

# The Impact of “China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation” and “Belt and Road Initiative” on Sino-Albanian Relations

## “Çin-Orta ve Doğu Avrupa İşbirliği” ve “Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi”nin Çin-Arnavutluk İlişkilerine Etkisi

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### Abstract

*The end of WW II in 1945 did not usher in a new era of lasting peaceful environment but brought in confrontations between two opposite camps based on two different ideologies and value systems: One was US-led Western industrialized countries in favor of democratic systems; another was Soviet Union dominated Eastern Bloc countries upholding socialism. China and Albania belong to the latter camp, but split with the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin due to Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization stance. Subsequently, China and Albania forged an alliance against Soviet Union in 1950s until Albania fell out with China in 1978. Sino-Albanian Rapprochement was achieved in 1980s after the death of Enver Hoxha. Bilateral relations remained stable since and entered into a new phase symbolized by Chinese business engagement with the launch of China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation (China-CEEC) and “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of the Chinese new initiative on Sino-Albanian relations.*

**Key Words:** China, Albania, the BRI, Enver Hoxha

### Öz

*İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın 1945'te sona ermesi, kalıcı barış ortamının sağlanacağı yeni bir çağın başlangıcı olmadı, ancak iki farklı ideoloji ve değer sistemine dayanan iki karşıt kamp arasında çatışmalara yol açtı: Bunlardan biri, demokratik sistemlerden yana ABD liderliğindeki Batılı sanayileşmiş ülkelerdi; bir diğeri ise sosyalizmi savunan Sovyetler Birliği hakimiyetindeki Doğu Bloku ülkeleriydi. Çin ve Arnavutluk ikinci kampa ait, ancak Joseph Stalin'in ölümünden sonra Nikita Kruşçev'in Stalinizasyondan arındırma tutumu nedeniyle Sovyetler Birliği ile ayrıldılar. Daha sonra Çin ve Arnavutluk, 1950'lerde Sovyetler Birliği'ne karşı ittifak kurdular ve 1978'de Arnavutluk Çin'le arası bozuldu. 1980'lerde Enver Hoca'nın ölümünden sonra Çin-Arnavutluk yakınlaşması sağlandı. İkili ilişkiler o zamandan bu yana istikrarlı kaldı ve Çin-Orta ve Doğu Avrupa İşbirliği (Çin-CEEC) ve “Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi”nin (BRI) başlatılmasıyla Çin'in ticari ilişkilerinin simgelediği yeni bir aşamaya girdi. Bu çalışmanın amacı Çin'in yeni girişiminin Çin-Arnavutluk ilişkilerine etkisini değerlendirmektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Arnavutluk, Kuşak-Yol Girişimi, Enver Hoca

### Introduction

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949 caught the attention of Albanian leader Enver Hoxha who immediately realized that

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PRC's political system based on communist ideology was shared by Albania. Tirana wasted no time to establish diplomatic relations with China on November 23, 1949 and became one of the first countries that recognized China.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning, bilateral relations was limited to Chinese Ambassador to Budapest or Bucharest's joining Albanian festivals or memorial activities. However, the convergence of national interests gradually helped two countries move closer and closer and resulted in opening embassies in each other's capitals in 1954.<sup>2</sup> This was a major development for Sino-Albanian relations that was non-existent before 1949 due to long distance and lack of intention of establishing close friendship ties from both sides.<sup>3</sup> After the estrangement of both China and Albania from Moscow in 1961, Sino-Albanian relations culminated in Albania receiving substantial aid until 1969, and deteriorated from 1971 onwards until the eventual split from each other in 1978. Therefore, before evaluating the impact of China's return to Albania through the BRI, it is worthwhile to tap into the Sino-Albanian political and economic relations during the Cold War, which may provide some insights on how Albania and China join hands once again within the context of China-CEEC and the BRI.

This article first begins with a brief overview on the background of Sino-Albanian Alliance; then provides in-depth information to shed light on the evolution of China's aid to Albania from 1956 until 1978. By exploring strategic concerns of both countries, this study aims to assess what impact China-CEEC and the BRI may have brought on Sino-Albanian Relations.

### **A Brief Historical Background of Sino-Albanian Alliance (1956-1978)**

After the death of Stalin, the new leader of Moscow Khrushchev openly denounced polices of Stalin era, and called for the revision of the previous stance based on ideology. His policy also reflected his intention of advocating peaceful coexistence with the US-led Western Bloc by constructing a bipolar world to be ruled by the United States of America and the Soviet Union on agreed terms. This change of policy of de-Stalinization was met with fierce objection from the Chinese Communist Party in 1957 during the meeting of the Communist and Workers' Parties held in Bucharest. Albania, overriding all objections, opted to side with China to rise up against the de-Stalinization line of Khrushchev.<sup>4</sup> It is believed that there were some other reasons

1 叶皓(YE Hao), “中国与阿尔巴尼亚关系发展历程及其经验教训”(The Historical Development of Sino-Albanian Relations and Lessons Learned), *国际问题研究* 2014年第6期 (International Studies, No. 6, 2014) retrieved May 29, 2023 from <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/39252442>

2 Ibid.

3 Enver Bytyçi, *In the Shadows of Albania-China Relations (1960-1978)*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. Retrieved June 2, 2023 from <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/resources/pdfs/978-1-5275-7768-8-sample.pdf>

4 周帅(ZHOU Shuai), “一带一路”投资政治风险研究之阿尔巴尼亚(One Belt and One Road Investment Risk Analysis Regarding Albania), retrieved May 29, 2023 from <http://>

for Albania to fall out with the Soviet Union. One of the major reasons was related to the new policy introduced by Khrushchev and it was thought to endanger Albanian leader’s power base, therefore, maintaining power at all costs and by any means became the best option for Enver Hoxha. Another reason was that Albania had already been unhappy with Soviet -Yugoslavian rapprochement, which was a sign of betrayal by Khrushchev.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it was in Enver Hoxha’s interest to split with Moscow and forge a new alliance with the People’s Republic of China, who did not pose any threat to Albanian territorial integrity and independence.

Severing ties with Moscow had been a huge challenge for Albania, given its small territory and population as well as weak economy. On the other hand, Albanian membership in the Warsaw Pact was another point of concern for Albanian leaders who were worried about possible Soviet military intervention. Albania’s continued defiance to de-Stalinization line further enraged Khrushchev, and eventually Moscow unilaterally cancelled its economic and military aid to Albania, withdrew all experts as well as its naval fleet from Albanian ports, and cut diplomatic ties with Albania in December 1961. Subsequently, China became Albania’s new strategic ally and replaced Soviet Union as aid provider.<sup>6</sup> A declassified US document claimed that China seized the opportunity to win over Albania, thus acquiring a former Soviet ally in a region where Moscow considered as its backyard, meanwhile, China was fully aware of the economic burden this alliance might bring, but believed that the price was well worth the cost.<sup>7</sup>

From a geostrategic point of view, it is worth mentioning the international situation faced by China in early 1960s. On the one hand, China desperately needed to make friends with developing countries in order to break embargos imposed by the US-led Western Bloc, and on the other hand, China had entered into an ideological rivalry with Moscow<sup>8</sup>, therefore, a new ally was always welcome to further China’s interests in international arena. Albania was well suited for Chinese leadership to showcase Chinese socialism in European countries. Meanwhile, by siding with China, Albanian leadership

views.ce.cn/view/ent/201509/17/t20150917\_6506387.shtml

5 叶皓(YE Hao),op.cit.

6 谿旭彬(SHEN Xubin), 最堵心的外交-中国援助阿尔巴尼亚(Most Annoying Diplomacy-China’s Aid to Albania) 华夏文摘(China News Digest) 2012年9月6日 (September 6, 2012), retrieved Jun 3, 2023 from <http://hx.cnd.org/2012/09/06/%E8%B0%8C%E6%97%AD%E5%BD%AC%EF%BC%9A%E6%9C%80%E5%A0%B5%E5%BF%83%E5%A4%96%E4%BA%A4%E2%80%95%E2%80%95%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%8F%B4%E5%8A%A9%E9%98%BF%E5%B0%94%E5%B7%B4%E5%B0%BC%E4%BA%9A%EF%BC%88%E5%9B%BE/>

7 “The Albania-China Rift: for Tirana Few Options”, August 1977, Approval for Release 2003/10/29, CIA-RDP79R00603A002900070002-5, retrieved Jun 4, 2023 from <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00603A002900070002-5.pdf>

8 Victor Carneiro Corrêa Vieira, “From Third World Theory to Belt and Road Initiative: International Aid as a Chinese Foreign Policy Tool”, Contexto Internacional vol. 41(3) Sep/Dec 2019, retrieved June 6, 2023 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0102-8529.2019410300003>

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wanted to let its people know that they were the real defender of the International Communist Movement against the de-Stalinization process with the support of a new powerful ally-China,<sup>9</sup> which became Albania's only window on the World during that time.<sup>10</sup>

### **Evolution of China's Aid to Albania (1961-1978)**

When Soviet Union cut off its aid to Albania in Spring 1961, China rushed to Albania's rescue by providing hundreds of thousands tons of food aid and 250 million Chinese yuan financial aid, undertaking 19 complete projects, and thus helped Albania realize the almost still-born Third Five-Year Plan.<sup>11</sup> Afterwards, Sino-Albanian relations were further strengthened with "The Sino-Albanian Declaration" signed in January 1964 and the "The Sino-Albanian Declaration" inked in May 1966. Both of these documents laid a solid foundation for a strong cooperation in the following years.<sup>12</sup>

Within this context, in June 1965, Beijing offered around \$214 million loan for Albania's fulfillment of its Fourth Five-Year Plan (1966-1970).<sup>13</sup> Between 1965 and 1970, with Chinese financial and technical support, Albania undertook 41 important projects of which 24 belonged to heavy industry sectors. During this period, it is worth noting that despite China's own financial difficulties, China managed to maintain its aid to Albania in terms of continuity, large quantity and good quality, and rendered aid on generous terms, either in the form of interest-free or low-interest credits and grants, and became an indispensable partner for the development of Albanian economy.<sup>14</sup> According to Chinese sources, from 1954 to 1978, China granted Albania 75 loans worth over 10 billion Chinese yuan (of which 28% were in-kind support, military materials made up 48%, complete projects comprised 25% and 2% were grant support). Large-scale projects offered by China amounted to 142, of which 91 were completed, 23 were either almost completed or in the making, 17 were in the designing process. To promote Albania's industrial capacity, China helped build new industrial facilities in the fields of steel, chemical fertilizer, soda, acid copper-alloy, glass, papermaking, plastic and arms industry; increased the number of projects in the sectors of electrical power, mechanics, light industry, textiles, building materials, telecommuni-

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- 9 Marsela Musabelliu, Sino-Albanian Relations: 70 years of diplomatic ties in retrospect, Working Paper, ISSN: 2560-1628, 2019, No. 7, China-CEE Institute, retrieved June 3, 2023 from [https://china-cee.eu/working\\_papers/sino-albanian-relations-70-years-of-diplomatic-ties-in-retrospect/](https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/sino-albanian-relations-70-years-of-diplomatic-ties-in-retrospect/)
- 10 Ramadan Marmullaku, Albania And The Albanians, 1975, C. Hurst & Company, London, retrieved Jun 5, 2023 from <https://michaelharrison.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Albania-and-the-Albanians-Ramadan-Marmuuaku-Hurst-London-1975.pdf>
- 11 谿旭彬(SHEN Xubin),op.cit.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Elez Biberaj, Albanian-Chinese Relations 1962-1969, JULY 6, 2020, retrieved June 3, 2023 from <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/07/06/albanian-chinese-relations-1962-1969/>
- 14 Ibid.

cations, thus greatly improved Albania’s industrial level.<sup>15</sup> Among these projects, the most well-known projects were, the Metallurgical Plant in the city of Elbasan, the Tractor Plant in Tirana, the Oil Refining plant in Ballsh,<sup>16</sup> the Textile Production Plant in Berat, two out of three Hydropower Plants along the streams of Drini River, the Chemical Plant in Fier.<sup>17</sup>

During these hectic years of bilateral relations, China’s aid was portrayed by Albania as the best model to follow for other socialist countries, which was in stark contrast from the aid provided by the “imperialists” and Soviet “revisionists.” Despite the rhetoric, in fact, Albania was not satisfied with Chinese equipment and considered Chinese experts were not as sophisticated as those of the Soviet.<sup>18</sup> Some Albanian sources argue that Chinese aid sometimes put constraints on Albania’s industrial policy due to its lower quality and poor coordination in the implementation of industrial projects. In addition, due to long distance between two countries, it took Chinese commodities long time to reach Albania, therefore, it created problems in the completion of various industrial projects, giving rise to readjustments in investments and construction, and Tirana ended up not achieving its major plan objectives.<sup>19</sup>

However, from the Chinese perspective, Chinese officials involved in the past aid activities had been quite discontent with Chinese aid policy for Albania. For instance, former Ambassador to Albania late General Geng Biao recalled in his memoir as such:

*“during that time, I was very much worried by our aid to Albania, because China’s aid to Albania was given under such circumstances when China was suffered by embargos and was struggling with economic difficulties. Since 1954, China rendered economic and military aid to Albania valued at nearly 9 billion Chinese yuan. It means about 4000 yuan per capita taking into account of Albania’s two million population. It was a big money if we consider annual per capita income in China only around 200 yuan. The annual output of China-built chemical fertilizer factory was 200 thousand tons, which already surpassed the amount of fertilizer applied in agricultural soils in China. Military aid, on the other hand, was so huge that it exceeded Albanian army’s defense needs. However, Albanian leaders*

- 15 王洪起(WANG Hongqi), “山鹰之国亲历” (Personal Experience in the Country of the Eagle), 新华出版社(Xinhua Publishing House), 2008年, p.35.
- 16 Jens Bastian, China’s Evolving Footprint in the Western Balkans: Navigating Between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Covid-19 Pandemic. July 16, 2020, Retrieved Jun 6 2023 from <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2020/07/16/chinas-evolving-footprint-in-the-western-balkans-navigating-between-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- 17 Marsela Musabelliu,,op.cit.
- 18 Albania: A Country Study, Federal Research Division Library of Congress Edited by Raymond Zickel and Walter R. Iwaskiw Research, April 1992, retrieved Jun 6, 2023 from <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/al/albaniacountrystoozick/albaniacountrystoozick.pdf>
- 19 Elez Biberaj,op.cit.

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*reckoned that it was entirely natural that China should provide aid to Albania. Enver Hoxha openly declared that Albania should possess what China had already possessed...*<sup>20</sup>

Chinese veteran journalist Wang Hongqi, who was stationed in Tirana during the Cold Wars years, shared similar observation. In his book, Wang revealed some appalling situations concerning attitudes of Albanians towards Chinese aid material and how they thought it was perfectly justified: “Albanians did not appreciate our aid. We frequently witnessed how those steels, mechanical devices and precision equipment, which were shipped from China with tremendous difficult journeys, were just randomly placed in open-air locations, being battered by the wind and the rain...”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, for the sake of ideological solidarity, Chinese Supreme leader Chairman Mao openly denounced any criticism related to aid to Albania at the height of Chinese Cultural Revolution. Indeed, between 1960 and 1970, the interests of the two ruling parties were highly convergent and reached the climax of Albania as the only ally endorsing Mao’s Cultural Revolution.<sup>22</sup> In international area, Albania returned China’s favor by providing consistent support for Beijing’s policies,<sup>23</sup> especially spearheaded the campaign of developing countries for China’s entry into the United Nations.<sup>24</sup> Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia led to Albania’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact in 1968. With Chinese assistance, Albania mobilized many resources to construct military underground facilities such as bunkers and anti-bombing shelters.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, preoccupied with the idea of possible Soviet invasion, Chairman Mao softened rhetoric towards the United States in 1969. However, Mao’s diplomatic maneuver caused dismay in Tirana. Premier Zhou Enlai’s subsequent meeting with Soviet Premier Aleksey Nikolayevich Kosygin (took place at Beijing Airport upon Soviet request)<sup>26</sup> further alienated Tirana from Beijing, an undercurrent of ideological rift came to surface.<sup>27</sup> However,

20 谿旭彬(SHEN Xubin), op.cit. for some other Chinese aid figures, see Sanja Arežina, “Reflections of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and China-CEEC Cooperation on the Perceptions of China Pervading the Public Discourse in Albania”, 6 July 2020, ISSN: 2560-1628, China-CEE Institute, retrieved June 6, 2023 from [https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working\\_paper-202027-by-Sanja-Arez%CC%8Cina.pdf](https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working_paper-202027-by-Sanja-Arez%CC%8Cina.pdf)

21 谿旭彬(SHEN Xubin), op.cit.

22 Peter R. Prifti, Albania’s “Cultural Revolution”, c/68-9 September 1968, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute Of Technology, retrieved Jun 5, 2023 from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/18623833.pdf>

23 Ylber Marku (2017). Sino-Albanian relations during the Cold War, 1949-1978: An Albanian perspective (Doctor’s Thesis, Lingnan University, Hong Kong). Retrieved June 4, 2023 from [http://commons.ln.edu.hk/his\\_etd/11/](http://commons.ln.edu.hk/his_etd/11/)

24 Elez Biberaj, op.cit.

25 Ylber Marku, op.cit.; “The Cold War bunkers that cover a country”, retrieved June 6, 2023 from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20181102-the-cold-war-bunkers-that-cover-a-country>

26 “Information about A.N. Kosygin’s Conversation With Zhou Enlai on 11 September 1969”, retrieved Jun 6, 2023 from <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/information-about-kosygin-conversation-zhou-enlai-11-september-1969>

27 周帅(ZHOU Shuai), op.cit.

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Albania remained committed to supporting China’s bid for UN seat<sup>28</sup> and played a leading role to get the resolution passed in the UN General Assembly in getting China into UN by ousting the Republic of China (Taiwan).<sup>29</sup> As Albania already became heavily dependent on Chinese aid, Enver Hoxha refrained from openly accusing China for improving relations with the United States, but relations became strained.<sup>30</sup>

Despite uneasy bilateral relations, in August 1970, Albania sent an official delegation to Beijing asking for China’s support for its Fifth Five-Year Plan (1971-1975), which involved a loan of 320 million yuan, China agreed to provide 195 million yuan long-term loan to Albania’s satisfaction.<sup>31</sup> In October 1974, Albanian Prime Minister Mehmet Shehu sent a letter to late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai requesting China’s financial support to its Sixth Five-Year Plan, which included \$50 million cash, 20 complete projects (to be financed by given loan) and 98 item materials, altogether valued at 500 million yuan. Albanian demand was more than China could chew due to its large quantity and the fact that Chinese economy was already drifting to the verge of bankruptcy, therefore, Chinese leadership decided to provide 100 million yuan instead after tough negotiations with Albanian delegation.<sup>32</sup> In his report to Enver Hoxha, head of Albanian Delegation Adil Çarçani expressed his frustration and strong disappointment after China only agreed to building 10 new works instead of 20.<sup>33</sup>

After Mao’s death, Enver Hoxha’s open criticism of Chinese new leadership and his fierce defamation campaign against Chinese Communist Party exceeded the level of Chinese tolerance. Then came the Chinese official announcement in 7 July 1978, in which it notified Albanian government about the complete termination of economic and military aid and immediate withdrawal of Chinese experts stationed in Albania.<sup>34</sup> However, unlike Soviet Union version of aid termination, China did not abandon almost completed projects but chose to finish remaining projects during the same year.<sup>35</sup>

28 Gjon Boriçi, the Fall of the Albanian-Chinese Relations 1971-1978, ILIRIA International Review 6(1):107, July 2016, retrieved Jun 5, 2023 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305744722\\_The\\_fall\\_of\\_the\\_Albanian\\_-\\_Chinese\\_Relations\\_1971-1978/link/5891e5c7aca272f9a5581b40/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305744722_The_fall_of_the_Albanian_-_Chinese_Relations_1971-1978/link/5891e5c7aca272f9a5581b40/download)

29 “Struggle to restore China’s lawful seat in the United Nations”, retrieved Jun 5, 2023 from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/200011/t20001117\\_697805.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/200011/t20001117_697805.html)

30 Gjon Boriçi, op.cit.

31 郭毓华(GUO Yuhua), 1979年: 从亲密战友到彻底决裂的中阿关系(1979: Sino-Albanian Relations from Intimate Friend to Complete Break-off), retrieved Jun 5, 2023 from <http://www.zxls.com/Item/1457.aspx>

32 Ibid.

33 Gjon Boriçi, op.cit.

34 “Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Note on China’s Forced Cessation of Aid to Albania,” Peking Review, No. 29, July 21, 1978, pp. 20-23. retrieved Jun 6, 2023 from <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1978/PR1978-29.pdf>

35 John Franklin Copper, China’s Foreign Aid 1978, Occasional Papers/ Reprints Series in Contemporary Asian Studies, Number 8 - 1979 (29), retrieved Jun 6, 2023 from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/56353791.pdf>

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## Tirana's Response to China-CEEC and the BRI

Following the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985, new Albanian leadership softened its harsh stance toward China, and Sino-Albanian relations entered a new phase towards relaxation of strained relations caused by ideological difference. Despite Albanian government's intention for repairing damaged bilateral relations, no substantial improvement materialized until 1989, when a protocol on economic and technological cooperation was inked by China and Albania to further bilateral relations. Afterwards, Albania's interactions with China remained at a low level albeit exchange of political and economic visits until 2005.<sup>36</sup> The real breakthrough in bilateral relations came in April 2012 when China launched its "16+1" Cooperation Mechanism with Central and Eastern European countries (China-CEE Cooperation)<sup>37</sup>. This mechanism took Sino-Albanian relations onto the "fast track".<sup>38</sup> Bilateral relations got further impetus when Albania signed up to join China's BRI in 2017.

In recent years, the China-CEE Cooperation has been gradually merged with the BRI strategy.<sup>39</sup> Chinese investments in Albania are mostly related to energy and transport sectors, but with mixed blessings and receiving widespread media coverage and becoming hot topics of public opinion. In energy sector, Chinese company Geo-Jade Petroleum made a major breakthrough by getting hold of American-Canadian Bankers Petroleum for US\$575 million, thus acquiring the major oil extraction field in Albania, such as Patos-Marinza oilfield, Europe's largest onshore oil reserve, as well as a 100 percent interest in the Kucova oilfield, Albania's second largest oilfield.<sup>40</sup>

Chinese performance in the transport sector however did not work out as well as expected. In 2013, Albania started its negotiation with China Communications Construction Company to upgrade small Shëngjin port at a cost of around 2.2 billion euros, but it did not bear fruit. In 2015, the Albanian government failed to reach a deal with China State Construction Company to build a highway connecting Tirana with the Dibra/Debar region on the Macedonian border. Should they have reached an agreement; the project would have been financed by the Exim Bank of China with a loan worth 250 million

36 Anne-Marie Brady, Hiromichi Higashi, "Are we real friends? Albania-China relations in the Xi Era", 17.9.2019, retrieved June 6, 2023 from <https://sinopsis.cz/en/are-we-real-friends-albania-china-relations-in-the-xi-era/>. Marsela Musabelliu, op.cit.

37 "Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries", retrieved June 7, 2023 from <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>

38 周帅(ZHOU Shuai), op.cit.

39 高晓川(GAO Xiaochuan), "一带一路"与中东欧: "16 +1" 机制下中国 - 中东欧经贸合作及建议(One Belt and One Road and China-Central and Eastern Europe: China-Central and Eastern Europe Economic and Commercial Cooperation and Suggestions Under the '16+1' Mechanism), retrieved Jun 8, 2023 from <http://47.94.233.156/RMBase/SysJP/Multimedia/Pdf.ashx?ID=214730&contentid=661130&form=browse>. "How the 16+1 Cooperation promotes the Belt and Road Initiative", China-CEEC Think Tank Book Series Huang Ping, Liu Zuokui, Edited, Retrieve June 8, 2023 from <https://sha.static.vipsite.cn/media/thinktank/attachments/0127811c10d2e4b9c9090b6240f73362.pdf>

40 Anne-Marie Brady, Hiromichi Higashi, op.cit.

Euros. It is believed that Albania gave up this deal because of concerns over increasing public debt.<sup>41</sup> Second transport related project proposal was Adriatic – Ionian Highway that stretches from Trieste to Kalamata, linking Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Greece once completed. Although Albania, Montenegro and the Chinese firm (Pacific Chinese) signed a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding in November 2015, massive student protests broke out in late 2018 which forced the Albanian government to scrap plans concerning the Thumanë–Kashar section development of the said highway in 2019.<sup>42</sup> Last controversial case of Chinese investment in transport is associated with Tirana Nënë Tereza International Airport. In 2017, Hong Kong-based China Everbright and Friedmann Pacific Asset Management Ltd. obtained 100 percent of the shares in Nënë Tereza International Airport with management license until 2027.<sup>43</sup> This acquisition is a milestone for Chinese investments because it was the first time for a Chinese firm to get 100 percent hold of a national gateway airport in the CEEC region. This also symbolized growing footprints of Chinese capital in Albanian economy. However, due to the sharp drop of passenger volume caused by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, China Everbright gave up its operation license by selling 100 % of its stake, setting a bad example for Chinese investment in the BRI countries in just four years after its signature.<sup>44</sup>

Cases of Chinese investments mentioned above made Albania the only country in the Western Balkans where no large infrastructure projects were undertaken with Chinese loans. According to skeptics, the nature of Chinese loan-based model of infrastructure project implementation might be the major reason for this setback. Chinese model is well known for its way of using Chinese contractors, workers, and materials to implement infrastructure projects overseas, which is contrary to EU rules and gives rise to public debt.<sup>45</sup> In addition, there might exist some negative impressions among Albanians towards the quality of Chinese projects while suspecting the motives behind Chinese investment. Moreover, given Albania’s close relationship with the United States, Sino-American tensions might compel Albanian government to engage with China through developing some projects with little strategic value.<sup>46</sup>

41 China In The Western Balkans, op.cit.

42 Anne-Marie Brady, Hiromichi Higashi, op.cit.

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## Conclusion

After a hiatus of many years, China's return to the Balkans in general, and to Albania in particular, has some strategic implications.<sup>47</sup> For instance, the CEE countries (except Greece) were all under communist regimes during the Cold War, which means they have a common legacy with China in terms of communist ideology. Among them, Albania stands out as China's staunch ally in 1960s.<sup>48</sup> Albania's NATO membership, connection to EU and its large Muslim populations are among the other reasons for Chinese decision-makers to restore and deepen its relations with Albania.<sup>49</sup>

China-CEEC cooperation and the BRI have signaled further strategic importance of Albania. In the eyes of the current Chinese leadership, Albania is no longer the close ally for its ideological and strategic war against the Soviet Union in the past, rather a source of natural resources and the shortest overland route between the Adriatic and the Aegean seas. In other words, Albania stands out as a useful hub for transporting Chinese goods to Europe.<sup>50</sup>

From the patterns of China's foreign policy implementation in recent years, it is quite evident that the BRI is the major policy instrument for China to advance its economic interest in most parts of the world especially in the fields of transport, energy and communication infrastructure. Hence, China's engagement in infrastructure development in the Western Balkans has great strategic value for the BRI's overall progress.<sup>51</sup> However, according to Chinese sources, the state relations between China and the 16 Central and Eastern European countries are at different "levels" as such: *strategic partnership* (Serbia, Poland and the Czech Republic), *comprehensive friendly and cooperative relations* (Romania), *friendly and cooperative relations* (Hungary), and *comprehensive cooperation partnerships* (Croatia), *general relations* (other CEE countries).<sup>52</sup> It is obvious that Albania belongs to category of the "other CEE countries", which can be justified by most recent Chinese academic studies on China-CEEC and the BRI.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, case

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studies show that Chinese investments are relatively small and symbolic, and lack of highest level visit from China to Albania does not match the importance China attaches to Tirana, while total investments so far do not exceed \$800 million,<sup>54</sup> which makes Albania the only country in the Western Balkans not benefitted from any BRI related loans.<sup>55</sup>

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