

China in Europe Research Network (CHERN) - CA 18215

China's Pandemic-Time Public Diplomacy in the Balkans

Basics

Host Organization: International Balkan University (North Macedonia)

Host Organizations's representative: Asst. Prof. Dr. Mare Ushkovska

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Representative's homepage: <https://www.ibu.edu.mk/>

The tentative length of the STSM: 2-4 weeks

Call's description and objectives

China's prompt assistance to countries in the Western Balkans in the first year of the Covid-19 crisis boosted their leadership image in the region to the detriment of the EU. The Balkans, placed at the crossroads of geopolitical interests of several global powers, have been experiencing a rise in commercial, educational, and diplomatic involvement by China in recent years.ⁱ An enclave of the European Union, the Western Balkans are traditionally considered part of the EU's sphere of influence, with all countries of the region aiming toward future EU membership. However the Covid-19 crisis has not only put to the test the EU's reputation of solidarity and partnership to the Western Balkans. The perceived neglect of the Western Balkans by the EU, during the initial vaccine distribution in early 2021, has impacted the EU's public diplomacy goals in the region, with political leaders in several Balkan countries accusing the block of selfishness.

At the same time, China emerged as the unlikely saviour of affected countries in the Balkans, with both a powerful public diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy offensive. Chinese shipments of planes containing tonnes of medical supplies, respirators, medical personnel, and later Sinopharm vaccines to the Western Balkans would be received with great pomp and live media coverage. This helped greatly improve public opinion on China in the Western Balkans, to the detriment of the EU,ⁱⁱ bolstering China's public diplomacy aims of reshaping the global narrative surrounding the pandemic and establishing itself as a dependable and benevolent global power.

Objectives:

- Conduct a literature review to detect the relevant gaps in knowledge;

- Developing an idea for a paper based on the identified gaps, that tackles China's public diplomacy activities in three/four Western Balkans states during the pandemic and the impact of those activities on public opinion of China in the Western Balkans;
- Developing a methodological framework for the paper;
- Identifying possible data sources;
- Identifying funding source.

Call's specific requirements

In addition to COST requirements (see **Practical details** below), the applicant should meet the following criteria:

- Familiarity with Western Balkans – EU relations and Western Balkans – China relations;
- Knowledge of China's investments and diplomacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina and/or Montenegro.

Results

In addition to COST requirements (scientific report) the STSM will results in:

- Draft proposal for a joint research project;
- A blog post published on the CHERN website;
- Report of the activities for CHERN.

Practical details

All applicants must carefully read the [STSM basic facts](#) on CHERN's website before applying.

Deadlines

Deadline for applications to be submitted: **May 8th 2023**

Notification of application outcome: **May 20th 2023**

Period of STSM: Exact dates to be determined together with the host

Submitting the reports: **30 days** after completing the STSM (and no later than October 15th)

Accepting/ rejecting the reports: **within 2 weeks** after submission of the report

Execution of the payment of the grant: **within 4 weeks** after submission of the report

More information

For more information please contact:

STSM Coordinator Martina Bofulin (martina.bofulin@zrc-sazu.si)

ⁱ Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, "China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans", European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022; Vladimir Shopov, "Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans", European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2021.

ⁱⁱ Jelena Gledić, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská, and Renáta Sedláková, "Serbian public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: An unyielding alliance?", Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020; Srdjan Hercigonja, "Serbia in the jaws of the covid-19 pandemic", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, December 2020; Wouter Zweers, Vladimir Shopov, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Mirela Petkova, Maarten Lemstra, "China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?", Clingendael Institute, August 2020.