


Chapter 1


Education as a Geopolitical Tool: EU and China's Competing Strategies in the Western Balkans Disinformation Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Education has long played a pivotal role in shaping political narratives, and in recent years, the Western Balkans have become a critical arena for geopolitical influence between the European Union and China. Both actors strategically leverage educational initiatives as instruments of soft power to expand their reach and assert their visions within the region. This chapter explores how the EU and China utilize education not only as a means of engagement but also as a conduit within the complex ecosystem of disinformation that characterizes the Western Balkans. By analyzing these educational efforts, the chapter sheds light on how they intersect with, reinforce, or challenge competing disinformation narratives, ultimately influencing the political and social fabric of the region.

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INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans, a region historically marred by political instability, economic volatility, and contested identities, has emerged as a key geopolitical arena for external powers seeking to expand their influence. Among the most prominent actors in this evolving landscape are the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China, which have adopted multifaceted strategies to assert their presence. Often overlooked in traditional geopolitical analyses, education has become a strategic instrument through which these actors pursue their respective visions for the region.

The EU, positioned as a normative power and long-standing partner in the Western Balkans, has embedded education at the core of its broader integration agenda. Initiatives such as Erasmus+, the Bologna Process, and regionally targeted programs are designed to elevate the quality and compatibility of higher education and foster democratic values, the rule of law, and institutional transparency. These educational efforts aim to create pro-European constituencies, cultivate reform-minded elites, and enhance the region's alignment with EU norms and standards.

China's approach, by contrast, is embedded in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and emphasizes principles of mutual benefit, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. Through scholarships, academic partnerships, and the establishment of Confucius Institutes, China is extending its soft power and offering an alternative development model. These educational channels are carefully crafted to nurture pro-Chinese sentiment, legitimize China's global leadership ambitions, and counter-narratives that portray China as a threat to liberal democratic order.

Crucially, both actors recognize the role of education in shaping public perceptions and combating—or, conversely, disseminating—disinformation. The EU has increasingly invested in media literacy, critical thinking, and civic education to build resilience against authoritarian narratives, particularly those from China.

China is governed by an authoritarian regime, with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tightly controlling government, media, religion, education, and civil society. Under Xi Jinping, power has been highly centralized, and years of crackdowns have severely weakened independent NGOs and human rights advocacy.

China has been accused of using educational and cultural platforms to propagate state-sanctioned narratives that downplay human rights concerns and depict the West as fragmented and in decline. In this context, education is a development tool and a geopolitical influence conduit.

This chapter critically examines the competing educational strategies of the EU and China in the Western Balkans, analyzing how these initiatives intersect with broader narratives of disinformation, political alignment, and regional transformation.

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