

## State Surveillance in Serbia: Examining the Role of Chinese-Supplied Surveillance Cameras

*“They are increasing the capacity quite significantly. If this was deployed to Belgrade, it would indicate a level of camera density rarely seen outside of China”.<sup>1</sup>*

### Tal Pavel

Legal Sciences, "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4046-0867>

E-mail: [Tal@cybureau.org](mailto:Tal@cybureau.org)

### Abstract

**Objective** – To examine Serbia's deployment of Chinese-supplied surveillance technologies and assess the implications for democracy, privacy, and civil liberties in the context of Serbia's deteriorating freedom indices and EU accession aspirations.

**Goal** – To analyse the technological cooperation between China and Serbia in surveillance infrastructure, evaluate the transparency and accountability of Serbian institutions in implementing these systems, review the legal framework governing digital surveillance, and assess local and international responses to this deployment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jelena Jankovic and Reid Standish, 'Leaked Files Reveal Serbia's Secret Expansion Of Chinese-Made Surveillance' [2025] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty <<https://www.rferl.org/a/exclusive-safe-city-china-surveillance-huawei-facial-recognition/33501155.html>>.

Received: 25.11.2025

Accepted: 25.11.2025

Published: 25.11.2025

#### Cite this article as:

T. Pavel, "State Surveillance in Serbia: Examining the Role of Chinese-Supplied Surveillance Cameras"

DOT.PL, no. 1/ 2025,

10.60097/DOTPL/ 214711

#### Corresponding author:

Tal Pavel, University of Galati,  
Romania

E-mail: [Tal@cybureau.org](mailto:Tal@cybureau.org)

#### Copyright:

Some rights reserved

Publisher NASK

**Methodology** – This study employs a qualitative research approach based on document analysis from diverse, highly reliable sources. The methodology prioritises relevance, reliability, and diversity, integrating academic publications, reports from established human rights organisations, investigative journalism, and official government documents. The 46 sources were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of technological, legal, political, and social dimensions of surveillance deployment in Serbia.

**Findings** – The research reveals that Serbia has significantly expanded its state surveillance capabilities through a strategic partnership with China, particularly with Huawei, deploying thousands of cameras equipped with facial and license plate recognition across major cities. The findings demonstrate a troubling lack of transparency and accountability, with agreements classified as confidential and explicit references to Chinese involvement deliberately obscured. Serbia's legal framework for digital surveillance remains underdeveloped, lacking adequate oversight mechanisms and privacy protections. Locally, concerns persist about the political misuse of surveillance for control rather than public safety. Internationally, the EU has expressed alarm over Chinese technological penetration and its implications for Serbia's EU accession goals.

**Keywords:** Serbia, Surveillance, Policy, China, Privacy

## Introduction

Serbia's democracy has deteriorated over the past decade; the government, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, centralises power and influences state institutions, “steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organisations”.<sup>2</sup> Multiple indices document a consistent decline in Serbia’s general and press freedom. Freedom House labels Serbia as “Partly free” and indicates an ongoing deterioration in the freedom and democracy score, as represented in Table 1 (“Freedom House’s Freedom Index”).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, ‘Serbia: Freedom on the Net 2024’ <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2024>>.

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House, ‘Serbia: Country Profile’ <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia>>.

Year	Freedom in the World Score (out of 100)	Democracy Score (out of 100)
2020	-	49.4
2021	64	48.21
2022	62	46.43
2023	60	46.43
2024	57	43.45
2025	56	-

**Table 1:** Freedom House’s Freedom Index

Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index indicates a constant deterioration in Serbia’s position according to the 2022-2025 methodology: From “Problematic” (55-70 points) in 2022 and 2023 to “Difficult” (40-55 points) in 2024 and 2025, alongside ongoing deterioration in global score from 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Year	Position	Global Score	Press Freedom Status
2025	96	53.55	Difficult
2024	98	54.48	Difficult
2023	91	59.16	Problematic
2022	79	61.51	Problematic
2021	93	67.97	-
2020	93	68.38	-

**Table 2:** Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index

The “Mapping Media Freedom” project, conducted by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, documented 10,773 media freedom incidents in 45 countries between 2014 and 2025. Analysing data on the number of incidents per country and the number of citizens in each country provides a multi-dimensional, fascinating insight into Serbia’s position on press and media freedom.

## Source of data

- European Centre for Press and Media Freedom – Columns “Country”, “Number of Media Freedom Incidents”.<sup>5</sup>
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – Column “Number of Citizens”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Reporters Without Borders (RSF), ‘World Press Freedom Index 2025’ <<https://rsf.org/en/index>>.

<sup>5</sup> European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, ‘Mapping Media Freedom’ <<https://www.ecpmf.eu/monitor/mapping-media-freedom/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), ‘Population Comparison - The World Factbook’ <<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/population/country-comparison/>>.

- Authors' processing – Columns “Percentage of all Incidents”, “Rank – Number of Incidents”, “Incidents per Capita”, “Rank - Incidents per Capita”.

Country	Incidents			Citizens		
	Number of Media Freedom Incidents	Percentage of all Incidents	Rank – Number of Incidents	Number of Citizens	Incidents per Capita	Rank - Incidents per Capita
Serbia	566	5.25	7	6,652,212	0.0000851	4

**Table 3:** European Centre for Press and Media Freedom’s Mapping Media Freedom

Serbia's 7th place ranking in the number of media freedom incidents (566 incidents, 5.25% of total) is particularly alarming when considered proportionally. Serbia's population of approximately 6.7 million is substantially smaller than the six countries ranking above it. When incidents are normalised per capita, Serbia's media freedom violation density ranks 4th, among Europe's highest, suggesting systematic rather than isolated press freedom suppression.

Three independent human rights indices—Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom—provide converging empirical evidence of Serbia's deterioration in democratic and media freedom. This is not a subjective assessment but a documented reality measured through different methodologies: declining freedom scores (from 64 to 56), worsening press freedom classification (from "Problematic" to "Difficult"), and exceptionally high media violation density (4th globally per capita). This deterioration establishes the critical context for understanding Serbia's surveillance deployment: a country experiencing democratic backsliding while simultaneously adopting Chinese surveillance technologies at densities "rarely seen outside of China".<sup>7</sup>

## Literature Review

Existing studies on Serbia's digital sphere encompass multiple dimensions, yet critical gaps remain in understanding the intersection of surveillance technology, authoritarian governance, and foreign technology partnerships. This review synthesises current research, identifies theoretical frameworks, and articulates the specific contributions

---

<sup>7</sup> Jankovic and Standish (n 1).

this study makes to surveillance studies, authoritarian diffusion theory, and EU enlargement literature.

**Digital Development in Serbia** – Historical analyses provide important context for understanding Serbia's contemporary digital governance challenges. Tunnard (2003) examines the transformative period of the 1990s, analysing how communications and information systems shifted from state-controlled media to the relative "anarchy" of the Internet, and documenting early attempts by states to control digital information flows.<sup>8</sup> Steele (2024) investigates independent media development, specifically examining Radio B92's role in creating new media development models during Serbia's democratic transition.<sup>9</sup> Mihaljinac & Mevorah (2019) extend this historical narrative from 1996 to 2014.<sup>10</sup>

**Digital Usage** – Research on digital usage patterns provides demographic and socioeconomic context. Ćelić et al. (2018) analyse the Serbian customers' attitude toward Internet usage,<sup>11</sup> While Stojić (2017) examines digital adoption among elderly populations, revealing significant generational divides in technology access and literacy.<sup>12</sup> Gagić et al. (2016) and Stojić (2023) studied rural Internet penetration and e-business applications. Milovanovic (2015) documents uneven digital development across Serbia's urban-rural divide.<sup>13</sup>

**Digital Sovereignty** – Recent studies examining Serbia's digital sovereignty and information manipulation strategies. Simić et al. (2024) argue that Serbia employs “a

---

<sup>8</sup> Christopher R Tunnard, 'From State-Controlled Media to the "Anarchy" of the Internet: The Changing Influence of Communications and Information in Serbia in the 1990s' (2003) 3 Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 97 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713999348>>.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Steele, 'What Can We Learn From the Short History of Independent Media in Serbia? Radio B92, George Soros, and New Models of Media Development' (2024) 29 The International Journal of Press/Politics 646 </doi/pdf/10.1177/19401612231170092?download=true>.

<sup>10</sup> Nina Mihaljinac and Vera Mevorah, 'Broken Promises of Internet and Democracy: Internet Art in Serbia, 1996–2014' (2019) 41 Media, Culture & Society 889 </doi/pdf/10.1177/0163443719831177?download=true>.

<sup>11</sup> Đorđe Ćelić and others, 'Differences in Attitudes toward Internet Usage-Empirical Study from Serbia' (2018) 23 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT 17.

<sup>12</sup> Gordana Stojić, 'Internet Usage by the Elderly in Serbia' (2017) 0 Facta Universitatis, Series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History 103 <<https://casopisi.junis.ni.ac.rs/index.php/FUPhilSocPsyHist/article/view/2731>>.

<sup>13</sup> Slavoljub Milovanovic, 'Application of Internet Technology and Electronic Business Concept in Serbia' (2015) 19 Procedia Economics and Finance 278 <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212567115000283?via%3Dihub>>.

common strategy of information manipulation to subvert any foreign or domestic authority other than the ruling party”.<sup>14</sup> Others analyse various cyber threats<sup>15</sup> including cybercrime,<sup>16</sup> cyberbullying,<sup>17</sup> and threats to digital privacy.<sup>18</sup>

**Regulatory Frameworks** – Studies on Serbia's cyber regulations reveal significant gaps between legal frameworks and practice. Marković & Marković (2025) evaluate the existing general and Serbian legal mechanisms, their adaptability to contemporary technological threats, and their potential for reform.<sup>19</sup> Golić (2023) examines the normative framework for electronic administration,<sup>20</sup> while Kovačević et al. (2023) analyse the Serbian Computer Emergency Response Team's contribution to national security.<sup>21</sup>

**Surveillance** – The most directly relevant literature addresses state surveillance practices in Serbia. Manojlović et al. (2024), Milošević (2013), and Žarković et al. (2016) analyse the legal dimensions of public and covert monitoring, recording, and surveillance systems.<sup>22</sup> Veljkovic et al. (2024) examine the impact of secret data collection on privacy

<sup>14</sup> Dragan R Simić, Dragan Đukanović and Saša Mišić, ‘Sovereignty in Cyberspace: The Case of Serbia Between “Digital Authoritarianism” and “Internet Freedom”’ <<https://rfpn.fpn.bg.ac.rs/handle/123456789/1444>>.

<sup>15</sup> Nenad N Kovačević, Komazec Nenad and Antonio Mak, ‘Analysis of the Impact and Actuality of Challenges, Risks and Threats to the Security of the Republic of Serbia’ (2023) 20 *Kultura Polisa* 146.

<sup>16</sup> Lazar V Stošić, Aleksandra V Janković and Lazar Stošić, ‘CYBERCRIME IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: PREVALENCE, SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES’ (2022) 19 *KULTURA POLISA* 82 <<https://kpolisa.com/index.php/kp/article/view/1444>>; Mirjana Pavlović, ‘FIGHT AGAINST CYBERCRIME IN SERBIA - Achievements and Challenges’.

<sup>17</sup> Branislava Popović-Čitić, Sladjana Djurić and Vladimir Cvetković, ‘The Prevalence of Cyberbullying among Adolescents: A Case Study of Middle Schools in Serbia’ (2011) 32 *School Psychology International* 412 <[doi/pdf/10.1177/0143034311401700?download=true](https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034311401700?download=true)>; Bojan Veljkovic and others, ‘CYBERBULLYING RESEARCH ON YOUTH POPULATION IN SERBIA’ (2022) 7 *RAP CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS* 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ivona Živković and Dalibor Petrović, ‘Political (Ab)Use of the Internet- Facebook in Hands of Serbian Right-Wing’ (2024) 66 *Sociologija* 64 <<https://doiserbia.nb.rs/Article.aspx?ID=0038-03182401064Z>>.

<sup>19</sup> Darko Marković and Darija Marković, ‘CYBERCRIME AND LAW – MANAGING CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE’ [2025] *Pravo - teorija i praksa* <<https://casopis.pravni-fakultet.edu.rs/index.php/ltp/article/view/898/753>>.

<sup>20</sup> Darko Golić, ‘Normative Regulation of Electronic Administration in Republic of Serbia’ (2023) 40 *Pravo - teorija i praksa* 44 <<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2315-5040>>.

<sup>21</sup> Kovačević, Nenad and Mak (n 15).

<sup>22</sup> Milan Žarković, Zvonimir Ivanović and Ivan Žarković, ‘Public Video Surveillance: A Puzzling Issue for Serbian Lawmakers.’ (2016) 18 *Varstvoslovje: Journal of Criminal Justice & Security* 214 <<https://openurl.ebsco.com/contentitem/gcd:116579650?sid=ebsco:plink:crawler&id=ebsco:gcd:116579650>>; Milan Milošević, ‘Legal Issues Regarding Secret Communication Surveillance In Serbia’ (2013) 3 *International Journal of Economics & Law* 118 <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=40819>>; Dragan Manojlović, Dejana Đorđić and Vojislav Jović, ‘Legal Aspects of Secret Surveillance and Recording and Process Authorities for Its Implementation: Comparative Research’ (2024) 14 *Civitas* 188 <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1306100>>.

rights, while Budak et al. (2012) investigate Serbian citizens' attitudes toward privacy, data protection, surveillance, and security, finding that demographic characteristics significantly influence these attitudes.<sup>23</sup>

The current literature lacks a systematic analysis of China-Serbia technological cooperation in the deployment of Chinese surveillance cameras on Serbian streets. To minimise this research gap, the paper focuses on the following research question: (RQ1) What is the technological surveillance cooperation between China and Serbia? (RQ2) How transparent and accountable are Serbian state institutions in their deployment and usage of digital surveillance technologies? (RQ3) What is the legal framework for digital surveillance in Serbia? (RQ4) What is the local and foreign reaction to Serbia's digital surveillance?

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach using an exploratory case study design. Serbia serves as a critical case for understanding Chinese surveillance technology exports to European candidate countries, given its unique position as it navigates between EU accession aspirations and deepening partnerships with China amid documented democratic backsliding.

**Data Collection and Source Selection** – Data collection prioritised diverse, highly reliable sources based on three core principles: relevance (direct connection to research questions), reliability (recognised accuracy and methodological soundness), and diversity (multiple perspectives and source types).

A chronological timeline documented key events from 2009 to 2025, enabling the identification of critical junctures and deployment patterns. The final corpus comprised of 46 primary documents including: (1) Academic publications, (2) Reports from established Human Rights organisations including Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, (3) Investigative journalism from reputable outlets, (4) Official government and

---

<sup>23</sup> Jelena Budak, Ivan-Damir Aniae and Edo Rajh, 'Public Attitudes towards Surveillance and Privacy in Western Balkans: The Case of Serbia' [2012] Radni materijali EIZ-a 5 <[www.eizg.hr](http://www.eizg.hr)>.

parliamentary documents, (5) Primary documentation, including archived web pages and leaked documents.

**Scope** – This study focuses specifically on the bilateral technological surveillance cooperation between China and Serbia, examining the supply, deployment, and implications of Chinese-manufactured surveillance technologies within Serbian territory. The analysis is deliberately bounded to this particular Sino-Serbian partnership. It does not extend to China's surveillance technology exports to other countries or Serbia's potential surveillance-related cooperation with other states or technology providers.

**Limitations** – This study acknowledges several constraints: (1) reliance on documentary evidence limits access to lived experiences and classified information, (2) predominance of English-language sources may underrepresent Serbian domestic discourse, (3) many Sino-Serbian agreements remain classified, requiring reliance on leaked documents and investigative reporting, (4) some surveillance capability claims could not be independently verified, and (5) as a single case study, findings provide deep contextual understanding but may not be directly generalizable.

## Findings

Serbia, which enjoys the most comprehensive relationship with China among the Western Balkan countries, was described as “the Focal Point of China’s 'Digital Silk Road'” and, since early 2009, has developed extensive and strategic relations with China, primarily focused on financial and infrastructure-related projects, but also extends into the national security domain and into technical cooperation in infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> In addition, a joint initiative involving the establishment of joint police patrols alongside

---

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Vladislavljev, ‘China’s “Digital Silk Road” Enters the Western Balkans’ (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) 2021) <[https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE\\_policy-paper\\_digital-silk-road\\_A4\\_web\\_04.pdf](https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE_policy-paper_digital-silk-road_A4_web_04.pdf)>.

military collaboration.<sup>25</sup> Serbian security agencies deployed Chinese surveillance technologies for wider state control and repression directed against civil society.<sup>26</sup>

In 2011, the Serbian Ministry of the Interior and the Chinese technology company Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd. initiated negotiations for a potential upgrade of the Ministry's information and telecommunications system, utilising solutions designed to enhance citizens' overall security within the “Safe City” project. This project, however, would be highly intrusive for citizens.<sup>27</sup> A Memorandum of Understanding outlining the proposed cooperation and the next steps in implementing the project was signed in December 2014. In April 2017, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications signed a contract with Huawei to build a broadband internet network in Serbia. The pilot phase of the “Safe City” project has commenced with the installation of new surveillance cameras that feature significantly higher resolution and advanced technical capabilities. Also, cameras will include facial recognition software.

In September 2018, both countries signed several agreements, including one signed by the Minister of Finance, “on the purchase of equipment, works and services for the realisation of a capital project of traffic surveillance”, from Huawei.<sup>28</sup>

As part of this agreement, in early 2019, Serbia launched the “Safe City” project in Belgrade, a two-year project of installing a thousand cameras, purchased from the Huawei to cover 800 locations in the capital, “enabling the face and licences plates recognition, making every citizen’s move known to the police”, as well as “patrol cars and

---

<sup>25</sup> Euronews, ‘Chinese Police to Help Serbia Cope with Its Workers, Tourists’ <<https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/02/chinese-police-to-help-serbia-cope-with-its-workers-tourists>>.

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Serbia: “A Digital Prison”: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia’ (2024) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>>.

<sup>27</sup> SHARE Fondacija, ‘New Surveillance Cameras in Belgrade: Location and Human Rights Impact Analysis – “Withheld”’ <<https://sharefoundation.info/en/new-surveillance-cameras-in-belgrade-location-and-human-rights-impact-analysis-withheld/>>.

<sup>28</sup> B92, ‘Serbia and China Sign Several Important Documents’ <[https://www.b92.net/o/eng/news/business?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=18&nav\\_id=105087](https://www.b92.net/o/eng/news/business?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=18&nav_id=105087)>; Stefan Vladislavljev, ‘How Did Serbia and Huawei Cooperate: A Chronology’ [2019] BFPE <<https://en.bfpe.org/in-focus/region-in-focus-focus/how-did-serbia-and-huawei-cooperate-a-chronology/>>; Vuk Vuksanovic, ‘Securing the Sino-Serbian Partnership’ [2019] Chinaobservers <<https://chinaobservers.eu/securing-the-sino-serbian-partnership/>>.

police officers in the street will gradually become equipped with these cameras” to increase public safety and facilitate the fight against crime.<sup>29</sup>

In April 2019, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, Rasim Ljajić, signed in Beijing the Memorandum of Understanding for the “Smart Cities” project, positioning Huawei as a strategic partner of the Serbian Government for the development of the smart cities strategy in Belgrade, Niš, and Novi Sad. In addition, Serbia has installed surveillance cameras across the countryside through contracts with the local company, Macchina Security, which have taken place under the radar, utilising cameras from the China-based Dahua company, a U.S. government-sanctioned entity and one of the world’s largest manufacturers of video surveillance technology.<sup>30</sup> For example, Osecina, a small town in western Serbia, has only 2,700 people and one installed camera for every 100 inhabitants.<sup>31</sup>

Leaked documents reveal new contracts from March 2024 for software and services designed to enhance Serbia's private police-only Huawei industry eLTE private network solution,<sup>32</sup> which supports facial and license plate recognition and could enable up to 3,500 surveillance cameras. Others note that the Serbian government is installing approximately 8,000 Huawei surveillance cameras with facial recognition capabilities, with thousands already deployed in the capital.<sup>33</sup>

The Serbian government significantly expanded its Chinese-made “Safe City” surveillance program, despite public protests and legal concerns in Serbia and beyond.

**Privacy** – Risk of misuse of the smart surveillance cameras for political purposes<sup>34</sup>. The Commissioner for Public Information and Protection of Personal Data between the years

---

<sup>29</sup> SHARE Fondacija (n 27).

<sup>30</sup> Johana Bhuiyan, ‘Dahua Facial Recognition Touts “Real-Time Uighur Warnings”’ [2021] Los Angeles Times <<https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-02-09/dahua-facial-recognition-china-surveillance-uighur>>.

<sup>31</sup> Natalija Jovanovic, ‘How Serbia Became Blanketed In Chinese-Made Surveillance Cameras’ [2023] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty <<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-surveillance-cameras-china/32526515.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Industry eLTE Private Network Solution’ (*Huawei Enterprise*) <<https://e.huawei.com/en/solutions/enterprise-wireless/industry-wireless/industrial-elte-private-network>> accessed 3 November 2025.

<sup>33</sup> Jankovic and Standish (n 1); Jovanovic (n 31).

<sup>34</sup> The Prague Security Studies Institute, ‘The Sum of All Fears – Chinese AI Surveillance in Serbia’ (2020) <[https://www.pssi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/8447\\_the-sum-of-all-fears-chinese-ai-surveillance-in-serbia.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/8447_the-sum-of-all-fears-chinese-ai-surveillance-in-serbia.pdf)>.

2004-2018, Rodoljub Sabic, said, “In the country in which the regime has used personal data against its citizens many times, video surveillance looks more like a new way of control than a new way of increasing safety”. Following reports from 2022 indicated that few days after plainclothes bystanders took pictures with unusual high-resolution technology looking similar to Huawei’s Intelligent Large-Screen Handheld “Huawei EP 821 trunking terminal” dozens of fines issued for obstructing traffic, apparently without any “stop and identify” procedure, the current commissioner, Milan Marinovic, was tasked with looking into breaches of personal data and whether facial-recognition capabilities were used at the protests.<sup>35</sup>

**Accountability** – Lack of transparency and accountability of the signed agreements, even labelled ‘confidential’, including avoiding explicit citation of Huawei as a supplier. The webpage on the Huawei website, which described, as of August 2018, their involvement in Serbia’s “Safe City” project, disappeared after Human rights researchers filed Freedom of Information requests and alerted the Serbian public.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, in its past statements, Huawei has maintained that it is only a manufacturer and vendor and that responsibility for how its technology is used ultimately lies with the user.

Due to inadequate Serbian legal regulation and a lack of regulations governing video surveillance, the local government lack a clear mandate to utilise surveillance systems.<sup>37</sup> Three years after it began installing smart cameras in Belgrade, the government decided it was time to find legal grounds for their deployment, only to withdraw its legislative efforts following intense public pressure.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, ‘The Commissioner Conducts Supervision Procedure in Ministry of Interior, Regarding Suspicion of Facial Recognition Technology Use’ <<https://tinyurl.com/3ub2bnez>>.

<sup>36</sup> Danilo Krivokapić, ‘Starting the Debate on Facial Recognition: A Case Study from Belgrade’ (Share Foundation 2022); Huawei Enterprise, ‘Huawei Safe City Solution: Safeguards Serbia’ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190313232443/https://e.huawei.com/en/case-studies/global/2018/201808231012>>.

<sup>37</sup> The Prague Security Studies Institute (n 34).

<sup>38</sup> Jankovic and Standish (n 1); Jovanovic (n 31); Đorđe Krivokapić, ‘A Disturbing Marriage: Serbia and China Team Up on Digital Surveillance’ [2022] CEPA <<https://cepa.org/article/a-disturbing-marriage-serbia-and-china-team-up-on-digital-surveillance/>>.

**“Presence of ‘Big Brother’ in Serbia”** – The Chinese high-tech industries are required under the Chinese National Security Act to relay all data in their possession to Beijing’s intelligence service, in addition to the fact that such a surveillance project makes Serbia a laboratory for Chinese influence and projects and “a vital test case for Chinese surveillance infrastructure beyond its borders”.<sup>39</sup>

**The EU** – Such concerns were raised not only in Serbia but also in the EU. Since Serbia is a candidate for accession to the EU, the “Safe City” project raised national security concerns in the European Parliament about “China’s penetration into Europe”, in a project where Huawei actively participates in more than 120 cities and more than 40 countries in the process of developing “Smart Cities”.

Although Huawei is a private company, the Chinese Communist Party has selected it as a national champion for developing homegrown telecom equipment. The US government has blacklisted the company over its connections to the Chinese military and concerns that its equipment could be used for espionage.<sup>40</sup> In October 2019, the European Parliament members Mara Bizzotto and Anna Bonfrisco raised the following questions: (1) Does it know the details of the “Safe City” project?, (2) Will it raise this issue urgently with the Serbian Government and ascertain whether EU funding is being used for the project? (3) Is this project not a case of dangerous Chinese interference in Europe’s politics, economy, freedom and security, and incompatible with Serbian accession to the EU?<sup>41</sup>

In June 2021, European Parliament member from France, Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, claimed that “The European Parliament is taking a close look at China’s high-tech presence in Serbia, indicating that an official representative of Belgrade who told one of

---

<sup>39</sup> Mara Bizzotto and Anna Bonfrisco, ‘Parliamentary Question | Safe City Project in Serbia - China Penetrating into Europe’ <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2019-003068\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2019-003068_EN.html)>; N1 Belgrade, ‘Thousand Surveillance Cameras in Belgrade – for Safety or Control?’ <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190517113322/http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a456797/Belgrade-will-have-1-000-new-surveillance-cameras.html>>; Reid Standish, ‘Serbia’s Legal Tug-Of-War Over Chinese Surveillance Technology (Part 2)’ [2022] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty <<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-chinese-surveillance-backlash-standish/32145138.html>>; Vuksanovic (n 28).

<sup>40</sup> SHARE Fondacija (n 27).

<sup>41</sup> Bizzotto and Bonfrisco (n 39).

these parliamentary meetings that Belgrade would be the city ‘where every corner will be under surveillance’”.<sup>42</sup>

## Discussion

This study examined Serbia's deployment of state surveillance cameras based on Chinese technology, focusing on questions of technological cooperation, transparency, legal frameworks, and reactions both locally and internationally. The findings enable answering the different research questions:

(RQ1) **Cooperation** – China and Serbia have developed multifaceted cooperation extending beyond financial and infrastructure projects to include significant security collaboration. This is exemplified by the "Safe City" project, a strategic joint initiative with Huawei, wherein thousands of Chinese-made surveillance cameras equipped with facial and license plate recognition capabilities have been installed in Belgrade and other major Serbian cities. This expansive deployment markedly increased the state's surveillance capacity, signalling a deeper technological alliance that integrates Chinese surveillance technology into Serbia's national security apparatus. The cooperation also includes police and military collaboration, reinforcing a broad security cooperation framework between the two states.

(RQ2) **Accountability** – The analysis reveals a troubling lack of transparency and accountability within Serbian state institutions regarding their use of digital surveillance technologies. Many of the agreements signed with Huawei and local partners have been classified as confidential, and even explicit references to Huawei's involvement have been deliberately obscured. Serbian authorities have also struggled to establish clear legal frameworks regulating the use of such intrusive technologies, and attempts to formalise the legal grounds for camera deployment have been withdrawn following public backlash. This opacity, combined with inadequate regulatory oversight, raises significant concerns about accountability.

---

<sup>42</sup> Georgi Gotev, ‘MEPs Sound the Alarm over Chinese Mass Surveillance Project in Belgrade’ [2021] Euractiv <<https://www.euractiv.com/interview/meps-sound-the-alarm-over-chinese-mass-surveillance-project-in-belgrade/>>.

(RQ3) **Legality** – Serbia’s legal framework for digital surveillance is underdeveloped and inadequate to regulate the use of advanced surveillance technologies. Existing laws do not provide clear mandates or comprehensive oversight mechanisms for the deployment and operation of facial recognition and other intrusive surveillance systems. This legal lacuna creates risks of privacy violations and abuse, particularly given the authoritarian governance trends and history of personal data misuse in Serbia. Attempts to introduce legal regulations have stalled under pressure from the public and civic society, reflecting tensions between technological expansion and civil rights protections.

(RQ4) **Reaction** – Locally, the deployment of Chinese surveillance technology has sparked significant concerns about privacy and human rights, with activists and former data commissioners warning that surveillance is being used as a tool of political control rather than for genuine public safety. Reports of misuse during public protests and concerns over data breaches have underscored local scepticism and alarm. Internationally, the European Parliament and the broader EU have expressed serious concerns about China's expanding high-tech footprint in Serbia. These concerns emphasise the risks of Chinese political interference, potential espionage, and the compatibility of such cooperation with Serbia’s aspirations for EU accession. The US government's blacklist of Huawei further complicates these dynamics, highlighting geopolitical tensions surrounding the deployment of Chinese technology in Europe. This international scrutiny frames Serbia as a testing ground for Chinese surveillance projects beyond its borders.

## **Conclusions**

This study has revealed that Serbia's deployment of Chinese-supplied surveillance cameras represents a significant expansion of state surveillance capabilities, enabled through a deepening technological and security partnership with China, notably Huawei. The "Safe City" initiative and related projects have created a level of surveillance capacity rarely seen outside China, substantially increasing the state's ability to monitor public spaces with advanced facial and license plate recognition technologies.

However, this expansion occurs amid troubling concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of Serbian state institutions, which have often classified agreements as

confidential and obscured Huawei's direct involvement. Moreover, Serbia's legal framework governing digital surveillance remains underdeveloped, lacking apparent oversight, regulatory mandates, and protections for privacy and civil rights. Public backlash has stalled legislative attempts to formalise legal bases for these surveillance tools.

Locally, there is widespread concern about potential abuses of the surveillance infrastructure for political control rather than genuine public safety. Internationally, the deployment has drawn scrutiny and criticism from the EU and other Western actors, who are concerned about Chinese political influence and strategic technology penetration in Europe. The combination of legal gaps, institutional opacity, and geopolitical tensions positions Serbia as both a testing ground and a vulnerability point in the broader contest over digital sovereignty and surveillance in the Balkans.

## Future Research

Additional studies could examine (1) **Alternative Surveillance Systems** – other means of surveillance in Serbia, including local and foreign technologies. (2) **Civil Society Responses** – to the proliferation of surveillance technologies, including grassroots efforts such as the "thousand cameras" initiative, where citizens have catalogued and mapped hundreds of surveillance cameras across Belgrade.<sup>43</sup> (3) **Comparative Analysis of Chinese Surveillance Exports** – the geopolitical dimension, particularly concerning China's role as a global exporter of surveillance technologies and its implications for EU candidate countries. (4) **Democratic and Human Rights Impacts** – The long-term effects on democratic governance, media freedom, and human rights in Serbia, with a focus on how surveillance influences political opposition, press independence, and public trust. (5) **Legal Frameworks and Regulatory Gaps** – examine Serbia's evolving legal framework for digital surveillance in greater depth. (6) **Role of International Actors** – analysing the role of international actors in mitigating digital surveillance export to Western countries.

---

<sup>43</sup> hiljadekamera, 'European Promotion of the SHARE Foundation's Book on Biometric Surveillance' <<https://hiljade.kamera.rs/en/>>; 'Surveillance under Surveillance' <<https://hiljade.kamera.rs/map/>>.

## References

Amnesty International, *Serbia: "A Digital Prison": Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia*, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

B92, "Serbia and China Sign Several Important Documents". [https://www.b92.net/o/eng/news/business?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=18&nav\\_id=105087](https://www.b92.net/o/eng/news/business?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=18&nav_id=105087)

J. Bhuiyan, *Dahua Facial Recognition Touts "Real-Time Uighur Warnings*, 2021, Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-02-09/dahua-facial-recognition-china-surveillance-uighur>

M. Bizzotto, A. Bonfrisco, *Parliamentary Question | Safe City Project in Serbia - China Penetrating into Europe*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2019-003068\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2019-003068_EN.html)

J. Budak, I-D. Aniae I-D, E. Rajh, *Public Attitudes towards Surveillance and Privacy in Western Balkans: The Case of Serbia*, 2012, Radni materijali EIZ-a 5 [www.eizg.hr](http://www.eizg.hr)

D. Ćelić at al., *Differences in Attitudes toward Internet Usage-Empirical Study from Serbia*. 2018. "23 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT 17".

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Population Comparison - The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/population/country-comparison/>

Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, *The Commissioner Conducts Supervision Procedure in Ministry of Interior, Regarding Suspicion of Facial Recognition Technology Use*. <https://tinyurl.com/3ub2bnez>

Euronews, *Chinese Police to Help Serbia Cope with Its Workers, Tourists*. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/02/chinese-police-to-help-serbia-cope-with-its-workers-tourists>

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, *Mapping Media Freedom*. <https://www.ecpmf.eu/monitor/mapping-media-freedom/>

Freedom House, *Serbia: Freedom on the Net 2024*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2024>

Serbia: Country Profile. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia>

D. Golić, *Normative Regulation of Electronic Administration in Republic of Serbia*. 2023. 40 *Pravo - teorija i praksa* 44. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2315-5040>

G. Gotev, *MEPs Sound the Alarm over Chinese Mass Surveillance Project in Belgrade*. 2021. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/interview/meps-sound-the-alarm-over-chinese-mass-surveillance-project-in-belgrade/>

hiljadekamera, *European Promotion of the SHARE Foundation's Book on Biometric Surveillance*. <https://hiljade.kamera.rs/en/>

Huawei Enterprise, *Huawei Safe City Solution: Safeguards Serbia*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190313232443/https://e.huawei.com/en/case-studies/global/2018/201808231012>

Industry eLTE Private Network Solution (Huawei Enterprise). <https://e.huawei.com/en/solutions/enterprise-wireless/industry-wireless/industrial-elte-private-network>> accessed 3 November 2025

J. Jankovic, R. Standish. *Leaked Files Reveal Serbia's Secret Expansion Of Chinese-Made Surveillance*. 2025. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/exclusive-safe-city-china-surveillance-huawei-facial-recognition/33501155.html>

- N. Jovanovic. *How Serbia Became Blanketed In Chinese-Made Surveillance Cameras*. 2023. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-surveillance-cameras-china/32526515.html>
- NN. Kovačević, K. Nenad, A. Mak. *Analysis of the Impact and Actuality of Challenges, Risks and Threats to the Security of the Republic of Serbia*. 2023. 20 Kultura Polisa 146.
- D. Krivokapić, *A Disturbing Marriage: Serbia and China Team Up on Digital Surveillance*. 2022. CEPA <https://cepa.org/article/a-disturbing-marriage-serbia-and-china-team-up-on-digital-surveillance/>
- D. Krivokapić, *Starting the Debate on Facial Recognition: A Case Study from Belgrade*. (Share Foundation 2022).
- D. Manojlović, D. Đorđić, V. Jović, *Legal Aspects of Secret Surveillance and Recording and Process Authorities for Its Implementation: Comparative Research*. 2024. 14 Civitas 188. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1306100>
- D. Marković D, *CYBERCRIME AND LAW – MANAGING CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE*. 2025. Pravo - teorija i praksa. <https://casopis.pravni-fakultet.edu.rs/index.php/ltip/article/view/898/753>
- N. Mihaljinac, V. Mevorah, *Broken Promises of Internet and Democracy: Internet Art in Serbia, 1996–2014*. 2019. 41 Media, Culture & Society 889. /doi/pdf/10.1177/0163443719831177?download=true
- M. Milošević, *Legal Issues Regarding Secret Communication Surveillance In Serbia*. 2013. 3 International Journal of Economics & Law 118. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=40819>
- S. Milovanovic, *Application of Internet Technology and Electronic Business Concept in Serbia*. 2015. 19 Procedia Economics and Finance 278. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212567115000283?via%3Dihub>
- N1 Belgrade, *Thousand Surveillance Cameras in Belgrade – for Safety or Control?*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190517113322/http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a456797/Belgarde-will-have-1-000-new-surveillance-cameras.html>
- M. Pavlović, *FIGHT AGAINST CYBERCRIME IN SERBIA - Achievements and Challenges*.
- B. Popović-Čitić, S. Djurić, V. Cvetković, *The Prevalence of Cyberbullying among Adolescents: A Case Study of Middle Schools in Serbia*. 2011. 32 School Psychology International 412. /doi/pdf/10.1177/0143034311401700?download=true
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *World Press Freedom Index 2025*. <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- SHARE Fondacija, *New Surveillance Cameras in Belgrade: Location and Human Rights Impact Analysis – “Withheld”*. <https://sharefoundation.info/en/new-surveillance-cameras-in-belgrade-location-and-human-rights-impact-analysis-withheld/>
- DR. Simić, D. Đukanović, S. Mišić, *Sovereignty in Cyberspace: The Case of Serbia Between “Digital Authoritarianism” and “Internet Freedom”*. <https://rfpn.fpn.bg.ac.rs/handle/123456789/1444>
- R. Standish, *Serbia’s Legal Tug-Of-War Over Chinese Surveillance Technology (Part 2)*. 2022. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-chinese-surveillance-backlash-standish/32145138.html>
- J. Steele, *What Can We Learn From the Short History of Independent Media in Serbia?* Radio B92, George Soros, and New Models of Media Development. 2024. 29 The International Journal of Press/Politics 646 /doi/pdf/10.1177/19401612231170092?download=true
- G. Stojić G, *Internet Usage by the Elderly in Serbia*. 2017. 0 Facta Universitatis, Series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History 103. <https://casopisi.junis.ni.ac.rs/index.php/FUPhilSocPsyHist/article/view/2731>

LV. Stošić, AV. Janković, L. Stošić, *CYBERCRIME IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: PREVALENCE, SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES*. 2022. 19 KULTURA POLISA 82. <https://kpolisa.com/index.php/kp/article/view/1444>

Surveillance under Surveillance. <https://hiljade.kamera.rs/map/>

The Prague Security Studies Institute, *The Sum of All Fears – Chinese AI Surveillance in Serbia*. 2020. [https://www.pssi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/8447\\_the-sum-of-all-fears-chinese-ai-surveillance-in-serbia.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/8447_the-sum-of-all-fears-chinese-ai-surveillance-in-serbia.pdf)

Tunnard CR, *From State-Controlled Media to the “Anarchy” of the Internet: The Changing Influence of Communications and Information in Serbia in the 1990s*. 2003. 3 Southeast European and Black Sea Studies 97 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713999348>

B. Veljkovic et al., *CYBERBULLYING RESEARCH ON YOUTH POPULATION IN SERBIA*. 2022. 7 RAP CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS 72

S. Vladislavljev, *How Did Serbia and Huawei Cooperate: A Chronology*. 2019. BFPE. <https://en.bfpe.org/in-focus/region-in-focus-focus/how-did-serbia-and-huawei-cooperate-a-chronology/>

China’s “Digital SilkRoad” Enters theWestern Balkans. (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe(CHOICE) 2021. [https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE\\_policy-paper\\_digital-silk-road\\_A4\\_web\\_04.pdf](https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CHOICE_policy-paper_digital-silk-road_A4_web_04.pdf)

V. Vuksanovic, *Securing the Sino-Serbian Partnership*. 2019. Chinaobservers. <https://chinaobservers.eu/securing-the-sino-serbian-partnership/>

M. Žarković, Z. Ivanović, I. Žarković, *Public Video Surveillance: A Puzzling Issue for Serbian Lawmakers*. 2016. 18 Varstvoslovje: Journal of Criminal Justice & Security 214. <https://openurl.ebsco.com/contentitem/gcd:116579650?sid=ebsco:plink:crawler&id=ebsco:gcd:116579650>

I. Živković, D. Petrović, *Political (Ab)Use of the Internet- Facebook in Hands of Serbian Right-Wing*. 2024. 66 Sociologija 64. <https://doiserbia.nb.rs/Article.aspx?ID=0038-03182401064Z>