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Non-Western Public Diplomacy in the Western Balkans ^[1]

Located in southeastern Europe, the Western Balkans is a region that comprises six countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The region is marked by its rich blend of history, ethnicity and politics, as well as a tumultuous past that continues to shape its dynamic present. The Western Balkans have attracted the attention of some powerful global actors — including non-Western nations such as China, Türkiye and Russia — each using a unique approach to public diplomacy in the region.

Although relatively new to the region, China is expanding its influence in the Western Balkans through various methods, such as the implementation of large infrastructure projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as cultural exchanges and media partnerships. With regard to infrastructure, China has invested heavily in the Western Balkans, such as the Budapest-Belgrade high-speed railway, the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade and significant highway

projects in Montenegro and North Macedonia. Not bound by the stringent regulations and conditions that come with EU funds, Chinese loans and investments are often seen as more attractive and accessible for many Western Balkan countries. However, the picture is not all rosy. The substantial debt accumulated from these deals, often called “debt diplomacy,” raises significant concerns about the countries' future financial stability.

Furthermore, there is more to the story than just steel and concrete. China has diligently expanded its public diplomacy in the region through cultural exchanges and media partnerships. Despite closure of Confucius Institutes in some EU countries — as well as the criticism surrounding them — cultural cooperation with the region remains in the countries of the Western Balkans, except for Kosovo. Not only has China established media partnerships with some Western Balkan public television stations with the free airing of Chinese programs , news management also seems to be occurring. For instance, it's common to find columns and articles on various popular print and online media platforms written by the Chinese ambassador. Also, there is an active sister cities framework between Chinese and Western Balkan cities. Additionally, the "vaccine and mask diplomacy" during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, where China provided much-needed medical aid and expertise, further boosted Beijing's image in the region.

Through its "Digital Silk Road" program, Beijing has also invested heavily in technology and digital infrastructure in the Western Balkans, including building 5G networks, smart cities and e-commerce platforms. Huawei has been at the forefront of these initiatives, particularly in Serbia, where it has established a "Safe City" project, providing advanced surveillance systems.

Unlike China, one of the main assets of Türkiye's soft power approach in the Western Balkans is the shared historical and cultural connections. The era of the Ottoman Empire left an indelible imprint on the region, not only in terms of architecture and history but also in people's day-to-day customs and traditions. Türkiye shows us that culture can be more than a shared nostalgia; it can be a diplomatic asset in contemporary geopolitics. Türkiye is extending its influence through public diplomacy, primarily through YTB, T?KA and the YEE Institute. Türkiye's comprehensive approach combines trade and cultural diplomacy, with funding for Turkish language schools, history courses emphasizing the shared Ottoman history, and broadcasting of Türkiyeish soap operas known as "dizi," which have gained significant popularity in the Western Balkans over the past decade.

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Türkiye has also established strong economic ties by being a top trading partner for many countries in the region: from infrastructure projects to textile industries. Türkiye's model, known as the approach that marries aid with investment, was evident after the earthquake in Albania in 2019 and during the COVID-19 crisis, when Türkiye provided vaccines, assisted in their procurement, and built a new hospital in record time.

In 2023 the Republic of Türkiye celebrated its 100th anniversary. All countries in the Western Balkans observed this day with reverence. Various cultural events took place throughout the region and one notable highlight was the illumination of Mostars Old Bridge in the colors representing Türkiye's flag. Additionally, Serbia paid tribute to this occasion by issuing a postage stamp featuring a picture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

With regard to Russia's diplomacy in the Western Balkans, energy dependence and shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage have emerged as key factors. Russia's public diplomacy uses different mechanisms to realize its interests, from using contacts with local politicians and the Orthodox Church, to various proxy groups. One example is the pro-Kremlin motorcycle movement known as the Night Wolves, which is active in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, Russian cultural centers, often referred to as "Russkiy Dom," play a significant role in promoting Russia's soft power in the region. A famous example is the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Belgrade, which offers a variety of activities ranging from Russian language courses to film and art exhibitions, as well as workshops about Russian literature, history and current events. Another example is the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, located in Nish, which primarily focuses on delivering emergency humanitarian aid to the Balkan region. Despite EU sanctions, Russian funds such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Aleksandar Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund are still actively operating in the Western Balkans.

Russia also uses an intricate network of media outlets to spread its narratives and strengthen its influence. Russian media outlets operate across the region, including *Russia Today* and the *Sputnik* news agency. Also, it is evident that pro-Russian narratives significantly impact this region, mainly through Serbian tabloids. The widespread understanding of the Serbian language among residents from the Yugoslav era only magnifies the range of this influence, making it a powerful tool. However, Russia lacks a solid economic or political counter-offer to the EU or China, so its soft power is felt mainly in Serbia, Republika Srpska and Montenegro due to shared religious and cultural connections.

Clearly, the influence of China, Türkiye and Russia through public diplomacy in the Western Balkans is a complex interplay of economic, cultural and political factors. Each country follows unique strategies: China leverages economic power through the BRI; Türkiye uses cultural diplomacy and investments; and Russia relies on historical ties. But whether it's building bridges (literally and metaphorically), airing soap operas or kindling cultural affinity, bear in mind that while these efforts significantly shape each nation's image in the region, the Western Balkans' aspirations to join the EU remain a crucial factor that can counterbalance or overshadow the influence of these non-western powers.

To conclude, a comprehensive and systematic analysis of public diplomatic activities by both Western and non-Western actors in this geopolitically strategic area is essential, since history has taught us that what happens in the Western Balkans usually doesn't just stay there.
