

SOFT POWER AND SINO-BALKAN RELATIONS: CHINA'S LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

As Sino-Balkan relations evolve within a rapidly transforming global landscape, language and cultural education have become central pillars of mutual understanding and cooperation. This presentation examines the dynamic interplay between Chinese language education, academic diplomacy, and intercultural exchange, using Bosnia and Herzegovina as a case study. Drawing on over a decade of institutional development at the University of East Sarajevo, including the establishment of the Sinology Department, participation in scholarship programs, coordination of the HSK Center, and successful organization of Chinese Bridge competitions, this paper analyzes how localized academic initiatives contribute to the broader framework of China - Bosnia and Herzegovina dialogue. The presentation argues for a more context-sensitive and reciprocal model of engagement, wherein Chinese language teaching is not merely an act of linguistic transmission, but a vehicle for intercultural literacy and long-term collaboration. By integrating elements of language, educational policy, and soft power analysis, this study highlights how academic practices can inform and enrich high - level bilateral cooperation. The paper offers innovative pathways for advancing Sino-B&H studies through sustainable, inclusive, and dialogic approaches grounded in real academic experience.

Key words: soft power, cultural diplomacy, educational diplomacy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Western Balkans, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade and a half, Sino-Balkan relations have diversified beyond trade and infrastructure to encompass language education, academic partnerships, and cultural programming. Bosnia and Herzegovina offers a focused case: until 2011 there was no institutionalized Chinese language instruction in the country. That changed with the establishment of the Department of Sinology at the University of East Sarajevo (UES), which marked

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the first formal pathway for Chinese language and China-related studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ In 2015, Bosnia and Herzegovina's first Confucius Institute (CI) opened at the University of Sarajevo, expanding access to language courses and cultural activities across the capital and beyond.² A second CI followed in Banja Luka in January 2018, further normalizing Chinese language study as part of Bosnia and Herzegovina's higher-education landscape.³

These educational milestones sit atop earlier, thinner layers of bilateral engagement. China and Bosnia and Herzegovina established diplomatic relations in 1995, followed by a basic economic and technical cooperation agreement (2000) and a bilateral investment treaty (2002)⁴⁵. While trade ties expanded gradually, it is only after 2011, concurrent with the advent of local language-teaching capacity, that cooperation broadened and visibly institutionalized across multiple domains. Key platforms included Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in the China–Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation (often known as “16+1/17+1”) and Bosnia and Herzegovina's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which signaled intent to deepen connectivity and investment cooperation.

On the cultural-educational axis, capacity expanded quickly. University of East Sarajevo became the country's first HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) center by 2016, enabling standardized credentialing for learners inside Bosnia and Herzegovina⁶. National “Chinese Bridge” competitions, now regularly hosted in Pale, Sarajevo and Banja Luka, have created recurring, high-visibility showcases of student achievement and vehicles for outbound study opportunities in China⁷. The opening of the Confucius Institute in Banja Luka in 2018 broadened this ecosystem to the country's second entity, offering courses and cultural programming and anchoring additional inter-university links⁸. Visa liberalization then accelerated mobility and added much flexibility to cooperation - following a mutual visa-free agreement concluded in 2017 and

¹ [https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/Bosnia and Herzegovina/neobicno-izazovno-a-vjerovatno-i-isplativo-odlucili-su-studirati-kineski-u-Bosnia and Herzegovina-i-nisu-se-pokajali/150515098](https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina/neobicno-izazovno-a-vjerovatno-i-isplativo-odlucili-su-studirati-kineski-u-Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina-i-nisu-se-pokajali/150515098)

² [https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/Bosnia and Herzegovina/otvoren-konfucijev-institut-u-sarajevu/150402118](https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina/otvoren-konfucijev-institut-u-sarajevu/150402118)

³ <https://www.unibl.org/sr-lat/vesti/2018/01/otvoren-konfucijev-institut>

⁴ [https://www.mvp.gov.ba/vanjska_politika_Bosnia and Herzegovina/bilateralni_odnosi_medunarodni_ugovori/prema_drzavama/Default.aspx?template_id=16&s1=1151&id=7714](https://www.mvp.gov.ba/vanjska_politika_Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina/bilateralni_odnosi_medunarodni_ugovori/prema_drzavama/Default.aspx?template_id=16&s1=1151&id=7714)

⁵ <https://ceec-china-sme.org/background/>

⁶ <https://www.ues.rs.ba/en/2018/04/24/hsk-test-was-held-at-the-department-of-synology-at-the-faculty-of-philosophy/>

⁷ <https://english.news.cn/20220606/372906285e174b8e9b2ef14b6306b84c/c.html>

⁸ <https://www.unibl.org/sr-lat/vesti/2018/01/otvoren-konfucijev-institut>

implemented in 2018, Chinese arrivals surged, contributing to record tourism volumes before the pandemic and rebounding again recently⁹¹⁰.

The economic and infrastructure dimensions evolved in parallel. The 300 MW Stanari Thermal Power Plant - constructed by China's Dongfang Electric and financed in large part by China Development Bank - entered commercial operation in 2016, becoming one of the most tangible Chinese-linked industrial projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina to date^{11 12}. More recently, the Banja Luka-Prijedor motorway concession with China's SDHS illustrated growing Chinese participation in transport infrastructure, even as it sparked debate over transparency and contracting¹³. Trade has also intensified: by 2023–2024, China ranked as Bosnia and Herzegovina's largest import source, underscoring a structural deepening of commercial ties¹⁴.

Is Sino-B&H cooperation at its highest point? On several metrics, yes - especially in the spheres most closely connected to language education and cultural diplomacy. Bosnia and Herzegovina now has two Confucius Institutes (Sarajevo and Banja Luka), university-based Sinology departments (UES and UNIBL), and two HSK testing centers, as well as regular "Chinese Bridge" circuits - none of which existed before 2011. These institutions have lowered transaction costs for learning, credentialing, and exchange, and they correlate with notable gains in student mobility and tourism following visa-free travel in 2018. For example, since 2011, over 170 students studied in China on a scholarship just from the University of East Sarajevo, which presents a remarkable change in student exchange with China from before.¹⁵

At the same time, the economic-infrastructure channel shows a more nuanced picture. While flagship projects like Stanari have been delivered and new concessions (e.g., Banja Luka-Prijedor) are underway, other planned energy projects - such as Tuzla 7 - stalled or were cancelled amid financing, regulatory, and environmental-compliance headwinds. This mixed pipeline suggests that while breadth and institutionalization of ties are at an all-time high, the "peak" in hard investment is uneven across sectors¹⁶.

⁹ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/05/c_137156745.htm

¹⁰ <https://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0625/c90000-20185248.html>

¹¹ https://www.gem.wiki/Stanari_Thermal_Power_Plant

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/eft-gets-chinese-loan-for-300-mw-bosnia-coal-fired-plant-idUSL5E8NL702/>

¹³ <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/66450/>

¹⁴ <https://www.biznisinfo.ba/veliki-obrat-kina-postala-najveci-uvoznik-u-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina/>

¹⁵ <https://raport.ba/poznajete-li-nekog-profesora-kineskog-jezika-u-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-mi-poznajemo-profesoricu-jelenu-nikolic-koja-za-raport-kaze-imam-150-studenata/>

¹⁶ <https://www.klix.ba/biznis/privreda/kinezi-vratili-elektroprivredi-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-248-miliona-km-zbog-neizgradnje-bloka-7/241220074>

Taken together, Bosnia and Herzegovina's experience supports a central claim of this paper: the onset of institutional Chinese language teaching in 2011 catalyzed a denser, more reciprocal web of engagements with China. Language and academic platforms have functioned as connective tissue - linking students, educators, officials, and companies - and have complemented higher-level frameworks such as the BRI and China-CEEC cooperation. The result is a qualitatively different phase of Sino-B&H relations, characterized less by sporadic projects and more by routinized exchange, credentialing, and people-to-people mobility.

China's engagement in Southeast Europe has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention, largely due to the interplay of infrastructure investments, cultural diplomacy, and shifting geopolitical alignments. While countries such as Serbia and Greece are often analyzed through the lens of high-profile infrastructure projects and foreign direct investment, Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a distinct case. Here, engagement has been primarily education- and culture-led, reflecting both the country's fragmented political landscape and China's preference for soft power channels in smaller or transitional states.

Building on Joseph Nye's framework of attraction and persuasion, this study argues that Chinese initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina - most notably the establishment of Sinology departments, Confucius Institutes, and scholarship programs - function as strategic instruments of cultural diplomacy, cultivating long-term influence through language learning, cultural exchange, and people-to-people contacts.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's relevance lies not only in its post-conflict reconstruction and EU aspirations but also in its role as a microcosm of broader Balkan dynamics, where educational cooperation competes with, or complements, infrastructure-led engagement. Despite this, scholarly analysis of Sino-B&H relations remains limited, often overshadowed by the focus on larger regional players. This article addresses this gap by combining institutional analysis with original survey data measuring public opinion across Sarajevo, East Sarajevo, and Brčko. By integrating public perception into the study of soft power, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of how China's cultural diplomacy resonates within Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how it compares with broader regional patterns.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates two interrelated theoretical approaches - soft power theory and intercultural communication theory, to analyze Sino-Balkan engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a particular focus on public opinion as a measure of cultural diplomacy outcomes.

2.1 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Joseph Nye's influential concept of soft power emphasizes the ability of states to shape international outcomes through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or financial inducement (Nye, 2019). Culture, political values, and foreign policy are identified as the three primary sources of soft power. Within this framework, education and cultural outreach programs represent intentional state strategies aimed at cultivating a positive international image and generating goodwill.

China's application of soft power has been a subject of extensive debate. While some scholars argue that Beijing has selectively adapted Nye's framework to emphasize state-led, institutionalized forms of influence (Kurlantzick, 2007; Callahan, 2015), others highlight the importance of cultural exchanges and long-term educational partnerships in fostering durable relational ties (Paradise, 2009). In the Bosnia and Herzegovina context, initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, the Departments of Sinology in East Sarajevo and Banja Luka, scholarships for Bosnia and Herzegovina students, and cultural events (e.g., Chinese New Year festivals, art exhibitions) exemplify instruments of cultural diplomacy designed to build familiarity and sympathy toward China. By examining local public opinion, this study evaluates how these initiatives are received at the societal level, thus moving beyond top-down institutional narratives to assess the credibility, resonance, and limits of Chinese soft power.

2.2 Intercultural Communication Theory

Intercultural communication theory provides a complementary lens for understanding how individuals and communities negotiate meaning in cross-cultural encounters. It emphasizes how perceptions of "the other" are constructed through direct interaction, mediated representation, and cultural products such as language, media, and educational materials (Gudykunst, 2004; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). In transitional societies like Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its history of ethnic fragmentation and complex identity politics, cultural exchanges are often filtered through pre-existing cognitive frames, stereotypes, and political narratives.

This perspective underscores that exposure to Chinese culture - whether through language study, participation in cultural events, or media narratives - does not translate automatically into favorable perceptions. Instead, attitudes are shaped by interpersonal trust, communication competence, and the ability of Chinese initiatives to align with local needs and expectations. For example, while language learning can generate curiosity and admiration, fears of political influence or dependency can simultaneously undermine trust, resulting in ambivalent or contested outcomes.

2.3 Synthesizing the Frameworks

The integration of soft power and intercultural communication theories allows for a more holistic analysis of Sino-Bosnia and Herzegovina engagement. While soft power highlights China's strategic objectives and tools of attraction, intercultural communication theory shifts the focus to the reception side, examining how individuals interpret, negotiate, and internalize these initiatives. This dual approach positions public opinion not merely as a passive indicator of China's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but as an active site where soft power strategies are accepted, resisted, or reshaped by local communities.

In this sense, public perception becomes both a dependent variable (reflecting China's cultural diplomacy efforts) and an independent variable (influencing the future sustainability of these initiatives). By situating Bosnia and Herzegovina within the wider Balkan and European landscape, the framework also enables comparative insights, illustrating how different governance structures and sociopolitical contexts condition the reception of Chinese soft power across the region.

The survey of public perceptions conducted in three regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina provides an opportunity to evaluate how such initiatives are received by different communities, thereby allowing a grounded assessment of the effectiveness of Chinese soft power in the local context. Second, intercultural communication theory sheds light on the mechanisms through which cultural encounters, whether through structured education, informal exchanges, or exposure to Chinese cultural products, shape perceptions, attitudes, and trust. Together, these frameworks position public opinion not merely as a reflection of China's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina but as a crucial indicator of how soft power strategies are negotiated, contested, and internalized at the community level.

3. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Since the establishment of the first Department of Sinology at the University of East Sarajevo in 2011, Bosnia and Herzegovina has witnessed a rapid institutionalization of Chinese language education and associated cultural initiatives. This trajectory was reinforced by the subsequent opening of Confucius Institutes in Sarajevo (2015) and Banja Luka (2018), which provided additional platforms for language learning, cultural exchange, and academic cooperation, effectively creating a vibrant ecosystem linking students, educators, and policymakers. These institutional developments have been accompanied by innovations in curriculum design that integrate applied linguistics, intercultural communication, and China-related studies, promoting

both linguistic proficiency and cultural literacy¹⁷. Student mobility has emerged as a central dimension of engagement: for example, over 170 students from the University of East Sarajevo Sinology Department have participated in scholarship programs, while numerous primary and high school students have taken part in Chinese Bridge competitions in China, and many learners have completed HSK examinations, enabling further study and research opportunities at Chinese universities.

Educators, particularly Chinese language instructors, function as essential cultural mediators, facilitating intercultural dialogue, mentoring students, and bridging institutional partnerships. Their involvement extends beyond the classroom to the organization of cultural activities, lectures, and workshops, which immerse both students and the broader community in Chinese traditions, contemporary developments, and intercultural perspectives. These combined initiatives have contributed to a perceptible shift in public opinion toward China, as surveys indicate heightened interest in Chinese culture, language, and bilateral cooperation over the past decade.

While these institutional milestones highlight the visible expansion of Chinese cultural and educational presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the crucial question remains how these initiatives are perceived by the broader public. Soft power, by definition, relies not only on the availability of cultural and educational opportunities but also on the degree to which they shape attitudes, trust, and a sense of affinity among ordinary citizens. In the Bosnian context, where historical legacies, political divisions, and competing foreign influences coexist, public perceptions of China cannot be assumed to align uniformly with institutional narratives of cooperation and exchange. Instead, they reflect a complex negotiation between direct exposure to Chinese cultural and educational initiatives, indirect encounters through media or commerce, and broader geopolitical discourses.

To examine this dimension, a targeted questionnaire was conducted in three distinct regions - Sarajevo (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), East Sarajevo (Republic of Srpska) and Brčko District (independent entity) - capturing the views of everyday citizens on China's cultural, linguistic, and political presence. The results provide critical insight into how China's soft power strategies resonate across different local settings and demographic groups, thereby offering a nuanced assessment of the reach and limitations of its influence.

¹⁷ Current syllabuses from both degree-based programs: <https://ff.ues.rs.ba/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SILABUSI.pdf> & <https://www.flf.unibl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NASTAVNI-PLAN-SINOLOGIJA.pdf>

a. Questionnaire: methodology, results and analysis

In order to gain a clearer understanding of how ordinary citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina perceive China, it is necessary to move beyond the institutional and programmatic achievements of recent years and to examine public opinion directly. While the establishment of universities and institutes has created structured avenues of engagement, these initiatives may not fully reflect how China is viewed across society as a whole. Public attitudes are shaped not only by formal educational and cultural programs but also by everyday encounters, media representations, and broader geopolitical narratives. This questionnaire has therefore been designed to capture the views of individuals who are not professionally or personally connected to China but whose perspectives are crucial for understanding how cultural diplomacy resonates in daily life.

By focusing on citizens between the ages of 25 and 35, a demographic often positioned at the intersection of professional development and cultural receptivity, the survey seeks to document perceptions of China's image, language, and culture, as well as to explore the presence of skepticism or unease alongside curiosity and interest. The insights gathered will provide a valuable foundation for assessing the reach of Chinese cultural initiatives and for identifying the factors that most strongly influence public opinion in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

i. Methodology

To assess public perceptions of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a structured short questionnaire was designed to capture attitudes across three urban contexts with varying degrees of exposure to Chinese cultural and educational initiatives. The survey included five core questions, each measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive), covering perceptions of China's overall image (Do you like China?), interest in learning the Chinese language (Would you like to learn Chinese language?), engagement with Chinese culture (Are you interested in Chinese culture?), feelings of fear or suspicion toward China (Are you afraid of China?), and the extent to which respondents consider China a friendly partner (Do you think China is our friend?).

Three groups of informants were selected, each comprising ten participants (N = 30). The first group was surveyed in Sarajevo (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), where the Confucius Institute has become the principal hub for Chinese cultural activities. The second group was drawn from East Sarajevo (Republic of Srpska), home to the country's first Department of Sinology and an active center for Chinese language education. The third group was based in Brčko District, which has no formal Chinese cultural or educational institutions but maintains indirect exposure to China through a large Chinese-owned marketplace in the vicinity.

Participants were selected randomly within a defined age group (25–35 years), representing everyday citizens not professionally or privately connected to China. The sample included a mix of occupations, such as bartenders, cashiers, and medical staff, in order to reflect diverse segments of society beyond academic or policy-oriented circles. Data was collected through face-to-face administration of the questionnaire, with respondents asked to circle their answers on the Likert scale. This methodological design allows for both comparative analysis across the three regions and an exploration of how the presence, or absence, of institutional Chinese engagement shapes public opinion.

ii. Results

Table 1 presents the values of responses to the five questionnaire items across the three groups: Sarajevo (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), East Sarajevo (Republic of Srpska), and Brčko District (independent entity). The results reveal notable variation in perceptions of China across different socio-political contexts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Table 1. Responses to questionnaire items by region (1 = most negative, 5 = most positive).

Question	Sarajevo (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina)	East Sarajevo (RS)	Brčko District
Do you like China?	3.5	4.5	3.0
Would you like to learn the Chinese language?	4.0	4.0	2.5
Are you interested in Chinese culture?	3.0	3.5	3.0
Are you afraid of China?	3.0	1.5	4.0
Do you think China is our friend?	2.0	4.0	1.5

Respondents in Sarajevo expressed moderate to positive attitudes toward China, particularly with regard to interest in learning the Chinese language ($M = 4.0$). However, perceptions of friendship ($M = 2.0$) and fear ($M = 3.0$) suggest ambivalence. This may reflect the coexistence of enthusiasm for cultural and linguistic engagement with caution shaped by media narratives or geopolitical framing.

Participants in East Sarajevo displayed the most favorable perceptions overall. Respondents reported the highest levels of liking China ($M = 4.5$) and perceiving China as a friend ($M = 4.0$), combined with the lowest level of fear ($M = 1.5$). These results suggest that proximity to the Department of Sinology and

related cultural programs, as well as political alignment within Republic of Srpska, may contribute to stronger positive associations with China.

In Brčko, responses indicate ambivalence mixed with skepticism. While interest in Chinese culture was consistent with the other regions ($M = 3.0$), respondents reported low interest in language learning ($M = 2.5$) and very low perceptions of China as a friend ($M = 1.5$). Notably, Brčko respondents reported the highest fear score ($M = 4.0$), suggesting that limited institutional exposure and reliance on commercial or media-based impressions may reinforce negative or cautious attitudes.

iii. Analysis

The findings highlight the interplay between educational exposure, political context, and public attitudes toward China in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

East Sarajevo respondents, situated in close proximity to the Department of Sinology and embedded within a political environment generally favorable toward China, demonstrate the most positive perceptions. Sarajevo respondents, with access to the Confucius Institute but operating within a more ambivalent political and media environment, express moderate engagement combined with cautious perceptions. By contrast, Brčko respondents, lacking institutionalized cultural programs and drawing primarily on everyday commercial encounters or media discourse, reflect both skepticism and fear.

These results resonate with broader literature on soft power and cultural diplomacy, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of language and cultural programs depends not only on their existence but also on the socio-political environment in which they operate. The heightened fear expressed in Brčko suggests that the absence of structured intercultural engagement can leave space for geopolitical narratives that construct China as a threat. Conversely, the strong support observed in East Sarajevo demonstrates how localized educational initiatives can foster sustained positive perceptions.

In sum, the results suggest that public attitudes toward China in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not uniform but are instead shaped by institutional presence, political alignments, and everyday exposure. This underscores the importance of strengthening inclusive and geographically balanced cultural initiatives if the aim is to foster nationwide intercultural understanding.

4. COMPARATIVE INSIGHT: HOW BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA FITS WITHIN BALKAN AND EUROPEAN SINO-ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS

Bosnia and Herzegovina broadly mirrors Balkan and wider European trajectories of engagement with China, but its internal political structure and uneven institutional landscape produce a distinctly asymmetric pattern. Compared with regional leaders in Sino-engagement -most notably Serbia and

Hungary - Bosnia and Herzegovina's ties are thinner in scale yet increasingly institutionalized through language-and-culture platforms (the UES Department of Sinology since 2011; Confucius Institutes in Sarajevo, 2015, and Banja Luka, 2018, Department of Sinology Banja Luka 2022). This positions Bosnia and Herzegovina within a trajectory where education and cultural exchange take precedence and infrastructure projects follow, a pattern comparable to Croatia and North Macedonia. In contrast, Serbia, with its emphasis on large-scale investments in steel, rail, and other high-profile projects, or Greece with its port developments, represents a model primarily driven by infrastructure.

Within Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entity-level context differentiates its trajectory from most neighbors. In Republic of Srpska, proximity to the Department of Sinology and a generally friendlier political discourse toward China coincide with higher public warmth and lower perceived threat in the questionnaire results (East Sarajevo: "like China" 4.5; "friend" 4.0; "afraid" 1.5). In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, access to the Confucius Institute supports interest in language (4.0) but public views remain more ambivalent on strategic alignment ("friend" 2.0; "afraid" 3.0). Brčko, lacking a formal hub and interacting mainly through commerce, shows the most skeptical profile (low "friend," high "afraid"). These internal regional differences - tied to institutional presence and political signaling - cannot be directly compared to neighboring countries that display more centralized policy steering.

On soft power mechanisms, Bosnia and Herzegovina conforms to the regional pattern in which education, certification, and cultural programming lower barriers to contact and accumulate familiarity over time. The country's record - over 170 UES Sinology students funded through scholarships, recurring HSK testing, and Chinese Bridge participation from primary and secondary levels - tracks with Balkan evidence that people-to-people channels are the most durable dimension of engagement. Compared with larger, highly publicized infrastructure projects elsewhere in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina's soft-power channels appear to carry more weight in shaping opinion: they are visible locally, repeated annually, and mediated by trusted educators who act as bridges between communities and Chinese partners.

In a European frame, Bosnia and Herzegovina's pattern is also consistent with the continent's shift from the early 2010s' enthusiasm for broad "17+1" style cooperation toward a more selective, risk-aware attitude since the late 2010s. While EU member states increasingly talk of "de-risking," they have largely retained cultural, academic, and sub-national exchanges. Bosnia and Herzegovina - though not an EU member - fits this recalibrated mix: cautious on large, politically sensitive projects; steadier growth in education and culture. The public-opinion attitude observed in your survey (positive where institutions are present; skeptical where they are absent) echoes findings elsewhere in Europe: structured, face-to-face engagement tends to neutralize fear narratives more effectively than sporadic commercial contact or media exposure alone.

Compared with Serbia, where large-scale infrastructure and high-level political signaling translate into broadly positive public sentiment, Bosnia and Herzegovina's softer profile relies more on localized legitimacy: educators, cultural events, and student mobility. Compared with Croatia or Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional expansion started later, but it has converged quickly since 2011, suggesting path dependence driven by academic motivations. Unlike Montenegro, where a single high-profile initiative arguably defined some perceptions (see the Bar-Boljare highway¹⁸ case), Bosnia and Herzegovina's multi-centered, education-driven model is comparatively more robust, as it spreads reputational risk.

The questionnaire results sharpen these comparisons. East Sarajevo's profile resembles Serbia/Hungary's high-contact pattern; Sarajevo's resembles the EU's curious but cautious center; Brčko approximates communities across Europe that encounter China mainly through retail and headlines, producing higher uncertainty and threat perceptions. In short, Bosnia and Herzegovina contains within its borders the spectrum of European responses to China - ranging from confident familiarity to wary distance - mapped closely onto where institutions and sustained programming exist.

Policy-wise, the inference is clear and regionally relevant: if Bosnia and Herzegovina wishes to align with the more constructive Balkan cases without inviting infrastructure-centric risk, it should focus on what works - expand hubs (or activities) to areas like Brčko; sustain scholarships and educator exchanges; and integrate community-facing workshops that demystify contemporary China beyond language classes. This approach leverages soft-power channels already validated by our data (lower fear, higher friendship scores where hubs operate), aligns with European risk-management trends, and differentiates Bosnia and Herzegovina as an education-and-culture-driven space in the Sino-Balkan frame.

5. DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND MEDIA FRAMING

In addition to traditional cultural diplomacy channels, the digital and media landscapes play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina. China's strategic engagement via Confucius Institutes, academic exchanges, and think tanks is mirrored in the media sphere through partnerships and content dissemination. For instance, in Republic of Srpska, favorable portrayal of China is amplified through collaboration with Chinese media - such as channels like *China Today* and *Voice of China* - and through cooperation agreements like that with the *Xinhua*¹⁹. Broader regional assessments indicate that China systematically deploys culturally neutral, predominantly economic narratives in regional media, often avoiding critical

¹⁸ <https://thediomat.com/2024/01/montenegros-scandal-ridden-chinese-road/>

¹⁹ <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union-integration-process-part-ii>

scrutiny of debt or governance issues²⁰. Yet, the influence of these frames intersects with local politics and media structures. Bosnia's media environment, characterized by deep fragmentation and political parallelism, serves as both a conduit and barrier to nuanced foreign narratives (Labonte, 2024). Public trust in media remains relatively high compared to political institutions, even as concerns over editorial autonomy persist. Within this context, Chinese narratives, when filtered through local media or digital platforms, can sway views without overtly drawing public attention, particularly in regions with institutional Chinese cultural presence. Conversely, in areas without such institutional anchors, the prevailing impressions of China may derive more heavily from digital snippets or news reports, both susceptible to subjective portrayals and geopolitical framing²¹.

Taken together, digital diplomacy and media framing operate as parallel channels of influence: they reinforce educational initiatives where such structures are in place, and substitute for them in areas where institutional presence is limited. Their impact on public opinion highlights the need to strengthen media literacy and safeguard independent journalism as integral components of a balanced approach to external engagement. This perspective is consistent with broader analyses of Chinese public diplomacy in the Western Balkans, which underline that sustainable soft power relies not only on cultural programming but also on strategically informed media engagement.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complex and multi-layered perceptions of China across Bosnia and Herzegovina's diverse socio-political landscape. While East Sarajevo demonstrates the most favorable attitudes - likely a product of direct institutional engagement through the Department of Sinology - Sarajevo displays more ambivalent views, shaped by access to Confucius Institute resources but moderated by broader political narratives within the Federation. Brčko, with its minimal institutional presence and largely commercial contact with China, exhibits the highest levels of skepticism, including elevated perceptions of risk and lower recognition of China as a partner. These findings point to an environment in which public opinion is closely tied to the availability and visibility of media influence as well as structured cultural and educational channels, rather than large-scale infrastructure or economic projects. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, these findings suggest that educational diplomacy alone cannot fully shape public attitudes toward China; media narratives and digital discourse play a parallel role in either amplifying or diluting the effects of

²⁰ <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions>

²¹ <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/short-analysis/challenges-of-chinese-soft-power-in-western-balkans/>

classroom and exchange programs. Ensuring that cooperation in the cultural and educational sectors is transparent and de-politicized, while simultaneously promoting critical media literacy and supporting independent journalism, may help shield Bosnia and Herzegovina from claims of excessive outside influence. In this way, Bosnia and Herzegovina can capture the reputational and developmental benefits of engagement while mitigating the risks of asymmetrical dependence.

Looking forward, Bosnia and Herzegovina's pathway of Sino-engagement appears to align more with an education-and-culture-driven model than with the infrastructure-heavy strategies observed in countries like Serbia. This "soft power first" trajectory has the potential to foster long-term resilience in bilateral relations by reducing vulnerability to debt-related controversies or reputational issues associated with singular high-profile projects. However, entity and regional variations in perception underscore the importance of a differentiated approach: while East Sarajevo provides a receptive audience, Sarajevo requires balanced cultural diplomacy that accounts for political sensitivities, and Brčko represents both the greatest challenge and opportunity for building trust through localized, people-centered initiatives.

Policy implications flow directly from these patterns. For Chinese institutions, strengthening cultural programming in Brčko and expanding beyond university-based initiatives in Sarajevo could help even out disparities in perception. For policymakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, promoting openness and keeping cultural and educational cooperation free from political interference can reduce suspicions of external influence while allowing the country to benefit from these exchanges. At the regional level, Bosnia and Herzegovina's diversified, education-led profile offers an opportunity to serve as a model of sustainable Sino-engagement that complements, rather than mirrors, the infrastructure-centric experiences of its neighbors.

In sum, Bosnia and Herzegovina's case demonstrates how the geopolitical complexities of a decentralized state intersect with the evolving contours of China's soft power strategy in Europe. The future of this relationship will depend less on a single project or policy initiative, and more on the ability to cultivate inclusive, balanced, and locally grounded avenues of exchange that resonate across Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal divisions while aligning with broader European dynamics.

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МЕКА МОЋ И КИНЕСКО-БАЛКАНСКИ ОДНОСИ: КИНЕСКА ЈЕЗИЧКА, ОБРАЗОВНА И КУЛТУРНА ДИПЛОМАТИЈА У БОСНИ И ХЕРЦЕГОВИНИ

Резиме

Рад анализира улогу кинеске „меке моћи“ у развоју кинеско-босанско-херцеговачких и ширих кинеско-балканских односа, са посебним фокусом на језик, образовање и културну дипломатију. Као примјер се истиче Босна и Херцеговина, у којој је од оснивања Катедре за синологију Универзитета у Источном Сарајеву 2011. године дошло до значајног развоја наставе кинеског језика, ХСК тестирања, програма стипендија, Конфуцијевих института и такмичења „Кинески мост“.

У раду се показује да кинески језик и културно-образовне активности нису само средство језичког учења, већ важан канал међукултурног разумијевања, академске сарадње и дугорочног приближавања Кине и Босне и Херцеговине. Посебна пажња посвећена је резултатима анкете спроведене у Сарајеву, Источном Сарајеву и Брчком, који показују да су ставови јавности према Кини најпозитивнији у срединама са снажним институционалним присуством кинеског језика и културе, док су скепса и страх израженији тамо гдје такве структуре нису развијене.

Закључује се да Босна и Херцеговина представља специфичан примјер кинеског ангажмана на Балкану, јер се односи са Кином више развијају кроз образовање, културу и контакте међу људима него кроз велике инфраструктурне пројекте. Рад наглашава потребу за уравнотеженим, транспарентним и локално прилагођеним приступом културној дипломатији, како би се јачало повјерење, смањивале предрасуде и развијала одржива сарадња између Босне и Херцеговине и Кине.

Кључне ријечи: мека моћ, културна дипломатија, образовна дипломатија, Босна и Херцеговина, Западни Балкан, Кина