

From Tarmac to Turning Point:

EU Integration, Public Perception, and the Limits of Chinese Geoeconomics in Albania

Executive Summary

This paper examines the limits of China's geoeconomic influence in Albania through the failed 2016 acquisition of Tirana International Airport (TIA) by China Everbright Ltd. While Chinese investment has flourished in much of the Western Balkans, Albania represents an exception, where Beijing's Digital Silk Road (DSR) ambitions have met persistent resistance. Unlike its neighbors, Albania's ambitions to join the EU—and the growing public frustration with opaque government deals—made Chinese-style investment increasingly unwelcome. The paper concludes that Albania's experience underscores a broader lesson for policymakers, revealing how Albania's strong EU integration agenda, institutional alignment with Copenhagen Criteria standards, and a vibrant culture of civic protest have collectively constrained Chinese influence. Through the TIA case, the paper demonstrates how domestic governance concerns and public pressure against opaque deals act as informal checks on foreign capital. Highlighting how normative convergence with EU and NATO frameworks, combined with bottom-up societal accountability, can weaken China's economic foothold in the region and reshape the boundaries of its digital and financial influence, Albania's stance represents both a model of resilience and a potential blueprint for mitigating Beijing's economic leverage in other small states.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its Digital Silk Road (DSR) continue to become key weapons for Beijing's growing geoeconomic influence in currently reshaping much of the Western Balkans- but not Albania. While neighboring countries such as Serbia and Montenegro have long embraced the large-scale Chinese investment in transport, digital, and energy infrastructure¹, Albania has welcomed a more cautious path, quietly shutting its gates to major flagship projects². Notably, since 2016, Chinese capital inflows into Albania have significantly declined and numerous high-profile projects have either been stalled or completely abandoned³- among these is the failed concession of Tirana International Airport (TIA). Acquired in 2016 by the Hong-Kong based company China Everbright Ltd.⁴, this offers a revealing study on the structural and political limitations to China's economic influence in small EU-aspiring states such as Albania.

This brings forth the question why Chinese geoeconomics is so effective in large regions of the Western Balkans yet appears far more constrained in Albania. The TIA case represents this specific tension, a strategically significant infrastructure project backed by Chinese capital which ultimately failed to secure long-term operational control amidst public criticism and shifting political priorities⁵. Therefore, assessing the factors behind this outcome is crucial for understanding the broader

¹ Szunomar, A. (2013) "China's relations with the developing world: A new type of colonialism or a fruitful cooperation." *China's changing competitiveness: shaking up or waking up the European Union*. P. 85-110.

² Brady, A. et. al, (2020). "How to Give China Face yet Not Bow to Pressure: Albania's Delicate Balancing Act with China." *The World of Small States*. 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_4. p.44

³ Malaj, E. (2024, March 23). "Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China's Engagement in Albania." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n128>. p.197

⁴ Tirana Times. (2016, October 7). "Chinese Consortium Fully Acquires Albania's Sole International Airport." *Tirana Times*. <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=129425>.

⁵ Enri (2025, July 6). "How €1.8B in Corrupt Deals Destroyed Tirana's Public Spaces." *Visit Albania*. <https://albaniavisit.com/tourism-politics/tirana-corruption-public-spaces-lost/>.

implications of China's DSR strategy in sovereign states where governance standards and public sentiment diverge from Beijing's preferred engagement model⁶.

This paper addresses this gap by asking: *What does the 2016 failed Tirana International Airport acquisition reveal about the vulnerabilities of China's geoeconomic influence through the Digital Silk Road in Albania?* This paper argues that the failed TIA acquisition illustrates how Albania's strong commitment to potential EU integration, its deliberate foreign policy balancing between China and Western partners, and a growing culture of public resistance and protest all together strain Chinese geoeconomic influence in Albania. By examining the intersection between decreased Chinese investment and Albania's diplomatic positioning, I aim to highlight the multi-layered nature of China's geoeconomic vulnerability in this politically contested environment.

Literary Review

Research on China's engagement with the Western Balkans has expanded alongside Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it can be organized in three overlapping themes:

1- Analyses of China's Geoeconomic Strategy in the Western Balkans

Cau (2018) and Szunomar (2013) contextualize the BRI and DSR within a broader contest for geopolitical influence, especially projects designed for critical security infrastructure that diffuse governance norms and standards. Markovic, Khaze, and Wang (2021) argue how this investment engagement creates a cycle of economic dependencies that in turn complicate EU accession.

⁶ Malaj, E. (2024, March 23). "Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China's Engagement in Albania." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n128>. p.197

Nonetheless, while such macro-level analyses tend to generalize regional patterns, which may obscure important local-level constraints of Beijing's influence.

2- Studies of Small State “Foreign Policy Balancing” Diplomacy

Brady and Higashi (2020) effectively showcase Tirana's “delicate balancing act”⁷ and the struggle of maintaining cooperative ties with China while simultaneously safeguarding EU and NATO political and strategic alignments. Kalemaj (2022) reinforces this argument, framing Albania's cautious interaction due to the historical Mao-Hoxha split⁸.

3- Work on Public Perception and Grassroots Mobilisation

Malaj (2024) identifies public perception as a critical filter and soft power tool for Chinese engagement in Albania while both Matura and Szunomar (2016) offer comparative research findings on CEE youth attitudes.

This paper sits at the intersection of all three schools of thought. While all three themes of findings have been examined in existing research, they are rarely considered in direct correlation to one another. However, in the Albanian context, these avenues of resistance are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, shaping Chinese investment outcomes in ways not observed in more receptive regional contexts.

Limitations

⁷ Brady, A. et. al, (2020). “How to Give China Face yet Not Bow to Pressure: Albania's Delicate Balancing Act with China.” *The World of Small States*. 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_4. p.46

⁸ Kalemaj, I. (2022, November 30). “Walking on Tightropes: The Idiosyncrasies of Albania-China Relations.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv9n4s110>. p.78

Despite the range of sources consulted, it should be acknowledged that this paper contains limited Albanian- and Chinese-authored scholarship on Sino–Albanian relations, and the TIA case in particular, which in itself reflects structural, political, and academic factors. This is in part due to the political risk of criticizing strategic partners such as China, especially when linked to corruption or governance failures⁹. Another constraint of this paper is the scarcity of local academic literature and publications on grass-roots level protests and perceptions¹⁰. Protests may be frequent in Albania, as demonstrated by this paper, while systemic data collection is rare, with reporting often fragmented as data is linked to individual events rather than generational patterns. While many qualitative findings do exist, they are rarely translated into peer-reviewed studies. Therefore, this paper heavily relies on sources from international think tanks, regional comparative studies, and investigative journalism, which may not fully encompass local Albanian perspectives.

Case Study: Tirana International Airport

At the time of the acquisition, the Tirana International Airport (TIA) also commonly known as the Mother Teresa Airport served as Albania's only commercial airport and international gateway, servicing around 2 million passengers a year¹¹. In 2015, a year before its sale to Hong-Kong based company China Everbright Ltd., TIA was amongst Albania's most profitable sources of capital inflow, amassing a turnover of roughly €35.5 million or converted ALL 4.9 billion while its profit

⁹ Brady, A. et. al, (2020). "How to Give China Face yet Not Bow to Pressure: Albania's Delicate Balancing Act with China." *The World of Small States*. 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_4. p.43

¹⁰ Malaj, E. (2024, March 23). "Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China's Engagement in Albania." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n128>. p.196

¹¹ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

rose 31%¹². Furthermore, the strategic value of the airport plays just as vital a role now as it did prior to its sale. Located near the village of Rinas, approximately 18 kilometers from the country's capital Tirana, TIA also had NATO-linked uses, marking it as a critical dual-use asset with national-security importance¹³. Before the Chinese acquisition, TIA operated under a 20-year concession awarded to a German-US consortium Hochtief Airport in 2005. Despite the arrangement including exclusivity over Albania's civil airspace, in early 2016, the Albanian government renegotiated to dilute exclusivity enough to allow for two new domestic airports. Nonetheless, structurally all security responsibilities were shared with former concessionaires and the Albanian authorities: Hochtief Airport oversaw airport security inside the perimeter, and the state police (Policia e Shtetit) oversaw security outside the airport, while the Civil Aviation Authority supervised overall performance¹⁴. Due to the dual use of the airport, numerous security concerns were raised regarding the negotiations of new ownership and operations, especially amidst EU-accession ambitions and commitments to NATO¹⁵.

In October 2016, China Everbright Ltd. with additional funding from Friedman Pacific (another Hong-Kong based conglomerate) successfully completed negotiations and purchased 100% of TIA under the existing concession with Hochtief Airport¹⁶. This purchase was already considered to be an unreliable investment as it was completed through offshore structures such as Keen Dynamics

¹² Bne IntelliNews. (2025). *China Everbright Limited completes acquisition of Tirana International Airport*. Intellinews.com. <https://www.intellinews.com/china-everbright-limited-completes-acquisition-of-tirana-international-airport-107704/?source=albania>

¹³ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

¹⁴ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

¹⁵ Brady, A. et. al, (2020). "How to Give China Face yet Not Bow to Pressure: Albania's Delicate Balancing Act with China." *The World of Small States*. 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_4. p.48

¹⁶ Tirana Times. (2016, October 7). "Chinese Consortium Fully Acquires Albania's Sole International Airport." *Tirana Times*. <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=129425>.

Ltd. (Cayman Islands) and Real Fortress Pte Ltd. (Singapore)¹⁷. China Everbright Ltd. framed the intent of the purchase as part of the larger BRI initiative and a strengthening of Sino-Albanian economic ties¹⁸. It is estimated that the transport hub and 100% of its stakes was purchased around €83-90 million- the exact prices of the deal have not been disclosed to the public and only close estimations exist.

From the concession onwards, TIA experienced a series of repeated incidents: armed robberies, failed security tests, etc., triggering public controversy and criticism towards both the concessionaire and state authorities responsible for the oversights in security gaps¹⁹. Following a high-profile heist in 2019, the Interior Minister Sander Lleshaj, deeply criticized China Everbright Ltd. for its inadequate measures of fulfilling security requirements as the company deflected that the Policia e Shtetit bore responsibility outside the perimeter²⁰. This dispute only further demonstrated the discontent that was already taking place in broader domestic debates about opaque concessions and foreign investments in the country and the lack of government reforms that were allowing this to continue. In December 2020, despite seven more years left on the concession, China Everbright Ltd. sold TIA to Albanian Kastrati Group for an estimated €71 million- without public explanation, effectively quietly ending Chinese ownership after just shy of four years²¹. At the time of the re-sale back to Albanian ownership, the Chinese operators of the airport had experienced exponential political pressure as well as a shift in growing emphasis on EU-compatible standards from the Albanian government.

¹⁷ Bne IntelliNews. (2025). *China Everbright Limited completes acquisition of Tirana International Airport*. Intellinews.com. <https://www.intellinews.com/china-everbright-limited-completes-acquisition-of-tirana-international-airport-107704/?source=albania>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stojkovski, B. (2021, December 15). "China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost." *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>

Under re-ownership with the Kastrati Group, TIA has undergone rapid expansions, renovations, and rebranding with growing aspirations to open long-haul flight routes to the US²². In addition, with one of the highest passenger growth rates in Europe, it has also been called one of the “most beautiful and unique airports in Europe”²³. With government visits in May of this year, the airport had experienced “record-time” improvements as it grows into the third largest airport in the Western Balkans, becoming a regional leader in air transportation hubs²⁴. Even within TIA’s own value propositions, the airport frames their mission around service excellence, safety, security, closely aligning with more EU-oriented expectations. Its current bolstered security, new terminals, increased passenger volumes and overall improved service rating all exceed previous performance seen during the Chinese concession, which many have attributed to the return of the airport to local ownership. For many Albanians, this return and frankly failed foreign acquisition has reinforced local perceptions that strategic infrastructure is better managed in the hands of domestic companies, emphasizing the importance of strengthening the local economy as well as limiting Chinese involvement in assets both yielding extreme economic, reputational, and security benefits as a critical transport hub and NATO-linked facility²⁵.

Since the short-lived Chinese ownership of TIA, the brief concession now serves as a form of cautionary tale, highlighting the strategic value of the airport and prove how local control and

²² Saliu, K. (2025, May 9). *Tirana Airport Officially the Largest in the Region, Surpassing Belgrade for the First Time in 2024* | RTSH English. RTSH English.

<https://rtsh.al/rti/en/tirana-airport-officially-the-largest-in-the-region-surpassing-belgrade-for-the-first-time-in-2024/>

²³ Vjesti. (2025, May 12). “Tirana International Airport Has Become the Most Beautiful Airport in Europe Thanks to Investments by the Kastrati Group.” *vjesti.me*.

<https://en.vijesti.me/marketing/business-marketing/758236/Tirana-International-Airport-has-become-the-most-beautiful-airport-in-Europe-thanks-to-investments-by-Kastrati-Group-Promo>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Malaj, E. (2024, March 23). “Public Perception and Geopolitical Implications of China’s Engagement in Albania.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n128>. p.200

ownership, combined with EU-compatible governance have resulted in extreme economic and social growth as TIA continues to grow into the region's most strategic airport²⁶.

The case of the Tirana International Airport is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of Chinese geoeconomics in the Western Balkans. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) continues to report on China's expansion of influence and economic reach across the DSR with over 135 Chinese-linked large-scale infrastructure projects worth more than €32 billion²⁷. While Beijing has deepened economic engagement with states such as Montenegro, which has pursued ambitious Chinese-financed transport links and Serbia, which has long attracted economic activity and multibillion euro projects and loans- including cooperation with Huawei and large BRI infrastructure financing, the same economic cooperation cannot be said to be the same in Albania. As documented in the 2019 Munich Security Report, Albania has seen far fewer investment deals materialize, specifically none financed through BRI lending- a stark contrast to other Western Balkan states²⁸. Albania remains attracted to markets and its capital, it has proven its commitment to strongly meeting EU criteria with its debt profile leaning more towards Western institutions (IMF, World Bank, EU), and BRI-branded finance has been minimal²⁹. Beyond media headline announcements, several flagship projects e.g., Arber Road, have either stalled, changed course, or been abandoned. This was further solidified when the Albanian government signaled additional caution in 2019 by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the United States to

²⁶ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

²⁷ Stojkovski, B. (2021, December 15). "China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost." *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>

²⁸ Fjori Sinoruka. (2021, April 8). *Albania Parties Trade Blame as Protest Closes Main Airport*. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/08/albania-parties-trade-blame-as-protest-closes-main-airport/>

²⁹ Kalemaj, I. (2022, November 30). "Walking on Tightropes: The Idiosyncrasies of Albania-China Relations." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv9n4s110>. p.81

exclude Huawei from 4G/5G upgrades, thus limiting the DSR penetration and expansion in the region³⁰.

The contrast of economic activity between Serbia and Albania- arguably the most influential key players in the Western Balkans, illustrates the extent to which Chinese investment patterns have been mediated by domestic political opportunities and strategic alignments, rather than determined solely by regional economic opportunity. Serbia's eager embrace of Chinese capital reflects a purposeful diversification strategy of economic partnerships, which not only leverages Chinese financing for geopolitical autonomy but implicitly signals to Western institutions such as the EU the hierarchy of its external economic alignments³¹. It is also important to note that just as Chinese investment has not been uniform, neither are regional gains of Western Balkan states; these partnerships with Beijing do not fundamentally undermine Serbia's core foreign policy objectives, hence why continued sustained cooperation is seen as both beneficial from an economic and political lens. However, this is clearly not the case for Albania. Chinese capital inflows have steadily declined in Albania since 2016³², suggesting a shift in perceptions whether that be public or political, ultimately deeming partnerships with Beijing as potentially incompatible with Albania's long-term strategic orientations and close alignment with EU standards and governance credibility. This divergence positions Albania as an outlier within the landscape of China's influence which is otherwise expanding. The decision-making rationale can be understood economically, reflecting the application of political-strategic criteria to foreign investments and partnerships as well as internationally, reinforcing its alignment with EU/NATO partners. The early termination TIA acquisition as well as

³⁰ Brady, A. et. al, (2020). "How to Give China Face yet Not Bow to Pressure: Albania's Delicate Balancing Act with China." *The World of Small States*. 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51529-4_4. p.46

³¹ Markovic Khaze, N. et. al, (2021). "Is China's rising influence in the Western Balkans a threat to European integration?". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. p.234-250, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340. p.242

³² Stojkovski, B. (2021, December 15). "China in the Balkans: Controversy and Cost." *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/15/china-in-the-balkans-controversy-and-cost/>

numerous delayed or re-routed projects only further highlights a structural filtering process that is taking place and is symptomatic of a deeper analysis: the immediate short-term economic growth of Chinese investments is not outweighed by the risk to EU integration and alliance commitments³³.

EU Integration and the Copenhagen Criteria

European conditionality operates not merely as a procedural framework for accession but as an active mechanism in shaping Albania's political economy of foreign investment. Albania has been an official EU candidate since 2014, following more than a decade of pre-accession engagement, and accession still remains a central pillar of its foreign policy strategy³⁴. Successive governments have framed EU membership as both a strategic imperative and more importantly a legitimising benchmark for governance reforms, aligning with the *acquis Communautaire* and the Copenhagen Criteria³⁵. By embedding requirements for democratic governance, transparency, and competitive procurement into the accession process, the EU effectively established a set of investment eligibility criteria that privileges partners whose operational standards align with their own norms³⁶. However, this influence is extremely anticipatory with candidate states almost compelled to make investment choices today that will withstand scrutiny of future compliance reviews. In the case of Albania, this has translated into the rejection of long-term agreements with partners whose practices might later

³³ Kalemaj, I. (2022, November 30). "Walking on Tightropes: The Idiosyncrasies of Albania-China Relations." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv9n4s110>. p/80

³⁴ Kalemaj, I. (2022, November 30). "Walking on Tightropes: The Idiosyncrasies of Albania-China Relations." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv9n4s110>. p.77

³⁵ Kaiser, J. (2024, November 6). "The Commission's Annual Enlargement Package: How Are Candidate Countries Faring?" *The Parliament Magazine*. <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-expansion-how-close-are-the-nine-candidate-states-to-membership>.

³⁶ Council of Europe (2025, April 3). "High-Level Meeting: '2030 Albania in the EU - the Path of Reforms', Democratic Success as a Process and Lasting Commitment - Portal." <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/high-level-meeting-2030-albania-in-the-eu-the-path-of-reforms-democratic-success-as-a-process-and-lasting-commitment>.

necessitate renegotiation or annulment³⁷. Unlike Serbia, who can manage potential EU-China tensions from a position of greater foreign policy flexibility, Albania's accession ambitions amplify the political cost of non-compliant projects, thus rendering certain Chinese offers strategically unviable. In this context, sustained Chinese engagement is assessed not solely in economic terms but in light of its compatibility with EU standards and Copenhagen criteria. Therefore, EU conditionality functions as both a regulatory screen and a geopolitical filter, narrowing the acceptable investment sources and reinforcing Albania's predisposition toward EU-NATO alignment. The resulting investment environment is not merely one in which Chinese flagship projects fail to materialise but one in which they are not actively prioritized in favor of politically "safe" and strategically compatible alternatives.

The Copenhagen Criteria itself has come under much scrutiny by states, international institutions, and scholars for acting as a moving target that many candidate states can rarely fully meet with an expanding scope and inconsistent application. In turn, this creates the perception for candidates that accession is less about fulfilling technical conditions than about the EU's shifting political will. For Albania, this tension continues to grow. Despite sustained reforms and rhetorical alignment with Brussels, membership remains elusive, leaving accession an almost unattainable objective³⁸. This dynamic between Tirana and Brussels explains much of Albania's investment caution. The cost of non-compliant deals, such as the TIA case, outweighs their economic benefits. Yet, by striving towards an ideal that may never be realised, Albania risks entrenching dependence on an enlargement process whose credibility is increasingly contested. The paradox is clear: Albania must

³⁷ Prroni, D. (2025). Albania's progress can't mask the ongoing EU "acrobatics." *The New Union Post*. <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/06/03/albania-eu-accession-negotiations-rama>

³⁸ Alkanjari, I. (2023). "Albania: Obstructed Democracy." *Eurozine*. <https://www.eurozine.com/albania-obstructed-democracy/>.

comply with EU norms and regulations, narrowing its space for alternative partnerships such as China, while the reward and goal of EU membership remains indefinitely deferred.

Albania's Balancing Act

Albania's position between Chinese investment opportunities and EU accession obligation exemplifies a delicate balancing act, one that exposes the vulnerabilities in both local governance and foreign policy. Chinese projects are often associated with fewer transparency requirements- offering immediate capital and infrastructure development, thus appealing to states with limited fiscal capacity such as Albania³⁹. Nonetheless, Albania's long-term commitment to EU accession continues to constrain the acceptance of such investments, at risk of violating accession benchmarks with weak accountability and financing structures. To the international community, Albania's approach to managing its relationships projects a twofold message. By keeping its distance from Chinese investment, the country signals its alignment with EU-NATO partners, aiming to strengthen its position as a credible candidate for membership⁴⁰. Yet, this outward image is complicated by concerns about whether EU-driven reforms have produced the structural improvements or simply encouraged superficial compliance⁴¹. This balancing act operates on multiple levels. Externally, Albania uses the EU's requirements as a filter for potential investors, showcasing its commitment to Western standards. Internally, however, the struggle with governance shortcomings continues, and conditionality alone has not been enough to solve these challenges. Domestically, public debate over

³⁹ Rapoza, K. (2016). "Albania Becomes Latest China Magnet." *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2016/06/13/albania-becomes-latest-china-magnet/>

⁴⁰ Markovic Khaze, N. et. al, (2021). "Is China's rising influence in the Western Balkans a threat to European integration?". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. p.234-250, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340. p.246

⁴¹ Cau, E. (2018). Geopolitical Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative: The Backbone for a New World Order? *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, 4(1), 39–105. p.63

corruption and transparency have only exacerbated, especially in light of high-profile cases like the Tirana International Airport concession. Incidents like these only reinforce public skepticism over governance practices that sidestep EU rules and what they really mean for everyday Albanians⁴². The sense that such deals benefit well-connected elites at the expense of the broader public continues to spark protest movements, highlighting strong civic resistance to both Chinese economic involvement and domestic governance failures⁴³. While Albania's protest movements may be fragmented, they consistently target the overlap between foreign investment and local governance problems. These episodes make clear that the country's geopolitical balancing act is not just a matter of international diplomacy, but it also fuels ongoing grassroots activism, with public perception playing a crucial role in determining the viability of Chinese-linked projects in the region.

Public Protest as Soft-Power Resistance

Public resistance has played a crucial, though often under-acknowledged role in shaping Albania's trajectory of foreign investment. While EU conditionality functions as a filter, protests and civic mobilisation act as an internal mechanism of accountability, highlighting governance failures and amplifying demands for transparency. In the context of Albania and Chinese geoeconomics, the protests against Chinese-linked projects are rarely about China alone, but rather about the intersection of external actors with domestic corruption. The TIA acquisition provides a clear example of this mechanism. Journalistic investigations link the concession to governance shortcomings and corruption risks, fuelling public suspicion that strategic critical infrastructure was

⁴² Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). "Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania." *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

⁴³ Enri (2025, July 6). "How €1.8B in Corrupt Deals Destroyed Tirana's Public Spaces." *Visit Albania*. <https://albaniavisit.com/tourism-politics/tirana-corruption-public-spaces-lost/>.

being mismanaged for elite benefit⁴⁴. Civic frustration was not limited to the airport itself but reflected broader concerns that foreign capital, when paired with weak domestic institutions, exacerbated rather than alleviated governance problems. Therefore, resistance to the TIA deal solidifies a wider discourse: transparency and accountability in state–business relations must be safeguarded if Albania is to credibly pursue EU membership.

These dynamics align with findings from broader regional research such as that of Dr. Agnes Szunomar, an economist and researcher of foreign direct investment in CEEC. Szunomar (2013) highlights that Chinese economic engagement in Central and Eastern Europe is consistently met with mixed public attitudes, often shaped by perceptions of the public. Similarly, Matura and Szunomar (2016) demonstrate this argument through their findings of survey data: university students across the region, including Albania’s neighboring countries, expressed significantly stronger support for EU and Western institutions compared to Chinese alternatives. Malaj (2024) reinforces this in the case of Albania, depicting how public scepticism of China derives less from geostrategy and more from local experiences of corruption in projects linked to Beijing. The protests regarding TIA can therefore be understood as a local manifestation of these broader normative trends where citizens use mobilisation to demand a closer alignment with the EU.

The implications extend far beyond the local level. By publicly contesting Chinese-linked projects, Albanian citizens not only influence domestic discourse but also shape international perception of Albania’s investment portfolio. Public resistance signals to Brussels and Washington that the domestic constituency supports EU integration over alternative alignments; in a way, contributing indirectly to Albania’s credibility as a candidate state⁴⁵. The TIA case demonstrates how grassroots

⁴⁴ Madhi, G. (2020, May 19). “Story of a Chinese Airport in Albania.” *Chinaobservers*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/a-story-of-a-chinese-airport-in-albania/>.

⁴⁵ Zekthi, F. (2025, July 5). “The Impact of Student Protests in Albania and Political Outcomes: A Critical Approach.” *Journal of Educational and Social Research*. <https://www.richtmann.org/journal/index.php/jesr/article/view/14352>. p.299

mobilisation can delegitimise Chinese concessions and reframe them as governance failures. Combined with survey-based findings from Szunomar and Matura, these movements highlight the decisive role of public perception in constraining Chinese influence.

Conclusion

The failed Tirana International Airport acquisition highlights not only the limits of China's geoeconomic influence in Albania but also the difficult balancing act the country faces between its own pressures and vulnerabilities. Albania's path toward EU membership plays a decisive role as accession criteria push policymakers to prioritise investment partnerships that meet standards of governance and transparency. Although the Copenhagen criteria are often perceived as unattainable, they continue to serve as a guiding framework for Albania's foreign policy, compelling political elites to favor EU-NATO alignment even when economic opportunities from Chinese capital still appear attractive. The balancing dynamic is further reinforced by civic mobilisation: protests over projects related to TIA, urban development, or environmental concerns have exposed corruption risks and pressured decision-makers to adopt higher levels of accountability. Albania's experience illustrates how foreign financial influence can fail when confronted with the combined weight of EU integration goals, governance debates, and public perception. Looking ahead, unless China adapts to local expectation of transparency and accountability, its role in Albania is likely to remain marginal while Albania's steady albeit difficult accession toward EU membership will continue to define its strategic goals.

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