

China's Geopolitical and Economical Interest in Western Balkans Countries

Научный руководитель – Mucalica Sergej -

Radonjić Nikolina

Student (specialist)

Крагуевацкий университет, Крагуевац, Сербия

E-mail: nradonjic96@gmail.com

In September 2013, at Nazarbayev University in capital of Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping announced the beginning of a project that would mark the foreign policy of China in the following period. Xi Jinping announced a start of Economic Belt along the route of the ancient Silk Road. Later in October, during the speech in the Indonesian parliament, Xi Jinping announced the idea of the Maritime Silk Road. Both projects became integrated into one great concept “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI).

In the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China launched the '16 +1' project for Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC), which was transformed into '17 +1' in 2019, when Greece joined. The '17 +1' collaboration format presents one of the BRI mechanism. In this mechanism, China negotiates bilateral agreements with each country individually. Until present, Western Balkans countries have signed agreements with China and started projects.

The BRI, and thus the '17 +1' mechanism, has been marked as Chinese' Marshall plan 'that actually intends to divide and rule Europe. Despite the Chinese government skillfully defends that the Initiative's goal is the mutual benefit, the world has been in a geopolitical momentum for the past few years, which is marked by a rise of one global power and a decline of another.

Concerning Western Balkans countries, four countries are candidates for EU membership (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina which is a potential candidate. According to a political analyst Sali, including the Copenhagen criteria which they must meet in order to start and progress in the accession process, the above mentioned countries also need investment and infrastructure. Brussels believes that China's increased presence and influence will eventually lead to the issue of loyalty [2, 32].

Relations between Albania and China date back to the period of the PRC establishment. Although there was turbulence during the sixty-year relationship, but it eventually culminated in Albania joining the '17 +1' mechanism. Chinese state owned companies have been concluding contract in the domain of Albanian oil fields, construction of Arber highway, giving concession on the international airport in Tirana (this leads to the point that China has a role in modeling Albanian air traffic).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is not on a priority transport corridor of special interest to China, so it cannot automatically expect significant proposals for infrastructure projects from China [1, 19].

In North Macedonia, China is building two highways (Skopje - Stip; Kicevo - Ohrid). North Macedonia is important in the context of the BRI, as a closed state it is on a promising route that connects the port of Piraeus (which is owned by Chinese company) in Greece and Budapest in Hungary.

China credited Montenegro for the construction of the highway. Previously Montenegro was rejected by Western European investors as they did not see their prospects of economic gains

in the Montenegro's construction project (as the terrain of construction is very complex with a low probability of profitability as the traffic rate is not at an enviable level).

Serbia is a key partner for China in the region. The largest projects are Zijin Mining with the mining and Smelting Basin in Bor, Shandong Linlong, a tire factory in Zrenjanin, ironworks in Smederevo. If Serbian administration continues this direction, there is a great threat of Serbia to become a work force of Europe.

The main peculiarity of cooperation between China and Western Balkan countries is that it is based on the loans but not direct investments. Agreements concluded by the PRC and state-owned companies with countries are characterized by a lack of transparency, suspicion of numerous corrupt practices and unequal tenders for projects. China itself does not provide data on its placements abroad, nor do international institutions record them, so the definite placements of Chinese money abroad are not known. Besides, the Chinese government does not give money directly to borrowing countries, but it does so through state-owned companies and banks (by having state-owned banks finance Chinese state-owned companies abroad and the borrowing country repaying loans to Chinese banks or granting concessions) [3].

Actually, the Western Balkans countries represent the door for China to penetrate to the European Union as its members willing to join the BRI. It is not excluded, taking into account that all the countries of that region aspire to join it. The Western Balkans countries are trying to use the momentum in order to facilitate its own infrastructure, get financial support from Beijing and let China to provide the BRI path through their territories.

In the coming years China's geopolitical and economic interests will crystallize even more, which are now reflected in creating a passage, continuing the route to Western Europe and then the Atlantic, and thus the US. However, from a rational perspective China will have to use more political leverages to let its Initiative succeed. It is questionable whether the Chinese side can achieve this without interfering in influencing political processes. How the Western side will respond to this, as well as the extent to which the Western Balkan states will be able to resist the upcoming pressures, remains to be seen in the following years.

References

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