

Goals and objectives of CCP malign influence

The rise of Chinese influence in Serbia **began in 2009**, when the two countries agreed to cooperate on economic matters and technological and infrastructure development. A subsequent formal **“partnership”** was declared in 2016. **China** is also a strong presence in Serbian politics, as well as digitalization and security. But the environmental impact of its high-profile projects has begun to make it the target of protests, locally and nationally. **Serbia** has become a **“poster child”** for Chinese influence. Belgrade and Beijing present cooperation as beneficial and friendly, and political leaders talk of “brotherhood” and a “steel friendship,” an allusion to China’s 2016 purchase of a Serbian steel mill. The ruling political majority’s championing of China has gotten results: Polls show that 83% of Serbian citizens see China as a friendly country and 77% view its impact on Serbia as positive.

CCP’s methods, tools, and tactics for advancing malign influence

Chinese influence in Serbia is spread through various means, directly through the activities of the Chinese government, or more visibly in tandem with domestic politicians. While it is not simple to categorize a wide set of tools, the most conspicuous and successful have been economic cooperation between Serbia and China, activities of the Chinese Embassy, bilateral visits, “mask and vaccine diplomacy,” and cooperation with Serbian media. Other, less prominent, arenas of influence are culture, sports, and technology.

The main avenue of Chinese influence in Serbia is preferential loans by Chinese banks to fund infrastructure projects, for which Serbian politicians portray China as a white knight. These deals are often opaque, with no public explanation of how or why **Chinese companies** are chosen to work on them. Since 2009, Serbia and China have agreed on infrastructure projects worth more than \$7.5 bn, financially tying Serbia to China for more than a decade. The total amount of the loan agreements and certain aspects of the contracts raise the specter of corruption, especially because the average costs of the projects are higher than in similar cases elsewhere in Europe. In addition to the infrastructure loans, China has significantly upped its investment in Serbia over the past decade, topping \$2.2 bn since 2009. ⁸ While that is a fraction of the 17 bn-plus euros that EU countries have poured into Serbia in the same period, making the bloc the largest investor, China became Serbia’s largest single country investor in 2021, putting in more than **700 million euros**.

The short-term economic benefits of the Chinese capital influx are indisputable, but the potential long-term consequences are questionable. Chinese investments have been mostly in export-oriented industries, meaning that most of the profits will go to Chinese companies and that Serbia’s take will be limited. There are also serious concerns about labor practices

and the environmental impacts of these projects.

The Chinese Embassy plays a significant role in promoting Chinese influence in Serbia. Ambassador Chen Bo meets regularly with top Serbian officials, including President Aleksandar Vučić. Her statements emphasize the role of China and Chinese companies in Serbia's economic development, echoing a narrative pushed by domestic officials. She is also on hand at construction sites when Chinese projects are presented as a boon to Serbian infrastructure and regularly attends press conferences when Chinese projects are announced or promoted. In addition to the work of the Chinese Embassy, officials from Beijing regularly visit Belgrade.

Efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic further cemented China's influence. As it did elsewhere, Beijing reached out to politicians, who in Serbia were much more receptive than their counterparts in some other countries. Chinese-Serbian amity reached new highs during the pandemic, including among the general public, in turn opening up new possibilities for the spread of Chinese influence.

While Chinese influence in Serbian media is hard to identify, there are key examples of Chinese interference. China Radio International has its own Serbian outlet as well as Serbian radio stations that broadcast content from CRI. But the second, more important feature, is the promotion of the pro-CCP media in Serbia. Chinese funding of media in Serbia is not as visible as its content's reach, direct influence comes from promotional op-eds and articles that appear in some mainstream outlets. It is fair to say that the media play a significant role in creating a nation of "**China lovers**," but the reasoning is twofold: direct Chinese media interference and close political relations with the ruling majority in Serbia.

Reach of influence measures

Infrastructure projects by Chinese companies, backed by loans from Chinese banks, are the foundation of China's popularity. Serbian politicians hail them as crucial to the country's infrastructure and economic development, saving jobs in factories and companies that were failing before being purchased by Chinese companies. The hype escalated during the COVID-19 crisis, when **Vučić said China was the only country that could help Serbia in the fight against the pandemic**, initially dismissing the very notion of European solidarity. With ceremonial receptions organized for the arrival of medical aid from China, Chinese "mask diplomacy" gained a lot of traction in Serbia.

While the assistance was initially presented as a donation, Serbian politicians later admitted that Serbia had also purchased medical equipment from China. Exactly how much equipment, and at what cost, has been designated a state secret. Nor has the government disclosed the details of its acquisition of several million vaccines from Pfizer/BioNtech,

AstraZeneca, Sputnik V, and Sinopharm, except to say that Sinopharm was the largest provider. This opacity has received no pushback from the opposition or the international community. While the exact funding has not been disclosed, Beijing has been portrayed as the most ardent supporter of Serbia and its citizens in the immunization process, in a win for its “vaccine diplomacy” in the Western Balkans’s largest country.

Target audiences and populations

China’s influence has risen across Serbian society. Polls show all age groups, urban and rural and regardless of gender, hold a positive view of the country. That is largely thanks to the political relationship between China and Serbia, which has helped make **China Serbia’s largest trading partner**; the breadth of relations between China and Serbia, in health, economic development, media, culture, and elsewhere; and the power that the dominant Serbian Progressive Party holds in the political system.

Until recently, China has not been a target for political parties outside the ruling majority, mainly because the leaders of the opposition were in power when the initial China-Serbia agreements were signed. Still, some in the opposition have begun to call out the environmental toll on areas where Chinese companies operate, and local activists have begun to confront China over its labor and environmental practices. Chinese influence in Serbia is hard to counteract, given its backing by the Serbian government, but local activists, nongovernmental organizations, and now some parts of the opposition are trying.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Serbia has become a hub of Chinese influence in the [Western Balkans](#), eager for economic cooperation via credit agreements for infrastructure projects and foreign direct investment. All the while, Serbia’s political elite, led by Vučić, have been cheerleaders for these deals. The Chinese have also used the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their interests in [Serbia](#) by distributing medical assistance and vaccines. While the rise of Chinese influence remains unchallenged by domestic political actors, it has faced resistance from some in the political opposition, as well as the environmental groups due to Chinese companies’ harmful practices in Serbia. Still, **China** remains one of the most popular partners for the Serbian government as well as a key partner for Serbian **economic development**.

Source: [Cepa](#)