

ZRC SAZU Graduate School

Cultural History module

PhD Thesis Summary

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Cultural Ties and Bilateral Relations: Sino-Serbian Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

This thesis analyzes the relationship between culture and economic, social and political cooperation through the study of the case of the relations between R Serbia and PR China under the new Chinese global connectivity agenda, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Half a century after the “cultural turn” there are still many open and underexplored questions when it comes to research on culture and international relations and culture and international political economy. The goal of this thesis is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, and for this the Sino-Serbian cooperation under the BRI is a fertile departure point. The theoretical departure point is the theory on cultural diversity by Christian Reus-Smit, which deals with the role of culture in international relations and gives a view on how managing culture can be a moderating factor in order-building (Reus-Smit C. 2018. *On cultural diversity: international theory in a world of difference*. Cambridge University Press).

BRI, an initiative aimed at creating a global unified market and promoting regional cooperation through infrastructure projects and investments, has been lauded as a relatively unique way for developing countries to advance their economies with “no strings attached” in terms of social and political order. For Serbia, this would mean circumventing complicated barriers such as, for example, fulfilling the conditions for EU accession or completely disavowing its socialist past. However, the question of the effects of China’s presence and the true extent of its influence in BRI countries is a heavily debated issue in academic and

policymaking circles. At the same time, it is no secret that culture has been playing an important role in China's foreign policy long before the BRI. Finally, the Sino-Serbian close and long standing friendship, built on historical ties forged under the countries' communist regimes, is regularly mentioned in the context of joint BRI projects that are actively being implemented or planned, and is reflected in the fact that Serbia is globally ranked as one of the top ten countries in terms of Chinese investment initiatives.

The dynamics between Sino-Serbian cultural ties and bilateral relations are examined through an analysis of official discourses and the perceptions of the wider population. The material of the study are a range of sources – official documents, media sources, semi-structured interviews and participant observation, public opinion surveys, as well as data from previous research, which are triangulated in a mixed-method constructivist approach. Different cultural narratives and framing are examined through cross-cultural and diachronic perspectives. The main research questions are:

1. Is the discourse on cultural ties related to bilateral relations and economic cooperation, namely are changes in the latter (i.e. an increased closeness and intensity) reflected in the former and, if yes, how?
2. Does the perception of a special Sino-Serbian friendship go beyond official discourses, i.e. is it present and how dominant is it in the perceptions of the wider population and does it facilitate cooperation?
3. Are the bilateral cultural ties represented in the same way in Serbia and China?

This thesis focuses on the linkages between culture and socio-economic cooperation, and in the wider perspective between cultural history and international relations and international political economy. Adopting a methodological paradigm that stresses the importance of transdisciplinary inquiry, this thesis aims to further elucidate theoretical concepts such as cultural narratives, soft power, cultural closeness. The results of this study will inform research on Sino-Serbian relations and the BRI, but will also provide useful insights for EU scholars exploring European responses to China's connectivity agenda.