 2015).

If we look at the enlargement process through the lens of the concept of linkage, the EU started to increase its efforts more intensely, after the wars in the Balkans. The linkage of the EU was effective at that time because the EU came to the Balkan countries when they were in a very vulnerable state, which made the linkage process of the EU unforced (Levitsky and Way, 2005)

Looking specifically at Serbia, it had a weak economy and had suffered through massive inflation throughout and after the Milosevic regime, and had no real political structure. The EU established economic linkage by assisting Serbia, with funds for post-war development and the notion of initiating the enlargement negotiations (Minic, (Eds.), 2015). Thus the EU's primary focus was to establish strong political and economic linkage to Serbia. The political linkage to Serbia was officially established with the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which functioned as the main tool of Serbia's development and the tool of EU's linkage to Serbia (Council of the European Union, 2013) What the SAA agreement also did was functioning as the main framework to identify mutual political and economic goals and push towards regional cooperation, as well as the implementation of the enlargement process (Minic (Eds.), 2015)

With the agreement and notion of EU-accession combined, it represented hope for prosperity in Serbia, as well as the rest of the Western Balkan countries, and Serbia also got to experience signs of it through trade (Zemniczky and Csüllög and Császár, 2015). However, with linkage and the relations to Serbia being enhanced through economic cooperation, it also meant that Serbia had to align within the structures of the EU in the form of becoming a well-functioning democracy, governed by the rule of law and respect for human rights. This part of EU-Serbia relations is explained through the concept of Leverage. After a western force has gained influence in a state through linkage it can then influence the internal structures of the state through leverage (Levitsky and Way, 2005). Furthermore, the enlargement process is also a way for the EU to establish geopolitical linkage to Serbia, when Serbia becomes a member-state it will ensure stability as Serbia now need to adhere to the EU's conditions of membership and as an EU-country it needs to adhere to the common rule and norms of the EU (Council of the European Union,2013)

The way the EU utilizes its leverage in Serbia is through the conditionality of the accession process. Meaning, the EU assists Serbia in different ways by for example enhancing Serbia's trade with EU countries, but in return the EU expects Serbia to integrate the values and policies of the EU and create reforms (Council of the European Union, 2013). The leverage of the EU is especially noticeable through the "Copenhagen Criteria" which is three main areas a country must have properly implemented before they can become an EU member state (Minic, (Eds.), 2015).

Through the Copenhagen criteria, the EU can demand the candidate country to adapt to the EU structures within three criteria areas (Marktle, 2006). One of the criteria being the political area, where the EU, requests Serbia to ensure the stability of democratic institutions, and overall guarantee democracy in the country, which is governed by the rule of law as well as respecting and upholding human rights and the rights of minorities in the country (Marktle, 2006). The second condition of the Copenhagen criteria are the economic area, where the EU wants the candidate country to establish a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces, the third is the administrative

and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *acquis* and ability to take on the obligations of membership (Marktle, 2006).

In theory, the conditionality of the Copenhagen criteria presented to a possible EU-member state is not only a way for the EU to shape the behavior and structure of a country (Marktle, 2006). Moreover, it can also solidify the political, economic, and social linkage to a country if the country in question is shaping itself through the criteria, the linkages the EU creates to the country becomes an unforced process (Marktle, 2006). Thus, if Serbia forms its internal structures by the Copenhagen criteria, the EU can uphold the linkages established to Serbia.

The notion of EU membership is also an example of active usage of leverage by the EU, by presenting the EU membership as the key factor for prosperity, the EU creates its leverage based on what the candidate countries potentially can achieve if they can align themselves with the criteria of the EU (Vachudova, 2013). Specifically, for the case of Serbia, the greatest attempt of the EU to fully utilize its leverage is the resolution of the Kosovo conflict. The EU has presented the resolution of the conflict and the recognition of Kosovo's independence as the main factor for Serbia's EU membership, and indirectly presenting the case as a final step towards full accession (Minic, (Eds.), 2015).

However, the EU has not yet been able to successfully utilize this leverage, since Serbia has not yet officially recognized Kosovo as an independent state. The reason for the failure of applying leverage in this specific area is not because the EU has a weak political linkage to Serbia, but the reason for the failure is because of Serbia's other linkages which have grown to become as great as the EU's linkages. Serbia's foreign relations with Russia has always been an example of very strong linkage, which had been built even before the first world war (Galina, Nelaeva, & Semenov, 2016), but in the last ten years China has established itself as a key partner for Serbia, and since the signing of the strategic partnership agreement in August 2009, China has nothing but created a resilient linkage to Serbia. Moreover, the Kosovo question is also a reason for an area where the EU has not been able to establish linkage to Serbia, which is military linkage. The EU does not have an officially joined military, each EU country has its own military, but the countries of the EU have all of their military capacity under NATO. However, Serbia has expressed its wish not to join NATO and

maintaining military neutrality (Litavski, 2012). The wish of maintaining military neutrality by Serbia is due to the bombing of Serbia by NATO in 1999 during the civil war on Kosovo between Albanians and Serbs (Litavski, 2012). It is arguable that the failed military linkage and the failed utilization of leverage in relation to resolving the Kosovo question are intertwined because they both revolve around Serbia's claim on Kosovo and how it is not yet possible to reach a compromise relating to this area.

China's linkage and leverage

China has created its linkage to Serbia primarily through economic efforts (Minic, (Eds, 2015). This has resulted in China today is seen as one of the most important economic partners of Serbia and has tremendous importance to the Serbian national economy. Like many other countries China creates linkage to, China has also been a big investor in Serbia, predominantly in Serbia's infrastructure. The big Chinese investments in the Serbian infrastructure also remains a prominent component of China's presence in Serbia (Mardell, 2020)

The initial major loan China made to Serbia was for the construction of the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade in 2009, which also was the foundation of a major shift in Serbia's economic cooperation with China, which from that point would be intensified (Ozturk, 2019). This was also due to Russia's inability to follow through on economic promises, which meant that Russia would take a more subtle position in Serbia's foreign relations while the relations to China was amped up due to financial resources made available for Serbia for other projects (Minic, (Eds.), 2015). These projects would include factories, railroad development, and more significantly the Zelezara Smederevo steel company (Mardell, 2020), which actually has been a cause for concern for the EU (Members of the European Parliament, 2021).

Even though China created a significantly effective linkage to Serbia by making financial resources available, China also accomplishes to intensify its linkage through political relations to Serbia. The most significant political support China offers is the question about Kosovo's independence (Minic, (Eds.), 2015). China does not recognize Kosovo as an

independent state and offers support for Serbia's claim on the region (Hartwell, 2021). China's position as a permanent UN security council member is also a major factor that makes them an appealing partner for Serbia whom they need to maintain and expand their relations to (Hartwell, 2021).

It is noticeable that China's approach for establishing linkage to Serbia has a lot of the same components of the EU's way of creating linkage, such as through offering economic support, establishing political cooperation, and engaging in bilateral agreements. However, the approaches differ in terms of the conditionality of China's linkage to Serbia, because, unlike the EU, China does not try to influence the internal political structure of Serbia, and China does not try to integrate any values or norms into Serbia, however, China still does utilize the leverage it has gained in Serbia (Minic, (Eds), 2015 P. 50). If we look at the economic partnership between Serbia and China, the one who is experiencing the true benefit is Serbia, so what purpose does Serbia serve for China and how can China exploit the leverage it has gained through political support and direct investments? The most significant reason for China to gain leverage in Serbia is to enter Europe, and this was officially made clear when the Belt road initiative was presented (Mardell, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a foreign policy slogan and development concept announced by Xi Jinping in 2013. The objective of BRI is to connect Asia with Europe (also with Africa) through land and through maritime networks, which will improve the regional integration, increase Chinese trade to the rest of the world and stimulate economic growth, which as an expected result will strengthen China's position as the economic leader (Mardell, 2020). This use of leverage by China has also been criticized and China has been accused of leveraging its economic power to take control of strategically important infrastructure assets in east and southeast Europe (Chan, 2019). This is also an example of the previously mentioned concept of 'Debt trap diplomacy' where China invests in infrastructure projects which the countries are not able to pay back, so instead of repayment China asks for influence and control over the assets of the infrastructure (Chan, 2019). Even though this sort of pragmatic method of utilizing leverage could be true, they are still just accusations. The reason the accusation does not have any merit is that they are impossible to prove, even the concept of debt-trap diplomacy was not something that was backed by evidence but emerged based on accusations against China (Rithmire and Brautigam, 2021).

Furthermore, it has been made clear that China's method of establishing linkage to Serbia differs drastically from the way the EU approaches it, based on two major factors. The first factor is there are no objectives from China to influence the political structure of Serbia. The EU is working towards democratizing Serbia through political and economic linkages, China, on the other hand, is more interested in developing its ties to Serbia in order for them to have a European ally and have the leverage to conduct the BRI (Minic, (Eds.), 2015 P. 50). The second factor is the conditionality of the EU, it has been made clear to Serbia that the benefits of the EU will be available to them, on the condition that they align themselves with the EU reforms, values, and norms. China again does not try to integrate any sort of "Chinese values" into Serbia (Hartwell, 2021), but an interesting component of the Chinese leverage in Serbia, is that the leverage seems to create a spillover into Serbia. Because of China's key role in the Serbian economy, infrastructure, and political issues, China has now positioned itself as a counterpart to the EU, which Serbia has publicly expressed (Hopkins, 2020). This position of China as the counterpart to the EU could also be the reason for the behavior of Serbia over the past 5 years (Russel, 2019). Serbia is moving more towards a governmental system that looks more like an autocracy, and it is also here that the Chinese influence becomes more visible (Russel, 2019). Here it also shows that, unlike the EU who is directly trying to influence Serbia through democratization, China's (and also Russia to some extent) position as the counterpart to the EU, indirectly promotes autocracy in Serbia. Burnell and Schlumberger, also mention an example regarding the Russian "export" of autocracy which shows similarities to the Chinese-Serbian relationship. They found that Russian influences help further non-democratic rule in former Soviet republics in Central Asia, but the contribution made by local 'receptivity' and the compatibility with vested elite interests in the republics (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010, P.12) This is similar to Serbia's acceptance of China's growing influence through economic assistance and political backing.

This has created a concern for the EU and has framed the growing Chinese influence in Serbia as a security threat, not only to the EU countries but also to the Serbia-EU linkage.

The growing influence of China, a cause for securitization?

In this next section of the analysis, the thesis will delve into how the EU frames the growing Chinese influence and leverage as a security issue. With the help of securitization theory combined with the theory of linkage and leverage, the thesis will demonstrate how the EU is approaching the behavior of Serbia and its intensified relations with China. Moreover, when looking at the way the EU frames the Serbia-China relations it can uncover aspects of weakened linkage between Serbia and the EU, as well as uncovering why the EU's use of leverage might not be successful.

Serbia has shown that it will not adhere to every condition presented by the EU, and this can create a concern for the EU as it is unclear what the intentions of Serbia are, and with the recent developments of Serbia's internal political structure, the EU has also raised concern in terms of Serbia's adherence to the general Copenhagen criteria.

As previously mentioned, the leverage of China has created a sort of spillover to Serbia, because now Serbia has a large counterpart to the EU who can provide financial resources when needed, and this could also be the reason for Serbia's behavior the past 5 years. Ever since Aleksandar Vučić became the president of Serbia in 2017, Serbia has moved away from being fully democratized and has shown tendencies of moving towards becoming an authoritarian state. In 2019 the European parliament released a report titled "Serbia at the risk of authoritarianism" (Russel, 2019).

The report covers a wide range of areas where Serbia is starting to show signs of authoritarianism such as the freedom of media in Serbia is declining and it is no longer a safe place for journalist, elections are not fully free and fair, the civil society organizations are being harassed if they have a critical view on the state authorities and the excessive concentration of political power (Russel, 2019).

Vučić's role as the president of Serbia, according to the constitution is supposed to be a ceremonial title, where the real influence on state affairs should be under the prime minister, however, this is not the case now, Vučić's position as leader of the dominant

Serbian progressive party (SNS) gives him control of the parliamentary majority, and therefore also of the government. The concentration of power in the country also means that the political oppositions continue to get weaker, and an overall lack of transparency regarding Serbia's internal affairs (Russel, 2019)

Serbia's authoritarian behavior could be the result of them believing they have the upper hand in regards to having powerful counterparts to the EU (Burnell and Shlumberger, 2010). However, the authoritarian tendencies of Serbia cannot be directly linked to the increased relations with China, yet, it still can offer a perspective on Serbia's negligence of the criteria and values of the EU in multiple areas. Additionally, the negligence of the EU's criteria, rules, and values could also be an indication of a steadily weakened linkage between Serbia and the EU.

Before delving into the different acts of framing and securitization made by the EU in regards to the growing influence of China in Serbia, it is crucial to form an overview of how the EU perceives China in general. By looking at the EU-China strategic outlook report we can create an overview of what areas China is beneficial as a partner to the EU or what areas China can be perceived as a threat.

“China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole-of-EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values. The tools and modalities of EU engagement with China should also be differentiated depending on the issues and policies at stake. The EU should use linkages across different policy areas and sectors in order to exert more leverage in pursuit of its objectives” (European Commission, 2019, P.1)

The EU recognizes the importance of maintaining good relations with China and at the same time, the EU reveals its view on China as a rival in terms of China's alternative approach of governance. Keeping Serbia in mind and their authoritarian tendencies, this is a suitable example of how the EU frames China's governance model and their increasing influence as a factor for concern, and which the EU must be aware of and take pragmatic measures if needed in order to maintain stability within their own states and their neighboring states. Furthermore, the EU shows that increasing cooperation with China is inevitable, but their cooperation should still be influenced by conditionality depending on the issues and policies that could be at stake. Finally, the EU mentions the importance of using its linkages across different policy areas in order to exert leverage within its interest, keeping Serbia and the western Balkans in mind where China is heavily involved by investing in the countries and their infrastructure and different enterprises, this could also be an example of creating an awareness of the EU's influence and how by the use of linkage and leverage needs to be upheld and not fall in the hands of China.

Another way the EU frames and securitizes China's activities as a concern and a threat is through China's enhanced military and technology, by looking in the strategic outlook report the EU also states that -

"China's increasing military capabilities coupled with its comprehensive vision and ambition to have the technologically most advanced armed forces by 2050 present security issues for the EU, already in a short to mid-term perspective. Cross-sectoral hybrid threats including information operations, and large military exercises not only undermine trust, but also challenge the EU's security and must be addressed in the context of our mutual relationship" (European Commission, 2019, P.4)

Again, the EU expresses its goal to develop effective and prosperous cooperation with China, but by viewing the behavior of China and how it undermines the trust between China and the EU. Most crucial of all, this quote from the strategic outlook report tells us that the EU recognizes China as a potential security threat to the EU in various areas and is also the reason why this in itself is an act of securitization by the EU. Furthermore, we will also look into how China supplies Serbia, with military equipment and surveillance technology.

The strategic outlook report also delves into the growing influence of China in the Western Balkans. “China's business and investment activity in third countries, including in the Western Balkans, the EU's neighbourhood and Africa has become widespread. Chinese investments have contributed to the growth of many receiving economies. At the same time, these investments frequently neglect socioeconomic and financial sustainability and may result in high-level indebtedness and transfer of control over strategic assets and resources. This compromises efforts to promote good social and economic governance and, most fundamentally, the rule of law and human rights” (European Commission, 2019, P.4).

This example can be directly correlated to the concern for Serbia's authoritarian tendencies, and how the growing influence of China is a factor in terms of the EU's decreasing influence in the region. Furthermore, this is not an exact act of securitization, because the EU does not mention how the growing influence and China's heavy investment activities in the Western Balkans is a threat to the EU's security, however, it is an act of framing in the sense that China's influence in the region is a challenge to the EU on multiple levels and the EU also tells us that China's influence is a cause for a weakened linkage between the EU and the western Balkans, based on how it compromises the EU's efforts in the region.

The first attempt of directly securitizing the Chinese influence in specifically Serbia by the EU, we will delve into the open letter addressed to the commissioner for enlargement and neighborhood policies, which has been shared on multiple news media outlets. The letter is signed by 10 members of the European parliament, the subject of the letter is “The EU must strongly address the growing Chinese influence in Serbia and the impending ecological impacts thereof” (Members of Parliament, 2021, P. 1)

This open letter is an act of securitization, in the way the members of parliament are framing the heavy investment activities of China in Serbia, as an environmental threat to the EU.

The members of parliament are referring to the development of Chinese industry investment in Serbia within different enterprises like steel, copper, and coal. The members of parliament here are raising the concern about the enterprises being taken over by Chinese investors and since the takeover, the environmental situation around all three enterprises has deteriorated drastically, impacting the surrounding communities' collective

health and well-being and despite these patterns of increasing emission levels going above-permitted levels, the Serbian government has not ordered the plants to be shut down or the situation to be corrected (Members of Parliament, 2021).

The members of parliament mention the Serbian citizens living around factories and power plants as the ones being affected negatively by it, but later in the letter also mentions that these developments are not just Serbian internal matters but affect EU-countries bordering Serbia.

It is affecting Romania and Hungary through air pollution, and therefore are likely to impact neighboring EU countries as well - it is estimated that the additional health costs in Romania due to Western Balkan coal pollution already reach up to 1.1 billion EUR a year (Members of Parliament, 2021). It is therefore in the interest not only of Serbia but of the European community, in general, to ensure that such effects are mitigated in scope and intensity, and as such, the project deserves close international attention.

The main focus of the letter is on climate challenges based on the activity within different enterprises in Serbia, but the way the members of parliament are framing this issue is the emergence of threat is due to the growing Chinese influence in Serbia, thus the Chinese influence is raising a concern that their influence in Serbia has the potential to affect the EU negatively. This is also a call for measures being taken to get the Serbian government to stop their steel and coal activities.

Nevertheless, when looking at the Chinese investments in Serbian coal and steel from China's and Serbia's perspective, the steel mill is a great result of Chinese investment and will assist Serbia in furthering its economic development. Moreover, the coal and steel investments of China is also an example of China establishing an enhanced economic linkage to Serbia as well as an example of weakened communication linkage between Serbia and the EU, because of Serbia's lack of transparency and unwillingness to discuss its cooperation with China, the EU is now left to address the environmental damage caused by the Chinese investments in an open letter.

Another example of the EU securitizing questions involving specifically the Chinese-Serbian ties and activities is to be found in the “European Parliament resolution of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Serbia” the report covers over a hundred different points on where Serbia is doing well and points that are causes for concern. We will look at point 78, 89 and 99 which are points exemplifying how the EU frames the growing Chinese influence as security issues other than environmental as the example of the letter gave us previously.

Point 78

“Expresses concern about China’s increasing influence in Serbia and across the Western Balkans and the lack of transparency and environmental and social impact assessment of Chinese investments and loans; calls on Serbia to strengthen its legal compliance standards for Chinese business activities” (European Parliament, 2021 P.16)

Here we revisit the concern of the EU, regarding the environmental impact of Chinese investments and loans. The interesting aspect of point 78 is the connection it is drawing between Serbia’s lack of transparency and its increased relations with China. This is the same assumption made previously in this chapter regarding Serbia’s risk of becoming an authoritarian state, based on China’s role as the counterpart to the EU. When Serbia does not need to adhere to the reforms of the EU and it can get loans and economic support from China, Serbia also stops adhering to the overall rules, norms, and values of the EU.

Point 89

“Welcomes the fact that Serbia aligned with the EU’s position on the presidential elections in Belarus; remains concerned, however, that Serbia has failed to align with the sanctioning of Belarusian officials and with the EU’s position on the new security law in China; calls on Serbia to increase its level of alignment with the declarations of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on behalf of the EU, and with Council decisions, including those on sanctions” (European Parliament, 2021 P.17)

The new security law in China which point 89 refers to is a new law that is imposed on Hong Kong by China. What the new security laws involve is that it outlaws subversion, secession, terrorism, and colluding with foreign forces to undermine national security. Moreover, the

new law gives China jurisdiction over national security crimes, where lawbreakers can end up getting a lifetime prison sentence. The law also allows China to set up a national security agency in Hong Kong with staffers from mainland China. China security agencies will also be able to operate publicly in the city for the first time, unbound by local laws as they carry out their duties (BBC, 2021).

The EU is of course against this new security law that China has imposed on Hong Kong, as it is a violation of the principles of western democracy and the values of the EU. The EU is concerned that Serbia has not aligned with the EU's stance on the new security law, and this can have several meanings. For one, Serbia in the last couple of years has not itself aligned with traditional democratic values, so a violation against democratic values is not something Serbia should concern itself with. Also, Serbia has by now a close linkage to China based on massive loans and investments made by China, and Serbia cannot partake in sanctions against China when its economy depends on China's economic support. Lastly, China has always supported Serbia's claim on Kosovo and has not recognized Kosovo's independence, so China has created political leverage in terms of Serbia not interfering with the way it conducts its foreign relations. This is also an example of China's effective formation of political linkage to Serbia, and again a cause for concern for the EU who do not have the same level of political linkage as they go against Serbia's wish to obtain its claim on Kosovo. Yet, this quote from the EU report, is not a direct act of securitization, because Serbia's failure to align itself with the EU is not something that can be categorized as a security threat to the EU. However, what we can gain from the quote is proof of Serbia's resistance to the EU, which in itself creates a challenge for the EU to maintain its political linkage to Serbia.

Point 99

“Expresses concern over Serbia's increasing dependence on defence and security equipment and technologies from the People's Republic of China, including a mass surveillance system in Belgrade and mass personal data collection without appropriate safeguards, and the insufficient transparency of the security sector's public procurement practices” (European Parliament, 2021 P.18).

Point 99 refers to Serbia's purchase of hundreds of cameras with facial recognition technology, in the framework of Belgrade's "Safe City" project (Fruscione and Sciorati, 2020). Mass surveillance has not only been a concern for the EU but also internally within Serbian civil society as the initiative for mass surveillance has not previously been publicly discussed and has not been explained to citizens how this system will work and how their privacy will be protected, as video recording in public spaces indeed collects personal data (Fruscione and Sciorati, 2020). Cameras enable continued monitoring of people which potentially could lead to surveillance technology being abused. Moreover, China has supported the Serbian military with drones, missiles, and other military equipment. This is a concern for the EU on multiple levels. Primarily that Serbia is preparing for another armed conflict to regain its former province, Kosovo (Stojanovic, 2019). Moreover, this is also an example of China creating military linkage to Serbia, they are not necessarily entering military cooperation, but through the supply of military equipment, China now has the opportunity to position itself as an important military partner to Serbia.

These acts of framing and securitization by the EU tell us three main things. Firstly, the growing influence of China in Serbia is a cause for concern for the EU on multiple levels, politically, environmentally and the military level. Second thing is that the EU indirectly admits that the Serbia-EU linkage is under massive pressure because of China, because Serbia's unwillingness to align itself with the EU is due to its alignment with China, in other words, Serbia cannot please both sides, so it chooses to gratify China's objectives. The third thing that the securitization acts tell us is that the overall linkage between EU and Serbia is starting to and has declined for a while, and the overall weakening of the EU-Serbia linkage could also be a reason for the EU's declining influence, also a reason for their incapacity to utilize their leverage.

But is the reason for China's success in establishing linkage to Serbia, because they can offer more, or is it just a question about the degree of conditionality?

Different diplomatic efforts in order to enhance linkage

In this section of the analysis, the theory and different concepts within diplomacy will delve into the key aspects of China's and the EU's attempts at further improving their relations to Serbia. The concepts of diplomacy serve as a supporting tool for the theories of Linkage and leverage and securitization since the theories align with the main components of establishing economic and political relations and how these relations become a topic of a security issue if they would be obstructed by a third entity.

Economic diplomacy

In terms of economic diplomacy by the EU and China, both entities come from the position of being the stronger economy and Serbia is the developing country that requires a stable economic relation to them [China and the EU]. This means that there is not a balance of trade in the economic agreements with Serbia, which is why both the EU and China are approaching Serbia out of interest and conditionality.

The EU supports Serbia with funds and the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the EU in 2008, which enables Serbia to export a limited number of products without customs or other fees. As of 2018, the EU countries were the largest trading partners of Serbia with 67% of the country's total foreign trade (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2019), additionally, the EU continues in 2020 to be the most considerable trading partner for Serbia (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2020). Besides being one of Serbia's biggest trade partners, the EU also focuses on capacity building, in regards to the economic support of the EU they make through various funds. These funds are aimed at assisting in the development of the infrastructure, reducing unemployment and other underdeveloped areas within the Serbian economy. This high-level focus on capacity building in Serbia is due to Serbia's status as a candidate country, for Serbia to finally join the EU, it must fulfill the economic criteria among other issues, this is also where the interest of the EU becomes visible. Serbia does not have the resources to reciprocate the level of investment and import the EU does, thus in return the EU expects Serbia to align itself with the policies, standards, and values of the EU, this allows the EU to gain influence over the internal structure and development within Serbia, all in all, the EU offers economic support in return for reforms.

China, on the other hand, approaches the economic relations with Serbia differently, of course, there are multiple aspects of how China practices economic diplomacy that is similar, however, China conducts its economic relations by focusing on alternative areas. Firstly, China's trade with Serbia is not nearly as great as the EU's. China creates its economic linkage primarily through investments in Serbia. For the construction of the Pupin bridge in Belgrade, China invested over 260 million USD (Dimitrijević, 2017) and China has also invested 319 million in the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest railroad (Dimitrijević, 2017), as well as the previously mentioned steel industry in Serbia which is as of 2019 worth more than ten billion USD, China has proved to be a crucial factor for Serbian economic growth (Ozturk, 2019) and there are still more investments from China to come. This is also a reason why Serbia values the economic support of China, even though the EU is the biggest trading partner to Serbia, China still maintains a crucial position within the Serbian economy due to the investments made by China.

As previously mentioned, China's objective when making investments in different ventures in Serbia is not to have any influence nor to interfere with the political structure of Serbia, but rather gain a good relation to Serbia in order for China to further expand its reach to Europe. Through the belt road initiative, it is made clear that the Serbia-China trade relation functions on a false perception of bargaining power, meaning that Serbia is essentially resigning its infrastructure projects to China, in order for China to further develop its belt road initiative. Additionally, China's main interest in Serbia seems to be infrastructure investment and creating a center in the Balkans for Chinese goods, as part of the broader 'One Belt One Road' initiative globally (European parliament, 2017, P. 4).

Furthermore, a factor that creates a disadvantage for Serbia and creates a concern for the EU is, when dealing with an autocracy like China there is no consideration for transparency of how China truly conducts its economic support and investments, according to Chatterjee this creates a disadvantage for Serbia because that the negotiations for economic and trade agreements which are not being conducted with the utmost transparency, can lead to one state taking advantage of the other states weak economic position (Chatterjee, 2020). This perspective of transparency in economic diplomacy also highlights the ambitions of China when looking at the goals of the belt road initiative, yet Serbia at its current state is relishing

in the cooperation with China because China serves as a counterpart to the EU, which allows Serbia to gain leverage to act in the way they currently do.

Public diplomacy

The enlargement process of the EU serves as the EU's main public diplomacy tool. When presenting the values, rules, and norms of the EU, it does not only present laws for Serbia to adhere to, but it also presents an expectation for Serbian prosperity. Meaning that if Serbia adheres to the structure and framework of the EU, it can too at some point experience the prosperity which is existing within the EU. However, as Nye states "if the content of a country's values, policies and norms are not attractive for some reason, the state will be unable to produce soft power" (Nye, 2008, P. 95). Not saying that the assurance of prosperity has declined, but the conditionality of the EU can possibly explain the behavior of Serbia, in terms of less respect of democratic values and their authoritarian tendencies, and why Serbia seeks to further develop its relations with China rather than the EU. Serbia has been undergoing its European integration process for several years and has integrated various reforms with the expectation of becoming an EU-member state, yet there are still some matters where Serbia is not willing to compromise, which results in a stagnation of Serbia's accession process. This sort of one step forward, two-step backward process of Serbia might explain why the prospect for EU membership seem less attractive for Serbia and why increasing the relations to China appears to be a better alternative for Serbia, also because that the ongoing postponing of the date of Serbia's EU-accession, Serbia can now start to question EU's credibility in terms of if the EU, in fact, wishes to allow Serbia into the EU. This is also where the public diplomacy efforts of the EU start to decline, because of the prolonged accession dates and continual demands for new reforms, the EU starts to lose its appeal, and that can also explain the reason why China has started to gain appeal in Serbia.

The decline in appeal for the EU is also a factor for concern for them because if the efforts of the EU is unable to have any effect in Serbia and China is step by step gaining more influence, it leaves Serbia in a position where it does not need to align itself to any reforms or positions of the EU, which is also why we are starting to see examples of the EU securitizing the growing influence of China in Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkans

Weakened or broken linkage between EU and Serbia?

The EU enlargement does not only present a promise for prosperity and an overall increase in the quality of life for Serbia, but it also presents a notion for stability in Europe. By integrating political and economic reforms into Serbia, the EU can gain influence to shape Serbia to become a country that can join the EU and ensure the rest of the EU that the state of Europe has reached stability, and that does not only relate to Serbia but the entire western Balkans. The EU continues to put efforts towards the European integration of the region to gain influence in the region and create stability and democracy in Europe and in a region that is already surrounded by other EU member states, thus the instability in the Balkan region can have a direct negative effect of the neighboring EU-states, which is another motivation for the EU to create stability in the Western Balkans. However, the goal of creating stability and shaping Serbia into a like-minded EU-country has been a significantly difficult task for the EU and since Serbia gained candidate status in 2012, Serbia has opened 18 of the 35 negotiating chapters, or policy areas, but conditionally completed only two within the areas of science and research, education and culture (Barber, 2020). This is not only a visible example of Serbia's inability to effectively complete the chapters of the acquis, but also the lack of effort from Serbia in general.

Furthermore, it has been made clear so far that the way Serbia's government has been developing over the past 5 years shows the opposite of the EU's vision for Serbia. This development of Serbia's internal structure can be described as a visible rejection of the EU values, as mentioned the rule of law and the independence of the media and the implementation of free and fair elections and the overall protection of civil freedom are all aspects of the EU values which are under serious political pressure. Thus Serbia's internal development is not compatible with the EU criteria and there are not any significant signs of Serbia changing direction in terms of steering towards more like-minded principles of the EU.

The role of China in the weakened linkage between the EU and Serbia is not essentially the intention of China, or there is no indication of it nonetheless. What Serbia has done with China, and also Russia, is to position itself as a buffer between the East and the West and attempt at balancing the eastern and western linkages, and at the same time keeping its close ties to Russia and China as counterparts to the EU.

Increasing assistance and political backing from China (and from Russia as well) that will not demand domestic compliance with human rights standards in return for support, contribute to Serbia's capacity to choose whether or not it wishes to align itself with the reforms of the EU. However, as previously established, the EU is still the biggest provider of funds and trade to Serbia, which remains as an opportunity for the EU to amplify its political leverage, despite Serbia's reluctance (Barber, 2020).

A crucial factor for the recently weakened Serbia-EU linkage and the enhanced China-Serbia linkage is the covid-19 pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic has put the relationship between Serbia and the EU to the test. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić caused a massive surprise when he in March 2020 at a press conference condemned the EU for not sufficiently supporting Serbia with medical supplies, and other necessities for combatting the virus. The president was far from diplomatic in his choice of words which was "European solidarity does not exist, it was only a fairytale on paper" (Vučić in Hopkins, 2020) these words can mean multiple things, one is that the choice of words are a statement of Serbia officially breaking their overall linkage to the EU, but based on the previous discoveries in terms of Serbia's resistance of complying with EU reforms this problematic statement from the Serbian president was maybe something that was building over time and when looking back is something that might be expected from Vučić. In other words, it could be possible that the covid-19 crisis did not create Serbia's stance towards the EU, but it simply uncovered the genuine stance. Moreover, concerning the EU at its incapacity to assist Serbia in the Covid-19 crisis, the Serbian president also manages to mention China and Xi Jinping and how China is the only hope for Serbia saying -

"I believe in my friend and my brother, Xi Jinping, and I believe in Chinese help. The only country that can help us is China" (Vučić in Vuksanovic, 2020). The harsh rhetoric against EU and the positive words for Xi Jinping and China can arguably be presented as a statement by

Serbia and Aleksandar Vučić which solidifies the future path of Serbia, in terms of breaking their linkages to the EU and fully focusing on enhancing them with China (Vuksanović, 2020). However, that was not the case, even though this form of un-diplomatic and politically incorrect rhetoric could have made that outcome take shape, a month after the controversial statement of the Serbian president, a meeting between him and the European delegation of Serbia took place in Belgrade. He then almost took back his previous statement and instead expressed that “Serbia is extremely grateful to the European Union for the financial assistance and every other type of support and solidarity that the European Union has shown towards our country in the previous period” (Vučić in Tatalović, 2020). The two quotes from the Serbian president have multiple meanings. For one, it is clear that Vučić realizes how significant the financial support of the EU truly is, secondly the change of heart could also mean that Serbia realizes how risky it is for them to formally choose a side, and chooses to maintain their position as being a country that juggles their relations with the west and the East.

The recent developments in the China-Serbia relations prove to be a steadily growing partnership, based on Serbia’s appreciation for the help they have received throughout the covid-19 pandemic. China has helped Serbia by providing all necessary tools to combat the coronavirus and has also supplied Serbia with vaccines, which is seen as another way for China to uphold and strengthen their linkages to Serbia, and this time it is done through the newly developed term “Vaccine-diplomacy”. Moreover, with new promises being made by the Serbian presidents, it is safe to expect that the Serbia-China linkage will be intensified in the near future. However, Serbia recognizes the benefit of being a candidate country to the EU and even with the harmful rhetoric made by Vučić, the Serbia-EU linkage continues to be a reality. Even though the Serbia-EU partnership continues, there remains a lot of uncertainty around the intentions and objectives of Serbia, and this raises the question if the linkage between Serbia and the EU is permanently weakened or is it possible to strengthen the relationship between the two?

Conclusion

The EU has shown that it has a key interest in more effectively pursuing the enlargement process of Serbia, the Western Balkans as well and neighborhood policies in general. That is strictly to strengthen the resilience of the candidate and potential candidate countries and to secure their full adherence to EU values, norms, and standards, and these standards are within key areas such as rule of law, public procurement, environment, energy, infrastructure and competition (European Commission, 2019). For the EU to secure Serbia's full adherence to the EU standards and values, Serbia must fully implement legally binding international agreements and prioritize the relevant negotiation chapters of the enlargement process, and the EU must guide the reforms more forcefully (European Commission, 2020). However, so far we have seen that Serbia is not ready to adhere to the standards of the EU, by looking at Serbia's behavior over the past 5 years, we have seen a country that is going the opposite direction of democratization, and its internal structure is slowly but surely moving towards becoming an autocracy instead of a well-functioning democracy.

In terms of Serbia's recent developments and behavior, it is hard to ignore the role of China within this whole process. China is not directly encouraging Serbia to form its governance to look like theirs, however, it is forming Serbia's behavior indirectly. China does not need to align itself with the EU in any way when it comes to countries within Europe it wants to cooperate with and countries it wants to invest in. Serbia, given the position they are in, can not afford to decline investment offers and especially not when it can potentially reconstruct a big part of their infrastructure, and revitalize big parts of their various enterprises. The large-scale investments made by China have shown Serbia that it can rely on a different partner to move towards something that looks like economic prosperity and another thing that has been a key factor of China's attractiveness is its minimal conditionality. Unlike the EU, China does not want to interfere in the internal structure of Serbia, nor does China attempt to integrate "Chinese values" into Serbia, which is a factor that makes China an appealing partner to Serbia. However, with the now-famous quote about European solidarity being a fairytale from the Serbian president and the lack of

respect for European values and norms, how come the EU-Serbia linkage is not formally broken.

The reason for that is Serbia still recognizes the significance of the benefits of being an EU-candidate country. Being a candidate country means that Serbia has the opportunity to trade with the EU-countries which is a great economic advantage to Serbia, also as we previously have established, the EU is the number one trade partner to Serbia, thus not only is it an economic benefit, but an economic dependence Serbia has to the EU.

By looking at the reaction of the EU through various reports stating concerns and possibilities of security threats based on Serbia's behavior in terms of its lack of democratic governance, lack of consideration for environmental issues, and an overall inability to align itself with the EU on key values, such as human rights and policy reforms. It reveals that the political linkage which has been a developing and ongoing process between the EU and Serbia is in a vulnerable state. Throughout the European integration efforts made by the EU, there have been signs of Serbia heading in the right direction on various fronts, in terms of implementing reforms, officially becoming a candidate country, and also working towards opening and closing the working chapters of the *acquis*. However, Serbia has with its recent developments proven that its European integration and bid for becoming an EU-member state is not an easy task, a lot of implications throughout the process have influenced the enlargement process of Serbia. Most notably the question about Kosovo, and Serbia's recognition of it. Moreover, it is arguable that Serbia amid this long ongoing process of European integration has reached a point of fatigue. By reaching a point of fatigue, it is meant that Serbia has been on its path towards becoming an EU-country for so long, and with the accession date which keeps getting pushed back, Serbia has started to question whether or not this goal of becoming a part of the EU, will ever come to fruition.

That is also why China's influence can be linked to Serbia's shift in the way they conduct themselves with the EU. With large scale investments in Serbia's infrastructure and political backing on Serbia's claim to Kosovo, China emerges as a powerful counterpart to the EU, which also can explain Serbia's behavior in terms of not showing consideration for the EU's key values, but also when we look at the Serbian president's bold statements towards the EU.

All things considered, the overall, but most importantly the political linkage between Serbia and the EU is in a fragile state, but not to the point where the EU or Serbia has given up on Serbia's EU-accession goal. Serbia has stated that even with its enhanced cooperation with China, it still looks towards the EU as the most logical future, however, with the continuing behavior of Serbia and the developments within its internal structure, it is unsure whether Serbia's future in the EU is secured, or if the general opinion on Serbia's EU accession will change shortly. The EU still looks towards gaining influence in Serbia as the most assured way of creating and maintaining stability in the Western Balkans, thus maintaining stability in Europe. When looking at the multiple challenges presented to the EU in terms of maintaining a political linkage to Serbia, it is visible that Serbia has the opportunity to completely disregard its relations to the EU, however, the EU has been a part of Serbia's foreign policy agenda for so long and has become an integrated part of the Serbian economy, that the cost of breaking the political linkage is too high.

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