

Turkey vs. China: Assessing Perceptions of the Economic, Political and Cultural Influence in Albania

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Abstract

China and Turkey are two countries exerting relevant global influence, both politically and economically. Their influence in Albania lies in several dimensions including economic, political and cultural dimensions. The purpose of the present study was to assess and compare perceptions of the economic, political and cultural influence of Turkey and China in Albania. It was hypothesized that Turkey would be rated higher across all dimensions. Methodology Participants were 80 young adults, all members of the political forum FRESSH. They were aged between 17 and 32 years old (mean age= 23.76 years, SD=3.67 years), 51.3% of the sample was female while 48.8% male. The instrument was a self-report questionnaire assessing attitudes of youth as regards the influence of non-European countries such as Russia Turkey and China in Albania. Results and conclusions: Politically engaged youth perceive a moderate influence from Turkey, mainly in the economic dimension, and less in the political or cultural dimensions. Although Turkish influence is perceived as stronger than Chinese influence, the two countries are not perceived as strong barriers to European Integration.

Keywords: Albania, Turkey, China, economic influence

Introduction

Throughout the course of history Albania has been struggling between the Western world (Western European countries and the United States of America) and Eastern influences of Asian countries. These two different poles have influenced Albanian politics, culture and economy in different dimensions e.g., understanding of the rule of law, democracy, moral values, freedom, and human rights etc. The pro-European approach and strategic partnerships of Albania, NATO membership and ultimate efforts to be part of the European Union suggest a dominance of Western over Eastern influence. However, the lack of a clear vision of the EU in relation to enlargement policies, barriers and postponements of membership, have contributed to an increasing Eastern influence across several dimensions, creating a favorable ground for other political and economic actors such as Turkey and China (Cox, 2012).

China and Turkey are two countries exerting relevant global influence, both politically and economically, and their role in Albania is quite obvious. However perceptions of the influence of these two countries, especially as reported by political organizations might provide important insights not only of the current political climate but also the future political strategies of Albania. The following section provides a comprehensive literature review on Turkish and Chinese influences in Albania.

Literature review

2.1. Turkish influence in Albania

The liberal political reforms in Albania in the recent years have greatly boosted foreign investments in the country (Bieber, Taleski, & Dimitrov, Nikola, 2017). According to 2014 data, Albania's largest foreign trade partners were Italy, Serbia, Spain, Malta and Turkey (Bank of Albania, 2014). Moreover NATO and World Bank membership (as well as EU membership negotiations), have created favorable conditions for attracting foreign direct investments going up to 750 million euros a year (in Southeastern Europe this is the third place after Serbia and Croatia). The ultimate result of this process was an economic growth of over 6% on an annual basis (Bank of Albania, 2017).

Turkish interests in the Balkan region are not new, while Albania and Kosovo, represent two of the most important economic partners of this country in the Balkan region (Grigoriadis, 2010). The close economic relationship to both these countries

could be explicable in terms of cultural as well as religious proximity (Hide, 2015); indeed the Albanian population is predominantly Muslim. According to the Turkish ambassador, Mr. Yörük. currently there are more than 400 Turkish companies operating in Albania, across very different sectors such as energy, mining, telecommunications, banking, etc., with a workforce of about 15,000, with potential for further development in the coming years. Some examples include: investments in telecommunication through Türk Telekom, in the education system through Educational Institutions like Epoka University and Colleges Mehmet Akif College, construction, e.g., Çalık Holding, in the Banking & Transport (the Cengis Construction company) etc.

The flourishing of trade and cooperation between Albania and Turkey comes as a result of the Free Trade Agreement signed between the two countries in 2006. According to this treaty there are no distinctions between Turkish goods and goods from European Union Countries; moreover 80 % of Turkish goods were duty free. Nonetheless it should be mentioned that in this very same year, Albania signed the agreement on Stabilization and Association with the EU. According to a report by SETA, a research organization for political, economic and sociological issues, in 2015 Turkish export towards Albania reached the value of 287 million euros (SETA, accessed in 2018). It is worth mentioning that Albania together with Kosovo are the only Balkan countries where Turkish exports dominate the German ones. Indeed, in 2015 German export towards Albania only reached the value of 223 million euros (SETA, accessed in 2018).

Therefore it might be summarized that Turkish economic influence in Albania in the recent years has been substantial; nonetheless, political and cultural dimensions are also involved although not in very straightforward manner.

Chinese influence in Albania

The delayed integration of Western Balkan countries in the European Union has increased the vulnerability of these countries to economic influence from China too (Ikenberry, 2008). While it must be acknowledged that Albania is a very 'small' country in terms of China's economic interests, the country's favorable geographic position with numerous port facilities provides considerable advantages as compared to other countries in the region. Hence, Albania actually provides a way through which China can access the European Union markets as well as other regional markets (European Parliament, 2018).

Chinese economic interests are clear, as the European Union countries are considered as the most important economic partners, while Balkan countries only as a bridge allowing the movement across for its capital and goods (Ikenberry, 2008). Indeed China is increasingly expanding into the Balkan region as a huge economic potential, competing vigorously with other actors in the region, such as the European Union, Russia and Turkey. All these countries have important interests in this region, and for this reason "war" for "territory" is extremely strong (European Parliament, 2018).

One of the most serious initiatives of emerging Chinese interests in the Balkan region is NISMA 16 + 1, launched in 2012 with the aim of regional co-operation (European Parliament, 2018). With a very large initial fund regional countries are benefiting in areas such as energy, infrastructure, transportation, extracting and processing of minerals, agriculture, education, culture etc. (European Parliament, 2018). Nonetheless, as compared to Turkish economic influence Chinese influence is clearly much weaker; for instance direct investments from China in the last year amount to one million Euro as compared to those from Turkey, 45 million Euro (Bank of Albania, 2017). Moreover, geographical distance and cultural divergence with Albania explains the weaker influence in political or cultural dimensions.

Aim of the study

The purpose of the present study was to assess perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence of Turkey vs. China among one of the largest youth political organizations in Albania, FRESSH. The study aimed to compare perceptions of both countries across these three dimensions, while hypothesizing that Turkish influence would dominate across economic, political and cultural dimensions. Moreover the study aimed to assess perceived barriers to European integration, both in general terms and also as regards the role of the two specific countries. In this case, it was hypothesized that Turkish influence would be perceived as a stronger barrier to European Integration as compared to Chinese influence.

Methodology

4.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants were 80 young adults, all members of the political forum FRESH. Participants were aged between 17 and 32 years old (mean age= 23.76 years, SD=3.67 years). In terms of gender composition 51.3% of the sample was female while 48.8% male (see Table 1. Gender distribution of the sample). As regards employment status, 26 participants (32.5%) were students, 39 (i.e.48.8% were graduated and employed while 18.8% were graduated but unemployed (See Table 2. Sample distribution by employment status). Figure 1 shows the sample distribution as regards membership time, i.e., time span reported as members of the political forum.

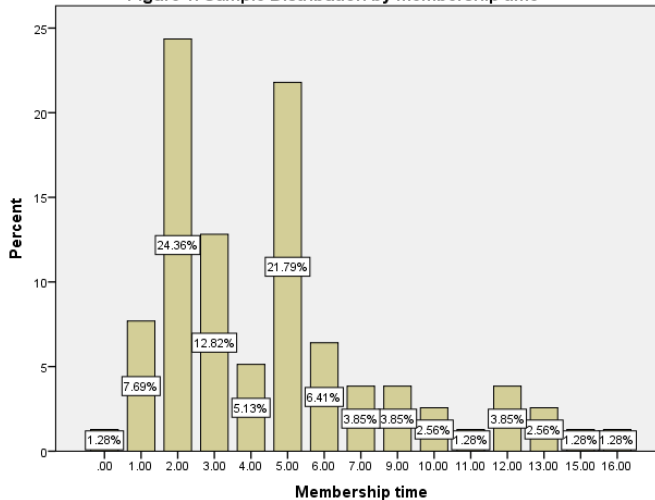
Table 1. Gender distribution of the sample

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	41	51.3	51.3	51.3
	Male	39	48.8	48.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Sample distribution by employment status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student	26	32.5	32.5	32.5
	Graduated/Employed	39	48.8	48.8	81.3
	Graduated/Unemployed	15	18.8	18.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1. Sample Distribution by membership time



Instruments

The instrument used in the present study was much broader in scope than the present research; therefore for the purpose of the study only specific sections were considered. The instrument was a self-report questionnaire assessing attitudes of youth as regards the influence of non-European countries such as Russia Turkey and China in Albania. For the purpose of the present study only sections addressing Turkey and China were considered; participants reported their perceptions on these countries influence in three dimensions including Economic, Political and Cultural influence. A likert scale was used to record the answers from one to five were 1-not at all, 2- a little, 3-somewhat, 4-considerable and 5-a lot. Also the

questionnaire asked participants for demographic information such as age, gender, employment status, and time spent as political forum member. Questions assessing more general attitudes such as Current Challenges in Albania (e.g. which of the following do you think are the major current challenges for Albania) were also assessed. The questionnaire was constructed and administered through the Google Forms Online Platform.

Results

Descriptive analyses for perceptions on economic political and cultural influence of Turkey revealed moderate scores on the three dimensions, as the highest influence was reported in the economic dimension, followed by the political dimension and the cultural one (see Table 4). T-tests revealed statistically significant differences between these 3 dimensions (Table 4.1).

Table 4: One-Sample Statistics: Economic, Political and Cultural influence of Turkey

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkish Economic influence	80	3.40	1.249	.140
Turkish Political influence	80	3.26	1.199	.134
Turkish Cultural influence	80	2.85	1.406	.157

Table 4.1. One-Sample Test Economic, Political and Cultural influence of Turkey

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkish Economic influence	24.352	79	.000	3.400	3.12	3.68
Turkish Political influence	24.346	79	.000	3.263	3.00	3.53
Turkish Cultural influence	18.129	79	.000	2.850	2.54	3.16

Descriptive analyses for perceptions on economic political and cultural influence of China revealed low to moderate scores on the three dimensions, as the highest influence was reported in the economic dimension, followed by the political dimension and the cultural one (see Table 5). T-tests revealed statistically significant differences between these 3 dimensions (Table 5.1).

Table 5. One-Sample Statistics: Economic, Political and Cultural influence of China

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Chinese Economic influence	80	3.13	1.286	.144
Chinese political influence	80	2.09	1.116	.125
Chinese cultural influence	80	1.75	.864	.097

Table 5.1. One-Sample Test Economic, Political and Cultural influence of China

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Chinese economic influence	21.726	79	.000	3.125	2.84	3.41
Chinese political influence	16.731	79	.000	2.088	1.84	2.34
Chinese cultural influence	18.112	79	.000	1.750	1.56	1.94

Cross-country comparisons as regards each of the specific dimensions revealed significant differences in terms of perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence (see Tables 6 through 8). Turkey was rated higher across all three dimensions as compared to China. Also t-tests revealed statistically significant differences existing across all three dimensions.

Table 6. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of economic influence of Turkey vs China

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkish economic influence	80	3.40	1.249	.140
Chinese economic influence	80	3.13	1.286	.144

Table 6.1. One-Sample Test: Perceptions of economic influence of Turkey vs China

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkish economic influence	24.352	79	.000	3.400	3.12	3.68
Chinese economic influence	21.726	79	.000	3.125	2.84	3.41

Table 6. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of political influence of Turkey vs China

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkish political influence	80	3.26	1.199	.134
Chinese political influence	80	2.09	1.116	.125

Table 6.1. One-Sample Test: Perceptions of political influence of Turkey vs China

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkish political influence	24.346	79	.000	3.263	3.00	3.53
Chinese political influence	16.731	79	.000	2.088	1.84	2.34

Table 7. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of cultural influence of Turkey vs China

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkish cultural influence	80	2.85	1.406	.157
Chinese cultural influence	80	1.75	.864	.097

Table 7.1. One-Sample Test Perceptions of cultural influence of Turkey vs China

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkish cultural influence	18.129	79	.000	2.850	2.54	3.16
Chinese cultural influence	18.112	79	.000	1.750	1.56	1.94

As regards barriers to European integration, descriptive statistics revealed that participants reported as the strongest barrier Organized Crime, followed by Lack of Political Vision, Influence of non-western countries and Radicalism (see Table 3). T-test revealed statistically significant differences between the scores, but it should be noted that mean values were moderate to low for three of the four barriers (except for organized crime).

Table 3. One-Sample Statistics: Perceived challenges to European Integration

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Political Vision	80	2.81	1.360	.152
Non-western influence	80	2.43	1.065	.119
Radicalism	80	1.61	.948	.106
Organized Crime	80	3.46	1.282	.143

Table 3.1. One-Sample Test: Perceived challenges to European Integration

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Political vision	18.493	79	.000	2.813	2.51	3.12
Non-western influence	20.372	79	.000	2.425	2.19	2.66
Radicalism	15.215	79	.000	1.613	1.40	1.82
Organized crime	24.153	79	.000	3.463	3.18	3.75

Finally results revealed that perceptions of these two countries as barriers of European integration were moderately weak, i.e., their influence is not perceived as a strong barrier to European integration (see mean values Table 8). However, scores were statistically significantly higher for Turkey as compared to China (see Table 8.1.).

Table 8. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of China and Turkey as barriers to European integration

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkey as barrier	78	2.26	1.200	.136
China as barrier	80	1.63	.817	.091

Table 8.1. One-Sample Test: Perceptions of China and Turkey as barriers to European integration

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkey as barrier	16.607	77	.000	2.256	1.99	2.53
China as barrier	17.787	79	.000	1.625	1.44	1.81

Discussion

The aim of this study was that of evaluating perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence FRESSH. The study compared perceptions about the two countries across the three dimensions and results showed that Turkish influence dominated across economic, political and cultural dimensions. Turkish economic influence was perceived as the strongest,

followed by political and ultimately cultural influence. Therefore it is perceived that the Turkish approach to Albania is mostly "economic war" to dominate the Western Balkan markets, exploiting all the advantages that the 500-year history of the Ottoman Empire dominance has provided; indeed the cultural proximity has quite favored the expansion of Turkish capital and investments in Albania, as compared to other countries (even European Union countries). Although Chinese influence in Albania is perceived as weaker than Turkish influence, perceptions on the specific dimensions are very similar; hence once again, the economic dimension comes up as strongest. This result was quite expected considering the geographical remoteness and also cultural divergence with Albania. Another purpose of the present study was that of assessing perceived barriers to European integration, with results showing that Organized Crime was rated as the strongest barrier, followed by Lack of Political Vision, Influence of non-western countries and Radicalism. In terms of the specific countries, Turkish influence was perceived as a stronger barrier to European Integration as compared to Chinese influence. However it should be mentioned that perceptions of these two countries as barriers of European integration were moderately weak; in other words, youth do not consider the influence of Turkey or China as a relevant barrier to European integration.

To conclude, the present study suggested that politically engaged youth perceive a moderate influence from Turkey, mainly in the economic dimension, and less in the political or cultural dimensions. Although Turkish influence is perceived as stronger than Chinese influence, the two countries are not perceived as strong barriers to European Integration.

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