ANALYSING DRIVERS OF SERBIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON CHINA: THE "IRON FRIENDSHIP" IN GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, Sino-Serbian relations have been at unprecedented heights, with China becoming one of Serbia's top trading partners and investors. At the same time, the strained relations between the EU and China, and especially between the US and China, pose a challenge for Serbia. The country is caught between its EU aspirations and orientation towards the global West on the one hand and its socialist heritage on the other. In this context, this paper employs a multifaceted approach to analyse Serbian public opinion towards China, presenting prevalent perceptions and positing underlying determinants. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, a nationally representative survey is studied, and the results are interpreted in the context of historical realities, contemporary economic ties, and local and geopolitical considerations. Key findings underscore the significance of economic well-being, local politics, and global power dynamics for shaping public sentiment. Furthermore, it is shown that contemporary sentiments reshape perceptions of historical periods, even for those who lived through them. This research highlights the complexity of factors steering public opinion while at the same time emphasising its malleability. Providing a nuanced portrayal of perceptions underpinning the Sino-Serbian "Iron Friendship", this research contributes to a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics characterising contemporary international relations.

Sino-Serbian Relations

The Republic of Serbia (hereinafter Serbia) and the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) established a strategic partnership in 2009, and their relationship has been becoming increasingly closer in the subsequent years,

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building on ties established when Serbia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Through the mechanisms of the Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China and Serbia have signed a number of economic and cultural agreements, and China is now one of Serbia's top trading partners and investors. At the same time, the two countries maintain a political dialogue with mutual visits at the highest level. In recent years, the relationship has been termed an "Iron Friendship" to further facilitate bilateral cooperation (Gledić 2019).

However, China's growing presence in Serbia has also been a source of tension. In terms of internal affairs, it has long been known that the BRI investment projects carry financial and environmental risks (Liu 2016), and specific work practices could hinder the sustainable development of Serbia's transition economy and further delay its European Union (EU) accession process (Gledić 2020). In terms of foreign affairs, China is one of the main pillars of Serbia's foreign policy alongside the EU, Russia, and the United States of America (US), and deepening Sino-Serbian relations could be an asset in an unpredictably changing global context (Dimitrijević 2020). At the same time, the presence of global powers in Serbia and the Balkans region is seen as a possible zero-sum game (Zweers et al. 2020), and the competition for influence is unlikely to change despite the crisis that shifts the focus of geopolitical competition (Zarić and Budimir 2022). A future of sustainable development without conflicts is possible for Serbia and its region through the deliberate collaboration of global powers (Gledić 2021). However, with the history of political divisions and economic instability, all factors impacting the country's socio-political reforms should be closely studied. This paper tackles the research puzzle of how China and Sino-Serbian relations are perceived in Serbia in the outlined context and whether drivers of public opinion can be determined.

Public Perception

This study is placed in the context of Sino-Serbian relations as well as the wider milieu of the role of public opinion in geopolitics and policymaking. Public opinion can provide valuable insights into larger currents within a culture, and it is also inextricably tied to public policy and government legitimacy in democratic societies (Glynn et al. 2018). While the field of public opinion research is characterised by a diversity of theories and methods, studies consistently show links between the evaluations of the public on the one hand and media and politics on the other (Norrander and Wilcox 2009). The recognition of the significance of perceptions is reflected in the shift of China's foreign policy in the years prior to the start of the BRI, abandoning their low-profile approach and striving to improve relations through assertiveness (e.g., Deng 2008; Yan 2014).

This likely contributed to improved public perceptions of China throughout Asia (Zheng 2019; Rahman and Shehab 2023; Xi 2023), as well as initial positive public perceptions of the BRI in Europe (Turcsanyi and Kachlikova 2020). In recent years, however, public opinion on China has become more negative due to its perceived role in the start of the global coronavirus pandemic (e.g., Neafie 2022) as well as increasing critical coverage of the BRI (Yang and Van Gorp 2023). Still, in Serbia, the pandemic seems to have strengthened bilateral relations (Kowalski and Rekść 2023), signalling the established resilience of BRI strategic communication in this country (Mitić 2017), which makes it a notable case to study the potential drivers of public perceptions.

Prior to the intensification of Sino-Serbian collaboration in the past decade, two studies researched the views of China and Chinese citizens in Serbia. Blagojević (2009) established the most common stereotypes, but also that younger populations identify local Chinese immigrants with China, while older populations clearly distinguish between the two. She found that China is perceived as vast and far and that it is most often associated with symbols of China, such as the Great Wall. There were more positive associations than negative ones, and the latter were most often related to the poor quality of imported goods. Trklja (2009) focused on the perceptions of Chinese immigrants in Serbia. She found that while there were negative perceptions of the quality of Chinese goods, there was also appreciation because those were the only easily available consumer goods during the periods of economic sanctions in the 1990s. A similar ambivalence also seems to exist today in both Serbia and other Central and Eastern European countries, where China is perceived simultaneously as a threat and an opportunity (Pavlićević 2018). It should also be noted that the Serbian government's perception towards China is more straightforward and clearly positive (Jojić 2017), and research on a smaller sample of young people (Petrović 2018) indicates this might start to be reflected in public opinion. After the start of the BRI, there have been a number of studies on Sino-Serbian relations in a geopolitical context (e.g., Dimitrijević 2018; Stojadinović and Rašković Talović 2018; Marciacq 2020; Šekarić Stojanović 2020; Božić Miljković 2021; Stojanović-Višić, Jelisavac Trošić and Simić 2023), as well as public opinion poll reports (e.g., BCSP 2020; IEP 2022; Rašeta et al. 2023). However, there remains a gap in linking the two in detailed, focused analyses that take into account both global and local contexts, which is the aim of this research.

In the framework of this study, it is also significant to note studies on the public perception of China vis-à-vis other global powers with a significant presence in Serbia—the EU, large Western European countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK)), Russia, and the US. In the past decade, research has consistently shown a general scepticism towards the EU and leading NATO countries in the Serbian public (e.g., Popović 2017; Vuksanovic,

Steric, and Bjelos 2022), seen as insincere and hypocritical actors likely due to their involvement in the civil war that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia. On the other hand, Russia and China are seen as close partners, even though not all aspects of their socio-political systems are seen as positive. Recent findings even directly link the positive perception of Russia and China to the slowing down of the EU's enlargement plans because they are increasingly seen as less demanding (Khaze 2022). This research shows that the Serbian public is divided on both its democratic EU future and the appeal of alternative, more authoritarian socio-political systems, which can be a sign of remaining open to a pragmatic way forward in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable global context.

Analysing Serbian Public Opinion on China

Method

This paper employs a multifaceted approach to analyse Serbian public opinion towards China using quantitative and qualitative methods. A nationally representative survey is studied, and the results are interpreted in the context of historical realities, contemporary economic ties, and local and geopolitical considerations.

This research is based on the Serbian section of a large-scale survey conducted in 13 European countries (Turcsanyi et al. 2020). The sample (n = 1500) is representative of the Serbian population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, localisation within the country (region), and settlement density (size of settlement). Data was collected in September and October 2020 online with the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method, with responses from 147 participants collected face-to-face with the computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) method as it was difficult to reach participants with lower levels of education who were underrepresented in online panels.

A general report on Serbian public opinion on China based on the above data has been published (Gledić et al. 2021), and the main findings are summarised below. This paper, however, presents a more detailed interpretation of these findings as well as an additional unpublished analysis of a subset of the data related to the goals of the current study. The quantitative analysis presented below was performed using the JASP software (Version 0.18.3) to calculate descriptive statistics and correlation and Microsoft Excel software (Version 2312 Build 16.0.17126.20132) to visualise the results. Content and thematic analysis were applied to the qualitative data to establish patterns.

The analysis starts with an extended summary of the principal published findings, with additional data, analyses, and interpretations. Then, connections between attitudes towards China and other global powers and local socio-economic factors, sense of identity, and political opinions are presented in separate sections. The analysis concludes with a section on the perceptions of China and Sino-Serbian relations based on the public opinion survey data.

Analysis

Public Opinion on China

The general report on public opinion on China in Serbia (Gledić et al. 2021) notes that there is a decisively positive view of China, with a majority of respondents reporting a positive (31.93%) or very positive (28.73%) attitude. Additionally, almost half (47.70%) of the respondents stated that their view of China had improved in the past three years before the survey. They view trade with China, Chinese investments, the BRI, and China's military power positively (mean values of 66.66%, 63.76%, 61.46%, and 59.15%, respectively), and China's impact on the global environment and its influence on democracy in other countries only slightly negatively (mean values of 45.76% and 44.57%, respectively).

In terms of foreign policy priorities in Sino-Serbian relations, more than two-thirds of the respondents believe these should be cooperation on global issues, such as climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism (72.10%), and promoting trade and investment (72.10%). Around one-half of the respondents agree that the Serbian foreign policy towards China should be focused on addressing intellectual property rights (51.90%), cyber security (50.60%), and advancing human rights and democratic reform in China (47.80%). Finally, slightly less than one-third think Serbia should focus on preventing China's geopolitical expansion (29.70%). It should be noted, however, that this question was the same for all the studied countries in the general survey and it did not offer choices related to key national issues, such as, for example, China's support for Serbia's position on Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in the United Nations Security Council, which might be high in perceived foreign policy priorities.

Compared to attitudes towards other countries included in the survey and relevant to the present study, China is the most positively viewed foreign country in Serbia after Russia. In contrast, attitudes towards the US and the UK are negative (further elaborated below). Almost half of the respondents view Russia as very positive (43.72%) and less than 5% as very negative (3.60%), and for China, it is around one-third as very positive (28.72%) and less than 10% as very negative (8.01%). France and Germany are in the middle, with around one-

fifth very positive (19.48% and 20.90%) and around one-tenth very negative (9.69% and 12.30%). Finally, the UK and the US have similar inversely proportional values (10.90% and 13.30% very positive, respectively, and 22.30% and 24.40% very negative, respectively).

Looking at the different characteristics of the powers that are said to be the four pillars of Serbian foreign policy, Russia is perceived as the leading military power (54.60% of respondents seeing it as very strong), followed by China and the US (seen as very strong by 42.24% and 41.60%). In contrast, less than one-tenth (7.11%) of the respondents assess the EU's military power as very strong. When it comes to the economy, China is clearly at the forefront, with almost half of the respondents seeing it as economically very strong (43.50%), followed by the US (33.30%), Russia (29.30%), and the EU (16.42%). Interestingly, when it comes to the perceived importance of these powers for the economic development of Serbia, Russia, the EU, and China are seen as almost equally important (seen as very important by 23.20%, 22.78%, and 20.90% of respondents, respectively). In comparison, the US is seen as very important by a half-smaller number of respondents (10.80%). This is also reflected in the perceived need to align Serbia's foreign policy with global powers, with the mean value being over the mid-point of the scale for Russia, China, and the EU and slightly below for the US (6.66, 6.07, 5.96, and 4.95, respectively, on a 10-point scale).

When it comes to socio-political factors, Russia is seen as possessing the most attractive culture (seen as very attractive by 26.30% of the respondents), followed by China (20.80%), the EU (16.18%), and then the US (8.30%). This attitude is somewhat consistent with the perception of trust, with Russia seen as strongly trusted by the highest percentage of respondents (12.69%), followed by China (7.20%), the EU (2.90%), and the US (2.30%). However, when it comes to assessing the human rights situation, Russia and the EU are on top (the situation was assessed as very good by 9.90% and 8.69% of the respondents), followed by China and the US with almost the same percentage (5.99% and 5.69%, respectively).

The findings published in the general report align with the previously cited studies. Additionally, in this study, highly statistically significant positive correlations of Serbian attitudes towards China and France (Spearman's rho 0.170***, $p < .001$), Germany (Spearman's rho 0.111***, $p < .001$), and Russia (Spearman's rho 0.533***, $p < .001$) were found, but no statistically significant correlation was found with the UK (Spearman's rho 0.032, $p = 0.210$) or the US (Spearman's rho 0.006, $p = 0.826$). It is interesting to note that the only negative ties found among the analysed pairs were for attitudes towards Russia and the US (Spearman's rho -0.066*, $p = 0.011$), with a low statistical significance, and Russia and the UK (Spearman's rho -0.050*, $p = 0.054$), with no statistically

significant correlation. These figures indicate a divide into the so-called "East" and "West", with the latter denoting the Anglo-American cultures rather than Euro-American, which should be further investigated.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents did not predict the attitude towards China and other global powers, but there are slight differences when it comes to age groups (Figure 1). Young people (aged 18–29) have a slightly more positive view of China, France, Germany, Russia, and the UK but a slightly more negative view of the US than other age groups, except for China, where the most positive attitude is held by those aged 60–70 and France by those 50–59. However, differences are apparent regarding the respondents' socio-political attitudes (further elaborated below). In terms of attitudes towards China, of the respondents who reported their support for a specific political party, the most positive views are found among the supporters of the parties that have been in power since the increase in cooperation with China: the Serbian Progressive Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia (very positive 41.60% and 37.00%). In comparison, less than half of declared supporters of opposition parties have very positive attitudes (e.g., 15.30% among Democratic Party supporters). Regarding ideological alignment, a larger percentage of those who see themselves as closer to the East view China as very positive (39.90%) compared to those identifying more with the West (24.50%). Similar percentages are seen with regard to communism: those with a positive view of communism are more likely to have very positive views of China (38.46%) than those with a negative view of communism (25.80%).

Figure 1: Attitudes of Serbian citizens of different age groups towards different countries (median values, 100-point scale from very negative to very positive)
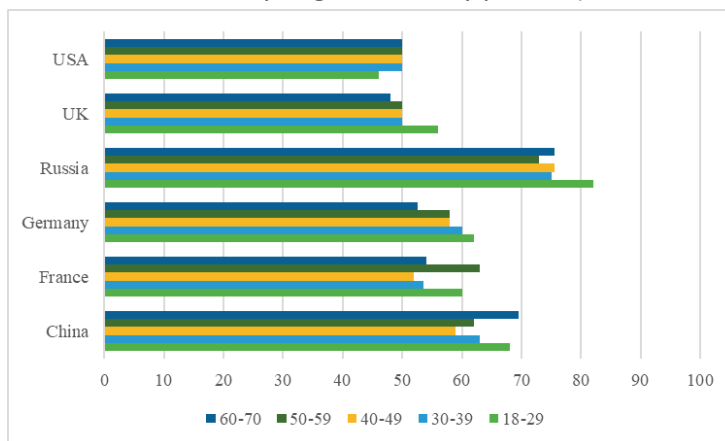
Source: Author's calculation.

As a final point in the extended summary of the main findings of the published report, it should be noted that the survey was conducted during the global coronavirus pandemic, which is said to have originated in China, so this is reflected in both the survey questions and the results. For example, the survey noted that a vast majority of the respondents think that China helped Serbia the most during the pandemic (60.20%, compared to 36.80% for Russia, 19.30% for the EU, and 5.10% for the US), which could have been a factor in the registered pronounced general improvement of the Serbian public's attitudes towards China. The coronavirus pandemic also frequently appears as an answer to the open-ended question on associations linked with China, noted below in the sections on public perceptions.

The published general report concludes that the public opinion survey results suggest that "Serbia might have an unyielding alliance with China, with public opinion improving over time and unaffected by views on socio-political issues" (Gledić et al. 2021, 5). The increasingly positive attitude towards China is tied to both the increased Sino-Serbian collaboration and the stagnating or even slowing down of Serbia's EU accession process. Additionally, as the EU is seen as the weakest military power, it should be noted that if forced to choose between EU membership and ties with powers with strong militaries such as China and Russia, the Serbian public, living in a developing economy in a region with long-standing unresolved territorial issues and a recent history of civil war, might be faced with a difficult but clear choice of standing with a more militarily powerful ally.

Connections between Attitudes towards China and Other Global Powers and Local Socio-Economic Factors

Considering that the socio-demographic characteristics were not found to be good predictors of attitudes towards China, and at the same time, significant differences were noted regarding socio-political attitudes, connections with satisfaction with the local political and economic situation were next explored. The correlations between, on the one hand, attitudes towards countries relevant to Serbia's foreign policy as noted above (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US) and, on the other hand, satisfaction with the economic and political situation in Serbia and the respondents' own economic wellbeing were measured (Table 1). Satisfaction on all three measures of local socio-economic factors was highly statistically significantly positively correlated with attitudes towards only China and Russia. There were medium to high statistically significant positive correlations for all three measures for France and a low statistically significant positive correlation between satisfaction with the economic situation in Serbia and attitudes towards the US. Furthermore,

negative connections are noted between satisfaction with the political situation in Serbia and attitudes towards Germany and the UK, but there is no statistically significant correlation.

Table 1: Correlations between attitudes towards countries
and satisfaction with local socio-political factors

Attitude towards:	Satisfaction with:	Spearman's rho	p
China	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.310***	< .001
	- The political situation in Serbia	0.330***	< .001
	- Your own economic well-being	0.184***	< .001
France	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.101***	< .001
	- The political situation in Serbia	0.073**	0.005
	- Your own economic well-being	0.075**	0.004
Germany	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.035	0.171
	- The political situation in Serbia	-0.002	0.926
	- Your own economic well-being	0.020	0.429
Russia	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.188***	< .001
	- The political situation in Serbia	0.211***	< .001
	- Your own economic well-being	0.118***	< .001
UK	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.032	0.219
	- The political situation in Serbia	-0.001	0.965
	- Your own economic well-being	0.022	0.404
US	- The economic situation in Serbia	0.066*	0.010
	- The political situation in Serbia	0.034	0.186
	- Your own economic well-being	0.039	0.130

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's calculation.

These findings indicate that the perceptions of China and Russia are linked with notions of national prosperity and personal well-being. That is, those who are more satisfied with the current state of Serbia's political system and economy are highly likely those with a more positive attitude towards China and Russia and, by inference, their political and socio-economic systems. The

low correlation between satisfaction with the Serbian economy and attitudes towards the US is likely due to the perception of the US as a leading global economic power, which is unavoidably significant for Serbia's development. However, no such importance is apparently attributed to Western European powers, except for France. The positive correlations in the case of France could perhaps be explained by a perceived shared socialist history and the legacy of France's aid to Serbia during World War I, but this requires further study.

Notably, while highly statistically significant correlations with attitudes towards China and Russia were noted for those who are satisfied with local socio-economic factors, there were no statistically significant negative correlations. This indicates that those who are less satisfied with the political and economic situation in Serbia, which is contributing to the delay of its EU accession process, are not clearly oriented towards EU powers (namely, France and Germany) and the system and values they represent.

Connections between Opinions on Global Powers and Sense of Identity

Further to exploring links with socio-political factors, this section explores connections with the respondents' sense of identity. As noted above, differences were observed in the attitudes of those who identify more with the so-called "East" when compared with those who identify with the so-called "West". As could be expected, there were also highly statistically significant correlations: positive for China (Spearman's rho 0.171***, $p < .001$) and Russia (Spearman's rho 0.283***, $p < .001$) and negative for France (Spearman's rho -0.165***, $p < .001$), Germany (Spearman's rho -0.188***, $p < .001$), the UK (Spearman's rho -0.148***, $p < .001$) and the US (Spearman's rho -0.216***, $p < .001$). To advance and refine the understanding of these findings, correlations between, on the one hand, attitudes towards countries relevant to Serbia's foreign policy as noted above (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US) and, on the other hand, agreement with statements on the respondents' sense of identity—Serbian and European—were measured (Table 2). There were three statements for the national and three for the regional identity, which had the same basis and aimed to capture potential nuances between the perceived importance of the identity (Being Serbian/European is an important part of my identity.), the respondents' perception of their identity (I am glad to be Serbian/European.), and their true sense of belonging (I feel a bond with people from my country/Europeans.). The statistical significance mostly grouped these responses into the national and regional axes, with some interesting exceptions.

Table 2: Correlations between attitudes towards countries and agreement with statements about identity

Attitude towards:	Agreement with the statement:	Spearman's rho	p
China	- I am glad to be Serbian.	0.231***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	0.231***	< .001
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	0.172***	< .001
	- I am glad to be European.	0.063*	0.015
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	0.038	0.145
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.025	0.34
France	- I am glad to be Serbian.	0.012	0.655
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	0.037	0.157
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	-0.017	0.502
	- I am glad to be European.	0.23***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	0.245***	< .001
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.179***	< .001
Germany	- I am glad to be Serbian.	-0.145***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	-0.081**	0.002
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	-0.161***	< .001
	- I am glad to be European.	0.201***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	0.237***	< .001
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.185***	< .001
Russia	- I am glad to be Serbian.	0.226***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	0.304***	< .001
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	0.289***	< .001
	- I am glad to be European.	0.064*	0.013
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	-0.014	0.597
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.016	0.546
UK	- I am glad to be Serbian.	-0.122***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	-0.079**	0.002
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	-0.144***	< .001
	- I am glad to be European.	0.169***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	0.221***	< .001
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.148***	< .001
US	- I am glad to be Serbian.	0.123***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with people from my country.	-0.064*	0.013
	- Being Serbian is an important part of my identity.	-0.122***	< .001
	- I am glad to be European.	0.159***	< .001
	- I feel a bond with Europeans.	0.226***	< .001
	- Being European is an important part of my identity.	0.152***	< .001

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Source: Author's calculation.

In line with previous results, there was a highly statistically significant positive correlation between a sense of national identity and attitudes towards China and Russia. In both cases, there was also a low statistical significance for the positive correlation between the perception of European identity but not its importance and a sense of belonging. This could point to Serbia's often-mentioned position of belonging both to the so-called "East" and the so-called "West" or the struggle between feeling European but not EU-European (i.e., geographically and historically belonging to Europe but not being able to have it as an important part of one's identity, as today the notion of Europe is often conflated with the EU). Conversely, there is a highly statistically significant positive correlation between attitudes and a sense of European identity for all the other countries—even for the US and post-Brexit UK. This fortifies the idea that there is still a strong existing "East" and "West" division, in this case, with no significant difference between Europe and Anglo-American cultures. When it comes to the sense of Serbian national identity, in the case of France, there is no statistically significant difference in attitudes. At the same time, attitudes are medium to highly statistically significantly negatively correlated with a sense of national identity for Germany and the UK. In the case of the US, there are statistically significant correlations on all three measures—positive only for the perception of the national identity—which should be further explored. Given the overall positive perceptions of China and Russia, the connection between a stronger sense of national identity and positive attitudes towards these countries, and by inference, their socio-political systems, is not surprising. However, it is important to note that there are no strong negative correlations with the sense of European identity. This could indicate that the "East" and "West" divide is still not mutually exclusive on the level of the Serbian citizens' sense of identity and belonging, which leaves room for support of pragmatic, middle-of-the-road, or issue-based solutions in the domain of foreign policy.

Connections Between Opinions on Global Powers and Politics

The final section on potential drivers of attitudes towards global powers explores connections with opinions on political systems. When it comes to the perceptions of Serbia's communist period, as could be expected based on the findings noted above, there is a highly statistically significant positive correlation with attitudes towards China (Spearman's rho 0.099***, $p < .001$) (i.e., those who view Serbia's communist past as more positive are highly likely to have more positive attitudes towards China). However, no statistically significant correlation was found on this item for the other analysed powers.

The divisive labelling of "East" versus "West" has been mentioned and is reflected in the results, but such a distinction is too simplistic and deceptively

clear-cut. All modern global powers have been operating on the international scene for at least a century, and their actions could have been aligned with different political ideologies throughout history despite their declarative modes of governance. To better understand the above-considered findings and initial conclusions, correlations between, on the one hand, attitudes towards countries relevant to Serbia's foreign policy as noted above (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US) and, on the other hand, attitudes towards authoritarianism, capitalism, communism, democracy, and liberalism were measured (Table 3). While any survey of abstract concepts could be based on different understandings of the notions in question and thus misleading, this section provides an exploratory analysis meant to add to the overall framework of the study.

Table 3: Correlations between attitudes towards countries
and political ideologies

Attitude towards:	Attitude towards:	Spearman's rho	p
China	- Authoritarianism	0.149***	< .001
	- Capitalism	0.037	0.152
	- Communism	0.101***	< .001
	- Democracy	0.047	0.067
	- Liberalism	0.110***	< .001
France	- Authoritarianism	0.085**	0.001
	- Capitalism	0.266***	< .001
	- Communism	0.033	0.202
	- Democracy	0.216***	< .001
	- Liberalism	0.242***	< .001
Germany	- Authoritarianism	0.049	0.058
	- Capitalism	0.223***	< .001
	- Communism	-0.004	0.874
	- Democracy	0.196***	< .001
	- Liberalism	0.240***	< .001
Russia	- Authoritarianism	0.103***	< .001
	- Capitalism	-0.039	0.127
	- Communism	0.028	0.272
	- Democracy	-0.007	0.800
	- Liberalism	-0.023	0.381

Attitude towards:	Attitude towards:	Spearman's rho	p
UK	- Authoritarianism	0.112***	< .001
	- Capitalism	0.241***	< .001
	- Communism	0.083**	0.001
	- Democracy	0.12***	< .001
	- Liberalism	0.239***	< .001
US	- Authoritarianism	0.094***	< .001
	- Capitalism	0.267***	< .001
	- Communism	0.024	0.353
	- Democracy	0.115***	< .001
	- Liberalism	0.133***	< .001

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Source: Author's calculation.

In line with the above finding, there is a highly statistically significant positive correlation between attitudes towards communism and China, but also a medium statistically significant positive correlation with the UK. Surprisingly, there are no statistically significant negative correlations. Conversely, for capitalism and democracy, there are highly statistically significant positive correlations with attitudes towards France, Germany, the UK, and the US, but there are no statistically significant correlations for China and Russia. However, there is a highly statistically significant positive correlation between attitudes towards liberalism and all the above so-called "Western" countries as well as China. This could indicate notions identified when analysing the qualitative data that China is perceived as more of a neoliberal than a socialist economy. Finally, there is medium to high statistical significance when it comes to positive correlations between attitudes towards authoritarianism and all of the studied countries except Germany. This supports the above-outlined idea that all global powers are first and foremost powers, at least in the public eye of the population of a relatively small nation. Germany could be an exception due to the 20th-century consequences of its authoritarian rule and the legacy of the Axis occupation of Serbia in World War II, which might make it more difficult for members of the public to, even subconsciously, link the two positively. However, this should be further examined along with the other results of this exploratory analysis.

Perceptions of China and Sino-Serbian Relations

The following section presents the perceptions of the Serbian public about China and Sino-Serbian relations. In this survey, the Serbian public assessed their knowledge of China as average (median five on a 10-point scale). Less than 3% have visited China (n = 40). Their primary sources of information on China are news media (median six on a 10-point scale), social media (median six on a 10-point scale), books (median five on a 10-point scale), and visits to Chinese shops and restaurants in Serbia (median five on a 10-point scale), followed by statements of politicians (median four on a 10-point scale) and friends or family who visited China (median three on a 10-point scale).

Based on this knowledge, in a series of questions assessing the perceptions of China on semantic differential scales, the Serbian public assessed China as more (median 2 points from the middle of a 9-point scale) interesting than uninteresting, more leading than subordinate, more active than passive, more friendly than unfriendly, and slightly more (median 1 point from the middle of a 9-point scale) familiar than unknown, slightly more trustworthy than untrustworthy, slightly more colourful than grey, slightly more pleasant than unpleasant, slightly more civilised than uncivilised, and slightly more traditional than modern, while median assessments of the threatening and non-threatening and tolerant and intolerant pairs were in the middle of the 9-point semantic differential scale.

The survey also contained an open-ended question, "What first comes to mind when you hear about China?" to assess the perceptions of China among the Serbian public. The most prominent categories that could be identified are China's size, China's global power, and Sino-Serbian ties (both positive and negative), followed by symbols of China and aspects of Chinese history (ancient and modern), which is in line with previous research. China's size is mentioned most often in terms of its population (e.g., "the most populous country" (*најмногољуднија земља)*, "large population" (*велики број становника)*). In terms of power, China is seen as a rising global power (e.g., "super-power of the future" (*супер сила будућности)*, "they managed to rival America and Europe" (*успели су да парирају Америци и Европи)*, "someone who will rule the world" (*неко ко ће освојити свет)*). Linked to the category of Sino-Serbian ties, this power is mentioned as important and beneficial for Serbia (e.g., "a mighty power that is becoming the number 1 global power and it is good they are on our side" (*моћна сила која постаје светска сила број 1 и добро је што је уз нас)*, "it is good that we are so close to China because they are a great power" (*добро је што смо се толико приближили Кини, јер они су огромна сила)*, with one respondent even noting that the first that comes to

their mind is that China is "a very friendly country defending us [Serbia] from the EU" (*веома пријатељска земља која нас брани од ЕУ*).

Sino-Serbian ties are most often mentioned in reference to the friendship between the two countries and peoples, as well as the Chinese projects in Serbia. However, while some respondents are grateful (e.g., "Hardworking and honest people with excellent governance. Thanks for the Steel Mill and Bor [mine]." (*Вредан и поштен народ, са одличним уређењем. Хвала им за Железару и Бор.*) while others note the environmental consequences and poor working conditions (e.g., "Smederevo Steel Mill, Bor [mine] and air pollution" (*Железара Смедерево, Бор и загађење ваздуха*), "pollution in Serbia" (*загађење у Србији*), "hard working conditions, the lowest paid domestic workforce in Serbia" (*тешки услови рада, најјефтиније плаћена наша радна снага у Србији*), and one respondent even mentions a personal bad experiences with Chinese employers "Exploitative employers-bosses. A Chinese person beat me at work." (*Експлоататорски послодавци-газде. Један Кинез ме тукао на послу.*). The answers also reflect the previously noted ambivalence, with China being seen as powerful but potentially dangerous or successful but at a high cost. This dichotomy is interestingly expressed in one response where it is noted that China is an "interesting culture" with "good food" and "hardworking people", but at the same time with "a total oppression of the freedom of speech" (*Добра храна, занимљива култура, вредни људи, тотална опресија слободе говора.*).

The symbols of China mentioned in the responses include the typical rice, chopsticks, the Great Wall, dragons, and Kungfu, as in previous research. This study also registers the mention of several modern global companies like Huawei, Xiaomi, and AliExpress, but also symbols of other East Asian countries such as origami, sushi, and karate, reflecting the associative blending of distinct cultures, which has been previously noted on various levels and is likely rooted in racialised perspectives of ethnicity (Gledić 2016). Several respondents also mention common stereotypes about Chinese people, such as eating pets (e.g., "they eat all kinds of things, including pets" (*да једу све и свашта, укључујући и кућне љубимце*), "traditional killing and eating of dogs" (*традиционално убијање и једење паса)*, and poor production practices (e.g., "plagiarising, forging, bad quality" (*плагирање, фалсификовање, лош квалитет*)). In terms of Chinese history, it is mentioned through responses noting the ancient Silk Road but also modern communism. Considering the most recent history, many respondents also mention the coronavirus pandemic as the first thing that comes to mind when they think about China. It is, however, important to note that the assessment of these perceptions as positive or negative is not straightforward. For example, due to Serbia's arguably prosperous socialist past, communism might have a positive connotation, as could the term "cheap

products", which were highly appreciated during the economic crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The questionnaire for Serbia in this research contained several specific items aimed at better understanding the dynamics of Serbian public opinion on China and potential underpinning drivers. Respondents were asked to assess in which period of history they think China and Serbia had the best relations, with several options offered and a possible selection of multiple options. Unsurprisingly, around two-thirds of the respondents (n = 974) selected recent years under the current president, followed by one-third (n = 490) who selected the period up until the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and then less than one-tenth selected the 1990s (n = 112), 2000s (n = 83), and 2010s (n = 86). The options were intentionally linked to specific presidents to check whether the perception of the quality of Sino-Serbian relations is linked to specific individuals. This finding shows that the historical reality that Sino-Serbian relations began to strengthen before 2009 and have been relatively sustainably improving since is not perceived as a historical continuum and is reflected, for example, in numerous multiple selections of this period. Furthermore, when the responses are analysed in terms of the respondents' age (Figure 2), the malleability of public perception is further demonstrated. While it can be argued that the Sino-Serbian ties were continuously close before the 1990s, during the subsequent decade of civil wars, economic sanctions, and political turmoil, the ties were comparatively much closer, even with some challenges after the breakup of Yugoslavia (see, e.g., Arežina 2014 for an overview), due to the isolation from other countries. There were numerous high-level state visits, international support, and flights from Belgrade to Beijing among the rare intercontinental travel lines in that period. In that period, the first larger Chinese immigrant community was also welcomed to settle in Serbia, moving southwards from Hungary after the tightening of their visa regime (Gledić 2020). However, those who lived through that period, with the slight exception of the oldest age group, did not report this experience in the survey. Similarly, those who lived through the establishment of Serbia's strategic partnership with China do not mark that period as continuous with recent years, likely connecting the increased closeness of Sino-Serbian relations with the current president.

Figure 2: Perceived period of best Sino-Serbian relations by Serbian citizens of different age groups (number of responses, multiple choices allowed)
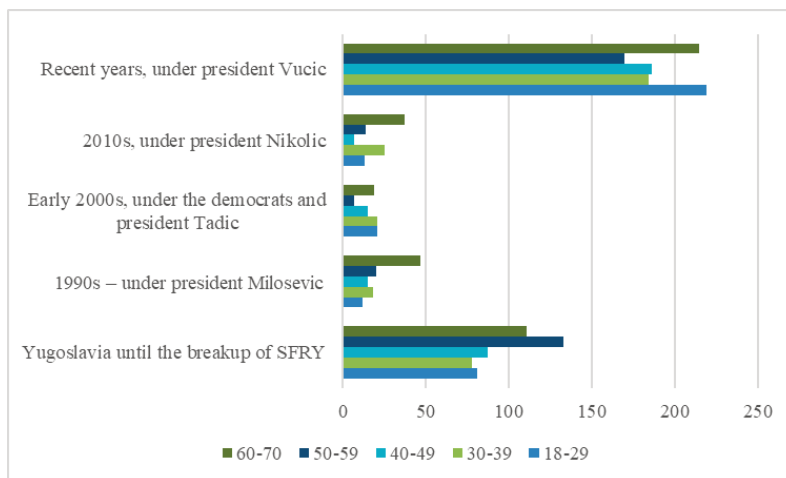
Source: Author's calculation.

Finally, to test this finding, which was hypothesised during the construction of the survey, a question on the perceived importance of different aspects of the relationship between Serbia and China was added (Figure 3). While all the items are over the halfway point of the assessment scale, pragmatic drivers (trade and investment, political support on the international stage) are perceived as more important than personal relationships or emotional bonds. The common positive bond (between the two peoples) is even assessed as more important than the negative bond (common "enemy") or bond between individuals (presidents).

Figure 3: Perceived importance of different aspects of Sino-Serbian relations (median values, 7-point scale from entirely insignificant to very important)
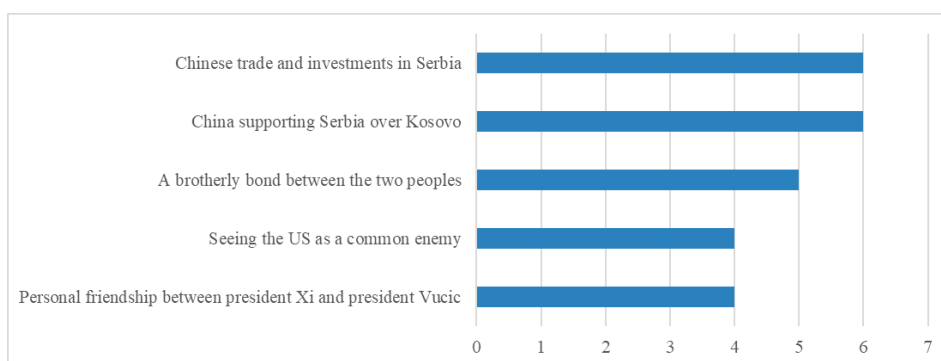
Source: Author's calculation.

The public perceptions of China and Sino-Serbian relations reflect the complex socio-political global situation, the disproportion in the countries' size and consequent power, and their turbulent individual histories that seem to have common elements despite no actual shared memory. China is seen as a strong, helpful ally and perhaps, along with Russia, the least bad or simpler option among the current global powers. This can contribute to reshaping perceptions of historical periods, even for those who lived through them, but perhaps driven by pragmatic reasoning.

Conclusions

This research analyses Serbian public opinion on China, aiming to examine the two countries' current "Iron Friendship" in global and local contexts. The key findings of this paper underscore the significance of economic well-being, local politics, and global power dynamics for shaping public sentiment.

The Serbian public, especially young people, increasingly sees China and Sino-Serbian relations as positive. Even seemingly negative symbols could be interpreted as positive elements of kinship between the two nations. For example, communism might have a positive connotation due to Serbia's arguably prosperous socialist past, and Chinese "cheap products" were highly appreciated during the economic crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s. Regarding the history of Sino-Serbian relations, the data shows that the historical reality that Sino-Serbian relations began to strengthen before 2009 and have been relatively sustainably improving since is not generally perceived as a historical continuum. Thus, contemporary sentiments seem to reshape perceptions of historical periods, even for those who lived through them.

Today, China is perceived as a strong rising power and an important ally in an increasingly unpredictable and complex global landscape. Namely, the increasingly positive attitude towards China is tied to both the increased Sino-Serbian collaboration in the past decade and the stagnating or even slowing down of Serbia's EU accession process. At the same time, while those who are satisfied with the current political and economic situation in Serbia demonstrate a clear affiliation towards China and Russia, those who are less satisfied are not clearly oriented towards EU powers (namely, France and Germany) and, by inference, the system and values they represent. Furthermore, the EU is seen as the weakest military power of the four entities that are the so-called pillars of Serbia's foreign policy (China, the EU, Russia, and the US). Thus, if forced to choose between EU membership and ties with powers with strong militaries, such as China and Russia, the Serbian public—living in a developing economy in a region with long-standing unresolved territorial issues and a recent history of civil war—might be faced with a difficult but clear choice.

The study further shows a connection between a stronger sense of national identity and positive attitudes towards China and Russia and, by inference, their socio-political systems. However, there are no strong negative correlations with the sense of European identity, which could indicate that the "East" versus "West" divide is still not mutually exclusive on the level of the Serbian citizens' sense of identity and belonging, which leaves room for support of pragmatic, middle-of-the-road, or issue-based solutions in the domain of foreign policy.

This research highlights the complexity of factors steering public opinion while emphasising its malleability. While socio-demographic factors are not likely predictors of public opinion in this study, ideological opinions and sense of identity are tied with attitudes towards China, and even more so local socio-economic factors and Serbia's relations with other global powers. Providing a nuanced portrayal of perceptions underpinning the Sino-Serbian "Iron Friendship", this research contributes to a broader understanding of the intricate dynamics characterising contemporary international relations.

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АНАЛИЗА ЧИНИЛАЦА ЈАВНОГ МЊЕЊА СРБИЈЕ О КИНИ: „ЧЕЛИЧНО ПРИЈАТЕЉСТВО" У ГЛОБАЛНОМ И ЛОКАЛНОМ КОНТЕКСТУ

Апстракт: У протеклој деценији, наводи се да су кинеско-српски односи на највишој тачки у историји, а Кина је постала један од највећих трговинских партнера и инвеститора Србије. Истовремено, затегнути односи између ЕУ, а посебно САД и Кине, представљају изазов за Србију, затечену између тежњи ка ЕУ и оријентације ка глобалном Западу, с једне стране, и социјалистичког наслеђа, с друге. Ово истраживање анализира јавно мњење Србије према Кини у овом контексту, представљајући преовлађујуће перцепције и претпостављајући основне чиниоце. Применом квантитативних и квалитативних метода, анализира се национално репрезентативно истраживање и резултати се тумаче у контексту историјске стварности, савремених економских веза и локалних и геополитичких разматрања. Кључни налази ове студије наглашавају значај економског благостања, локалне политике и глобалне динамике моћи за обликовање јавног мњења. Штавише, показује се да савремена осећања преобликују перцепцију историјских периода чак и код оних који су их преживели. Ово истраживање наглашава сложеност фактора који управљају јавним мњењем, истовремено наглашавајући његову прилагодљивост. Пружајући нијансиран приказ перцепција које су у основи кинеско-српског „Челичног пријатељства", ово истраживање доприноси ширем разумевању сложене динамике савремених међународних односа.

Кључне речи: Кина; Србија; јавно мњење; Челично пријатељство.