RUSSIA AND CHINA
FRIENDS AND BROTHERS
OF THE CAPTURED STATE

ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES USED TO CAPTURE THE STATE

Vuk Vuksanović

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Introduction

Under President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Serbia fits well into the description of a captured state, a type of polity where the state’s institution and decision-making are dictated by the narrow interests of the ruling elite. Indeed, in 2020, the watchdog organisation Freedom House qualified Serbia as a hybrid regime. More recently, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) put Serbia among the European countries experiencing the greatest decline in democracy, alongside Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia.

The research established that the Serbian government cooperation with illiberal powers like Russia and China goes in the background of specific narratives that are a manifestation of a captured state in Serbia. Regarding Russia, one can observe a narrative of uncritical praise of brotherly relations between two Slavic and Orthodox nations that actually exposes a process of capturing the media. The hyperbolic praise of Russia shows a media environment completely controlled by the government where the media grip is being used to push for the pro-Russian content that helps the promotion of the incumbent elite.

On top of that, the way media are captured is also shown in the way how easily and quickly the pro-government press and tabloids change their narrative of Russia. During the violent anti-lockdown protests in the summer of 2020, the pro-government media and players accused the pro-Russian players of instigating the unrest. Later on, the pro-Russian narratives resurfaced as Serbia was forced to rekindle some of its old ties with Moscow. The pro-government media can easily shift their narratives on Russia from uncritical praise to accusation of subversion and then back to praise speaks of the reality of captured media. The reality is that the media are controlled by the government and capable of changing the story arbitrarily based on the daily interests and challenges of the ruling regime.

Regarding China, two narratives have been identified that speak of the state capture process in Serbia. The first is the narrative of praise for the Chinese projects and the benefits that they bring to the Serbian citizens. However, these projects bring more benefits to the ruling coalition, as these projects are based on the strong erosion of the rule of law standards: these standards concern transparency, environmental and labour standards, and the use of potentially invasive technologies. However, the pro-China narratives cloak the decline in the rule of law and deflect any criticism that this decline provokes.

The second narrative related to China deals with the tendency of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to promote himself domestically by fostering an image of friendship and brotherhood with China and its President Xi Jinping, with him as the main driver of that friendship. This narrative shows a captured state through the lens of captured foreign policy. Namely, while in Serbia, the ultimate responsibility for foreign affairs lies with the government and not the President, foreign policy has been completely put in the service of one man. This reality is exemplified through the narrative of friendship with China.
Russia – The Big Brother in the Captured Media

The incumbent regime has mostly pushed the pro-Russian narrative through the government-controlled and government-friendly media and tabloids. The narrative has been one of uncompromising friendship and brotherhood, where Serbia’s cooperation with Russia is portrayed as vital to the country, particularly in the context of Russia supporting Serbia on the issue of Kosovo. The pro-government media also tend to switch stories where Russia can also be scapegoated for the regime’s difficulties, only for the narratives to switch back to praising Russia when the mood of the powerholders changes.

This narrative exposes the reality of media that are captured. This shows the reality in which the media are under government control and are captured to the extent that they easily switch the narrative based on the arbitrary desire of the ruling elite guided by its daily interests. Since 2014, the SNS government suppressed media freedoms in the country as the media faced threats, intimidation, editorial pressures, and economic sanctions, like denying advertisement revenues on which most independent media rely. Reporters Without Borders’ Press Media Freedom Index put Serbia in 93rd place out of 180 countries regarding media freedoms.

The logic of forcing pro-Russian narratives revolves around two major domestic themes from the standpoint of the Serbian elite. The first is the emotional pull that the issue of Kosovo has for the domestic public, meaning that Serbia is tied to Russia in the context of Russia giving support to Serbia in the UN Security Council. The second is the high popularity of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin in the Serban public, meaning that Serbian politicians avoid alienating pro-Russian constituents. In that context, pushing for a pro-Russian narrative is useful for the incumbent regime to strengthen the domestic base and strengthen their hold on power.

This reality helps explain why most pro-Russian narratives are being pushed through pro-government media and tabloids. Dragan Vučićević, the editor and owner of the most popular pro-government tabloid Informer, openly admitted: “I am a businessman. Our usual daily circulation is 120,000, so we are already the highest-selling tabloid in Serbia. When I have Putin calendars, we sell 250,000. (...) If I had put Catherine Ashton [former EU’s chief diplomat] or Juncker [former President of the European Commission] on the calendar, I don’t think I would sell even 12 copies.” Vučićević’s Informer is the frequent source of powerful pro-Russian narratives. The one narrative is where Russia is praised as the power where the future lies, an uncompromising Serbian ally. An article addressing the public opinion surveys where the Serbian youth showed a favourable attitude towards Russia had the title “Russia rules! Forget America. The Youth in our Country Believes that Serbia Should Turn Towards Putin.”
The statement from politicians follows the same lines. Nenad Popović, the minister without a portfolio in the Serbian government, known as a pro-Russian figure, would frequently stress that Serbia should give up on EU integration and bind itself economically and militarily with Russia as that country respects Serbian sovereignty on Kosovo. As Popović said in mid-2019: “Serbian political boat needs to be turned slowly and wisely, without disturbance, in another direction. That direction involves Serbia developing tighter political, economic, and military cooperation with those countries that want to build their ties with Serbia on the foundation of equality, by respecting Serbia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity regarding Kosovo.”

The narrative that focuses on Russia supporting Serbia on Kosovo also showed flexibility. Namely, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, one would expect that its standing in the discourse of Serbian politicians would decline. Namely, Russia annexed Crimea by invoking the Kosovo precedent, which means that Russia did to Ukraine exactly the same thing it claims that the West did to Serbia, imposing a territorial change through a unilateral military force. Normally, that would imply the loss of credibility for the pro-Russian narrative in Serbia. However, this narrative was easily re-adjusted in the media by framing the analogy between Kosovo and Crimea in the context of historical rights. According to this version of the narrative, Crimea historically belongs to Russia just like Kosovo belongs to Serbia, and just like Russia succeeded in taking Crimea back, Serbia will do the same. In a country with independent and critical media, that type of issue would receive more scrutiny but in a country where media are captured by the ruling party, changing and spinning the narrative is easier.

Military cooperation between Serbia and Russia is frequently portrayed in hyperbolic fashion by the pro-government media as a means of self-promotion. Namely, if you are seen as strengthening the Serbian armed forces, you gain popularity among the Serbian voters. Suppose you are doing it with the support of popular great power, like Russia, even better. This political thinking leads to hyperbolic praise of this collaboration in the media and tabloids. However, inconsistencies regarding military cooperation with Russia are frequently not openly conveyed to the public by the government-controlled media.

Russian donation of six MiG-29 fighter jets to Serbia in 2017 is a case in point. While this transaction formally qualifies as a donation, Belgrade still had to pay Moscow around 185 million USD for their reparation. The government media do not report on these details. However, despite this contradiction, the MiG-29 jets were still a powerful promotional narrative for Serbian leadership. Ahead of the 2017 Serbian presidential elections, pro-government tabloids were full of headlines referring to the arrival of jets. ‘Putin will defend Serbia with weaponry’ or ‘The Serbian Army will roar when the new MIGs arrive’ are just some of the examples of those types of headlines.

However, the pro-Russian narrative pushed by the Serbian elite has also become something of a hindrance. Vučić and his allies fear the prospect that Putin could sabotage any hypothetical agreement that he could negotiate regarding Kosovo if
it excludes Russia and deprives Russia of the opportunity to trade its acquiescence on Kosovo for something else, in potential great power bargaining. Given Putin’s popularity among Serbian citizens, that situation would be perceived that Putin is more willing to defend Serbian interests than Vučić, spelling domestic political fiasco for Vučić.\textsuperscript{12}

This secret fear from Russia helps explain, in part, why in recent years, Serbia replaced Russia with China as its primary partner outside the West. Indeed, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the government officials and the pro-government media did not greet the Russian medical aid with the same enthusiasm and attention as the Chinese aid.\textsuperscript{13} More importantly, in July 2020, Serbia experienced violent anti-lockdown protests triggered by the illiberal rule and the government’s handling of the pandemic. The government responded violently as the special police and anti-riot units suppressed the riots.

The biggest novelty was that the pro-government tabloids that used to glorify Russia accused the pro-Russian elements of organising the protests. The pro-government tabloid “Kurir” claimed that the “anti-European forces led by pro-Russian right-wingers organised the demolition of Belgrade.”\textsuperscript{14} Another tabloid, “Alo”, ran a cover page story that the Russian “deep state” in Moscow and Russian intelligence services were behind the protests.\textsuperscript{15} The government’s smear machine targeted Russia to decrease pro-Russian sentiments that could have impeded Vučić as he tried to resolve the Kosovo dispute with US President Donald Trump’s assistance. Equally important was that the Belgrade regime was trying to muster support from the West by inflating the Russian threat, particularly as at the time of the protests, Vučić was meeting French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris at the time of the protests.\textsuperscript{16} The ease with which government-friendly media can change the script shows the ruling coalition’s grip over them.

The situation is now different as Belgrade has rekindled some of its old ties with Moscow after the rise of Joseph Biden’s Presidency in the US. Serbian leadership needs a diplomatic protector on issues like Kosovo and democratic decline as it is always potentially fearful that the Biden administration will be tougher on them than Trump’s administration. As a result of this re-pivot to Moscow, some of the old pro-Russian narratives also resurfaced in the pro-government circles in different capacities. In October 2021, the pro-government tabloids started circulating a story that Russia and Putin have a special plan for the Balkans and Serbia. According to that plan, Russia would designate the Balkans as a priority region for its foreign policy; even though the region is beyond Russian strategic priorities, the incumbent government in Serbia gladly uses Russia for domestic spins.\textsuperscript{17}

The media continue projecting the pro-Russian narratives. In November 2021, as Vučić was meeting Putin in Sochi to discuss a favourable gas price, which Vučić badly needed for both the economy and the elections, pro-government daily Večernje novosti spoke how Vučić would try to use friendly ties between the two governments to secure a beneficial price for Serbia.\textsuperscript{18} The gas price for Serbia remained the same, and the amount of delivered gas would increase for the next six months. After the meeting, Vučić told
Pink TV, one of the most powerful pro-government TV stations with national frequency, that Putin “showed exceptional friendship.” However, none of the media inquired with President Vučić what happens after the expiration of six months and was there any counter-favours that Belgrade would have to provide to Moscow in return. Instead, the media gladly and uncritically accepts the official government narrative of uncompro-mising Serbo-Russian partnership.

As long as the Kosovo dispute dominates the political agenda in Serbia, pro-Russian narratives will be useful for the incumbent elite to legitimise themselves, and by extension, strengthen their hold over the state. Being the make it or break it factor in Serbian politics, the Kosovo dispute gives Russia political relevance and the incentive for Serbian leadership to push pro-Russian narratives. However, with the Serbian government fighting to secure the total win on all electoral fronts in April 2022, the narratives focused on Kosovo and Russia in the Serbian media can be used to conceal the reality of a downgraded democracy. It would not be the first time. As President Vučić himself stated back in 2017, a year when he won the first presidential term: “Kosovo is the key issue; Serbia’s relationship with Russia is in the second place, while the rule of law is in the far third.”

Another confirmation of danger to foster captured state via pro-Russian narrative came most recently as the government tried to use Russia to discredit major environmental protests by claiming that the West instigated them. This was done after a December 2021 meeting between the Serbian Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin and Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council in Moscow. In an attempt to discredit the protests, the two officials pledged to jointly combat coloured revolutions. Vulin’ statement after the meeting stated: “It was pointed out at the meeting that the ‘colour revolutions’ have become a traditional policy instrument of certain centers of power and countries aimed at undermining statehood and losing sovereignty under the pretext of democratisation, and noted that free countries must resist it.” After the meeting, the pro-government portal reported that Russian security services warned Serbia of a coloured revolution disguised as environmental protests instigated by the West and Biden administration. The government will continue projecting pro-Russian narrative in the media at will, and depending on the circumstances, it will amend it. With captured media, it can continue behaving that way.
The one narrative associated with China is one of praise to the bilateral cooperation that the two countries are achieving where the Chinese projects in the country help Serbia’s development. However, behind this narrative is a hidden reality of a complete degradation in Serbia’s rule of law. This degradation manifests itself in the non-existent transparency surrounding transactions with the Chinese, the decline in environmental and labour standards, and the domain of security, as technology supplied by Huawei is intrusive of citizens’ privacy. The China narrative provides a perfect cover for these pathologies and a way to deflect potential critics.

In terms of the wider context, China provides the Serbian government with quick access to cash and promotional material for domestic political marketing, which propels the illiberal turn in Serbian polity. The infrastructural lending by China is one example of such behaviour. The arrival of the Chinese capital can be timed to correspond with local political cycles making it suitable for domestic promotion. Serbian leadership has shaped national legislation in a way that benefits China as it degrades the rule of law standards on transparency and public procurements. In that context, the Serbian government adopted the 2019 law on public procurement and the 2020 law on “special procedures.”

The fear of corruptive practices benefiting the ruling coalition is always in the background of collaboration with China, as most contracts regulating Sino-Serbian projects are designated secret. While Serbian citizens have the right to access information related to Chinese projects as stipulated by the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Significance, the information is not being disclosed. The narrative of cooperation with China fosters a culture of secrecy and non-transparency that helps the state capture and benefit the ruling coalition. The examples are numerous. The government never disclosed the price for the six Chinese-made CH92-A drones delivered to Serbia in June 2020. When asked by Radio Free Europe about the cost of Chinese drones, President Vučić stated that all procurements are secret, including those involving China.

The pandemic also strengthened the non-transparency, while the pro-China narrative provided the perfect method to conceal that non-transparency. The government never disclosed full data on how much medical equipment Beijing donated to Belgrade and how much was sold to Belgrade by Beijing. The cooperation with China is used not just for promotion but also for the concealment of data of public interest. While President Vučić stressed that he is not at liberty to disclose the amount of protective medical masks donated to China, he claimed that those masks that Serbia bought were bought below the supply price, leaving no possibility to verify the authenticity of the statement. Slamming the opposition is also part of the narrative based on secrecy and China
praise. During the first wave of the pandemic, Vučić said: “You always hear different and primitive accusations that largely speak of those uttering them. The greatest made-up story is that we get the masks from China for free and then sell them to Belgrade pharmacies. (...) As we face the coronavirus, they [opposition] and their media have only one problem, and that problem is me.”

Non-transparency is being used to hide more nuanced data on cooperation with China, showing both a tendency of the SNS government to promote itself domestically that way and to use cooperation with China for its own agenda. The price that Serbia paid to China for the COVID-19 vaccines was also never disclosed and kept secret.

In China, President Vučić had a justification for secrecy: "When you see the price, you will erect a monument of me one day. I cannot say the price because everybody else will ask the Chinese for that same price. Because of them, I cannot say the price."

The pro-Chinese narrative used by the Serbian leadership also shows the reality of a downgraded rule of law, manifested in the degradation of environmental and labour standards that accompany Chinese projects in the country. However, the government can easily use the pro-Chinese narrative to discount any criticism directed against the unsatisfactory standards of the Chinese projects, as coming from people who endanger national interests by being anti-China or from people opposing economic progress.

The case of the Serbian city of Zrenjanin, where the Chinese company Linglong is constructing a tire factory, demonstrates this political reality. The factory project in Zrenjanin is the biggest greenfield investment in the country. However, the project is marred by environmental concerns, and more recently, with labour rights violations, as the Vietnamese workers engaged in factory construction were kept in inhumane conditions with their passports taken away from them.

However, the government officials discounted all the critics. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić framed the critics in the context of being opposed to investments from China. "In the beginning, the problem with Linglong factory was environmental protection. Now everybody forgot about it and focused on the workers there. The next day it will be something else", Brnabić said. President Vučić discounted critics with a simple question: "What do they want? Do they want us to destroy a 900 million-dollar investment?"

This is not the first time the SNS has used this type of narrative to deflect critics directed at Chinese projects. In 2020, after several failed attempts to get authorities to act on the issue of environmental pollution caused by steel mill owned by Chinese company Hesteel in the city of Smederevo, local activists backed by opposition called for the blockade of the port of Smederevo. Zorana Mihajlović, at the time Minister of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, blasted the opposition: “It is very irresponsible for opposition politicians to call for a blockade of the Port of Smederevo, which employs more than 150 local citizens, while the Ironworks employs more than 4,000.”

The import of Chinese technology, like Huawei’s cameras with facial and licence plate recognition software, is also an example of the declining rule of law and part of an attempt for further state capture by the SNS government. As part of the “Safe City”
spearheaded by Serbia’s Ministry of Interior, which mandates the installation of Huawei’s cameras in Belgrade, a hold over the captured state can be strengthened as the intrusive nature of this technology can boost authoritarianism tendencies. The narrative that stresses how Chinese technology improves the safety of the citizens helps conceal the dangers coming from this technology.

The former Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović was frequently the one pushing this narrative. Speaking in front of the parliamentary Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs back in 2017, Stefanović defended the need for stronger video surveillance: “Instead of having police officers on the watch day and night on some traffic route, the camera will do it instead, and it will timely provide data. In the next three years, we will expand the number of these cameras. Not just in Belgrade. (...) Experience from Europe and the world showed us that the wider use of advanced technological instruments reduces the general crime rate. Therefore, I think this is a good move by the Ministry.”

When Stefanović signed with Huawei an agreement of introducing eLTE, Huawei’s broadband system within the “Safe City” projects, he stated: “We appreciate the readiness of Chinese companies and the Government of People’s Republic of China in helping the Republic of Serbia in improving the security of our citizens by raising the level of our information and communication systems, and technical capacities.”

The narratives on Chinese tech improving security can also be used the other way. That way is one where you discredit critics of the regime, either among the political parties or the NGOs, which is a narrative enforced by Stefanović’s successor to the position of Interior Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. After Vulin tried to push for the adoption of the bill on interior affairs that would legalise the use of facial recognition cameras, a major pushback from the civil society organisations followed. Vulin was forced to retract the proposed bill but noted that he had no choice as he accused the Western intelligence services, the opposition, and civil society groups of plotting violence in the streets under the excuse of opposing the legislation. As Vulin’s statement from September 2021 says: “Through intelligence services, we obtained information that several Western intelligence services, through their networks of agents in the media, NGOs and political parties, have prepared the media for organising violent protests to destabilise Serbia. Serbian heads are of no importance to them, and they are ready to throw them away in senseless clashes. (...) The bill on interior affairs has been withdrawn, you will have to find some other reason for bloodshed in the streets of Belgrade.”

The narrative of cooperation with China and the benefits it brings to the Serbian citizens is a perfect tool used to cloak the degradation in the rule of law that helps the incumbent coalition in the state capture enterprise. The SNS government deemed the Chinese projects important because of the cash influx and political marketing tools. However, while these projects remain controversial, Serbian leadership will continue using them for their ends.
The narrative of brotherhood has become particularly potent in the language of Serbian leadership when it comes to the country’s ties with China. Most frequently, the main source of this narrative has been President Vučić. The main purpose of this narrative is for Vučić to promote himself to the Serbian constituency as the competent leader bringing Serbia benefits through cooperation with friendly China and his friendship with Chinese President Xi Jinping. However, in the Serbian political system, the formulation of the country’s foreign policy rests not with the President but with the government led by the prime minister. This also shows one aspect of a captured state, where one man hijacks foreign policy as one of the key public policies and instrumentally uses it with the single purpose to promote himself politically.

Just like in the case of Russia, most of the pro-Chinese narrative in Serbia does not originate from any organised Chinese campaign, even though some Chinese media outlets are present in Serbia, like CGTN. Instead, pro-Chinese narratives are pushed through pro-government media. This push by the Serbian ruling elite led by President Vučić began the moment Serbia experienced a significant influx of Chinese capital. The Chinese have been a partner of necessity as very few investors were willing to take over troubled Serbian industrial facilities that employed many Serbian workers.

When in 2018, Chinese Zijin Mining took over a debt-burdened copper mining complex RTB Bor in the Serbian city of Bor, Vučić portrayed it as his own personal struggle. As Vučić was telling the Serbian media: “We have enormous problems there (in Bor). We deal with them every day, but we do not have a magic wand, and there is no easy solution. I beg the Chinese, I kneel before them, to take part in it. That is where we bleed, where our blood flows every month. We have so few people in eastern Serbia; we have to save those jobs for them because if we do not save those jobs, we will not have that part of Serbia.” Unbecoming of the President to beg, let alone talk about to the media, but the narrative is powerful as President Vučić is portraying himself as a patriot willing to take the sacrifice of humiliating himself in front of the foreigners for the wellbeing of the country.

The tendency of Serbian leaders to force pro-Chinese narrative reached its height in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Serbia was introducing a state of emergency in 2020 in the country, President Vučić held a press conference, in which he stated: “I believe in my friend and my brother, Xi Jinping, and I believe in Chinese help. The only country that can help us is China.” In that same conference, Vučić took a jab at the EU over what turned out was a temporary ban on the export of protective medical equipment outside the EU: “By now, you all understood, that great international solidarity, actually, does not exist. European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale on paper. (...) That decision was made by the people who lectured us that we are not supposed to
purchase Chinese goods. (...) To the rest of them, thanks for nothing. Trust me that I will find a way to thank them. What I have spoken today in front of you are the words of a president. Nice and polite.” In both cases, one can see the personalisation of foreign policy and Vučić using it to communicate with its own public to score. The emphasis is on his personal displeasure with the EU and desire to confront Brussels over perceived injustice perpetrated against his country. Similarly, Vučić emphasises his personal friendship with Xi Jinping, leading to the conclusion that every benefit that the country gets from cooperation with China is the direct result of his actions and his personal relationship with Xi Jinping.

Later on, as Vučić greeted the plane carrying Chinese medical aid, he kissed the Chinese flag. Another warm statement directed towards China followed: “We should thank them with all our hearts, they have proven to be great friends of Serbia and Serbs. (...) I am waiting for Xi to visit Serbia, and hundreds of thousands of people will welcome him.”

During those days, Belgrade was full of billboards reading “Thanks Brother Xi”, banners referring to China and Serbia as “brothers”, and “steel friends”, and some buildings were lit up in the colours of the Chinese flag. As opposed to that, the planes with Russian medical aid arrived; they were not greeted by Vučić but by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin. Again, in both acts, the focus is on the personality of Aleksandar Vučić and his dominant role in Serbian foreign policy based on which issues can be graded in importance based on the attention he dedicates in dealing with them.

A similar pattern was present regarding Chinese vaccine donations to Serbia. However, the public narrative had more nuances compared to the period from the first wave of the pandemic. As the first deliveries of China-made COVID-19 Sinopharm vaccines arrived in Serbia, it was greeted at the airport by President Vučić, accompanied by Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar, head of Serbia's principal intelligence agency Security and Intelligence Agency Bratislav Gašić, and the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo. The arrival of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines and Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine did not involve a high-profile reception from the Serbian leadership.

In that setting, President Vučić again used the opportunity to project a narrative of a wise leader fostering friendship with a rising global power like China and bringing benefits to his people, in this case, the vaccines. In January 2021, Vučić talked to the Serbian media about his personal struggle to secure vaccines for the Serbian population: “It was already in October that I wrote to Xi Jinping. I begged him, and the price was dramatically lowered.” Other high-level government officials enforce the Vučić-centered narrative. At a party gathering in November 2021, Prime Minister Brnabić stated: “When the COVID crisis began, thanks to the good relations of President Vučić, we got the vaccines and the medical equipment.”

The fact that Vučić received the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine also contributes to this narrative. After receiving the Chinese jab, Vučić wrote on Instagram: “I received the vaccine, and I feel great. Thank you, our great health workers. Thank you, our Chinese brothers.” In one interview, Vučić even stated that vaccines from the East are safer than those originating from the West.
China will continue being a tool of domestic promotion through which President Vučić will solidify its hold in power. Namely, in April 2022, Serbia is about to undergo parliamentary and presidential elections as well as the elections for the capital of Belgrade. The elections will be held in the context of the pandemic and the uncertain economic fallout. With Serbia in electoral mode, China appears as an attractive partner both as a source of cash and marketing material.

The Sinopharm vaccine factory, financed by China and the UAE, is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2022. The narrative of a country able to sustain its economy despite the pandemic, and thanks to the wise policy of its leadership that formed a partnership with China, comes to the fore. The case of the Sinopharm factory is a case in point. As the factory’s opening was announced, Vučić boasted that the factory would provide vaccine supplies to both Serbia and the region. Naturally, boasting of friendship with China was also there, as Vučić stated: “This is also the proof of friendship, although we frequently doubt friendships in international relations. When we faced difficulties, we received help from China and the UAE.”

In November 2021, Serbia signed an agreement with a company from China on constructing an access road, bypasses, and a tunnel at various locations across the country. This need for Chinese capital and electoral promotion will ensure that the pro-Chinese narrative will continue and that it will be used as a tool of state capture. Within that setting, foreign policy will be captured by a single leader, who will espouse this reality through the narrative of the personal friendship he nurtures with China and its President Xi Jinping.
**Conclusion**

The narratives used by the Serbian elite and pro-government media in 2020 and 2021 show that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives play a role in the process of state capture. By pushing the pro-Russian and the pro-Chinese narratives, the Serbian elites promote themselves domestically to their public, strengthen their hold, and prolong the condition of the captured state.

The pro-Russian narrative exposes the reality of captured media in Serbia. The narrative of brotherhood where Russia is the mighty power protecting Serbia, particularly on Kosovo. The narrative is pushed through government-controlled and government-friendly media so that the ruling coalition can capitalise on Russia's popularity in Serbia.

As Serbian leadership tried to tone down its ties with Russia, the narrative on Russia also changed, as demonstrated by the reception of Russian medical aid during the pandemic and accusations against Russia during the violent anti-lockdown protests. However, as Belgrade reactivated some of its old ties with Moscow, the pro-Russian narrative was reinvigorated in light of Biden's presidency in the US. The easiness with which Serbian leadership changes the narrative on Russia depending on what suits her better at a given time shows the government's control over the media domain, a major element of state capture.

In regards to China, two major narratives were identified. The first narrative is the one where the Chinese projects and the perceived benefits they bring to the Serbian citizens are being praised. However, the Chinese projects come at a price of the declining rule of law standards, expressed through decreased transparency, degraded environmental and labour standards, and the introduction of Huawei's surveillance technology. The declined rule of law helps the Serbian elite in the state capture enterprise. The Chinese narrative enables Serbian leadership to get away with the degradation of standards and defend themselves against criticism.

The second narrative involving China is one of steel friendship and brotherhood between the two countries and between two presidents, President Vučić of Serbia and President Xi of China. This narrative focuses on President Vučić, who promotes himself domestically as the enabler of partnership with China. Behind this narrative is the process of captured foreign policy. Namely, in the Serbian system of government, the government and the prime minister are in charge of foreign policy and not the President. However, foreign policy as one of the key elements of public policy is dominated by a single, illiberal leader who uses it for domestic promotion, as fostered and demonstrated through his narrative of friendship and brotherhood with China.

One can expect that the pro-Russia and pro-China narratives in Serbian public discourse will continue. With the Serbian election coming in April 2022, the SNS government will use these narratives to consolidate ranks and power, prolonging state capture in the process. This generates the need for Serbian civil society and political activists to come up with an alternative narrative for Serbian polity. The narrative based on transparency and independent democratic institutions.


36 Ministry of Interior Republic of Serbia, “Stefanović: U okviru prve faze pilot projekta „Bezbedan grad“ započeta je zamena starih kamera za video nadzor [Stefanović: Within the First Phase of the Pilot „Bezbedan grad“],” December 27, 2017, http://www.mup.rs/wps/portal/sr/arhiva/put/p/z0/fy3LDolwFER_hcSwbG5pkcfSRwKKLtsF2g25hapFLajV-Pk2ce9gZk4m-MyDqBMLgW1_R6s5g6_JZRGRULKi8y-gmW6ymdJZuw3y-3PEiCeEwDuX-UE42aA2sQfxvuzndP-J9iBqLqiFUC6f-JVtdla27ND7tu0PZgz7F4abFTkfs-tEq0zjPaBD7thM12iNerSr1kDh4PxrVjCFYPy-JKxkXYxSHaCNEIQs4D2KZJxX09-z4Baeo_50/!

37 Ministry of Interior Republic of Serbia, “Sporazum MUP i Huawei, uvođenje eLTE tehnologije [Agreement between Ministry of Interior and Huawei, Introduction of eLTE Technology],” February 3, 2017, http://www.mup.rs/wps/portal/sr/arhiva/put/p/z0/fy3LDolwFER_hcSwbG5pkcfSR-wKKLtsF2g25hapFLajV-Pk2ce9gZk4mMyDqBMLgW1_R6s5g6_JZRGRULKi8y-gmW6ymdJZuw3y-3PEiCeEwDuX-UE42aA2sQfxvuzndP-J9iBqLqiFUC6f-JVtdla27ND7tu0PZgz7F4abFTkfs-tEq0zjPaBD7thM12iNerSr1kDh4PxrVjCFYPy-JKxkXYxSHaCNEIQs4D2KZJxX09-z4Baeo_50/!


