The Contributing to Modern Partnerships: Assessments of Sino-EU-Serbian Relations:
Delphi Report

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Introduction

The Contributing to Modern Partnerships: Assessments of Sino-EU-Serbian Relations project (hereafter referred to as COMPASS) aims to identify, analyse, and provide recommendations regarding the risks associated with Serbia's political, security and economic cooperation with the EU and China. The main objective and outcome of the project is to give recommendations how to reduce or mitigate these identified risks.

The initial phase of this project, which is part of Work Package 1, involved conducting a literature review and gathering relevant data about research topic. The second phase entailed assessing potential risks in multilateral cooperation, followed by the third phase, which involved administering a Delphi survey to gather expert opinions about possible risks in Sino-EU-Serbia cooperation.

While preparing the project proposal, the COMPASS team recognized the importance of incorporating insights and expertise from other sources besides their analysis and opinions. To achieve this, the team employed the Delphi survey technique, which involves engaging experts, in this case, in international relations and economics, so that they could enhance previous assessments of project team members.

Delphi survey is widely used in all fields of life, as a research technique that provides valuable data and opinions on different topics, which as a main characteristic has participation of experts in specific field. In social sciences, this technique is widely used in management field, but its flexibility and inclusiveness provide that it can be used in all spheres of science. Originally, it was developed by RAND research organization in the 1950s to forecast the effect of technology on warfare (RAND). Currently, it is not widely used in international relations and economics, but given the context of COMPASS project, its multidisciplinary approach and complexity, it was decided that it will be valuable addition to already employed research methodology.

The Delphi technique is, according to Khodyakov et al. (2023), "An iterative, anonymous, group-based process for eliciting and aggregating opinion on a topic to explore the existence of consensus among experts". The four main characteristics of this survey are anonymity, iteration with controlled feedback, statistical group response, and the use of experts (Goodman, 1987). The first step in this technique is to gather data that would help define research problems and questions that organizers of Delphi research want to explore. The next step is to create a list of experts who could

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contribute to this research. The third step involves formulating questions related to the topic being explored. Following this step, the survey is distributed to the participants, nowadays usually in online form. After the completed questionnaires are collected, data gathered through surveys are statistically processed "according to their median and percentage scores as decided by group responses on Likert-type scales" (Goodman, 1987). The responses are then ranked according to the priorities the panellists made. Iterations (rounds) with the questionnaire continue until a consensus is reached, which occurs when subsequent iterations show no significant statistical differences in responses.

There are several advantages and disadvantages associated with the use of this survey technique. Among the pros there is the anonymity of participants who are not pressed to make answers depending on the other people who are participating; the responses show prevailing opinion, thus allowing for a more accurate assessment of the questions raised; experts in specific fields can provide knowledgeable answers to the posed questions; it uses both qualitative and quantitative methods; Delphi survey can be applied across various areas of life (Goodman 1987; de Loë et al. 2016; Okoli, Pawlowski 2004; Landeta 2006).

The main cons are lack of accountability of expressed views from participants; research results depend on the motivation of the participants to do their job correctly; inconsistency in using this technique by various researchers; Delphi survey does not take into account differences in opinions, which could in some cases be instrumental in formulating recommendations on policies; simplifying complex issues that require a more nuanced understanding (Goodman 1987; de Loë et al. 2016; Okoli, Pawlowski 2004; Landeta 2006).

COMPASS Delphi survey

Serbia's relations with the EU and China, its key partners, are complex and encompass multiple dimensions across three main areas: political, security, and economic. The COMPASS team collected relevant data on the risks associated with Serbian cooperation with the EU and China during the initial project phase. This foundational research allowed the team to identify key points, challenges, opportunities, and risks within this cooperation framework, which they aimed to further explore using the Delphi survey. Experts from the politics, security, and economics fields contributed insights to identify the main trends and processes that they believe are most likely to shape the future of Serbia's relations with the EU and China.

Due to the interconnections and overlaps between the domains of security and politics, the team organized and conducted two Delphi panels: one focusing on politics and security and the other on economics. Each panel included insights from 15 experts, who provided their responses through Google Forms surveys. The panels were conducted over three rounds and featured a predetermined set of indicators identified by the project team as relevant to the future of Sino-Serbian and Serbia-EU relations in the three analysed domains. The experts were asked to consider the central question: "Do you agree that the following indicators are relevant for assessing Serbia's relations with the EU and China over the next five years?" Each indicator was rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with detailed descriptions provided by the project team:

- Strongly disagree (1) – You believe that the indicator is unlikely or even not possible to happen until 2030, therefore, you are pessimistic about whether it should be included in the next rounds.

- Disagree (2) – You believe that there is a small chance that the indicator is possible to happen, therefore, you are pessimistic about whether it should be included in the next rounds.

- Neither disagree nor agree (3) – You believe that the indicator will manifest albeit slightly or you are not sure about the response.

- Agree (4) – You believe that this is a good developing indicator/process and/or you think that there is a high chance that it will manifest in the next period, thus, you are optimistic about its inclusion in the pool of indicators for the next round.

- Strongly agree (5) – You believe that this is a good developing indicator/process and/or you are sure that it will manifest in the next period, thus, you are optimistic about its inclusion in the pool of indicators for the next round.

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Furthermore, indicators were divided into three categories:

1. Indicators for Assessing Serbia's Relations with the EU

2. Indicators for Assessing Serbia's Relations with the China

3. Global and Regional Related Indicators for Assessing Serbia's Relations with the EU and China

After the first round, the COMPASS project team members ranked all indicators based on the average ratings given by participants. Indicators that scored above a predetermined threshold were selected to advance to the second round. In the second round, none of the indicators were eliminated; however, the question used as a baseline for the experts' assessment was revised to: "Which of the following indicators do you believe would be best for assessing Serbia's position in the international system for the next year (2025)?"

In the second and third rounds, the indicators were ordered by the voting score from the first and second rounds, respectively. Additionally, in the first two rounds, the experts had the opportunity to recommend additional indicators, which were then included in the survey for the following rounds. In the third, final round, experts were asked to identify in the free form a trend or process they deem will be most impactful and important in 2025.

Politics and Security Delphi panel

The Politics and Security Delphi panel aimed to assess the expert's opinion and the existence of a potential consensus on the subject: which indicators – events, processes and trends in Serbian relations with the EU and China, as well as global ones affecting those relations, are most relevant and most impactful on determining Serbia's position in the international system.

To come to this conclusion the panel gathered 15 experts who have knowledge, experience and insight into areas of international relations, international security, geopolitics, foreign policy creation, and foreign policy analysis which makes them equipped with the required skill set to answer questions regarding Serbia's position in the international system, Serbia's foreign policy, Serbia's security environment, EU accession process, EU common foreign and security policy, China's foreign policy and grand strategy, war in Ukraine, and great power competition, as well as crucial trends in economy, international relations, international law and international security.

The group of 15 experts consisted of 12 people from Serbia, 1 from an EU country, 1 from China, and 1 from a Western Balkan country. Furthermore, 11 stem from academia and 4 from the non-governmental sector. Thus, the group reflects geographical and professional diversity which contributes to a wider grasp of opinions gathered.

Politics and security Delphi panel timeline:

First round:
1 July 2024 – 16 July 2024

Second round:
22 July 2024 – 6 September 2024

Third round:
01 October 2024 – 07 October 2024

After three rounds of expert votes, some of the topics on which an opinion of consensus emerged are importance of developing integration with EU energy and transportation networks, support for Chinese stances on international issues and UN voting, and rising trade volume with China. Among global issues, further deterioration of bilateral relations between Russia and EU and escalation of US-China rivalry were among those with highest consensus between the experts. When proposing their own suggestions for leading trends in 2025, the experts highlighted the impact and unpredictable influence of upcoming Donald Trump administration, and it polices. This overwhelmingly dominant proposition was followed by wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which are also closely connected to the potential and expected effects of Trump's second presidency. On the other hand, the most divergent opinions emerged on issues relating to security cooperation with China, for example potential joint military exercises between Serbia and China or defence/security Sino-Serbian cooperation agreements.

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Economic Delphi panel

The Economic Delphi panel focused on evaluating crucial global economic trends and relevant benchmarks for assessing bilateral economic relations between countries. This includes examining the size, scope, type, and timeline of trade and direct investments to appraise Serbia's position in the international economic system.

The group comprised 15 experts, 11 of whom work in Serbia, two in the EU, and two in China. Of these participants, 14 are affiliated with academia, while one expert comes from a nongovernmental institution closely connected to the Serbian government. This panel brought together highly qualified individuals with PhDs, capable of providing informed and credible assessments and predictions based on their extensive knowledge and analytical skills.

Additionally, the inclusion of an expert from a nongovernmental institution added value due to their in-depth knowledge of the relevant subjects, access to official data, and involvement in the formulation of Serbia's official economic policies.

Economic Delphi panel timeline:

First round:
12 June 2024 – 7 July 2024

Second round:
22 July 2024 – 3 September 2024

Third round:
01 October 2024 – 07 October 2024

The topics which have seen the highest level of consensus among the experts in the economic Delphi panel were EU investments in green energy projects in Serbia and the impact of Chinese foreign direct investments and Belt and Road Initiative projects in Serbia. When identifying trends for the next year, the experts were more divided than in the politics and security Delphi panel, which also reflects more divergent opinions on global issues, as there was a more distinct absence of consensus on these subjects. The identified trends generally emphasize the unpredictability of the international economy and the influence of economic policies of great power on global trends, as well as highlighting the rising impact of Artificial intelligence as an important additional point. On the other hand, the issues which have seen the most opposing opinions by the experts are those referring to potential negative aspects of Serbian Free Trade Agreements with third and regional countries, particularly China, the consequences of Chinese loans to Serbia, and the likelihood for Serbia to join World Trade Organization in the upcoming period.

Literature

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