

Understanding the tools, narratives and impact of China's "soft power" in North Macedonia

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"Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong."
— Lao Zi (2003:177)

INTRODUCTION

Research context and objectives

In 2022, China reached its best ever performance in the Global Soft Power Index¹, climbing to the 4th place in the overall ranking (after the USA, the UK and Germany) and overtaking Japan as the highest-ranked nation in Asia. According to this index, China ranks 4th for familiarity, 2nd for influence and has performed particularly well in the Business and Trade pillar, where it ranks 1st, ahead of the US, Germany, and Japan. The way China handled the COVID-19 pandemic, teamed with its donations of medical equipment, supplies and vaccines to other countries certainly contributed to this result.²

Despite the obvious rise of China's soft power worldwide, detailed portrayal of China's soft power, its specific tools and impact in North Macedonia is lacking. Instead, the existing scholarship in the country follows the regional trends to focus on China's economic engagement and is usually not based on original, empirical data, but rather on secondary literature. Recent years have seen the rise in number of public opinion polls which include separate question(s) on China in the attempt to grasp the citizens' perceptions. Such an approach can provide a basic overview of the general sentiment and an indication whether China is viewed favorably or whether it is considered to be a friendly country. However, it fails to take into account the different dimensions of China's presence and engagement (economic, political, cultural, educational, etc.), the nuances that potentially exist in the opinions of the "elites" versus the "laymen", and to uncover the underlying reasons behind the results, thus painting a picture which is largely oversimplified.

North Macedonia has not seen particular benefits

from the economic cooperation with China in the form of significant exports or direct investments. Yet, recent research into China's presence and portrayal in the media has indicated that China's influence in North Macedonia is quite strong, ranking 3rd among 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), behind Serbia and Bulgaria, despite the fact that it has invested very little resources in North Macedonia in comparison to the other countries.³ Such an outcome mandates a deeper look into China's soft power as one of the main tools at its disposal to shape perceptions, as well as the specific strategies used to target different groups, especially those yielding influence on policy processes and public opinion.

In such a context, this research aims to provide nuanced and detailed insights into China's soft power in North Macedonia by looking into:

- the tools and tactics that are used by different Chinese stakeholders to engage with different target groups;
- the objectives that those stakeholders pursue and/or achieve;
- the main narratives shaping the perceptions, and
- the impact that the tactics and narratives produce.

In order to facilitate the understanding of China's actions in the broader context, the first section aims to shed light on the concept of soft power in general, as well as its meaning and implications in China's global foreign policy. Then, the second section focuses specifically on the Macedonian context and the last section draws conclusions, identifies policy implications and defines potential avenues for further research.

Research framework

To this effect, the first part of the research is structured on the basis of Mark Leonard's three dimensions of public diplomacy.⁴ The tools and tactics identified in China's soft power presence in North Macedonia will be categorized according to these dimensions, ranging from the short to the long-term outlook in shaping perceptions and enhancing influence.

The first and most immediate dimension is daily communications, which involves explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions. This dimension framed as **news management** also involves dealing with crisis and countering attacks, hence necessitates the mobilization of "rapid response capacity". The second dimension, which resembles political or advertising campaigns to improve the perception of the general public or targeted groups, is **strategic messaging**. It covers pre-planned activities, events and communications over a mid-term to reinforce some symbolic (ex. cultural) themes, or to advance a particular government policy. The third dimension which takes place over the long term is the **building of lasting relationships** with key individuals through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, etc.

The second part of the research is structured according to the seven categories measured in the Global Soft Power Index. It allows to identify and test the main narratives, as well as to measure the degree to which those narratives resonate in the public opinion. The seven categories include:

1. Business and trade
2. Governance
3. International relations
4. Culture and heritage
5. Media and communications
6. Education and science
7. People and values

Finally, the third part assesses the outcome and effectiveness of the Chinese strategies in improving Macedonian citizens' **familiarity** with China-related information and knowledge, China's **reputation** in North Macedonia and the perception about the **influence** it wields.

Methodology

The research was conducted through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The first stage of the data collection included desk research, namely a review of secondary literature on China's soft power, as well as primary sources, focusing primarily on China's strategic documents and its official presence in the country (mostly through its Embassy's statements and Facebook account). The second stage included collecting primary data about the perceptions of targeted stakeholder groups: representatives of academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, business community, politicians and national institutions, being considered stakeholders with significant influence in the community, as well as the broader public. To that effect, three different tools and techniques were used:

- (i) **Semi-structured interviews** with pre-selected individuals (eg. directors of big NGOs and media associations, politicians, university professors);
- (ii) **Focus groups** – one convening representatives of the above-mentioned target groups who have not been exposed to Chinese soft power tools, such as trainings in China, scholarships, funding through different means (research, projects etc.), and a second one with representatives who have had direct experience through travel to China for different purposes and cooperation with Chinese stakeholders. The same set of questions was asked in both focus groups in order to allow for comparability of the responses.
- (iii) **Survey questionnaire** (in Macedonian and Albanian language) targeting the general public in order to measure the extent to which the identified key messages that China would like to further actually resonate with the general population in North Macedonia. For that purpose, the survey consisted of statements that measure both the familiarity, reputation and influence aspects in the seven identified areas.

The third stage of the research consisted of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data, using the SPSS software for the survey responses and the grounded theory of inductive reasoning⁵ for the analysis of the input from the interviews and focus groups.

THE CONCEPT(S) OF SOFT POWER

Soft power as a "product" of the western world?

The scholar who developed the term of "soft power", Joseph S. Nye Jr, argued that "the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policy will be more influential on its engagement with other nations than the number of ballistic missiles at its disposal".⁶ He believed that soft power should not be observed in isolation from "hard" military or economic power, but as an additional toolkit which emphasizes the importance of cooption and persuasion, rather than coercion in the relations between states.⁷ Since then, there appears to be a consensus among scholars that a "foreign policy based on the combined use of both hard and soft power can yield superior results over one that relies exclusively on one or the other kinds of power".⁸

"If a state could make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it would encounter less resistance to its foreign policies; if a state's culture and ideology seemed attractive, allies would be willing to follow it rather than being ordered to do so; and if a state could establish international norms consistent with its own society, it would not be required to alter its behavior".⁹ According to Nye, a country's soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture; its political values, such as democracy and human rights when they are consistently upheld; and its policies.¹⁰

However, one of the "caveats" of soft power is related to the long timeframe needed to achieve the desired effects and outcomes.¹¹ Moreover, many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, especially in democratic societies. Non-governmental actors, such as companies, universities, foundations, religious institutions and protest movements possess various degrees of soft power which sometimes reinforces official foreign policy goals, and sometimes contravenes them.¹²

Soft power – the "Chinese way"

While the modern concept of soft power is usually associated with the works of Nye, ideas similar to various aspects of what is known as soft power today can be traced back to the ancient Chinese philosophers. In the Taoist classic *Dao De Jing*, written between the 6th and 4th century BC, Lao Zi dismisses the power of armies and weapons and says that the best rulers exert power indirectly and lightly.¹³ Sun Zi's *Art of War* also teaches how soft power combines with hard power to produce outcomes favorable to the state: "Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting".¹⁴

In ancient times China viewed itself as the center of the world (Middle Kingdom being the translation of its name in Chinese - 中国). In the frequent periods of power superiority in East Asia, China considered neighboring countries as vassal states and expected them to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor, while the rest of the world was considered barbarian. Being convinced that the superiority of the Chinese culture and norms made it attractive and appealing to foreigners, Chinese dynasties throughout history often believed that they did not need to employ coercive measures to build influence. Instead they used the trade routes, such as the ancient Silk Road to spread Chinese cultural influence and civilizational values.¹⁵ Two Confucian concepts shaped the ancient Chinese thinking on influence: "attractiveness" (吸引力), and "appeal" (感召力).¹⁶ Fast forward hundreds of years, the New Silk Road, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (一带一路) and the concept of "Community with Shared Future for Mankind" (人类命运共同体), are meant to contribute to revive China's vision of an international society.

The initial merit of resurrecting the soft power concept in Chinese political discourse should be credited to President Hu Jintao and his speech at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2007.¹⁷ At the following congress in 2012, Hu's successor, President Xi Jinping devoted an entire plenary session to "Cultural Soft Power" (文化软实力).¹⁸ In 2014 President Xi noted: "We should increase China's cultural soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."¹⁹ At the following 19th Congress, he pledged to offer "Chinese

wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems of mankind" as "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence".²⁰ The scholarly concept of soft power in China developed in part as a reaction to Nye's ideas, which were viewed as "an American weapon that could be used to infiltrate Western ideas into China to subvert and overthrow the regime".²¹ Subsequently, three mainstream schools of thought developed: the "Culture School" or "Shanghai School" whose adherents believe that China's overseas soft power campaigns should focus on the intensive promotion of Chinese culture to improve Beijing's global "appeal" and "attraction", and advocate for rapid spread of Confucius Institutes around the world; the Political School whose proponents (most notably Yan Xuedong) argue that imbalances between China's enormous material power and its soft power can hinder efforts to win genuine friendships, hence China should focus its soft power engagement on strengthening overseas solidarity, building a harmonious society at home, and reforming its social institutions; the most recent school of thought, which supports the idea that China's soft power should focus on the goal of transforming the structures of the current international system to facilitate China's resurgence as a Great Power (世界强国) and puts forward the idea that Chinese models and norms offer viable alternatives to the West.²² The last school of thought largely bears the imprint of China's current approach and Xi's thought on diplomacy.

Indeed, in recent years China has been making unprecedented efforts to strengthen its global presence, to legitimize and uphold its own views on the international order and to promote its governance and development model as an alternative to the Western liberal democracies. To that effect and given its advantage of a highly centralized and authoritarian party-state, China has been deploying a concerted strategy which spans across all sectors and involves various actors. In addition to the central government and its institutions, provinces and municipalities, media outlets, research institutes, universities, both state and private enterprises have been actively engaged in "telling China's story well", aiming to reduce the "dissonance" which occasionally occurs in democratic societies, sometimes to the detriment of the soft power appeal.

The newest Roadmap on the promotion of China's soft power published in July 2022 aims to expand Chinese global influence through the foreign cultural trade using a variety of tools and methods: fine arts and literature exports, radio and television programs, film (co-)productions, performing arts, video games etc.²³ It also envisages policy improvements and state support for cultural exports and investments abroad, internationalization of Chinese standards and active participation in the formulation of global rules and standards. This approach seems targeted to remedy China's weaknesses in the projection of soft power, especially when it comes to the promotion of China's modern culture.

Image source: Unsplash. Photo credit: Denise Bossart.



According to previous research and in line with the global tendencies, China's soft power in Southeast Europe is not based on the appeal of its culture. According to Tonchev, it "is not measured by blockbuster films, but by the appeal of its economic achievements. The key driver of Beijing's clout has been the expectation that China can help the region crawl out of underdevelopment and catch up with advanced European economies".²⁴ In the context of limited economic engagement and tangible outcomes of the economic cooperation, Vangeli further notes that "it is not so much the material impact of the cooperation, but rather the sense of possibility that China inspires".²⁵

The impact of China's soft power in North Macedonia

Tools and tactics: developing and diversifying

News management: when Chinese propaganda meets Western media

China has a very developed network of traditional media outlets that broadcast and offer content in English and a number of local languages. The most prominent include Xinhua – the national news agency, China Daily, China Global Television Network (CGTN, formerly the international branch of CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and the Global Times (English-version tabloid of the People's Daily, the main CCP newspaper). However, they do not broadcast in Macedonian and are not available using the common cable or digital subscription packages offered by Macedonian service providers. While CRI broadcasts in Albanian and Serbian, languages that are understood by the Macedonian and/or Albanian speakers in the country, there is no evidence that Macedonian citizens follow its program.

Although some domestic media outlets tend to publish more news and information on China than others, there is no specific evidence of direct Chinese influence in the form of funding or through the ownership structure. However, some outlets and especially online portals tend to publish articles and op-eds signed by the Chinese Ambassador, which disseminate China's policies and positions on key topical issues, such as the pandemic, Xinjiang, Hongkong etc.

When it comes to social media, the networks which are largely used in China are virtually unknown in North Macedonia (Weibo, Wechat etc.), with the exception of people who have lived in China or engaged with Chinese entities. While globally used social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, Chinese stakeholders operating abroad have learned how to make use of them. The Chinese Embassy in Skopje opened its Facebook account in November 2019, while the Confucius Institute joined Facebook back in 2013. While the latter publishes in Macedonian, potentially amplifying its outreach, its posts are limited to its own activities and cultural topics (Chinese festivals, cuisine, tea etiquette etc.) There has not been any controversy related to the activities of the Confucius

Institute in North Macedonia thus far, unlike the case in many Western and Central European Countries.

The Embassy, on the other hand, publishes in English and covers an unlimited array of topics, ranging from its activities in North Macedonia (visits and meetings of the Ambassador, donations etc.), information highlighting China's beauties and achievements, to global topics of interest to China and even issues seemingly unrelated to the bilateral relations (ex. Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, Lithuania's opening of a Taiwan office, China's foreign minister's visit to Pakistan etc.)

It is interesting to note that while globally, in many Western countries, China has engaged in what is dubbed "wolf warrior" diplomacy, as seen for instance in Sweden or France, Chinese diplomats in North Macedonia have largely refrained from adopting a confrontational rhetoric,²⁶ despite North Macedonia's diverging positions on certain topics of key interest for China and its alignment with the strategic partners – NATO and the EU. The strongest public reaction by the Embassy so far was published after the signing of a Memorandum between North Macedonia and the USA for cooperation in the Clean Network Initiative on 5G technologies in October 2020.²⁷ However, the rancor seemed to be completely aimed towards the statement of the US high-level official, although the Macedonian Prime Minister echoed similar remarks, albeit in a more veiled manner, not mentioning China.²⁸

Strategic messaging : focus on traditional Chinese culture

One of the focal points of China's strategic messaging in North Macedonia is undoubtedly the Chinese culture. There are not regular, but recurrent visits of Chinese artists at festivals and other occasions in different cultural settings: singing and dancing performances, piano recitals, theater plays etc. Some of the events were organized in the framework of the China-CEE cooperation framework, as part of regional tours, some of them by the Confucius Institute in Skopje and others in the framework of sister city partnerships (ex. Skopje and Nanchang, Bitola and Ningbo etc.) It is interesting to note that most of the cultural events are thematically focused on the Chinese traditional culture, while contemporary Chinese culture remains underrepresented.

That is also the case when it comes to the translation of books into Macedonian, an activity which is gaining in intensity in recent years. Namely, since 1978, a total of 90 Chinese titles have been published in Macedonian, 50 of them from the beginning of 2018 alone and half of them - children's books.²⁹ Some of the translations have been published in cooperation with the Beijing-based publishing house Dolphin Books, a subsidiary of China International Publishing Group, which in turn is owned by the CCP.³⁰

In parallel to the traditional civilization, modern China is presented through the television show *Ni Hao*, broadcast bi-weekly on Telma, a television station with national coverage. The show, which is sponsored by the Chinese Embassy, sets the objective to "present China the way it is", "show China's real meaning" and "what it gave to the world in every context" – architecture, philosophy, technology, fashion, medicine etc.³¹ Furthermore, in 2021 the Chinese Embassy sponsored the publication of the edited book "Digital Transformation: The future", which presents China as the global digital leader and the example for North Macedonia to follow.

In addition to Chinese state entities, some Chinese companies present in the country are also involved in the strategic messaging with the aim to promote their own brand and improve the market share. Indirectly, they help to portray contemporary China as an advanced country, with technological prowess and high-quality products, debunking the stereotype of Chinese goods as being cheap and of low quality. Huawei is the most prominent example of such soft power projection by Chinese companies. In addition to its presence in the retail market and in public procurements (ex. IT equipment for schools), it has left a footprint through its marketing activities, such as roadshows and high-tech exhibitions, as well as corporate social responsibility.³²

Relationship-building: Confucius Institute and trips to China take center stage

Probably the most important and long-term strategy for anchoring China's soft power in North Macedonia is the opening of the Confucius Institute in Skopje, at the oldest and most renowned public university, Ss. Cyril and Methodius in 2013. The Institute has been providing free-of-charge Chinese language classes for a variety of audiences, ranging from pre-school children to adults, including university students, professionals from different companies which do

business with China (ex. the biggest winery Tikvesh) and civil servants. The number of students increased from 60 during the first year, to 562 in the academic year 2020-2021, alongside the opening of classrooms in different cities throughout the country.³³

China has been providing scholarships to Macedonian students for more than 20 years. Initially starting with 1-2, at present the number of scholarships reaches approximately 10 per year and, according to the words of an education ministry representative, they are always used up. Scholarships are provided in cooperation between the Macedonian Ministry of education and science and the Chinese Ministry of Education, specifically the China Scholarship Council. Occasionally the Chinese Ministry of Commerce or the Confucius Institute provide additional opportunities to study or travel in China.

One of them is the Human Resource Development program in the framework of the bilateral development cooperation managed by the Secretariat for European Affairs in the Macedonian Government, which offers training in China. The program predominantly targets civil servants, but occasionally editors, journalists, representatives of business chambers and academia are also invited to visit China over the course of 2-3 weeks. Some of the beneficiaries go on to occupy posts with high level responsibility, as is the case with at least 2 Members of Parliament elected in 2020. As witnessed by the beneficiaries of such trainings, the formal teaching aspects are not very attractive, but the "side experience" of the visit, which usually includes a display of China's most beautiful sights and sceneries, culinary experiences and technological advancement, leaves a profound impact.

Image source: Unsplash. Photo credit: William Olivieri.



In recent years China has become more active in the implementation of joint research projects, to the point that today North Macedonia has more such bilateral projects with China than with any other country in the world (a total of 40 in the last 5 years).³⁴ The projects are funded in the framework of a bilateral cooperation program based on a Memorandum for joint project financing, research and development signed by the education ministries of the two countries. Agriculture, information technology, nanotechnology and earthquake engineering are some of the priority areas.³⁵ Moreover, joint research projects in the area of social sciences have been sponsored by the China-CEE Institute, a branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) based in Budapest which focuses on the cooperation between China and CEE countries.

Various Chinese stakeholders cooperate with Macedonian counterparts in the framework of various events with the purpose of exploring potential ad-hoc opportunities. Some of the prominent examples include the cooperation between the Macedonian Chambers of Commerce and different Chinese partners (All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, China Foreign Trade Center, Ningbo – CEE Exhibition and Cooperation Promotion Center etc.); the cooperation between the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts and CASS which resulted in the organization of the 5th high-level China-CEE think tank symposium in Skopje in 2018; or the cooperation between the Community of local self-government units (ZELS) and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) which laid the foundation for intensifying the establishment of sister city partnerships.

The three dimensions of China's soft power presence in North Macedonia are summarized in the following table:

CATEGORY	TOOLS AND TACTICS	OBJECTIVES
<i>News management</i>	<p>Traditional media - op-eds and articles by the Chinese Ambassador in selected printed and online media and portals (ex. Macedonian Information Agency, Nova Makedonija, Večer, Premin, Antropol, Opserver).</p> <p>Social media – Facebook (ex. account of the Chinese Embassy).</p>	<p>Responding to the 24-hour news cycle</p> <p>Crisis management</p> <p>(Positive) amplification of news and information</p>
<i>Strategic messaging</i>	<p>Cultural offer - through the China-CEE cultural cooperation, in the framework of sister cities cooperation, or through the activities of the Confucius Institute.</p> <p>Translation and publication of books.</p> <p>TV shows (ex. Ni hao).</p> <p>Chinese companies' activities (ex. Huawei).</p>	<p>Promotion of Chinese culture</p> <p>Reputation and image building</p> <p>Dissemination of China's official positions and propaganda</p> <p>Promotion of Chinese brands and products</p>
<i>Relationship building</i>	<p>Activities of the Confucius Institute.</p> <p>Scholarships – in cooperation between the education ministries, occasionally through the Chinese Ministry of Commerce.</p> <p>Trainings – through the Human Resource Development program in the framework of the bilateral development cooperation.</p> <p>Research projects – implemented jointly in the framework of the bilateral cooperation program or sponsored by the China-CEE Institute.</p> <p>Memoranda of Understanding and Cooperation Agreements.</p> <p>Cooperation through various events - conferences, fairs etc.</p>	<p>Engaging with various stakeholders – policy makers, political parties, business chambers, academia, NGOs to build long-term partnerships</p>

Narratives: economic benefits and culture are "winning hearts and minds"

The analysis of the contents channeled using the above-mentioned tools and tactics employed to further China's soft power in North Macedonia led to the formulation of 24 statements that were discussed with Macedonian citizens in order to examine to which degree these narratives resonate with the target audience. A total of 163 respondents were surveyed, 135 through an online questionnaire disseminated in June and July 2022, 20 through focus groups and 8 through semi-structured interviews. The respondents' perceptions and opinions were coded and categorized in the 7 thematic areas presented below.

The following figure summarizes the most common associations of Macedonian citizens when it comes to China. While economic and technological concepts dominate, cultural and historic notions follow suit.



Business and trade

Business, trade, investments and other economic topics are the first association that comes to mind among Macedonian citizens when talking about China. China mainly enjoys a positive reputation, its economy is considered strong and stable, with a strong potential to continue growing and developing in future. Chinese brands and products are widely accepted and demanded on the market, especially given their affordability, albeit doubts persist regarding their quality. China is considered to be a global economic power and an investment opportunity for North Macedonia, although at the business level it is seen as somewhat opportunistic.

Governance

In terms of governance, the picture is rather nuanced. The fact that China is a non-democratic, one-party, authoritarian state is seen in a very negative light. It is believed that rule of law and human rights are not respected nor protected in China. However, it is considered to be a well-managed country, with functional and efficient governance processes allowing to make quick decisions when needed. Despite this, the perception how it handled the pandemic is not very positive, nor the perceptions about how safe and secure a country it is.

International relations

China's reputation in the area of international relations is considered to be neutral. It is seen as quite influential in the diplomatic circles and as a country which favors diplomatic solutions over tensions and conflict. Its diplomacy is considered to be at a very high level, set to achieve long-term objectives, and quite skillful in putting emphasis on the positive aspects of the bilateral cooperation. Despite China's attempts to portray itself as a generous and credible partner providing help when needed, for instance during COVID-19, it is not perceived as overly helpful to other countries, nor as a country which invests a lot of efforts to protect the environment.

Culture and heritage

Culture and heritage are the area where China enjoys the most positive perception. China is considered a beautiful country highly worthy of visiting, Chinese culture is said to be exceptional, and its history very rich and abundant. Nevertheless, although modern China is still considered to be influential in the world of art and entertainment, the portrayal is more nuanced compared to the traditional civilization. Contemporary China is not seen as a place with very attractive lifestyle, nor Chinese food is of everyone's liking. Despite two recent Olympic games taking place in China, sport is also not an area where China is perceived as a world leader.

Media and communications

In terms of media and communications, there is a widespread understanding that Chinese media are under strict state control and subject to censorship. This lack of freedom of speech and media contributes to a largely negative perception and undermines the credibility of Chinese media in the eyes of Macedonian citizens, oftentimes making them question whether the information arriv-

ing from China is sufficient and reliable enough to help them create an informed opinion.

Education and science

When it comes to education and science, including the area of innovation and technology, China enjoys a fairly positive perception. It is considered to be at the forefront of scientific achievements, digitalization and new technologies in a number of areas (space research, artificial intelligence, climate change etc.), thanks to both strong state impetus and private initiatives. However, there are lingering questions how and to what intent will China use this progress, whether it will be for a benevolent purpose, given its dubious track record in certain cases (ex. facial recognition and mass surveillance). Moreover, in terms of education, there are doubts about the availability of education which is considered to be a privilege in China, with a large portion of the Chinese population believed to be uneducated and poor.

People and values

The Chinese society is mainly seen as traditional and conservative. This, on one hand is seen as positive (for instance in terms of family values, governance, patriotism etc.), but on the other hand is seen as lag-gard (ex. in terms of women's rights). Chinese people are generally considered to be peaceful and friendly. Their hard work, professionalism and discipline underpin China's economic success and progress. However, they are not considered to be overly trustworthy, which could be related to the perception of their reputation in doing business, with past examples of shady deals, frauds and poor product quality.

Image source: Unsplash. Photo credit: Bird Liang.



Impact: building reputation and influence on cherry-picked information

Familiarity

For the most part the process of obtaining meaningful information about China takes place "on demand" – those who are interested in China-related topics do have access to satisfactory information online, but they constitute a small minority. Most people do not follow closely and on regular basis what is happening in China or in relation to China and the rest of the world, and the information that reaches them seems to be "accidental", on social media or occasionally in the news. There is also awareness, albeit limited, about the possibility that some of the information may not be true or fully accurate.

The majority of the population receives China-related information either through Macedonian or through Western media outlets, not through Chinese media. Although the Chinese Embassy in Skopje is considered to be an important source of information, there is skepticism to which extent the information they put forward (either directly or indirectly, ex. through domestic media outlets) is credible and not cherry-picked to achieve a desired effect. There is very little public debate about China's presence in the country, even when there is strong basis for that – such as the case of the highway construction project, where China's role was not properly covered.

Macedonian media offer insufficient quantity and quality of China-related information, given that most of the news are translated and relayed from foreign outlets, and there are not many analytical pieces that cover the implications of China-related global developments for North Macedonia. When Macedonian outlets do cover China-related topics, they tend to be considered neutral and objective. However, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions as this happens very rarely, it is seldom based on investigative journalism, and political or sensitive topics are largely absent.

Reputation

Perceptions about China's reputation in North Macedonia are a mixed picture, tending to be more positive among people who have had direct experience and interactions with China and Chinese stakeholders. There is a consensus however that the lack of credible information, public debate and the general lack of interest about China-related topics in

the country make it difficult to have a well-founded opinion. Moreover, political, economic and other developments "of the day" contribute to tip the balance one way or the other. For instance, China is usually seen as a traditionally friendly country which has not done anything to harm North Macedonia's interests. On the other hand, at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China was seen in a rather negative light.

While China is expected and believed to be making efforts to promote itself and build a positive reputation globally, such efforts in North Macedonia are not very visible and noticeable for the general public. It is commonly believed that North Macedonia is too small to matter to China and most of China's activities are not associated with the objective to influence the public perception. The more informed section of the public however does recognize some of the soft power tools employed by China in North Macedonia, quoting investments, scholarships and projects as means to exert influence.

Influence

China is believed to have big and rising influence at the global scale, especially in parts of the world outside the Western developed countries (ex. in Asia, Africa, South America). This is ascribed to the strength of the Chinese economy and its seat in the UN Security Council. While its influence in the global economy is seen as largely positive, because of its contribution towards the digitalization and technological development, its influence in geopolitical issues is not always considered positive, given for instance its currently ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine which is believed to benefit China.

China's influence in North Macedonia is perceived as much more limited, as the country is not in China's sphere of geostrategic interest, but is indirectly dependent on China's interactions with the rest of the world. The influence is mostly visible in the area of the economy and considered to be positive. One aspect of this influence is seen through the increased consumption of Chinese products which becomes a necessity given the protracted economic crisis in the country and the fact that Chinese products are cheaper than Western products. More importantly, China is seen as an underused development opportunity, especially in terms of knowledge and technology transfer. However, some of the most prominent dealings with China, like the highway construction project, challenge China's

positive track record in economic terms. Moreover, although the country remains in need of foreign capital and this could be seen as an entry point for China, there are doubts whether the influence has any potential to further grow in future as North Macedonia became NATO member and also needs to align itself with the EU's rules and standards.

Image source: Official poster for the film.



When it comes to Chinese culture, although it is strongly admired and appreciated in vague, abstract terms, it is not very well known, nor influential. This applies particularly to China's modern culture and is associated with the distance in the geographic and cultural space. Western culture is perceived as dominant and preferred. Even Russia and Turkey are perceived as more culturally influential because of the proximity and more intensive presence.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent years have seen an evolution in China's concept of soft power, both in scholarly terms and in terms of its practical, foreign policy implications. Since President Xi Jinping took power in 2013, China seems to be on a spree to validate the legitimacy of its political model throughout the world and to present it as an alternative to Western liberal democracies. This objective, which was not explicitly formulated until recently, could have normative implications for the rest of the world in its engagement with China, including North Macedonia.

The research establishes a slightly positive correlation between the soft power projection tactics, especially the long-term dimension of relationship-building, and the improvement in the perception on China. In the scarcity of credible and objective information provided by domestic media and public opinion shapers, Chinese sources portray China entirely in positive light, downplaying and excluding all the negative elements which could help Macedonian citizens create an informed and realistic opinion. While the more informed part of the "elite" has access to a broader range of sources, language proficiency and certain level of media literacy allowing them to recognize fabricated and purposefully embellished information, the general public usually takes away the idealized version and messaging.

This allows for associations to be created between the negative and positive aspects of China's global ascent, presenting for instance authoritarian governance models, media censorship or environmental negligence as more favorable or even necessary for achieving economic growth and societal development. Such associations could not only undermine citizens' appreciation of democratic governance, but also devalue the importance to continue the country's reforms to achieve full democratization and market economy, especially in light of the standstill in the EU accession process.

Another aspect which largely supports China's soft power projection is its centralized party-state system which allows for the deployment of tools and tactics by a diversity of stakeholders (state institutions, subnational authorities, universities, think tanks, companies etc.) putting forward the same narratives. The concordance of efforts at different levels, aimed to achieve the same objec-

tive, contributes to create synergy and potentially increase the success rate. This approach has also allowed China to overcome the limits of its state-centered approach, which in the past focused only or primarily on state actors, and to target simultaneously a broad range of stakeholders which have some influence in the Macedonian society.

The research also confirms the general trend identified in the region of Southeast Europe, that China's main strength and appeal lies in its economic success. Despite the consensus that the cooperation with China has thus far been an underused opportunity and failed to produce specific economic benefits, Macedonian citizens still have the hope and expectation that China could help the country overcome its economic hardships. Culture, the aspect which takes precedence in the Chinese soft power concept, has the potential to enhance the positive perception about China, but by itself alone it is by far insufficient to reduce the appeal of the Western culture or to detract the country from its Western trajectory. While traditional Chinese culture is praised and admired, most citizens do not have any detailed understanding or knowledge about it. Modern Chinese culture also remains a mystery, as it is not a part of the market offer or demand which are based on consumers' interest and attraction.

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China's rising ambition to increase the projection of its soft power abroad has been going hand in hand with the deployment of various policy measures. This article aims to provide insights into the tools that China employs in North Macedonia, the narratives it puts forward and the impact its efforts have achieved so far in shaping public opinion. To this effect, it uses Leonard's three dimensions of public diplomacy to detail and categorize the tactics and objectives, in combination with the categories used in the Global Soft Power Index to investigate the effect of the narratives and to assess the results of China's soft power enhancement activities.

The paper details the tools and tactics that China uses in North Macedonia for "news management", "strategic messaging" and "relationship-building". It uncovers a slightly positive correlation in the deployment of the strategies aimed to establish long-term partnerships and the positive opinion on China-related topics. Overall, China's reputation tends to be positive, especially in terms of its economy, culture, scientific and technological development, and negative in terms of political system and state control over the media. However, amidst the perceived scarcity of information, especially credible, objective and analytical contents from the Macedonian media, it seems to be difficult for the general public to create an informed opinion.

Chinese soft power tools are either not visible or recognized and perceived as such by the Macedonian citizens. Neither is China considered to have any substantial influence in the country, unlike in the rest of the world. Chinese culture, while inspiring admiration, remains relatively unknown and holds little relevance and influence. It is the hope for economic and technological benefits from the bilateral relationship, which could potentially support North Macedonia's development, that make the citizens look up to China. Hence, the combination of the Chinese soft power strategy, the specific tools and exclusively positive messaging could have both normative and practical implications.