



## WESTERN BALKANS CHINA POLICY TEAM

### POLICY MEMO – MONTENEGRO

#### CHINA'S SOFT POWER - "DISCOURSE POWER"

One of the main tools of soft power is culture. For every nation, culture is an important source of power, placing it at the center of China's plans, with its promotion being Beijing's primary strategy for expanding its influence. China's foreign policy activities aim to strengthen its soft power in media, education, arts, and other similar domains<sup>1</sup>. China fundamentally sees its culture as global, and its level of soft power has risen in recent years, currently placing it third according to Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index<sup>2</sup>. The term "Discourse Power" is embedded in Chinese

diplomacy as a cornerstone of soft power. It is used to describe China's need to achieve greater global influence and to shape global public opinion<sup>3</sup>. Through "discourse power", China aims to outweigh Western influence worldwide and, as they state, have a strategy for managing the digital world. The foundation for achieving their goals lies in the "power to speak" and the "power to be heard", and their propaganda cannot be heard unless they first create a fertile ground for their messages<sup>4</sup>.

#### MONTENEGRO - FERTILE GROUND FOR THE SPREAD OF CHINESE PROPAGANDA

Given that Western territories are less accessible for spreading Chinese influence through soft power, stabilitocracies and developing countries with high levels of corruption are fertile ground for China's activities and the implementation of soft power. In this context, Montenegro has become a focal point of Chinese interest. Chinese

diplomacy in Montenegro has initially focused on nurturing good relations, investments, and promoting language and culture to create an attractive and positive image. For current, more tangible success, it is essential to win over the Montenegrin elite to achieve a "spillover effect" on other areas of society. Given the lack of trans-

<sup>1</sup> Shambaugh, David. "China's soft-power push: The search for respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94.4 (2015): 99-107.

<sup>2</sup> <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/brand-finances-global-soft-power-index-2024-usa-and-uk-ranked-top-nation-brands-china-takes-third-place-overtaking-japan-and-germany>

<sup>3</sup> [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/discourse-power/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/discourse-power/)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinese-discourse-power-ambitions-and-reality-in-the-digital-domain/>



parency from the Montenegrin Government regarding relations with China and pressure from the EU, elites are now crucial to preventing potential damage to China's image due to numerous accusations about economic cooperation and to continue expanding their influence. Chinese soft power in Montenegro is present; however, due to their strategy, this phenomenon can only be noticed through a critical approach, as the contours of their influence are not yet receiving enough attention.

#### Presentation of China's soft power in Montenegro: Cultural diplomacy and elite targeting

In promoting soft power, the Confucius Institute is China's primary tool, and it can be understood as a form of state-sponsored cultural diplomacy through universities to create a positive image of China globally<sup>5</sup>. The main mechanisms for implementing soft power through the Institute are the Chinese language and the promotion of culture and holidays. In Montenegro, the Confucius Institute is present at the University of Montenegro and collaborates with the University of Donja Gorica. The most telling indicator of the Institute's work and presence is the fact that the Chinese language is taught at 29 educational sites, in 10 cities in Montenegro, at two universities, in 27 primary and secondary schools, covering over 2,000 students.

Cultural events and festivals have recently become focal points of Chinese interest, raising

cultural exchange to a higher level. The Montenegrin Minister of Culture and Media recently stated that already established cultural ties would be deepened by signing a new agreement, inviting Chinese artists to come to Montenegro. Besides cooperation at the state level, cooperation has also been formalized locally. Kotor and Shanghai jointly signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation as part of the art festivals in both cities. The "China Stage" was created as a tribute at the recent "KotorArt" festivals, hosting Chinese artists. Another noteworthy cultural promotion is the Chinese New Year celebration, with the Chinese Embassy organizing a large annual event to promote their values and create a positive image among Montenegrin citizens. Given these cultural events, a greater influx of Chinese tourists can be expected. Last year, the total number of arrivals from China to Montenegro reached 32,277, while in 2022 that figure was 8,256, indicating a significant increase.

Humanitarian donations are also seen as a form of cultural diplomacy, contributing to a positive image of the donor and acting as a means of spreading nation's values. This was precisely the case in China's relationship with Montenegro during the COVID-19 pandemic, as China was the first to send a larger contingent of vaccines to Montenegro, leveraging the global health crisis to strengthen ties and create a perception of itself as a reliable partner.

Targeting and networking with elites, as well as meetings with high-ranking officials, are essential methods of soft power to achieve a direct impact on policymakers and key decision-makers in their sectors. China has frequently organized

<sup>5</sup> Pan, Su-Yan. "Confucius Institute project: China's cultural diplomacy and soft power projection." *Asian Education and Development Studies* 2.1 (2013): 22-33.



“one-on-one” meetings for many years, with the potential for cooperation between state-owned companies, actively courting the elites in Montenegro. The most common mechanism involves “one-on-one” meetings, usually held between representatives of the Chinese Embassy in Montenegro and Montenegrin elites. Based on information

from the website of the Chinese Embassy in Montenegro, this practice is extremely intensive. Currently, the most targeted sectors in this cooperation are those related to education and science, culture and media, as well as infrastructure and regional development.

### PROOFS:

<https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/drustvo/direktorka-instituta-konfucije-luo-cunsja-trzistu-potrebniljudi-talentovani-za-kineski-jezik-5154413>

<https://rtcg.me/kultura/kulturna-galaksija/558139/crna-gora-i-kina-u-oblasti-kulture-i-umjetnosti-mogu-razmenjijati-znanja-i-iskustva.html>

[http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/sghd\\_1/202406/t20240628\\_11444011.htm](http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/sghd_1/202406/t20240628_11444011.htm)

<https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/313058-u-podgorica-organizovana-proslava-kineske-nove-godine>

<https://monstat.org/eng/page.php?id=180&pageid=44>

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31109677.html>

<https://rtcg.me/vijesti/drustvo/528339/jace-veze-sa-kinom-kroz-saradnju-vodecih-medijskih-kuca.html>

[http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/sghd\\_1/index.htm](http://me.china-embassy.gov.cn/mon/sghd_1/index.htm)

These examples indicate that the presence of Chinese soft power in Montenegro is a consistent phenomenon, and its current scope, given the numerous political upheavals, may become more visible in the upcoming

period. Certainly, the outlines of Chinese culture, cooperation, and elite influence are already rooted in Montenegrin society, suggesting that Chinese power has a tendency to continue growing.



## CHINA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH POST-DPS GOVERNMENTS

The Montenegrin Government is encountering a re-emerging phenomenon and seems to be increasingly under scrutiny. The government before 2020 opened doors to China and established relations, with China's impact primarily projected through the economy. After August 30, cultural diplomacy continued to progress, but frequent government changes have undoubtedly complicated China's efforts to exert pressure and establish networks among new political elites. Although the current government promotes EU accession, China's pragmatism and non-interference in Montenegrin politics allow it to remain a relevant partner. China will strive to establish connections among elites

to continue expanding its influence and maintaining a positive image. An increasing trend worth noting involves more frequent cooperation with leading representatives in the fields of culture, media, and education, accompanied by frequent meetings. According to the Chinese ambassador to Montenegro, education cooperation and cultural exchange are increasingly present factors, with Montenegrin representatives in these areas strongly supporting this cooperation and welcoming China's efforts. China has already invested enough in creating a positive image of itself in Montenegro to abandon its further efforts to maintain it.