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Perceptions and Implications: China's Global Initiatives in Southeast Europe

Ana Krstinovska, Anastas Vangeli, Konstantinos Tsimonis
and Zlatko Simonovski



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Table of contents

Executive summary	5
Introduction.....	7
Development, Security, Civilization, Governance: China's New Global Architecture.....	7
Four Initiatives, One Strategy?	7
Why Southeast Europe Matters as a Case	9
Methodological and Conceptual Approach	10
The Global Initiatives in Local Discourse: a Country-by-country Sketch	11
Albania.....	11
Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	13
Bulgaria	15
Croatia	17
Greece.....	18
Montenegro	21
North Macedonia	22
Serbia	23
Regional Views and Perceptions.....	26
Quantitative approach – overview and demographics	26
Survey findings	26
Patterns, Comparisons and Policy Implications	29
A Typology of Reception.....	29
Main Observations and Patterns	30
Looking Ahead: What the Patterns Suggest	32
Endnotes	34

Executive summary

China's four global initiatives (4GI) – the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), and Global Governance Initiative (GGI), have arrived in Southeast Europe (SEE) at a moment of global reckoning, concurring crises and conflicts in Europe and beyond, and dilemmas pertaining to the region's EU integration trajectory. Their effect on the region's fundamental alignments remains limited; their more visible role is discursive, providing some actors with alternative vocabularies. Drawing on media and public discourse analysis and expert survey data, this study maps the reception of the four global initiatives (4GI) across nine Southeast European countries through four analytical dimensions: official uptake by state actors, media visibility and circulation, initiative-specific views and perceptions among the expert community, and the contextual elements and structural conditions that enable or constrain deeper engagement.

Serbia is the clear outlier, having incorporated all four initiatives into formal bilateral documents and framed its relationship with China in terms of joint implementation. Bosnia and Herzegovina holds an intermediate position, displaying selective receptivity without coherent policy adoption, reflecting the country's political and administrative structure. Across the remaining countries, engagement is limited and largely discursive. Bulgaria and Greece debate the initiatives primarily through a critical geopolitical lens, while Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania exhibit little more than sporadic media exposure, with Chinese state-affiliated actors providing much of the available content. The 4GI have almost no presence in Kosovo, which does not have diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and whose statehood is not recognized by Beijing.

The 4GI also achieve uneven traction. The GDI resonates most strongly because it connects to familiar themes of infrastructure, economic

modernization, and development cooperation already introduced by BRI. It also happens to be the first one introduced among the initiatives, which has given sufficient time for it to enter the public discourse. The GSI finds limited appeal in contexts where sovereignty remains politically salient, but faces significant constraints in NATO member states. The GCI derives most of its leverage through cultural diplomacy and existing institutional networks, with Greece representing a distinctive case through its dialogue on ancient civilizations. The newest initiative, the GGI, announced with more pomp than the others, has generated the greatest media attention but remains insufficiently understood, appearing often as shorthand for China's broader geopolitical ambitions than as a distinct policy framework.

The reasons why the 4GI have thus far had limited resonance in Southeast Europe are geopolitical, institutional, and semiotic. EU membership or accession commitments, NATO obligations, fragmented state institutions, and limited domestic demand for alternative governance models all restrict the space within which 4GI can become politically meaningful. Moreover, compared with the BRI, whose initial ambiguity was gradually filled through roads, railways, energy facilities, factories, and visible projects, the 4GI at this stage remain abstract and difficult to grasp. They relate to broad categories such as development, security, civilization, governance, but few immediately recognizable local reference points. Their relevance therefore depends heavily on whether local actors can connect them to existing concerns, which have built up over the years: frustration with development conditionality, debates over sovereignty and alignment, demands for cultural recognition, or uncertainty about the future of EU integration. For the time being, however, the 4GI remain detached from actual regional geopolitics, and circulate as mostly China-driven diplomatic discourse rather than as politically meaningful frameworks.

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The region's expert community has no clear understanding about the scope and content of the 4GI, but nevertheless for the most part it approaches them with caution and scepticism, arguably due to broader geopolitical considerations. The broader

public, by contrast, remains largely unfamiliar with them. Elite engagement remains without ideological alignment, reflecting primarily strategic calculation; while limited public awareness suggests that the long-term trajectory and impact of China's initiatives in Southeast Europe remains unclear. Whether today's pattern of pragmatic, selective engagement evolves into deeper institutional embedding or gradually recedes will depend less on decisions taken in Beijing than on choices made in Tirana, Sarajevo, Sofia, Athens, Zagreb, Podgorica, Skopje, Belgrade, Prishtina - as well as Brussels.

The study argues that the 4GI should be understood as an emerging normative framework entering SEE's regional setting marked by pre-existing political and institutional gaps, tensions, or unmet demands - some of which may create conditions for selective uptake of China's initiatives. The significance of 4GI in SEE ultimately lies in their potential for generating an evolving vocabulary that originates in Chinese initiatives but remains open to selective input and reinterpretation by local actors pursuing their own political, economic, or diplomatic objectives; nevertheless, this does not amount to transforming strategic alignments.

Introduction

Development, Security, Civilization, Governance: China's New Global Architecture

Over the past five years, China has launched four global initiatives (4GI) that, taken together, amount to the most ambitious articulation yet of its aspiration to shape the norms and institutions of the international order. The Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in 2021, was followed by the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022, the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) in 2023, and, most recently, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) unveiled in September 2025. The launch of the GGI took place on the occasion of the 2025 SCO+ summit, gathering several heads of states including Russia's President Vladimir Putin, immediately before the military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. Individually, each initiative addresses a distinct domain: development, security, culture, and governance, respectively. Read together, they constitute something more than the sum of their parts, a layered framework in which economic engagement, security cooperation, civilizational discourse and global institutional reform are increasingly presented within a common policy framework, offering partner countries what Beijing terms "Chinese solutions" to global challenges, and offering China itself a vocabulary through which to present its growing international weight as a coherent alternative to the Western-led order.

For countries in Southeast Europe (SEE) - a region that spans EU candidate states in the Western Balkans and EU member states such as Greece, Bulgaria and Croatia, the 4GI arrive at a particularly delicate juncture. Against the backdrop of wars, conflicts and different crises across the world, economic and supply chain restructuring, climate change and related policy responses, the region continues to navigate its EU integration trajectory, whether as accession candidates seeking to demonstrate reform credibility

or as member states balancing the obligations of EU membership against a more fragmented geopolitical environment. SEE countries manage an increasingly crowded field of external relationships, with the United States, Türkiye, the Gulf States and Russia all pursuing their own agendas in the region, alongside an increasingly ambitious China.

China's presence in the region is not new: it has built a substantial footprint over the past decade through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the cooperation format for China and Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), financing highways, ports, power plants and rail links, and establishing itself as a visible economic and diplomatic actor. What is new is the shift in register. While BRI-era relations were defined by China's economic clout, the current wave of initiatives demonstrates greater ambition, extending into the normative domains of development, security cooperation, cultural narratives, and global governance – domains far closer to the normative core of the EU integration itself.

Four Initiatives, One Strategy?

Each of the four initiatives carries distinct thematic content, while recent Chinese policy documents increasingly situate them within a common governance framework. On 17 June 2026, coinciding with the G7 leaders' statement on global affairs, China published the White Paper titled *More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions*, where it explicitly links the four major initiatives into an effort to reform and improve global governance.¹

The Global Development Initiative

The GDI positions China as a partner in sustainable growth, framing development as the precondition for security and stability. Centred on eight priority areas, from poverty alleviation to the digital

Source: Shutterstock



economy, the GDI marks a deliberate departure from the large-scale infrastructure lending of the early BRI years towards smaller, higher-visibility “livelihood” projects: green energy retrofits, digital connectivity, vaccine access, agricultural technology. Recent cooperation initiatives in SEE reflect this shift: in the absence of major Chinese loan-funded projects concluded in the past five years, development cooperation has continued in new smaller projects and under different funding arrangements – windfarms, solar plants, communal infrastructure, hospitals, etc.

The Global Security Initiative

The GSI extends Chinese discourse into international security, built around the principle of comprehensive or “indivisible” security, which implies that no state should pursue its own security at the expense of others. At the level of principle, indivisible security is a normative claim that frames security as relational: one state’s security choices can generate insecurity for others. Yet, the principle also raises a second-order question about agency: who decides when one state’s security choices threaten another’s, and how should such concerns be balanced against the right of states to define their own security arrangements? For most countries in SEE, this tension acquires particular political salience in SEE, where states have already institutionalised security commitments through NATO, EU frameworks, or other partnerships. Hence, the initiative’s practical

expression in the region remains limited compared to its rhetorical ambition, but it is not absent: law-enforcement cooperation and joint police patrols correspond to the GSI’s emphasis on security dialogue and capacity-building, while emerging engagement on cybersecurity and the governance of new technologies offers an additional channel for its regional application.²

The Global Civilization Initiative

The GCI is the most abstract, and arguably the most consequential, of the four initiatives for a region whose EU integration as aspiration or lived reality is built on shared values. It emphasizes civilizational and cultural diversity and questions the assumption that particular understandings of modernisation, democracy, and human rights can be applied uniformly across different historical and cultural contexts, creating potential tension with more universalist interpretations of these principles. Operationalized largely through party-to-party dialogues, conferences, media, cultural and academic exchange programmes, the GCI builds on tangible pre-existing institutional presence in SEE: active Confucius Institutes in most capitals³ seminars for political elites, a diplomatic and cultural dialogue platform based on the concept of “ancient civilizations” with Greece, emerging academic institutions like the Research Centre on Building a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity in Sarajevo,⁴ etc. The initiative’s strategic impact lies less in any single project than in the broader vocabulary through which development, political order and modernisation are discussed. For SEE, this is politically relevant because the region strives to align with a normative framework in which democracy, rule of law and human rights are standardized institutional commitments.

The Global Governance Initiative

The GGI, the newest and most institutionally ambitious of the four initiatives, seeks to reshape global governance, promoting five principles: sovereign equality of states, international rule of law applicable to all, UN-centred multilateralism, a “people-centred approach” focusing on the measurement of results in material-developmental terms, and “action-oriented approach.” In practice, this ranges from the weighted influence of Western states in the IMF and World Bank, to the standards

governing emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Its most concrete expression to date in SEE is in the domain of AI governance, where China has begun offering SEE partners an alternative and access to the newly established World AI Cooperation Organization (WAICO). Serbia's participation as a founding member in WAICO,⁵ and the integration of Chinese standards in digital, energy and infrastructure projects implemented by Chinese contractors, could suggest that the GGI may prove the most operationally significant of the four initiatives for the region's medium-term technological trajectory because it operates through technical standard-setting, and is therefore less visible to public and political scrutiny.

Why Southeast Europe Matters as a Case

Southeast Europe is arguably not the most prominent arena in which China's 4GI are being tested, but it may be among the more analytically instructive ones. The region is not equidistant between two competing visions of the international order: EU accession trajectories, NATO membership or partnership, and transatlantic security ties remain the dominant frameworks within which most SEE governments operate. Yet these frameworks are under pressure by the rise of far-right movements across Europe, enlargement fatigue, and domestic institutional disillusionment. These are not uniquely SEE phenomena, but they are present here too. It is precisely the gap between the publicly expressed regional consensus around EU integration and democratic values, and the growing underlying skepticism about whether that consensus delivers, that creates room for alternative vocabularies to gain traction.

In a global context, Southeast Europe occupies a distinctive position from which to examine how China's new initiatives are received outside the traditional binary framing of Western developed countries versus the "Global South." The region is simultaneously part of Europe, bound, in different degrees, by EU membership, candidate status, or association agreements - while still struggling with issues of dependent economic development, incomplete state-building, systemic and democratic fragility, like many countries in the Global South. This dual positioning makes SEE an unusually revealing

test case. Unlike Africa, Asia or Latin America, where Chinese initiatives compete primarily against a relatively distant Western normative presence, SEE countries are asked to weigh Chinese frameworks against EU accession conditionality or the obligations of EU and NATO membership. The result is an asymmetry in the stakes of engagement: Beijing loses much less if individual actors decline to endorse particular initiatives, whereas Brussels is far more likely to treat such engagement as politically significant because it increasingly expects normative alignment from SEE states within the EU integration process.

Despite this, the existing literature offers only a partial and fragmented picture of the 4GI. A growing body of Western scholarship has analysed the GDI, GSI, GCI and GGI individually, typically at the global or systemic level.⁶ A smaller-scale, though valuable, regional discussion, has documented the initiatives' reception in Serbia in some depth.⁷ The seminal work of Dian and Menegazzi examines the four initiatives as a coherent Chinese leadership blueprint targeting primarily the Global South and the BRICS countries.⁸ What remains largely absent is a systematic, comparative assessment of how these four initiatives, considered together, as an interlinked framework, are understood, debated and acted upon across the wider SEE region, including in EU candidate countries beyond Serbia and in EU member states navigating their own "strategic autonomy" debates. There is, in particular, limited systematic evidence on the degree of public and elite familiarity with these initiatives, on the motivations - economic, political, or ideational, that drive selective SEE engagement with them, and on how such engagement squares with the region's parallel commitments to EU integration and transatlantic security cooperation.

Far from replacing Southeast Europe's Euro-Atlantic orientation, China's 4GI have provided a flexible normative framework through which regional actors can selectively pursue political, economic and diplomatic objectives. Their significance therefore lies less in immediate geopolitical realignment than in their gradual institutionalization as alternative frameworks that coexist with European institutional commitments, while introducing partially different and potentially challenging understandings of development, sovereignty, security and governance.

Methodological and Conceptual Approach

The paper at hand sets out to fill these gaps and provide a comprehensive and comparative account of the deployment and reception of China's 4GI in SEE, covering nine countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. It maps and assesses how China's 4GI are perceived and understood across Southeast Europe, and what implications this evolving engagement may carry for the region's economic strategies, security priorities and political alignments. For this purpose, we adopt four analytical dimensions: official uptake by state actors, media visibility and circulation, initiative-specific views and perceptions among the expert community, and the contextual elements and structural conditions that enable or constrain deeper engagement.

Four questions guide the analysis that follows: How do SEE countries perceive and interpret China's new global initiatives? What motivations - economic necessity, political convenience, ideological affinity, or strategic pragmatism drive SEE engagement, or the absence of it, with these frameworks? What perceptions of benefits and risks does such engagement carry, both for individual countries and for the region's collective European trajectory? And how might SEE countries respond in ways that serve their long-term interests both in terms of security and economic opportunities that Chinese engagement may offer in particular circumstances?

The analysis draws on a combination of: (i) official document analysis examining Chinese official statements, speeches and policy texts; (ii) review of secondary literature from European and Chinese sources; (iii) online media and public discourse analysis with a cut-off date March 2026; (iv) quantitative data collected through regional expert survey designed to capture patterns of awareness and perception among an initiated audience - policymakers, diplomats, scholars, journalists and civil society experts. The purpose of the survey was not to produce a statistically representative measurement of attitudes, but rather to surface the views, perceptions and interpretations of the expert community in SEE regarding China's 4GI. Where possible, the study also maps concrete

expressions of engagement: participation in China-led forums and platforms, bilateral agreements or memoranda that explicitly reference one or more of the four initiatives, and specific projects that can be plausibly linked to their stated objectives. Such mapping covers the period since 2021 when the announcement of the first such initiative - the GDI happened.

Limitations should be acknowledged: the analysis of media outputs and public discourse captures visibility, while the expert survey reflects informed perceptions; this means impact on target audiences and representative public opinion remain yet to be studied. Finally, because the GGI was introduced only recently, its longer-term regional effects and uptake still cannot be accurately assessed.

Conceptually, the study approaches Southeast Europe through the lens of small-state agency and strategic balancing in a complex geopolitical environment. It treats SEE countries not as passive recipients of great-power influence, but as agents actively navigating uneven and differently structured expectations, incentives, and constraints emanating from Brussels, Washington, Beijing, Moscow and others. SEE countries pursue domestically defined interests that do not always map neatly onto the binary framing of "West versus East" through which the region's external relations are often discussed. This framing matters for how the findings that follow should be read. Some form of engagement with a Chinese global initiative need not signal strategic realignment away from Europe; equally, formal EU alignment does not preclude case-by-case engagement with Chinese initiatives where domestic circumstances make this attractive. Distinguishing between rhetorical or substantial alignment, between pragmatic, normative or strategic engagement, as well as identifying the main drivers behind decisions to engage or not in the first place is one of the principal analytical tasks this publication sets for itself.

The chapters that follow examine each of the four initiatives in turn, comparing their global ambitions with the specific reception across Southeast Europe, drawing cross-cutting findings on patterns of engagement, areas of convergence and tension with European and transatlantic frameworks, and analysing the strategic considerations shaping national and regional responses.

The Global Initiatives in Local Discourse: a Country-by-country Sketch

The section that follows offers a discursive scan of how China's 4GI appear in the media and public debate of each country surveyed. The media and public discourse analysis that serves as basis was conducted in March 2026 and covers 355 online references across the nine countries. It relied on systematic internet browsing, using local language translations of each of the four Chinese Global Initiatives with the aim of capturing as comprehensive set of references and mentions as possible for each country. The analysis includes traditional media with nation-wide coverage, local outlets and internet portals, including Chinese state-owned media, domestic outlets and local services of Western news agencies present in the region, as well as their social media accounts, spanning across general and more specialized outlets with different focus and target audiences. It captures the narratives with their nuances and vantage points, and provides country-specific contextual elements that contribute to understand the advancement and uptake, or lack thereof, across the region.

Taken together, across most of the region, the 4GI remain marginal to mainstream public discourse across most of the region, and where they do appear, it is largely through the promotional work of Chinese state-affiliated outlets publishing in local languages. Some national media across the region report on 4GI as well, as part of their editorial affiliation. Several patterns stand out. Where Western media maintain local-language editions or correspondents, their coverage provides a counterweight, tending towards more critical or geopolitically contextualized readings of the initiatives. Where such presence is thin or absent, the informational field is left more open to Chinese framing by default. Serbia occupies a disproportionately large share of the analysis because it constitutes the most advanced case of institutional engagement with China's four initiatives. In this respect, Serbia is the clear outlier, as the only country where the 4GI have moved beyond media

circulation, generating a correspondingly richer and more contested domestic debate. Everywhere else, the initiatives remain on the periphery of public discourse. In other words, there is enough 4GI content for them to be noted, but they have not yet been embedded enough to be genuinely contested, owned, or repurposed by local actors.

Albania

Albania, a country with a very strong pro-Western public sentiment, is often described by EU stakeholders as one of the "frontrunners" for EU membership. As the country navigates its foreign policy between Brussels and Washington, China's 4GI have attracted modest Albanian-language coverage and no uptake by state officials.

Chinese state-affiliated outlets publishing in Albanian⁹ present all four initiatives in consistently positive and cooperative terms closely aligned with official Beijing messaging. Albanian online news portals and op-eds situate China's proposals within wider debates about global governance reform, development cooperation, and a shifting international order. Geopolitical commentary and social media content frames the initiatives more critically, approaching them through the lens of strategic competition and great-power rivalry. In contrast to their once-hailed communist-era alliance and 'privileged' bilateral relations, Albanian coverage of the 4GI contains no significant ideological current that explicitly embraces the initiatives as a desirable challenge to Western dominance.

Coverage of the GDI in the Albanian media environment is limited and largely confined to online portals, without sustained engagement by major national news outlets. Where coverage does appear, it tends to present the initiative as a Chinese contribution to narratives around global development rather than as a subject of scrutiny.

On the local media side, coverage of the GDI includes descriptive articles and commentaries. Argumentum, an online commentary and analysis platform, addressed the initiative on at least two occasions: one piece presented the GDI as a Chinese proposal for inclusive and sustainable global growth, stressing poverty reduction, multilateralism, and development cooperation, while a second situated it within a broader discussion of China's evolving worldview on international order and development governance.¹⁰ Smaller online news portals, relay the initiative's content in broadly descriptive terms.¹¹ Tirana Diplomat, a platform specialising in diplomatic and foreign-policy commentary, discussed the GDI as one of several frameworks proposed by China to address imbalances in the existing international order.¹²

As is to be expected, social media posts by Chinese state-affiliated channels CGTN Albanian and CMG Shqip frame the GDI as one of four complementary pillars of China's multilateral vision, consistently presenting it in positive terms without analytical elaboration. Across these sources, the GDI functions primarily as a lens through which Albanian commentators address China's broader ambition to contribute to international development.

Coverage of the GSI is more varied. On the one hand, Chinese state-affiliated and promotional channels present the GSI as a framework for peace, development, and multilateral cooperation, framing China's security proposals as contributions to international stability rather than as instruments of geopolitical repositioning.¹³ Occasionally, local media also frame the GSI in terms that broadly echo official Chinese messaging.¹⁴ On the other hand, Albeu, a mainstream Albanian news portal, took an explicitly sceptical position, interpreting the GSI as part of China's effort to build alternative security alignments perceived as opposing Western alliances.¹⁵ This critical strand is to be expected given that Albanian foreign and security policy is firmly anchored in NATO membership and EU accession.

The GCI has received proportionally more Albanian-language coverage than the GDI or GSI. The predominant framing is positive and cooperative, presenting the initiative as a framework for intercultural dialogue and civilisational coexistence. Chinese state-affiliated channels supply the most consistent promotional coverage. CGTN Albanian covered the GCI on multiple occasions, framing it

as China's proposal to promote dialogue among cultures and counter civilisational confrontation in global politics, and presenting it as supporting international cooperation through cultural respect and shared modernisation paths.¹⁶ CMG Shqip social media content echoed this framing, presenting the initiative as a vision for peaceful coexistence through cultural exchange and shared human values.¹⁷

Albanian coverage generally portrayed the GCI as a framework for intercultural dialogue, mutual learning, and peaceful coexistence among diverse civilizations. It was also presented as a diplomatic instrument through which China promotes cultural pluralism, non-interference, and a greater normative role in shaping global governance.¹⁸ Overall, the positive framing of the GCI in Albanian-language sources is supplied by a combination of Chinese state channels and domestic platforms, which appear sympathetic to China's civilisational discourse.

The GGI generated the largest volume of Albanian-language references. As elsewhere, however, a significant portion of this coverage consists of brief or incidental references rather than sustained analytical engagement with the initiative. Chinese state-affiliated and institutional channels supply the most consistent and substantively developed coverage of the GGI. CMG Shqip framed the initiative as a Chinese contribution to multilateral governance reform and collective responses to global challenges. The Embassy of China in Albania promoted official messaging on social media, highlighting the initiative as a responsible contribution to global stability.¹⁹

Albanian coverage generally presented the GGI in descriptive terms as part of China's broader diplomatic vision and its efforts to promote a more balanced model of global governance²⁰. More analytical coverage situated the initiative within China's wider strategy to shape international norms and institutions, including through multilateral forums²¹, while a smaller number of references mentioned it only in passing as one element of China's broader governance and development agenda.²²

Le Monde Diplomatique Shqip and Faktor.al offered more contextualised approaches. The former interpreted China's expanding global role as an attempt to shape globalisation through alternative

governance concepts at a time of US retrenchment, while the latter discussed Sino-Albanian relations and framed China's global initiatives as part of a long-term diplomatic strategy to expand partnerships through economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and multilateral messaging.²³

To conclude, Albanian-language coverage of China's 4GI is limited in volume and is shaped decisively by the structure of the Albanian online media environment, in which portals, diplomatic commentary sites, and social media channels account for the bulk of relevant output, with major broadcast and print outlets largely absent from the picture. Across all four initiatives, a recurring bidirectional pattern can be identified. Chinese state-affiliated channels present all four initiatives consistently in cooperative, positive terms closely aligned with official Beijing messaging. A second tier of domestic Albanian online platforms engages with the initiatives in broadly descriptive or mildly contextualising terms, presenting them as part of China's evolving global role without sustained critical analysis (with very few exceptions). Among the four initiatives, the GCI and GGI attracted the widest range of domestic Albanian engagement, albeit still at a modest level. The overall picture suggests that **China's 4GI have achieved only a limited footprint in Albanian public discourse, with their reception shaped more by the promotional activity of Chinese state media operating in Albanian than by sustained critical engagement from domestic media.**

Kosovo

Beijing does not recognize Kosovo as an independent country, but considers it a Serbian province. While the two sides do not maintain diplomatic relations, there is a liaison office in Prishtina that operates as an outpost of China's Embassy in Belgrade. In a situation of non-engagement with the authorities in Prishtina, China's presence has been mostly visible at the sub-national level and in the business domain, while on the Kosovar side China is often viewed through the prism of Beijing's close relations with Belgrade.

In such a context, unsurprisingly, the 4GI have attracted very limited attention in the Kosovo media environment.

Infosot, a Kosovo-based online news portal, presented the GSI as a Chinese proposal for global peace and cooperative security, emphasising dialogue, non-interference, and shared responsibility as alternatives to confrontational alliance structures. On the other hand, The Geopost, a Prishtina-based geopolitical analysis platform, framed China's promotion of the GSI at defence forums as part of a broader effort to reshape international security norms alongside partners such as Russia, implicitly situating the initiative within a competitive great-power framework. The remaining three initiatives have left no discernible trace in Albanian-language media published in Kosovo. The absence of coverage across three of the four initiatives, and the minimal engagement with the fourth, suggests that China's 4GI have not yet entered Kosovo public discourse in any meaningful way.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) engagement with China's 4GI can be best described as selective, fragmented, and politically mediated: individual officials and diplomats have echoed Beijing's language, Chinese embassy messaging has promoted the 4GI into the local discourse, and parts of the media ecosystem have circulated the vocabulary. But, the 4GI have not hardened into a consolidated state position, let alone a formal bilateral framework. In evidentiary terms, BiH is therefore best understood as a case of **selective discursive receptivity, without formal alignment.**

The strongest evidence of official uptake remains Željka Cvijanović's June 2023 interview with Chinese state media, where, as rotating chair of the BiH Presidency, she explicitly expressed support for the BRI, the GDI, GSI and GCI.²⁴ However, such sentiment has not been codified into a Presidency decision, MFA statement, Council of Ministers document, or joint communiqué. So, while it is an important instance of executive mention, it remains an expression of an executive's statement for Chinese media, and remains far from state uptake.

The subsequent record is characterized by the same distinction and pattern. The 2025 exchange

marking 30 years of China-BiH diplomatic relations used the familiar diplomatic language of equality, mutual respect, practical cooperation, friendship, and common prosperity.²⁵ In that sense, this was the obvious place where 4GI would appear - however, the mutual congratulatory messages did not name any global initiative.

4GI circulate elsewhere, but mostly through para-diplomatic, media, and China-linked channels. Notably, the magazine *Glas Kine* (voice of China) – published by the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship Association, has published three thematic issues on GDI, GSI and GCI. They have mostly relayed China's official messaging, and explored the concepts from a theoretical or explanatory point of view. Seldom linked to existing examples of collaboration, 4GI stand as abstract reference points and discursive frames – with little tangible and practical footprint.

The GDI has the greatest appeal for BiH. It maps onto infrastructure, energy, hospitals, agriculture, digitalization, and modernization, sectors in which China has been already embraced as a practical partner. Ambassador Siniša Berjan's 2026 comments in Chinese media,²⁶ praising China's planning model and highlighting renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and development cooperation, fit this pattern. The GDI resonates because it can be translated into a development-first vocabulary: infrastructure, clean energy, agriculture, digital infrastructure, balanced modernization, and cooperation not explicitly tied to EU-style rule-of-law conditionality.

In BiH media, the GDI receives the most pragmatic treatment, described mainly through references to sustainable development, economic connectivity, infrastructure investment, poverty reduction, food security, green development, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.²⁷ Some media present the GDI as part of China's wider package of global proposals, but their interpretation is developmental-pragmatic rather than ideological. The tone is therefore mostly depoliticized. The GDI is framed predominantly as a development offer: China as provider of growth, connectivity, and practical solutions, overlapping with familiar BRI-era themes, but updated with the rhetoric of development governance and shared modernization.

The GSI has a narrower but politically sensitive resonance as BiH still faces unresolved sovereignty disputes. China's GSI language has the potential to speak directly to the post-conflict realities of the country,²⁸ however, there is little evidence that BiH has operationalized it as a security framework. Limited diffusion is noted in BiH media. China-affiliated outlets present it in China's preferred terms: dialogue, cooperation, shared responsibility, multilateralism, non-confrontation, and peaceful settlement of disputes.²⁹ However, GSI has been also sensationalized by click-bait media, presented as a spectacular Chinese "offensive"³⁰ or "strike back" to the "blood-soaked" Western hegemony³¹ - charged and amplified readings that depart from Beijing's rather peaceful and calming language.

The GCI enters through culture, mutual learning, civilizational diversity, education, and people-to-people exchange. In BiH, GCI can be folded into an expanding but still limited cultural diplomacy across the country, without requiring an explicit geopolitical choice. Chinese actors can promote it through embassy activity, cultural programming, and sympathetic media activity.³² Within the China-linked milieu, the messaging is that the initiative does not promote "China versus the West," but rather China against civilizational hierarchy. The recurring formula is respect for different development paths, dialogue among civilizations, and rejection of civilizational superiority. Yet, despite some media presence, there is also no evidence that the GCI has gained significance outside the organizations that promote cooperation with China.

The GGI, since its launch in September 2025, has been actively promoted by Chinese representatives in BiH, as a response to deficits in global governance, emphasizing sovereign equality, international law, true multilateralism, and a stronger voice for developing countries. Ambassador Li Fan's 2026 Sarajevo speech presented the GGI through precisely these themes, especially multilateralism, the UN-centred order, sovereign equality, and rejection of unilateralism.³³ Yet, there is still no verified BiH state endorsement of the GGI. The available evidence therefore demonstrates sustained Chinese advocacy of the initiative, but not corresponding endorsement by BiH state institutions.

In terms of the media presence, GGI has the richest and most explicitly geopolitical media life, creating

three layers of reporting. The first is official Chinese promotion centred on the ideas of sovereign equality, multilateralism, institutional reform, and boosting the Global South voice. The second is neutral reporting, centred on the act of Xi Jinping's proposal of the GGI during the SCO summit, as well as relayed explanation of diplomats. The third is normatively charged geopolitical interpretation: GGI as part of China's challenge to Western dominance, at times linked to Russia and alternative order-building.

The broader picture of BiH and the 4GI is therefore one of **discursive availability accompanied by selective political receptivity, but without consolidated state-level adoption..** As their advocates present them, China's 4GI are available to BiH actors as a flexible vocabulary (e.g. development beyond conditionality, sovereignty without supervision, pluralism without liberal universalism, and multilateralism on equal footing). Different actors can use pieces of it for different purposes, while the state as such remains formally anchored in EU accession and careful diplomatic ambiguity. In sum, 4GI remain weakly embedded outside China-BiH friendship networks, Chinese embassy communication, selected media outlets, and occasional elite statements. **They remain politically peripheral and conceptually unfamiliar compared with the BRI.**

Bulgaria

Being an EU member state and a NATO ally, Bulgaria is on one hand bound by EU and NATO positions in key sensitive sectors and areas where Brussels has strong competence. On the other hand, it has a seat at the table and agency to voice its own interests and concerns when China-related policies are formulated at the supra-national level. This bi-directional channel makes it an interesting case to examine media and policy uptake of 4GI, especially since many analytical platforms rank the country among the top in the EU when it comes to both exposure and positive public perception towards China.³⁴

In the Bulgarian-language public discourse on China's global initiatives, three broad and at times overlapping categories of coverage can be distinguished. The first consists of Chinese state-affiliated outlets publishing directly in Bulgarian³⁵

together with institutional channels such as the Confucius Institute in Sofia and the Bulgarian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, all of which present the 4GI under consistently positive light. A second category comprises leading Bulgarian financial and general-interest media³⁶, which approach the 4GI in a more critical manner and within wider debates about a changing international order and China's rise. A third, smaller category comprises outlets sympathetic to an explicitly anti-Western or multipolar worldview,³⁷ which embrace the initiatives as evidence of a desirable shift away from Western dominance.

Bulgarian-language coverage of the GDI is moderate in volume and divided between channels that present the initiative cooperatively and channels that read it, more sceptically, as an instrument of Chinese influence over a development-finance architecture historically dominated by Western-backed institutions. Chinese state and bilateral-business channels frame the GDI almost uniformly as a constructive contribution to global development. The GDI is presented as a tool contributing to narrowing the gap between the Global North and South and, separately, as synergy with broader governance reforms intended to keep development high on the United Nations agenda.³⁸ Other media discuss the practical implementation of "small but beautiful" projects carried out under GDI. Notably, the Bulgarian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's own blog discussed the GDI's contribution to a fairer international governance system achieved through trade.³⁹

Several of Bulgaria's leading outlets engaged with the GDI analytically, generally adopting a more sceptical stance about China's challenge to the existing world order. For instance, the Bulgarian service of Deutsche Welle offered a critical reading of how Beijing uses development aid and the GDI to reshape the international order and contest Western norms.⁴⁰ Other commentators highlighted China's efforts to strengthen its leadership among developing countries, examined the initiative's potential impact on the existing international order, and discussed how China-backed development institutions could emerge as alternatives to established Western-led financial organizations.⁴¹ Some analyses also portrayed the GDI, alongside the GSI, as evidence of a broader shift towards a more multipolar global system.⁴²

A distinct group of organisations engaged with the GDI primarily as a development-cooperation framework rather than as a geopolitical instrument. The Bulgarian Diplomacy and Dialogue association assessed the initiative as a vehicle for sustainable development in the post-pandemic period,⁴³ and the United Nations Association of Bulgaria examined how China uses the GDI to reshape globalisation towards a more inclusive model.⁴⁴ Other portals also identified the GDI as a vehicle for green-energy cooperation and for convergence between Chinese and African development priorities.⁴⁵

A smaller number of outlets associated with explicitly anti-Western or multipolar positions treated the GDI as further evidence of a desirable global realignment. Duma, the newspaper of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, reported on China's proposal for a fair governance model in which the GDI empowers the Global South,⁴⁶ while others situated the initiative within debates about a multipolar alternative to Western-led development finance and a broader contest over the shape of a New World Order.⁴⁷

The GSI attracted a more narrowly focused, though still varied, range of Bulgarian-language coverage than the GDI, with mainstream financial and political commentary engaging the initiative more critically than is the case for the other three initiatives, alongside Chinese state-aligned sources that reproduce Beijing's propaganda.

Bulgaria's leading financial press portrayed the initiative as part of China's broader effort to build coalitions capable of challenging Western alliances and norms.⁴⁸ Other major media outlets associated the GSI with Beijing's growing global political ambitions, while noting that China presents it as a cooperative framework centred on dialogue, stability, and alternative approaches to security governance.⁴⁹ Several commentators interpreted the initiative as a vehicle for reshaping the international system, reducing Western influence, and advancing China's long-term geopolitical position.⁵⁰ Some analyses further linked China's expanding role to perceived weaknesses in Western strategy and portrayed Beijing as increasingly capable of offering an alternative model of global leadership and transforming existing power balances.⁵¹ More analytical perspectives framed the GSI as part of China's wider effort to reform the international order, emphasising principles such as sovereignty,

indivisible security, and cooperation among developing countries.⁵²

By contrast, Chinese state-affiliated and diplomatic-relay channels presented the GSI in strongly positive terms, describing it as an internationally recognised initiative that promotes peace, stability, multilateral cooperation, and respect for national sovereignty.⁵³ Similarly, pro-China commentary depicted the initiative as a response to Western dominance and as a contribution to a more equitable international order.⁵⁴

The GCI received more limited but increasingly visible attention in Bulgaria, where it was generally interpreted as a component of China's broader effort to shape international narratives and expand its global influence. Several media outlets portrayed the initiative as part of Beijing's soft-power strategy, highlighting its emphasis on civilizational dialogue, cultural cooperation, and the promotion of a more pluralistic vision of world order.⁵⁵ More critical commentary argued that initiatives such as the GCI serve as instruments for extending China's ideological and narrative influence internationally, while others viewed its civilizational discourse as a form of geopolitical messaging.⁵⁶ Some coverage treated the initiative primarily as a rhetorical framework accompanying high-level diplomatic engagements in Kazakhstan and North Korea rather than as a distinct policy programme.⁵⁷

Chinese state media and bilateral-institutional channels, including CGTN,⁵⁸ CRI,⁵⁹ and the Confucius Institute in Sofia⁶⁰ by contrast, present the GCI as a coherent and positive cultural-diplomatic project. Beyond these official channels, several commentators present in the GCI positively as an alternative to Western universalist approaches, emphasising cultural diversity, civilizational plurality, and the emergence of a multipolar international order.⁶¹ Overall, the positive framing of the GCI here is made almost entirely by Chinese state channels, while Bulgarian mainstream and ideological commentary treats the initiative an indicator of China's wider ideological ambitions.

The GGI generated, by a considerable margin, the largest number of Bulgarian-language references among the four initiatives examined here. This volume should be interpreted with some caution,

however: a substantial share of the relevant material consists of brief or incidental mentions embedded within stories devoted to other subjects including high-level Russia-China-North Korea diplomacy, BRICS cooperation, the trade dispute between China and the United States, or general commentary on a shifting “world order” rather than dedicated treatment of the GGI as a distinct policy initiative.

Only Chinese state-affiliated outlets treat the GGI consistently as a coherent, substantively defined programme. CGTN Bulgarian portrayed it as a roadmap for reforming global institutions towards equity and shared development, and elsewhere as a cooperative governance model.⁶² CRI Bulgarian framed governance reform as necessary for global justice and cooperation, emphasised fairness and representation as central governance principles, and described a reform of global structures intended to reflect contemporary power balances.⁶³ The Bulgarian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's blog also framed the GGI as a framework for fairer global governance grounded in multilateralism and inclusive decision-making.⁶⁴

Bulgaria's leading financial and political outlets approached the GGI more critically linking it to global ambitions and the China-Russia alliance.⁶⁵ Bloomberg TV Bulgaria situated the initiative within the wider context of global economic competition, in a piece on China's position in the trade dispute with the United States.⁶⁶ Duma addressed the GGI on at least two occasions,⁶⁷ including via a social-media repost of the same proposal,⁶⁸ treating China's governance ideas as part of an alternative globalisation model and as a plan for “more just” global management. Another outlet generally associated with fringe and anti-Western commentary, presented the initiative positively as Xi Jinping's vision for global stability and development.⁶⁹ A supportive, promotional tone was likewise evident in a Facebook reel circulating China's governance proposals,⁷⁰ and the diplomatic-affairs outlet Diplomatic Spectrum once again echoed official Chinese messaging, this time linking governance reform to international cooperation more generally.⁷¹

The remaining and most numerous categories of references treat the GGI only in passing, as a secondary element within stories about other developments.⁷² A group of articles linked the GGI to economic and technological competition, BRICS, AI governance, and Chinese diplomatic

messaging on governance reform.⁷³ Another set of articles mentioned briefly the initiative within broader discussions of high-level diplomacy, China's geopolitical ambitions, and proposals for a more equitable international order.⁷⁴

To conclude, **the discussion on the 4GI falls under a pre-existing Bulgarian media conversation about multipolarity, Russia-China alignment and a contested “new world order”, rather than evidence of deeper substantive engagement.** Only Chinese state media, together with a handful of mainstream outlets treat the GGI as a defined programme with identifiable content, while elsewhere, **the 4GI function chiefly as a label attached to an already familiar geopolitical narrative.**

Croatia

Firmly anchored within the EU and NATO strategic frameworks, Croatia treats its relationship with Beijing strictly through a pragmatic, transaction-focused lens. While it remains open to Chinese investments in green energy and infrastructure - like the Pelješac Bridge or Senj Wind Farm, Zagreb demonstrates virtually no appetite for China's 4GI as a normative alternative to the Western international order.

In that context, China's 4GI have attracted only modest and largely descriptive coverage in the Croatian-language media environment, with the volume of dedicated reporting remaining considerably lower than in most other countries examined in this study. Three broad channels can be identified. The first consists of Chinese state-affiliated outlets publishing directly in Croatian or in related regional languages,⁷⁵ which present all four initiatives in consistently positive and cooperative terms. A second stream comprises mainstream Croatian news media and the public broadcaster,⁷⁶ whose engagement with the initiatives is sporadic, largely confined to relaying official Chinese diplomatic statements, and only occasionally analytical or critical. A third, smaller channel consists of promotional, diplomatic, and social media content.⁷⁷ **Croatian coverage contains no significant ideological characteristics that explicitly embrace the initiatives as a desirable challenge to Western dominance, nor does it**

feature the kind of sustained critical engagement found in media elsewhere.

Coverage of the GDI in the Croatian media environment is sparse and largely confined to regional news portals relaying official Chinese statements rather than analytical commentary. We have not identified a national-level outlet that has addressed the GDI as a distinct subject in its own right, and the initiative rarely appears except as a subsidiary element in broader discussions of China's rise. Croatian regional media reproduce official Chinese announcements about the GDI without analytical elaboration⁷⁸. The GDI's domestic footprint in Croatia appears minimal, emerging only at the margins of broader coverage of China-EU relations or the BRI.

The GSI has attracted the thinnest coverage of the four initiatives in the Croatian media environment. The most substantive engagement covered the GSI as a Chinese proposal for a new international security approach grounded in sovereignty, dialogue, and opposition to bloc confrontation,⁷⁹ largely reproducing the official Chinese framing.⁸⁰ Croatian mainstream media have not engaged with the GSI through the lens of security risk, strategic competition, or implications for Croatia's position within NATO and the EU.

The GCI has received somewhat more attention than the GSI in Croatian media, though the bulk of the coverage originates with Chinese state-affiliated outlets or consists of brief references accompanying Chinese diplomatic statements, while substantive Croatian-authored analysis remains limited. CGTN Croatian and CRI Croatian present the GCI as a positive framework for promoting mutual learning, cultural exchange, and respect for diverse development models, and as a diplomatic concept aimed at strengthening civilizational dialogue and countering ideological confrontation.⁸¹ Several Croatian outlets relayed remarks by Ambassador Qi Qianjin linking civilizational dialogue to China's opposition to trade confrontation and its vision of cooperative international relations. Other coverage briefly linked the GCI to statements by foreign political figures, discussions at international forums, and China's broader messaging on civilizational cooperation,⁸² multipolarity,⁸³ and global partnerships.⁸⁴

The GGI generated the largest volume of Croatian-language coverage among the four initiatives, a pattern consistent with findings from other countries in this study. As elsewhere, however, a significant portion of this coverage consists of brief or incidental and descriptive coverage⁸⁵ rather than sustained analytical engagement with the initiative as a distinct policy framework. Chinese state-affiliated outlets (CRI Croatian, CGTN Croatian, and CRI Serbian), present the GGI as a framework for fairer international cooperation and the reform of global institutions, and as a constructive model for addressing geopolitical tensions and economic inequality.⁸⁶ Croatian portals situate the GGI within discussions of global crises and multilateralism, presenting China's governance proposals as responses to shared international challenges.⁸⁷

Local media, presented all four Global Initiatives simultaneously as complementary pillars of China's framework for reforming global governances in relation to trade and security.⁸⁸ More critical approaches included an analysis framing China's governance ambitions in explicitly competitive terms, linking them to Xi Jinping's alignment with Putin and to a shared effort to reshape the global order against Western interests. Others examined China's peace-and-governance messaging with a similarly sceptical tone, questioning whether the rhetoric of global responsibility masks underlying strategic ambitions.⁸⁹

To conclude, Croatian-language coverage of China's four Global Initiatives is **limited and is characterised predominantly by relay journalism rather than analytical engagement**. The absence of media that either embrace or systematically criticise the initiatives, combined with the thinness of dedicated coverage, suggests that **China's Global Initiatives have not yet penetrated Croatian public discourse in any meaningful way**.

Greece

While Greece has traditionally maintained a pragmatically open posture towards Beijing, driven largely by past investments like the Piraeus port project, Athens' firm Euro-Atlantic integration leaves little strategic space for China's global ambitions. This underlying skepticism has sharpened considerably following the recent arrest of a senior

Perama Attica Greece 14 December 2025
(Source: Shutterstock)



Hellenic Air Force officer on suspicion of passing classified NATO-related military information to handlers allegedly linked to China.⁹⁰ This spying episode - the first of its kind in the region - serves as a tangible precedent shaping the space of potential Greek engagement across the 4GI.

As a general remark, all the four initiatives have received modest coverage in the media, academic discussions, and diplomatic exchanges and their visibility remains significantly lower than that of the BRI. Media reporting reveals a mixture of supportive, descriptive, and critical interpretations. Greece's engagement with these initiatives appears largely discursive and symbolic rather than operational. It should be noted, however, that China's engagement with Greece in the realm of culture is substantial, especially in the context of the dialogue between ancient civilizations that falls under the Global Civilization Initiative.

Amid the scarce coverage of the GDI in Greek media, both private financial outlets and the public broadcaster have engaged with the GDI primarily as an analytical lens for understanding China's broader strategy that can explain specific events, rather than as a subject covered systematically in its own right. Coverage has linked the GDI explicitly to the BRI and to debates about the future shape of global governance.

Naftemporiki, a leading Greek financial daily with close cooperation with Chinese media,⁹¹ has covered

the GDI on at least two occasions. On the tenth anniversary of the BRI, the outlet identified the GDI as one of the new pillars of "Xi Jinping Thought", intended to address gaps in global governance.⁹² In a separate piece, Naftemporiki reported on China's "firm support" for the GDI, framing it as a tool for "common development" that prioritises the needs of the world's least developed countries.⁹³

Some mainstream media addressed the GDI in the context of emerging powers and a changing global order. One article argued that China is using the GDI to offer Global South leaders, such as Brazil's Lula da Silva, a development alternative to the "Washington Consensus".⁹⁴ Another, considered the GDI in light of shifting United States foreign policy, arguing how a more isolationist "America First" approach, including a potential withdrawal from international commitments, could create a power vacuum that would favour China's Global Development Initiative and its broader ambitions for global leadership.⁹⁵

ERT News, Greece's public broadcaster, reported in 2024 on a seminar focused on the GDI, emphasising the initiative's role in expanding global cooperation networks through the opening of the Chinese economy.⁹⁶ Unlike the analytical framing used by Greek financial media, state media adopt the descriptive language typically associated with events organised around, or in cooperation with, Chinese institutions, offering no analysis.

Across these examples, a common pattern emerges: independent Greek financial media treat the GDI principally as evidence of, or a vehicle for, China's broader strategic positioning relative to the West and the Global South. On the other hand, the Greek state media and those private with cooperation agreements with Chinese outlets, present it under a neutral or positive light that stresses the GDI's contribution to development.

The most substantive engagement with the GDI in the Greek press comes from established private financial and general-interest outlets. These sources generally treat the GDI analytically, situating it within debates about China's broader strategic posture, its relationship to the BRI, and its implications for the existing international order. Kathimerini, one of Greece's most established newspapers, covered the GDI on at least two occasions and in relation the war

in Ukraine.⁹⁷ Mainstream media present the GSI as a deliberate complement to the BRI, extending China's international role from economic infrastructure into the security domain,⁹⁸ as a way to "export" the PRC's domestic security concepts to the global stage through,⁹⁹ or even as a central component of China's foreign policy to build an alternative global security order that reduces reliance on Western military alliances and promotes China's leading role.¹⁰⁰ OT.gr, a mainstream Greek news and opinion outlet, reported on Xi Jinping's early call to BRICS countries to adopt the GSI as a means of countering a "Cold War mentality". These media, while varying in focus, share a tendency to read the GSI as part of a long-term Chinese effort to reposition itself as a leader of an alternative bloc of nations.

A second, distinct tier of Greek-language coverage comes from smaller websites and blogs with limited general readership, often associated with particular ideological or political currents. These sources tend to interpret the GSI through pre-existing political frameworks, such as anti-imperialism, multipolarity, or BRICS-centred analysis, rather than through the more conventional geopolitical framing found in the mainstream press.¹⁰¹

Cypriot Greek-language media outlets form a distinct sub-category, largely because their interest in the GSI stems from its perceived relevance to the Cyprus problem rather than from broader geopolitical analysis. In that regard, Cypriot media reported that the Chinese Ambassador had cited the GSI as the basis for China's constructive role in peace negotiations and how the GSI could provide a "new window of opportunity" for resolving the Cyprus issue through dialogue.¹⁰² Mainstream outlets in Cyprus relay official Chinese diplomatic statements rather than offering independent analysis, giving this strand of coverage a notably more favourable tone towards the GSI than is found in mainland Greek financial media.

A final category consists of sources that are not Greek in origin, but which nonetheless feature in the Greek-language information environment, either through translated or Greek-facing content, or through their influence on Greek commentary. Unlike the GDI, where Chinese state media have a clear Greek-language edition presenting the initiative in cooperative terms, the sources available here are more varied in origin and offer a critical perspective on the GSI and its potential impact on the Cyprus issue.¹⁰³

China's GCI has received relatively limited attention in the Greek language media and remains far less visible than Beijing's economic and geopolitical initiatives. References to the GCI appear primarily in smaller news outlets, opinion platforms, Cyprus-based publications, and Chinese state media rather than in the country's leading mainstream media. Among the sources surveyed, *To Vima*, one of Greece's most influential newspapers, mentions the initiative mainly in the context of the China-Russia strategic partnership and the emergence of a world order not defined exclusively by Western values.¹⁰⁴ Smaller online media outlets have connected the GCI with China's vision of a multipolar international system and have portrayed the initiative as a Chinese soft-power instrument designed to challenge Western cultural dominance and promote an alternative model of global leadership.¹⁰⁵ The official narrative of Chinese state media reports in Greek¹⁰⁶ is occasionally reproduced by minor media in Greece and Cyprus.¹⁰⁷

This relatively limited visibility of the GCI is somewhat surprising given the intensity of Chinese cultural diplomacy in Greece over the past decade. In practice, many of the key themes of the GCI have long been promoted through the framework of a "Dialogue among Ancient Civilizations." Greece occupies a privileged place in this discourse because Chinese officials frequently present Greece and China as the two great continuous civilizations of Europe and Asia.¹⁰⁸ This narrative has been institutionalized through a range of initiatives, most notably the Ancient Civilizations Forum (ACF), jointly promoted by Greece and China since 2017, which seeks to employ culture and historical heritage as instruments of international cooperation and diplomacy.¹⁰⁹ More recently, the establishment of the Center of Chinese and Greek Ancient Civilizations in Athens, together with a growing number of academic conferences, archaeological collaborations, and cultural forums dedicated to Sino-Greek civilizational dialogue, has further strengthened this agenda. Consequently, while the GCI as a branded initiative has attracted only sporadic attention in Greek public discourse, many of its core concepts and narratives have already been disseminated through Greek media¹¹⁰. The relatively weak public profile of the GCI should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of Chinese cultural influence. Rather, Beijing has successfully embedded many of the initiative's underlying ideas within a narrative centred on the

alleged special relationship between the ancient civilizations of Greece and China.

As the most recent of the four initiatives, the GGI has received only limited attention in Greece, with coverage dominated by Chinese state-affiliated Greek-language outlets. Domestic reporting generally presents it as part of China's broader effort to reform the international order and challenge Western dominance,¹¹¹ and linking it to anti-Western narratives that are still present in the Greek online public discourse¹¹² while Chinese media consistently frame it as promoting sovereign equality, multilateralism, and a UN-centred system.¹¹³ Overall, the GGI remains largely invisible as a distinct initiative in Greek public discourse.

To conclude, **China's global initiatives under review have attracted very modest attention in Greek public discourse** and are discussed primarily through Chinese state media, specialized outlets, or ideologically oriented platforms rather than mainstream national media. Nevertheless, narratives on economic cooperation, sustainable development, cultural exchange, and dialogue among civilizations align more closely with Greece's existing engagement with China and encounter less political resistance. In particular, the themes underpinning the GDI and GCI have often been absorbed into broader discussions of development cooperation and Sino-Greek civilizational ties, while the GSI and GGI are treated as part of a geopolitical agenda with little relevance for Greece. Overall, the gradual diffusion of narratives related to development and civilization suggests that **some elements of China's broader normative agenda are finding a degree of receptivity within Greek political, academic, and cultural circles.**

Montenegro

Montenegro's engagement with China's 4GI is best read as a case of **discursive exposure without strategic follow-up**. Chinese representatives have regularly introduced the language of the 4GI into the bilateral conversation, while Podgorica has continued to frame relations through more established categories, e.g. BRI-type of pragmatism (infrastructure, trade, tourism, culture, education) combined with the language of EU integration and NATO membership (green development, rule of law, security governance, and reforms). At the state

level, there is no verified executive uptake of any of the 4GI. In March 2026, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Bečić told the new Chinese ambassador that Montenegro was "firmly positioned" on its European and Euro-Atlantic path, while maintaining good relations with friendly countries in areas of mutual interest, i.e. economy, transport infrastructure, culture, education, tourism, reforms, and the fight against crime, without mentioning of the 4GI.¹¹⁴

Yet, the 4GI are integral part of the Chinese officials' rhetoric. In November 2025, Chen Guoyou, China's special representative for China-CEEC cooperation, visited Montenegro and introduced the "core tenets" of the GGI to senior officials, including the deputy prime minister and vice president of parliament.¹¹⁵ The Montenegrin government readout, however, framed the meeting through education, science, technology, culture, AI, people-to-people ties, and Montenegro's future role as an EU member.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, Chinese embassy and media-facing texts present China-Montenegro cooperation as non-conditional, sovereignty-respecting, compatible with EU accession, and rooted in Xi's 4GI, with the explicit message that EU accession should not preclude practical cooperation with China. This compatibility claim is prominent in Chinese official discourse, while Montenegrin sources do not yet provide evidence of corresponding formal policy alignment.¹¹⁷ In June 2026, Prime Minister Spajić met the Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang, but the readout from the meeting did not mention any global initiative, while focusing on a number of instances of pragmatic cooperation.¹¹⁸

The 4GI find their way in the Montenegrin media space, most often through the relaying of official PRC embassy communication or diplomats' op-eds. While there is limited local uptake, one can note that there has been a nascent critical discourse emerging in parallel, as a result of civil society projects that look for potential Chinese influence in the region.¹¹⁹

Conceptually, in Montenegro GDI feeds into existing cooperation with China in infrastructure, green transition, tourism, and digital modernization, and is associated with items such as sustainable development, investment, development projects, economic growth, shared prosperity, multilateral cooperation, and alignment with the UN 2030 Agenda. Local media have relayed official Chinese presentation

of GDI as a constructive global development framework and less so as a geopolitical instrument.¹²⁰

The GSI is perhaps least compatible with Montenegro's agenda, as its hard-security anchor is NATO. Yet, it has found its way in the country's media space, primarily through op-eds of Chinese diplomats. The dominant frame is peace-oriented: dialogue, political settlement, balanced security interests, cooperative security, respect for sovereignty, opposition to unilateral sanctions, and rejection of bloc politics.¹²¹ China's ambassador has also discussed GSI in light of the Ukraine war.¹²² However, there are no signs of local uptake or contribution.

The GCI is presented as less policy-heavy travels through culture, education, and civilizational dialogue, and can be linked to existing soft-power endeavours, though in its limited diffusion in the Montenegrin media space, it is most often presented through the official Chinese programmatic 4GI discourse. The GGI is ambitiously promoted by Chinese diplomats, but is less visible than the rest of the 4GI. Montenegrin media have relayed Chinese ambassador op-eds,¹²³ and the coverage ends there. The main exception is the November 2025 Chen Guoyou visit, which formally placed GGI language in front of senior Montenegrin officials; however, the official reply remained sectoral and noncommittal, which makes GGI a case of agenda-setting by Beijing with little to no reception by Podgorica.

In sum, Montenegro is a rather **revealing low-uptake test case for China's global initiatives inside a NATO ally and EU-candidate state**. China itself takes rather limited efforts to present them. Podgorica keeps the existing pace of cooperation with China without objecting or contesting the official language, but also avoids rhetorical or doctrinal alignment. Overall, from the Montenegrin perspective, **the 4GI currently appear to provide an additional interpretive vocabulary for existing sectoral cooperation**.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia exhibits virtually no explicit executive uptake of the 4GI vocabulary, despite continued bilateral engagement with China in adjacent policy fields. China's 4GI are visible in the country's information environment, but they have

not become part of Skopje's official foreign-policy vocabulary. Officials speak about China through the language of mutual respect, One-China Policy, practical cooperation, trade, infrastructure, education, culture, tourism, and development projects – but do not name the 4GI. The clearest late-period example is the February 2026 meeting between Chinese Ambassador Jiang Xiaoyan and Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski.¹²⁴ However, the 4GI appear in the Macedonian information space primarily through Chinese embassy messaging, Chinese ambassadorial op-eds, reporting that reproduces or draws heavily on Chinese news-agency material. Most socio-political actors remain silent on the 4GI, regardless of their attitudes on other issues concerning China.

GDI has the lowest political barrier as it translates into development, modernization, infrastructure, green transition, and cooperation with the UN 2030 Agenda. Yet North Macedonia does not appear to have framed its own development policy around the GDI. Official Skopje keeps the China policy wording generic. Beyond policy, some media relay Chinese media discourse that describe the GDI as a “beacon of hope” amid global turbulence.¹²⁵ A Beijing correspondent has also framed GDI as a blueprint for more equitable and inclusive international development model.¹²⁶ To some extent, this potentially upgrades BRI-style language, imbuing it with deeper ideational and governance meanings. However, even original contributions rarely ask what GDI would mean for the country's development policy specifically.

North Macedonia's NATO membership strongly structures its existing security commitments and vocabulary, making formal uptake of the GSI less likely even if elements of Chinese security discourse gain traction in public debate. Such conditions notwithstanding, GSI is present in the media space, primarily through ambassadorial op-eds and explanatory pieces relayed to the Macedonian public.¹²⁷ The most important localizing channels are not the country's security debates, but external crises. GSI appears through Ukraine escalation and Taiwan analogies.¹²⁸ National outposts of Western media like Deutsche Welle and Radio Free Europe are significant here, as they adopt a more sceptical stance towards China's global and regional security endeavours, corresponding to Western European and American interpretations.¹²⁹ In sum, whatever debate on GSI is taking place in the Macedonian media, it appears as commentary on somewhat

distant global geostrategy, and not on national security. There has been no distinctive country position on GSI articulated.

The GCI has been present through the softer route of language, culture, and education. Events such as the International Chinese Language Day are framed as providing a platform for civilizational and people-to-people language without forcing a geopolitical commitment.¹³⁰ Participants from North Macedonia engage in cultural diplomacy, without formal policy uptake. Macedonian media at time carry clear positive framing relaying Chinese official discourse: civilizations should learn from one another, cultural exchange is a bridge for progress, and peaceful futures require respect for different national paths and identities.¹³¹

After Xi Jinping proposed the GGI in September 2025, Macedonian media, including the local versions of international media, covered it as part of the changing international order, the Global South, China-Russia alignment, and debate over alternatives to Western-led governance.¹³² However, the official state institutions and representatives remain absent from this debate.

Ultimately, North Macedonia sees limited circulation of the 4GI discourse while keeping official policy anchored in pragmatic cooperation and Euro-Atlantic positioning. **Chinese-originated 4GI narratives have acquired some media and cultural visibility, but this has not translated into observable incorporation of the initiatives into the state's foreign-policy vocabulary.**

Serbia

Serbia is an outlier in the regional and European landscape, and perhaps the clearest **case of formal state-level codification of China's 4GI**. The relationship has moved through three stages: first, BRI-led infrastructure and "ironclad friendship;" second, adoption of the "community with a shared future" formula and support for GDI/GSI/GCI in the May 2024 joint statement; third, full codification of GDI, GSI, GCI, and GGI in May 2026 through a dedicated bilateral statement on implementing the four initiatives. With this, **Serbia has moved from strong formal endorsement to the threshold of joint implementation.**

*Belgrade, Serbia May 9, 2024
(Source: Shutterstock)*



The decisive starting point is the 8 May 2024 Serbia-China joint statement issued during Xi Jinping's visit to Belgrade. In that text, Serbia supported building a "community with a common future for humanity" and declared itself ready to implement the GDI, GSI and GCI jointly with China. The same document placed this commitment inside a broader strategic formula: mutual support on core interests, sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, BRI cooperation, the Serbia-China free trade agreement, infrastructure, clean energy, digital cooperation, biotechnology, UN-centred multilateralism, opposition to hegemony, and an "equitable and orderly multipolar world."¹³³

The 2024 statement was already exceptional in its own right. The September 2025 Xi-Vučić meeting during Vučić's China visit at the occasion of China's celebration of the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII coincided with the launch of the GGI. In the Chinese MFA readout, Xi described Serbia as the first European country to have built "a community with a shared future in the new era" with China. President Vučić, in turn, stated that the GGI's principles of sovereign equality and a people-centred approach were significant for reforming and improving global governance, and that Serbia "fully supports" the initiative.¹³⁴

During the May 2026 landmark state visit by President Vučić to China, the two countries issued two major statements: one on continuing to build

the Serbia-China community with a shared future, and another on advancing implementation of the 4GI. The Chinese MFA press conference said the two sides would implement GDI, GSI, GCI, and GGI together, linking them respectively to development challenges, international security, civilizational exchange, and reform of global governance.¹³⁵ The Serbian government's own readout confirmed that Vučić and Xi signed a joint statement on jointly advancing implementation of the 4GI, and separately noted a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two governments on cooperation within the framework of the GSI.¹³⁶ The May 2026 package also included documents on legal assistance, BRI cooperation for 2026–2028, artificial intelligence, education, vocational and dual education, environment, technological development and innovation, industrial and supply chains, tourism, and development cooperation.¹³⁷

Chinese MFA Wang Yi's formulation emphasizes **Serbia's exceptionalism as the first country in the world to issue a joint statement with China supporting the 4GI**.¹³⁸ To compare, in June 2026, China signed MoUs with Myanmar and Cambodia on select initiatives that still fall short of the Serbian precedent of issuing joint statements on all four.

Serbia localizes GDI through development planning, infrastructure, industrial modernization, connectivity, railways, clean energy, biotechnology, digitalization, AI, supply chains, exports, and market access. In this sense, GDI is not a separate doctrine floating above the relationship; it becomes a label that reorganizes older BRI and bilateral economic cooperation into a newer developmental vocabulary. The move from roads and railways to AI, digital economy, green energy, advanced manufacturing, supply-chain cooperation, vocational education, and industrial development gives the GDI a forward-looking, post-BRI quality. To Serbia, China offers capital, technology, export opportunities, diplomatic attention, and a non-lecturing development partner.

The Serbian specificity is that GDI easily attaches to an already tangible China presence. In media discourse, development is not abstract like in other countries where the initiative often remains generic or embassy-led. The discourse, however, is not unchallenged, especially by Western outlets in the country as well as some domestic media. While most media elevate the GDI as a development-and-modernisation doctrine

compatible with Serbian sovereignty and multi-vector foreign policy,¹³⁹ the critical counter-frame, drawing on Western sources, sees it as the developmental arm of China's influence.¹⁴⁰

Importantly, Chinese and China-friendly accounts increasingly present Serbia not simply as a recipient of roads, railways, factories, and loans, but as a partner in industrial upgrading, supply-chain repositioning, AI cooperation, and national development planning. A June 2026 China Daily commentary, for example, explicitly described Serbia as a pioneer in advancing China's 4GI in Central and Eastern Europe and linked GDI to Serbia's modernization and core national interests.¹⁴¹

The GSI is more politically charged. Serbia's security vocabulary already overlaps with China's preferred terms: sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, opposition to unilateralism, respect for the UN Charter, and rejection of external pressure. This does not mean Serbia is replacing its security posture wholesale with a Chinese security framework. But it does mean that Chinese security language now has an institutional foothold in Belgrade's foreign policy. The May 2026 GSI MoU matters precisely because it gives this vocabulary a bureaucratic form, even if the content remains vague.¹⁴²

Overall, Serbian debates on GSI are more elaborate than elsewhere in the region, not least demonstrated by the "Dialogues on China" conference, one of the most attended conferences on China in Europe, which in 2023 was themed precisely on the topic of the new Chinese initiatives.¹⁴³ Serbian authors do not merely ask "what is GSI" but rather try to interpret how it changes global dynamics and how it affects Serbia.¹⁴⁴ Some authors link Sino-Serbian military cooperation to GSI.¹⁴⁵ Media also analyse GSI as part of the broader Chinese geopolitical calculus.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, critical and semi-critical outlets complicate the picture, framing Chinese initiatives, including GSI, as part of an influence-expansion strategy, against the backdrop of global power competition.¹⁴⁷

The GCI has on one hand been localized through the standard Chinese register of civilizational dialogue, mutual learning, respect for difference, and rejection of "clash of civilizations" narratives. It has been presented as part of China's broader geopolitical vision, promoting dialogue among civilizations and alternatives to Western dominance.¹⁴⁸ But GCI also

diffuses in Serbia in a distinctive and more politically charged manner, for instance as a venue to raise the issue of the status of ethnic Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo, identity protection, and the politics of historical memory.¹⁴⁹ **In Serbia, therefore, the GCI matters beyond soft power.**

In general, the GCI is the most elastic of all the 4GI. It can be read as UN reform, Global South empowerment, anti-hegemony, multipolarity, development governance, human-rights governance, or a justification for defensive claims on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Similarly to the GCI, GGI allows Serbia to frame its sovereignty-first critique of Western double standards as part of a wider demand for UN-centred, sovereign-equality-based reform of global governance.¹⁵⁰

Serbian media have seen the GGI as a Chinese proposal for restructuring global governance institutions,¹⁵¹ a step towards institutionalizing diversity at the international stage,¹⁵² but also an initiative that can strengthen Serbia-China political and economic ties.¹⁵³ Critical and interpretive outlets however see it as a counter-Western ideological and security framework.

To conclude, Serbia's unique relationship with China is often juxtaposed against the country's prospective membership in the EU. Even though observers often express doubt, nominally, Serbia remains committed to the EU path.¹⁵⁴ Serbian officials explicitly present China ties and the EU path as compatible.¹⁵⁵ However, using the 4GI Serbia builds a parallel normative and institutional track in which Belgrade nominally projects itself not as a rule-taker but a respected sovereign partner. The end result is somewhat of a **dual embedding: formally European, operationally multi-vectoral, and increasingly normatively fluent in Chinese global-order language**. Whether such position is sustainable on the long run, remains to be seen. In the public discourse, the overall pattern is **combined normalization and politicization**. China-friendly and state-aligned media normalize the initiatives as natural extensions of Serbia-China friendship, while critical media tend to interpret them through the lens of Beijing's 'influence' pursuits.

The current political context adds a layer of uncertainty. President Vučić announced in June 2026 that he would resign within weeks and that Serbia would hold early presidential and parliamentary

elections, after prolonged anti-government protests. Even if he is expected to remain a decisive figure, such move implies uncertainty for China, as the 4GI alignment has been highly personalized around the leadership relationship between Vučić and Xi.

Moreover, a valid question is **to what extent is Serbia's 4GI push really rooted in ideological alignment with China, and to what extent it is performative pragmatism**. In practice, Serbia appears less likely to act as a substantive co-designer of the 4GI than as an active political supporter and implementation partner. Its foreign-policy approach remains strongly transactional and multi-vectoral, using relations with several major powers to pursue specific national interests, including on Kosovo.

Moreover, in practice, Serbia continues to play all sides. Even after deepening ties with China, President Vučić also cultivated the Trump connection; Serbian and regional coverage in June 2026 noted that President Trump shared Vučić's remarks praising him and Serbia's pro-Trump sentiment.¹⁵⁶ This does not negate the China alignment, but it shows firm limits, as **Belgrade's enthusiasm for Beijing seems to be embedded in a wider transactional strategy, and should therefore not be taken, by itself, as evidence of comprehensive normative convergence with China**. Therefore, Serbia's embrace of the 4GI can therefore be read primarily as pragmatic policy alignment with practical benefits, while the available evidence does not establish the degree to which this also reflects deeper normative convergence with China. The survey and other anecdotal evidence suggest that 4GI have been indeed institutionally codified before they got socially understood.

Nevertheless, institutional codification matters. Once the initiatives are written into joint statements, action plans, MoUs, etc., they have the chance to become more durable than any act of political performance. After all, Serbia is the only European state that has moved from exposure to adoption, and from adoption to co-implementation, of China's 4GI, which now at least nominally provide a diplomatic framework for the China-Serbia relationship. While the future is wrought with different uncertainties, **Serbia therefore provides the region's most developed empirical case of how 4GI language can move from diplomatic endorsement toward formalised bilateral implementation.**

Regional Views and Perceptions

Quantitative approach – overview and demographics

This section analyses the perceptions on each of the four initiatives across the nine SEE countries, on the basis of an expert survey administered online in May 2026. A total of 99 experts were invited to fill in the questionnaire, selected across the nine countries and across different sectors – diplomacy, academia, civil society and business, with a common denominator - having a demonstrable track record of working on China, international relations and/or geopolitics in the context of SEE. We received a total of 51 responses, with the distribution per country provided in Table 1.

Country	Responses
Greece	5
Bulgaria	6
North Macedonia	7
Serbia	7
Croatia	6
Montenegro	4
Bosnia and Herzegovina	7
Albania	5
Kosovo	4
Total	51

Table 1: Distribution of responses per country.

For comparative purposes, the questions asked on each initiative were the same, with minor adjustments in the type of activities that respondents were to associate with each initiative, reflecting the purpose and specific nature of the initiative. In order to have a benchmark against

which to measure, assess and compare the four new initiatives, the same questions were asked about the BRI, as a precursor and pioneering effort of Chinese diplomacy to deploy a global vision and strategy encompassing a multitude of regional, trans-national and country-specific activities.

The inclusion of the BRI also serves as a valuable instruction of the effect of time: it has been actively implemented for over 13 years, compared to the other initiatives that were launched during the time span 2021-2025 and had significantly less time to “take root”. The BRI arguably has offered important lessons to Chinese policymakers for the implementation of the new initiatives.

Survey findings

Visibility and familiarity

The most significant finding of the survey is the **disparity in familiarity between the BRI and the four newer Chinese global initiatives. The BRI stands in a category of its own, recognized by the respondents as the most visible and consequential initiative.** It is seen as delivering on infrastructure projects and trade, and enjoys persistent media coverage across the region (3.6 on a scale of 1 to 5). On the other hand, the four newer initiatives fall around the midpoint of the scale (1-5). Namely, GDI scores 2.75, GSI 2.72, GCI 2.61, and GGI a mere of 2.39%, the lowest of all five. This reflects in a very straightforward manner the impact of time – as the newer initiatives are less known even among an initiated audience.

Collected data also reveals that the BRI had the advantage of physical visibility, with infrastructure projects cited by 17.9% of respondents as its most visible form, alongside China-related media articles at 15.4%. People-to-people exchanges such as tourism, conferences, and study visits follow

closely at 14.5%, while diplomatic visits and Chinese commercial investments each account for around 8.5%. This pattern suggests that BRI's footprint in the region is not limited to physical construction alone, but is reinforced by a steady stream of media coverage and direct human contact that keeps the initiative visible long after individual projects are completed. On the other hand, for the four newer initiatives, the visibility profile shifts away from physical infrastructure towards more diplomatic and discursive channels. The GDI's most cited activities are a mix of unspecified "other" responses (15.4%), official visits and diplomatic exchange (13.8%), and China-related media articles (13.8%), with people-to-people exchanges and academic events standing at 12.3% each, and infrastructure projects at just 9.2%.

The GCI stands out as the most soft power-oriented of the five initiatives, with people-to-people exchanges and cultural and academic events tied at the top, each cited by 20.9% of respondents, followed by diplomatic visits and media articles at 16.4%. The GSI and GGI follow a similar pattern to one another. Namely, both are led by a large share of "other" responses (21.5% and 22% respectively), suggesting that their visible activities are harder for experts to categorize using conventional indicators, while diplomatic visits and media coverage remain consistently present, both ranging at 16.4 for the GSI and 18.6 for the GGI. Notably, increased use of Chinese technology registers more prominently for the GSI (12.3%) than for any other initiative, a detail consistent with the initiative's natural framing.

A limited number of respondents (11.3%) do not see any Chinese initiatives active in their country and these answers were not spread evenly but occurred in the case of Bulgaria (1 response), Croatia (2), Albania (2), and Kosovo (1).

Objectives and outcomes

All five initiatives are perceived by experts across the region primarily as instruments to advance Chinese interests and influence. The BRI ranks at the top of the list with 36% of respondents who hold this view, the GDI and GCI stand at 28%, and the GSI and GGI at 27%. The consistency of this response across all five initiatives indicates a relatively widespread perception among the surveyed experts that Chinese multilateral initiatives are understood as instruments of Chinese foreign policy, not as

neutral or universally beneficial platforms. The secondary perceptions, however, differ as per the nature and scope of the initiatives, revealing how different dimensions of global Chinese engagement are experienced across the region. For the BRI, the second and third most cited associations are related to creating dependencies (21% of responses) and security risks (18%), an indicator that reflects real experiences with debt-laden infrastructure contracts, governance shortcomings, and the strategic implications of Chinese-built critical infrastructure. Only around 8% of BRI respondents identify significant benefits for their country, and fewer than 4% see it as fostering genuine people-to-people understanding.

The new initiatives attract a meaningfully different and more ambiguous pattern of responses. For the GDI, GCI, and GGI, the second most cited response is that the initiatives are simply not relevant to the country in question, accounting for 19%, 17%, and 18% of responses respectively. This finding suggests a lack of perceived connection to the national context. The "I don't know" response also registers more prominently for the newer initiatives, reaching 14% for both the GDI and GGI, compared to just 1.3% for the BRI.

The responses related to the GSI reveal a slightly different pattern. Security risks rank second at nearly 22% of responses, just behind the dominant "helps to advance Chinese interests and influence" description. The GSI also generates the least favourable set of responses among the five initiatives. Namely, only one respondent in the entire region indicated that "it brings significant benefits", while only two respondents selected "fosters better understanding between citizens and professionals in both countries". This pattern is likely consistent with heightened sensitivity among SEE expert communities to security-related frameworks, given the region's proximity to NATO structures and its exposure to geopolitical competition. Compared to the others, an initiative explicitly framed around security that positions China as a potential alternative to Western-led security framing is naturally more likely to trigger concern.

Asked whether their countries should engage more or less with each initiative, regional experts express consistent caution. When it comes to the BRI, the initiative that the respondents are assumed to know best and can most concretely

evaluate, nearly 47% of respondents advocate for reduced engagement. This is an interesting result given the BRI's established presence in the region and the economic outcomes it has generated in several countries. Only 10.5% believe their country should engage more with the BRI, which reflects their awareness of governance and sustainability concerns surrounding specific BRI projects implemented in the region.

For the four newer initiatives, the preference shifts to maintaining the current level of engagement, potentially reflecting a combination of uncertainty, awareness, and strategic cautiousness. The “engagement should remain as it is” response dominates across responses related to the GDI (45%), GCI (37%), GSI (34%), and GGI (37%). In each case, the “I don't know” response follows in second or third place, reaching 29% for the GGI and 26% for both the GDI and GSI. Across all five initiatives combined, fewer than one in eight respondents advocates for increased engagement. The share of respondents favouring less engagement consistently outweighs the share of those favouring more, and this holds true across all three initiatives. For the GSI, 32% want reduced engagement compared to just 8% wanting more, the widest gap of the three. For the GGI, it is 26% versus 8%, and for the GCI, 21% suggest pulling back against 10.5% opting for increased cooperation, reflecting a narrower split. The pattern is consistent enough to argue that expert opinion leans against deepening engagement with Chinese-led frameworks, regardless of which initiative we look at. That said, the share of respondents advocating

for more engagement should not be perceived as a statistical background noise, especially amidst serious geopolitical turbulences and EU-related developments that affect SEE countries.

One of the most significant findings concerns how experts understand the relationship between the five initiatives taken together. **A commanding 71% of respondents see China's global initiatives as a holistic and interconnected strategy.** Only 10.5% see them as discrete, unrelated frameworks, while 18.4% express uncertainty. This is one of the clearest and most consistent findings in the entire dataset, which holds important implications for both analysis and policy. It suggests that SEE expert communities tend to interpret the initiatives through a holistic frame, associating them with a broader Chinese effort to influence the evolution of international norms and institutions.

Some quotes from the survey respondents:

“To a large extent, [the 4GI are] empty shells and manifestations of a performative diplomacy.”

“All these initiatives remain as mere talking points in not so mainstream political or professional circles.”

“We in Europe need to think strategically how to ensure our survival and prosperity in the world that has already changed. The existing paradigms are already old. We need to understand much better the world that is changing rapidly.”

Patterns, Comparisons and Policy Implications

The analysis presented in this publication set out to examine how China's four global initiatives (4GI), namely the GDI, GSI, GCI and GGI, are perceived and received across nine Southeast European countries, and what patterns their reception reveals about the region's relationship with China's expanding pro-active role in normative and institutional debates at the global level. The findings produce a picture that is more differentiated than either the alarmist or the dismissive readings of Chinese global initiatives would suggest. The 4GI occupy a generally limited position in the region's public discourse. They exist, they circulate, and they find traction in some countries more than in others. However, in several crucial respects the initiatives are less visible, less understood, and less acted upon than their global ambition implies - and still lag behind the imprint of the BRI.

Three overarching observations dominate the comparative reading that follows. First, the gap between Chinese promotional activity and substantive domestic reception is significant across most of the region. It persists even in the case of Serbia where there is strong institutional uptake, but the level of public awareness and debate is much behind the government's actions of de facto institutional alignments with China's 4GI. Second, the BRI remains the dominant frame through which SEE actors understand and evaluate Chinese engagement, and the 4GI have not yet displaced it as the primary reference to China's global strategy, even among an expert audience demonstrably familiar with Chinese foreign policy. Third, the 4GI are experienced differently depending on the institutional, geopolitical and media context of individual countries, generating a spectrum of reception patterns that do not map neatly onto a single axis of proximity or distance from China.

Across Southeast Europe, four patterns of engagement emerge:

Institutional champion	Selective recipients
Serbia	Greece Bosnia and Herzegovina Bulgaria
Pragmatic observers	Peripheral actors
Albania Croatia North Macedonia Montenegro	Kosovo

A Typology of Reception

The nine countries examined in this study can be examined along a spectrum defined by two variables: the degree of official policy uptake of the 4GI vocabulary, and the depth of domestic media and public discourse about them. These two variables do not always move together: a country can have active media engagement with the initiatives without any formal endorsement, but their interaction produces recognisable reception patterns.

Serbia stands at one end of this spectrum, in a category of its own. It is the only country in the region and in Europe more broadly to have moved from exposure to formal inclusion of all four initiatives in joint diplomatic statements, and from inclusion to co-implementation in the form of MoUs and action plans. From the May 2024 joint statement on the GDI, GSI, and GCI, through President Vučić's September 2025 endorsement of the GGI, to the May 2026 comprehensive bilateral package – Serbia displays a qualitatively different level of engagement. It also generates the most substantive domestic debate about the initiatives, the only country where the 4GI have moved beyond Chinese embassy messaging into public discourse, academic conferences and localised political usage.

Bosnia and Herzegovina occupies an intermediate position best described as selective discursive receptivity: the 4GI vocabulary has entered individual executive statements, para-diplomatic channels and parts of the media ecosystem, but has not crystallised into a formal state position or any bilateral document. Different actors across entities can draw selectively on Chinese vocabulary for domestic purposes without committing the state as a whole, making BiH a useful indicator of how the 4GI can function as a political resource.

Greece and Bulgaria, both EU member states with developed and pluralistic media environments, engage analytically but predominantly through a lens of strategic scepticism, reading the initiatives as instruments of Chinese influence. The exception in Greece is the GCI, whose underlying civilizational dialogue discourse has long been institutionalised through the Ancient Civilizations Forum and Sino-Greek cultural diplomacy, generating a degree of effective diffusion that the initiative's visibility alone would not suggest. Bulgaria's additional distinctive feature is a small but nevertheless significant tier of anti-Western stakeholders that embrace the 4GI as evidence of a desirable shift away from Western dominance.

The remaining countries - Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Croatia and Kosovo - represent, in different degrees, cases of limited diffusion in public discourse without policy uptake, where 4GI content circulates primarily through Chinese channels and official narratives, while the states remain anchored in EU accession and Euro-Atlantic alignment. Montenegro matters as Beijing has been active in promoting 4GI language through bilateral conversations, while Podgorica has consistently reframed the encounter in the language of sectoral cooperation and EU commitments, making the gap between Chinese supply and Montenegrin uptake a finding in itself. Croatia, Albania, and North Macedonia share a similarly firm structural anchor in NATO and EU accession that has prevented the emergence of any ideological current embracing the 4GI as a desirable alternative.

Main Observations and Patterns

The BRI benchmark

The most robust finding across both the media and public discourse analysis and the expert survey is the

persistence of the BRI as the dominant frame for understanding Chinese engagement in the region.

Survey respondents rate the BRI significantly above all four newer initiatives on visibility and familiarity, and the BRI's footprint seen through physical infrastructure, media coverage, and people-to-people exchanges has produced a level of embeddedness that the 4GI are far from replicating. This could create an interpretive "glitch" for China's ambitions, with the 4GI being read through the BRI lens and assessed against BRI-era expectations that only partially but not fully correspond to initiatives whose primary register is normative and governance-oriented, departing from the infrastructural focus of the BRI. At the same time, the survey finding that 47% of expert respondents advocate for reduced engagement with the BRI, despite its established presence, suggests that scepticism about Chinese multilateral frameworks could be running ahead of awareness of what they actually involve.

Promotional "supply" and domestic "demand"

Across all nine countries, there is **a consistent and substantial gap between the promotional supply of 4GI content, primarily from Chinese state-affiliated outlets, embassy channels, and bilateral friendship associations, and the domestically generated demand for it, as measured by organic media engagement or policy uptake.** Across most SEE media environments, 4GI content originates primarily with Chinese institutional actors, with comparatively little domestically generated debate. **Relay journalism - the reproduction of Chinese or Western institutional messaging without analytical elaboration, is the dominant mode of 4GI coverage across most of the region.** Where independent analytical coverage does exist, it tends towards scepticism. The partial exceptions are Serbia, where 4GI attract comparatively more domestic attention than in other countries, but they are still a marginal topic overall and Greece, where the GCI's underlying discourse has been absorbed into pre-existing Sino-Greek cultural frameworks in a way that blurs the line between Chinese supply and Greek co-production.

The GGI paradox

A counterintuitive pattern emerges from the media analysis: **the GGI, the newest and least**

operationally developed of the four initiatives, consistently generates the largest volume of media references across the region. This paradox can be explained when the character of GGI coverage is examined more closely: the initiative has a high referencing frequency as it appears as a label in a variety of geopolitical contexts and narratives about a changing world order. Moreover, the initiative was launched during the SCO+ meeting, ahead of the big parade in Beijing, where heads of states including Putin were present. Most of the coverage actually refers to the high-level launch, not to the later developments. Still, the GGI lacks analytical depth as it is rarely treated as a distinct policy framework and analysed on its own terms outside of content produced by Chinese state actors. The high volume of incidental mentions reflects the initiative's success in attaching to a pre-existing and widely shared set of frames about geopolitical competition, global governance and institutional reform. It does not indicate, though, deep public understanding of what the initiative entails or what its implementation would mean for SEE countries specifically.

As the PRC's White Paper of June 2026 suggests, the GGI could also be conceived as an umbrella initiative connecting all the other thematic or single-issue initiatives. The very concept of governance as an underlying and cross-sectoral topic that permeates all global discussions also lends itself favourably to such interpretation. That would also imply that while **the GGI may not have abundant content on its own, it could feed off the objectives, narratives and achievements of the other initiatives.**

The holistic reading and its implications

71% of the surveyed experts read **China's global initiatives as a holistic and interconnected strategy.** This result suggests that the SEE expert community is not evaluating the 4GI in isolation, but through an integrated interpretive frame that has sensed what was only recently acknowledged in China's recent White Paper. It also implies that the initiatives are unlikely to be successfully disaggregated in policy responses: a country that engages selectively with the GDI while distancing itself from the GSI will, in the expert community's reading, still be perceived as engaging with the wider Chinese blueprint, whether or not that is its intention.

The four initiatives are not received in the same manner across the region, and there are initiative-specific sensitivity patterns. The GDI occupies the most comfortable political space, since it can be absorbed into familiar development cooperation vocabularies and aligns with existing expectations of Chinese engagement: infrastructure, connectivity, green energy, digital modernisation. Its barrier to entry is lowest because it does not require governments to take positions on security architecture or civilizational values. The GSI, on the other hand, is seen as incompatible with the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, which implies that governments in the region will need to manage carefully.

The stability of the EU anchor

One of the most important structural finding of this study is the role of the Euro-Atlantic integration framework as the principal institutional context conditioning 4GI uptake. Across all nine countries, including those with historically close ties to China such as Serbia or Albania, and including EU member states and NATO allies navigating their own strategic autonomy debates such as Greece and Bulgaria, the Euro-Atlantic framework remains the dominant reference point for foreign-policy self-presentation and institutional alignment. Even Serbia, which has moved furthest towards formal 4GI codification, continues to nominally claim EU membership as a strategic goal and presents its alignment with China as complementary to its European trajectory.

This does not mean however that the durability of the EU anchor should be taken for granted or that the 4GI are genuinely compatible with EU integration. It does mean that the scenario of 4GI uptake driving a substantive reorientation away from EU integration, as the most alarmist reading of Chinese initiative diffusion in SEE, is not materialising. At least for the time being and given current evidence, what is happening is something more subtle: **a gradual accumulation of discursive, institutional and normative exposure to Chinese frameworks that, while not displacing EU alignment at the formal level, creates parallel vocabularies and practices through which concepts such as sovereignty, development, security and multilateralism can be articulated differently from dominant EU formulations.** Over the long term this may complicate EU's normative dominance, especially in non-EU countries.

Looking Ahead: What the Patterns Suggest

The findings of this study support neither the alarmist reading of the 4GI as an imminent challenge to SEE's Euro-Atlantic integration nor the dismissive reading of them as empty diplomatic packaging with no real-world significance. They suggest, instead, a more nuanced picture whose trajectory is not predetermined.

The initiatives are more present, more institutionally developed, and more strategically coordinated than their low public visibility in most countries would imply. The June 2026 White Paper explicitly linking all four initiatives into a coherent global governance reform agenda confirms what 71% of SEE experts already sensed: this is an integrated blueprint, not a collection of loosely related proposals. The absence of explicit 4GI labelling in every bilateral activity should not be overinterpreted. **The 4GI function chiefly as diplomatic vocabularies and statements of principle, with more limited application as operational cooperation mechanisms. Their advancement manifests through gradual routinisation of this vocabulary within Chinese diplomacy and their success should be interpreted by the extent to which partner governments selectively adopt, translate, or reinterpret 4GI's constituent concepts.** For some of the countries – Serbia first and foremost, the pace of institutionalisation - from Xi's 2021 GDI launch to the May 2026 4GI co-implementation MoU - has been faster than the pace of public discourse catching up with it. This gap between institutional development and public awareness raises a broader governance challenge: decisions about the terms of engagement are being made before the concepts involved have received substantial public debate.

The BRI offered SEE countries a relatively tangible proposition: infrastructure financing in exchange for diplomatic goodwill and market access. The 4GI offer something less concrete and potentially more consequential: a normative vocabulary, a set of governance principles, and a framework for situating bilateral relations within the broader Chinese vision of the international order. The region's expert community is sensing this shift; the broader public is not.

Whether the 4GI follow the BRI's trajectory and move from diplomatic concept to tangible presence through a combination of projects, media visibility and circulation, and elite political endorsement, will depend on several factors that are not yet fully determined: the pace and coherence of implementation on the Chinese side, the degree to which EU integration dynamics accelerate or slow for the non-member countries, and the extent to which domestic political actors in individual countries find the 4GI vocabulary useful for their own purposes.

Serbia, for instance, did not adopt the 4GI because it was persuaded of their normative merits. It adopted them because the framework offered a useful set of resources, including diplomatic visibility, a sovereignty-affirming vocabulary, a counterweight to EU conditionality pressure, and opportunity to strengthen the relationship with a major power that could further bring investment, and potentially be played off against others. Whether other SEE countries find their own version of this utility calculus will shape the 4GI's regional trajectory more than any amount of Chinese promotional activity.

For the EU, the central issue is the credibility of its own policy offer to SEE countries, particularly in development, security, political recognition and institutional integration. The persistence of the EU anchor across all nine countries as demonstrated in this study could be considered an asset by EU actors, especially in the context of current EU-level challenges, recurrent foreign policy dissonance, especially vis-à-vis China, institutional complexity, and the absence of a credible membership timeline for most of the non-member states. However, these vulnerabilities predate the 4GI and may shape the conditions under which the initiatives gain traction. Namely, the vulnerabilities create openings in which Chinese frameworks can acquire relevance, especially where existing European efforts no longer fully address local frustrations over development, sovereignty, security, identity, and institutional order. **The most important policy implication of this study is therefore not about China, but about the EU's own capacity to deliver on the promise towards SEE countries that their European integration can help protect and advance their own interests.**

While the 4GI present themselves as an alternative proposal for a loose normative framework, their

current vagueness and flexible delivery, the low degree of receptivity in SEE, and the lack of in-depth analysis of their aims and compatibility with EU commitments limit the scope for more detailed policy recommendations. Still, given China's sustained efforts to promote and institutionalize the 4GI, the EU needs to maintain its focus and sharpen its lens to follow developments in parts of the continent further away from the core, in order to devise adequate policy responses. Three specific recommendations stand out:

- **EU actors should assess individual 4GI initiatives and specific forms of cooperation on their substance and compatibility with EU commitments, distinguishing between largely rhetorical engagement and engagement with more substantive strategic implications.** Such an analysis would not only contribute to a better understanding of China's approach, but also provide insight into where and why the 4GI resonate in SEE, shedding light on where the EU's own approach may be falling short. This, in turn, can help **ensure that the EU's own policy offer in SEE is sufficiently visible, coherent and responsive** in the areas addressed by the 4GI. To support this effort, the EU should strengthen its China-specific expertise on the 4GI and systematically mobilize relevant regional (SEE) expertise.

- **SEE countries – both existing EU member states and enlargement countries – need to be more actively engaged in the ongoing policy debates**

on European strategic autonomy, defence of democracy, and competitiveness that are largely driven by Brussels and the capitals of the biggest EU member states. Policy solutions in which SEE countries are merely recipients, without having any contribution to their formulation, are likely to miss some of the actual challenges and constraints that these countries face and deliver sub-optimal results. For non-EU countries, such solutions may also be seen as externally imposed and lacking legitimacy, especially if their EU accession process is not credible and on track.

- China's 4GI diffusion in the media is largely based on information from Chinese state media and policy institutions, and reflects official Chinese positions and framings, but does not generally contain disinformation that can be readily debunked or dismissed. This is significant because the 4GI narratives are not primarily a fact-checking problem; they constitute a distinct set of political narratives and policy propositions that can provide a basis for actors seeking to question or contest prevailing EU approaches. Without meaningful domestic debate or substantive engaging with their premises, the 4GI will remain interpreted primarily through Chinese official sources rather than through locally grounded discussion. Hence, **strategic communication efforts by the EU and other relevant European and regional actors should account for the issues addressed by the 4GI, while articulating their own positions on development, security, values, and global governance thoroughly, clearly and consistently.**

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China's four global initiatives have arrived in Southeast Europe at a moment of global reckoning, concurring crises and conflicts in Europe and beyond, and dilemmas pertaining to the region's EU integration trajectory. Their effect on the region's fundamental alignments remains limited; their more visible role is discursive, providing some actors with alternative vocabularies. Drawing on media and public discourse analysis and expert survey data, this study maps the reception of the four global initiatives (4GI) across nine Southeast European countries through four analytical dimensions: official uptake by state actors, media visibility and circulation, initiative-specific views and perceptions among the expert community, and the contextual elements and structural conditions that enable or constrain deeper engagement. The study argues that the 4GI should be understood as an emerging normative framework entering SEE's regional setting marked by pre-existing political and institutional gaps, tensions, or unmet demands - some of which may create conditions for selective uptake of China's initiatives. The significance of 4GI in SEE ultimately lies in their potential for generating an evolving vocabulary that originates in Chinese initiatives but remains open to selective input and reinterpretation by local actors pursuing their own political, economic, or diplomatic objectives; nevertheless, this does not amount to transforming strategic alignments.