

Known as the “Tear of Europe”, Montenegrin Tara River’s riverbanks have been transformed into dumping sites for excavated material such as gravel and sand, while the river’s course has been affected by the construction of bridges along the highway. These findings are a result of the work of MANS, a Podgorica-based watchdog, that has monitored the construction and urged the government to act through the years. MANS and other watchdog organizations across the Western Balkans have been filling the gaps left by government and media alike, informing citizens and protecting their rights. Indeed, the unfortunate marriage of authoritarian China and the efforts of local strongmen to obscure the details behind deals makes honest actors on the ground evermore crucial. Despite little cooperation from governments, and outright confrontation at times, NGOs in the region have managed to cast a light on the gross mishandlings of Chinese projects and the consequences local citizens must live with.

Keeping a Watchful Eye

The Montenegrin government signed the construction contract for the Bar – Boljare highway with China Road and Bridge Corporation CRBC, followed by a loan agreement with China’s Eximbank back in 2014. For at least three years following the deal between Podgorica and Beijing, very little was known about the project. The Ministry of Transport decided in favour of classifying most of the information concerning the highway including finances, control of the implementation of works, dispute settlement mechanisms and other fundamental aspects.

MANS has become notorious for challenging the government’s closed doors approach by sending thousands of information requests to institutions. Despite numerous public appeals, the Montenegrin government has not released significant information so most of what is known about the project is a result of MANS’ investigative work. After gaining evidence of the environmental degradation in the Tara river, MANS filed criminal charges against the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Sustainable Development, the Directorate for Inspection Affairs (part of the Ministry of Ecology), and CRBC. After four years, in April 2020, the State Prosecutor’s Office rejected the criminal charges without any explanation. In a surprising turn of events, Montenegro launched a state investigation into the damage done in March 2021, after having ignored environmental warnings for years.

Aside from restricting information, another significant roadblock is governments’ refusal to engage in dialogue as seen in the experience of Ekotim, a Bosnian environmental organization that monitors the construction of block seven unit of the Tuzla coal plant. The president of the Sarajevo-based NGO, Rijad Tikvesa, notes that his impression after going

through the technical details such as pollution standards and planned ash landfill sites was that “the experts which worked on the environmental impact assessment study did not expect that anyone will really read the materials. We have sent more than 200 comments and around 100 pages of explanation on the miscalculations that were in the original permit. Instead of a better environmental assessment study, we received threats”, says Tikvesa. The Bosnian government entered a loan agreement with China’s Eximbank and the construction company China Gezhouba Group back in 2014. Ekotim has filed a court case challenging the permit in Sarajevo Cantonal Court and a complaint due to the lax pollution standards to the Energy Community. While the NGO’s actions have brought awareness to the outright incompetency involved in drafting the documents, authorities have managed to block their legal efforts. The Sarajevo Court dismissed the case on the grounds that an organization based in Sarajevo cannot challenge an environmental permit issued for a project in Tuzla. Moreover the Minister of Foreign Trade has said that regardless of the Energy Community ruling, the unit will be built. Despite the numerous trials and strong community resistance, preparatory works for the construction of the unit have been completed in March 2021 and construction is expected to start this year.

Citizens Strike Back

Chinese activities are problematic not solely from an environmental point of view, but also from a human rights perspective. In 2019, the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that it will cooperate with Huawei on installing surveillance equipment throughout Belgrade. The leading Serbian digital rights group, SHARE Foundation requested further details from the government following the announcement, but the Ministry of Interior denied access to information due to documents being classified. While GDPR is not applicable in Serbia per se, Belgrade enacted laws based on the EU’s regulation that would pertain to the surveillance rollout. The law sets out that authorities must carry out an assessment study and share the results for review with the national data protection institution before deploying any surveillance tools. After increased scrutiny, the Ministry of Interior delivered an assessment to the national data protection body which was ultimately found not to meet the sufficient legal requirements laid out in the law. And yet – the cameras were nonetheless installed.

Their everyday use has far reaching consequences for the fundamental rights and privacy of citizens. The simplest questions like where the cameras are located, how data will be processed and protected, and what the cost of the project is remain unanswered. In

response, SHARE Foundation is leading a civic initiative, Hiljade Kamera (A Thousand Cameras) that employs crowd-mapping in order to push for information disclosure. As of March 2021, volunteers behind the initiative have managed to map and categorize over 470 cameras across Belgrade and provide more tangible information than the government institutions have published.

Chicken or the Egg?

The common denominator for projects with Chinese involvement in the Balkans is lack of publicly available information. China's push for international projects for its companies is not rooted in the explicit aim of exporting ideology, and yet, through the way deals are concluded its domestic model of business relations and corporate culture of secrecy is inevitably transposed.

Unfortunately, molding the information space is not a purely Chinese import. Significant part of the media authorities in the region are politically captured and instrumental to the ruling governments' agenda. Countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia are reported to have a serious issue with press freedom in particular in particular with regard to threats, pressure, and violence towards journalists which scrutinize the activities of public authorities.

All things considered, the symbiosis between local strongmen and Chinese corporate culture has created a chicken and egg situation where it is unclear which side reinforced the need for secrecy first. For the local politicians, there is a strong incentive to chip away transparency laws in order to promote themselves domestically. "To the public, everything is presented as a great thing, representatives from the government and the public utility never mention that they are taking loans and that we will have to pay them back. But they say it is the biggest investment in the last 25 years", adds Tikvesa regarding the coal plant in Tuzla.

As for the benefits for Beijing, controlling the information space and making sure that China's story is told well is critical to protect its investments and image abroad. Efforts aimed at censoring criticism of Chinese-backed projects in other countries' domestic debates have long been part of Chinese embassies and companies' public diplomacy. Despite misinformation efforts, the local population is aware of the issues that come with doing business with China.

"We understand the negative aspects of Huawei and all the issues they have, especially in China - how this technology is used and misused. But our main concern is that this technology will be misused by our government," Danilo Krivokapić, director of the Belgrade

based SHARE Foundation, said of the surveillance cameras in Belgrade. “We would be equally concerned if this was a deal made with an American company or company from Europe or even if it was Serbian technology.”

Winds of Change?

The lack of support from society in those three instances presents an important lesson for Chinese overseas endeavors. China’s deal-making in the Western Balkans so far has occurred exclusively through government to government and business to government agreements. As civil society is not included in the initial discussions of projects like the Safe City or the Bar – Boljare highway, it is no surprise that such projects are met with scrutiny, resistance, and legal action

Chinese companies are paying close attention to local concerns without a doubt, but they are choosing to actively withhold information and obstruct discussion. When faced with a lack of information on the project from the Serbian government side, SHARE Foundation resorted to translating and publishing descriptions of the surveillance project sourced from Huawei’s official website. After publishing the information in Serbian, “It took [Huawei] less than 10 hours to remove the original publication,” says Krivokapić.

Yet, there is an opportunity to be seized by Chinese international companies as major destinations for Chinese dirty energy financing are starting to reconsider the trajectory they are taking. Bangladesh, for example, has decided to axe two coal projects with Chinese involvement and plans to reassess the role of coal in its energy mix following significant public opposition. After Dhaka’s announcement the Chinese embassy in the country declared that China will no longer consider funding new coal projects in the South East Asian country.

While a complete exit from coal-powered projects remains a largely European phenomenon, it is a matter of time before the practice spreads to key destinations for Chinese financing. If Western countries manage to match their rhetoric on sustainable development with funding for developing countries, Chinese projects may lose a significant part of their appeal. The same cannot be said for projects with a fundamental rights angle such as export of surveillance technology. China’s track record on surveillance and suppression of human rights is set to only worsen as international pressure mounts on issues like Xinjiang and Huawei. The use of technology both at home and abroad is not set for a major restructure as there is no business case similar to the one of meeting climate targets.

This enshrines an ever more growing importance in local watchdogs. Resources to bolster NGO’s capacities and echo their findings are critical to their ability to monitor and evaluate

Chinese projects and tell China's story right. As of now, the situation remains grim – due to the lack of political will of the countries' elites, civil society's efforts remain constrained in actually overturning problematic and unlawful projects.

Source: chinaobservers.eu