Effects of Covid-19 on cultural relativism and state sovereignty

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has generally affected the attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles of people and states. Although there is still no definitive position on the causes of the new species from the coronavirus family, there have been articles and discussions leading to the blaming of Chinese cultural tradition of eating the meat of bats - mammals which were also considered by scientists as potential transmitters of SARS-CoV-2. To measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the changing attitudes towards the doctrine of cultural relativism, in anthropological and sociological terms and state sovereignty in political terms, respondents from several Western Balkan countries, such as Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina answered a series of questions. The research findings show that changing the attitudes towards cultural relativism and state sovereignty is significantly dependent on bilateral relations between the Western Balkan nations with Chinese Foreign Policy rather than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, cultural relativism, sovereignty, international relations, diplomacy

Introduction

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 contagious disease with the virus called Sars-Cov-2 created news, discussions, and articles on the causes and origins of the pandemic. Consequently, there were also attributions of responsibility for the spread of Coronavirus, blaming the government of the People's Republic of China as well as local cultural traditions in certain regions of this state, for eating the meat of bats, as bats along with rodents are considered to be carriers of many infections. Although it has been assumed that bats may also be potential spreaders of SARS-CoV-2, there is still no final scientific explanation for the origin of this virus. Currently, an official position from the World Health Organization (WHO) on the origin of this virus, comes from its published report, which among other things mentions bats, and states: "The closest genetic relationship with SARS-CoV-2 was a bat virus." (WHO, 2021).

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However, the latest findings from the same source conclude: "The team called for a continued scientific and collaborative approach to be taken towards tracing the origins of COVID-19." (WHO, 2021). Meanwhile, the most up-to-date information is that the second phase of an investigation into the origin of the coronavirus has been requested again, which includes the hypothesis that COVID-19 could have leaked from a Chinese laboratory, seeking laboratory audits, possible breaches of laboratory protocols for virus leakage during research and markets in Wuhan City, demanding transparency from authorities, while quoting the Chinese deputy minister of the National Health Commission, saying that we will not accept such a plan for tracing the origin as it, in some aspects, makes no sense and challenges science (Crossley, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has often been mentioned that SARS-CoV-2 came from bats and food traditions in China, thus affecting attitudes towards cultural relativism. "Some people also blame bats for the dangerous pathogens they carry — including, potentially, the precursor of the new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. That virus may have gotten into us from one of the several kinds of horseshoe bats from southern China." (Quammen, 2020). Publication of articles on bats and Chinese food culture has further deconstructed the doctrine of cultural relativism.

Franz Boas known for cultural relativism, said: "Civilization is not something absolute but relative, and our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (Boas, 1887)

Authors of cultural relativism (Jecker et al., 2007) through their claims emphasize that different societies have different moral codes, the moral code of a society determines what is right within that society, and there is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's, the moral code of our own society has no special status, it is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of other people. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

Cultural relativism does not just dismiss even the slightest possibility of objectivity; it vehemently scoffs at any attempt to integrate knowledge beyond one's culture-bound reality. The premises, upon which cultural relativism is based, as well as its assertive claim about the equal validity of all cultures, are anything but vague on this issue. This is the first way in which cultural relativism emphatically denies reason and objective reality (Kanarek, 2013). The discussion of cultural relativism in the potential conflict with international human rights was very early, many decades ago. In the context of the debate about the viability of international human rights, cultural relativism may be defined as the position according to which local cultural traditions (including religious, political, and legal practices) properly determine the existence and scope of civil and political rights enjoyed by individuals in a given society (Tesón, 1985).

Cultural relativism is closer to the idea of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism consists of the assertion of normative principles that affirm the value of such cultural

diversity in terms of equality between groups, and the realization of these values in institutions and policies. Despite the factual presence of cultural differences within them, few polities are adequately multicultural in this normative sense, and many explicitly reject such multicultural values (Parekh, 2001).

In particular, multiculturalism refers to the existence of difference and uneven power relations among populations in terms of racial, ethnic, religious, geographical distinctions and other cultural markers that deviate from dominant, often racialized, "norms." Based upon an acknowledgment of diversity, multiculturalism also refers to formal recognition and incorporation of those defined by such differences through policies and discourses that acknowledge the rights and needs of minoritized groups within the public realm, but which also control the terms of such integration (Clayton, 2020).

Multiculturalism refers to (1) the state of a society or the world in which there exists numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups seen to be politically relevant; and (2) a program or policy promoting such a society (Ivison, 2015). Relativists want us to worry about provincialism, that is, that our perceptions, intellects, and sympathies will be limited by the "overtaught and overvalued acceptances of our society." Anti-relativists want us to worry about a kind of "spiritual entropy," a degradation of the mind. One form is on the naturalist side, the other on the rationalist side. The objection to anti-relativism is not that it rejects the relativistic approach to knowledge or morality but foresees the loss of these approaches by fixing morality beyond culture and knowledge beyond morality and culture (Geertz, 1984).

The idea of cultural psychology implies that the processes of consciousness may not be uniform across the cultural regions of the world, any treatment of the topic must address the problem of rationality, as well as several closely related issues, including relativism, romanticism, realism, and modernism (Shweder, 1991). In the context of cultural relativism, moral relativism takes on special importance. Ethical relativism is the doctrine that denies that there is a single moral standard that is universally applicable to all people at all times. They insist that any morality is relative to the time, place, and circumstances in which it occurs. Cultural relativism has serious practical disastrous implications such as the problem include the problem of defining culture, problems related to the place of a reformer, the impossibility of moral criticism and argumentation (Eshetu, 2017). Also, the concepts of culture are also related to the environment, and Julian Steward made an important contribution to this correlation. He was the first to combine four approaches in studying the interaction between culture and environment: (1) an explanation of culture in terms of the environment where it existed, rather than just a geographic association with economy; (2) the relationship between culture and environment as a process (not just a correlation); (3) a consideration of the small-scale environment, rather than culture-area-sized regions; and (4) the connection of ecology and multilinear cultural evolution (Sutton & Anderson, 2010).

For a long time, two controversial positions on relativism have been elaborated: radical cultural relativism and radical universalism. Radical cultural relativism would hold that culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule. Radical universalism would hold that culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights and rules, which are universally valid (Donnelly, 1984).

The contemporary argument about relativism and universalism is probably best understood as an argument about the extent and legitimacy of those resonances. The idea of morality can explain by the experience of the Prague marchers. Clearly, when they waved their signs, they were not relativists: they would have said, that everyone in the world should support their cause. But when they turn to the business of designing a health care system for Czechs and Slovaks they will not be universalists: they will aim at what is best for themselves and won't insist that all the rest of us endorse or reiterate their decisions (Walzer, 2006).

A pivotal moment in the trajectory of classical cultural relativism was the American Anthropological Association's criticism of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As early as the 1830s, Auguste Comte argued that one of the ways positivist sociology differed from theology and metaphysics was that it had a "tendency to render relative the ideas which were at first absolute." Today critics call the AAA's resistance to the Universal Declaration embarrassing or even shameful" (Brown, 2008).

It was natural, then, that the United Nations - through UNESCO would ask a well-known member of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) to submit a statement to assist the UN Commission on Human Rights, which was in 1947 working on a draft version of what would eventually become the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. During the period from 1947 to the mid-1980s, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights served as the foundation for the creation of an entire framework of international human rights discourse. What has made normative cultural relativism in the vein of the 1947 AAA statement indefensible is the impact of globalization and transnationalism on societies almost everywhere, especially in Western Europe but also in North America (Goodale, 2006).

In addition to criticism of cultural relativism that opposes any form of ethnocentrism, even the idea of state sovereignty has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as contagious diseases exceed state borders by their very nature of transmission from one person to another, regardless of state, ethnic, cultural identity, etc.

Alongside cultural relativism, the idea of state sovereignty under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly controversial. The post-Cold War cosmopolitan dream of a world without borders looks brittle right now. The coronavirus crisis has revealed the strength or weaknesses of nations. Besieged Italians did not look to the European Union but their government for answers. Americans need American solutions. In Australia, the government has been asked not just to keep us safe, but also to keep us afloat (Junior, 2020). The philosopher

Slavoj Žižek emphasizes the need for global cooperation, precisely because of the pandemic. Given the global flows of goods and people, the potential now exists for worldwide disasters. Pandemics do not respect political borders. You cannot build a wall to stop coronavirus. Ours is a cosmopolitan world, not one of national seclusion. 'The coronavirus epidemic signals the fatal limit of nationalist populism which insists on full state sovereignty: it's over with "America (or whoever) first!" since America can be saved only through global coordination and collaboration (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020).

International society is the institutionalization of common interest and identity among states, creating and maintaining common norms and institutions. A spectrum defined by pluralism and solidarism provides a way of describing the types of values they share as well as the depth with which they are shared. Solidarism builds on pluralism so that a move from pluralism toward solidarism involves adding to characteristically pluralist values of survival and self-interest (Buzan, 2004).

As the security and protection against the SARS-CoV-2 virus increases with border closures and strict controls, its combat in an increasingly interdependent world transcends particular solutions within a single state, without international and global cooperation. With the appearance of Covid19, it seems that states fully exercised internal sovereignty by taking measures to manage the spread of the Covid19 virus. States began closing borders and restricting movement within. In times of crises, as we have seen, the state shares power with such practitioners on the ground as medical doctors, health workers, epidemiologists, virus experts, volunteers, producers of medical equipment, etc. Decisions for further restrictions have often been made in response to media pressure rather than a product of authoritarian desire on behalf of governments… Yet, the global state of alert, which is being largely administered by sovereign governments, has unveiled the vulnerability of sovereignty under exceptional circumstances… The sense of official Brussels' inaction at the beginning of the crisis has pushed neighbouring countries to look for bilateral solutions in border management and information sharing to prevent the virus from spreading (Makarychev & Romashko, 2021). However, in some cases, WHO recommendations and the measures of the most consolidated states against the COVID-19 pandemic served as models for other states and were applied in their territories.

The idea of a world without borders seems to have been hit. In the first months, the solution or consolation was sought only within the territory of the state. This also came as a result of the lack of general coordination of supranational organizations like the EU. However, strengthening internal sovereignty cannot bring benefits in the long run and this is also pointed out by the author Stan Grant, who claims that: "National sovereignty triggers concern about a return of a survival-of-the-fittest mentality. At its worst critics say virulent nationalism leads to war. Nazi Germany always held up as the prime example." (Grant, 2020).

One of the great difficulties of modern life is presented by the conflict of ideals; individualism against socialization; nationalism against internationalism; enjoyment of life against efficiency; rationalism against a sound emotionalism; tradition against of the logic of facts (Boas, 2021).

Sovereignty is misunderstood as total autonomy or even autarky from all cultural, political, economic, and religious influences from outside leads to isolation, poverty, cultural and religious monotony, and social stress (Stückelberger, 2021). This does not necessarily mean that the pandemic hit the idea of globalization. In the first case, it was highlighted the lack of international solidarity, as the needs and capacities of the states were at imbalance, each state needed more equipment and space for the treatment of the infected, the number of which was constantly increasing. However, states adapted to the needs of the time during the pandemic. Knowing that globalization is already a necessity, normalizing the situation would return it to its previous position, although this position will not be the same as before, due to the impact of the pandemic. In this sense, the author Goodwin (1974) has emphasized that just as within the state the sovereign has traditionally been seen as subject to certain restraints, so internationally the concept of the sovereignty of the state externally has to be reconciled with at least that minimal degree of order necessary to ensure mankind's survival (Goodwin, 1974). From the experience with the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems that external sovereignty, in the future, may be even more vulnerable, whether as a preventive humanitarian measure, as a need to find solutions against major disasters like Covid-19, or as dependence on globalism.

1. Methods

To gather data on how the pandemic affected attitudes toward cultural relativism and state sovereignty, we applied the quantitative methodology, distributing an online questionnaire on August the 8th 2020, and receiving answers by June 2021, with 10 closed-ended questions, in the Albanian language for Albanians and English language for neighbours. The sample consisted of 600 respondents from Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey received full responses from 600 individuals who identified themselves through the addresses of academic research institutions, institutional websites such as institutes, NGOs and media. Some of the respondents were contacted through contacts on social networks.

In the questionnaire participated 16.66% of respondents for each country. Respondents are in different age groups from 21 to 60 years, with a gender ratio of 63 percent being men and 37 percent women. In ethnic terms, 38.32% of respondents are Albanians from Kosovo, Albania, and Northern Macedonia, 11.66 Macedonians from Northern Macedonia, 28.66% Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 10.16% Montenegrins from Montenegro and 11.66% Bosnians from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respondents were political analysts, university professors

and assistants, publicists, commentators, and various opinion leaders. They responded to our research via e-mail communication. Research was conducted from August 2020 until the end of June 2021.

2. Results

In the question of what mostly influenced the spread of COVID-19 worldwide, we divided the questions into two sections: the first five questions on cultural relativism and five other questions on state sovereignty in times of pandemic. There were differences in attitudes depending on the country of origin and the ethnic identification of the respondents.

Serbian respondents from Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia don't blame the Chinese Government for allowing local and cultural traditions such as eating wild animals and other products, including bats, as an alleged source of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The attribution for the spread of the pandemic is the lack of transparency of the Chinese government, which differs in the ethnic Albanian and Slavic majority states.

In the question "What was the greatest impact on the spread of COVID-19 pandemic worldwide?", 26% of the respondents from Kosovo thought most about the impact of the lack of transparency of the Chinese Government, 21.1% from Albania thought the same, 10% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12.5% from Northern Macedonia, 9% from Montenegro and only 2.2% of the respondents from Serbia, blamed the Chinese Government for the lack of transparency.

Concerning the second option, 33% of the respondents from Kosovo thought that the local culture and food traditions in China are the cause. In comparison, only 5.6% of Serbian respondents blamed Chinese culture for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Serbia and China have excellent diplomatic relations with each other, compared to Kosovo; additionally, China is in stable diplomatic relations with Serbia, and it openly opposes Kosovo's Independence and hinders any initiative for international organisations membership. Other details on the optional choices given in this questionnaire for comparative review can be seen in Table 1.

Depending on where the respondents came from and their state and ethnicity, it was believed that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was due to the Chinese government's lack of transparency in the spread and control of the pandemic correlating the dependent variable 'pandemic' with the type of political system, namely the Chinese communist state.

Some believed in the hypothesis that the effects of cultural traditions on food played a significant role in the spread of the pandemic, emphasizing the impact of the variable - 'cultural tradition' on the 'pandemic' dependent variable.

Further, on the third answer, we see the belief in the effects of conspiracy theories and the impact of the politicization of the pandemic, especially following the highlighted statements of former US President Donald Trump, who accuses

China of spreading the virus. Claims by conspiracy theorists have strengthened additionally following the Chinese Government's rejection of a request by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for the second phase of investigation into the virus's origin from the laboratory.

Table 1. Western Balkan's attitudes for reasons on the spread of COVID-19

Q: What was the greatest impact on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide?

States	Kosovo	Albania	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia & Herzegovina
Questionnaire alternatives						
Lack of transparency of the Chinese Government	26%	21.1%	2.2%	12.5%	9%	10%
Local culture and traditions of food in China	33%	11.1%	5.6%	15.2%	20%	17.5%
Possible mistakes in virus laboratories	24%	34.4%	38.9%	25.6%	31.5%	30%
Globalization in general (e.g., increasing number of travel)	15%	25%	27.8%	33.5%	37.5%	25.5%
Environmental damage, such as deforestation	2%	8.3%	25.6%	13.2%	2%	17%

Source: Authors' representation

In the optional penultimate choice of the question for the respondents, asking what has had the highest impact on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether it has been the role of globalization in general, and as an example, has it been due to the increase in the number of world travellers, 37.5% of respondents from Montenegro stated that globalization has had the highest impact, 33.5% of respondents from North Macedonia thought the same along with 27.8% of respondents from Serbia, 25.5% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 25 % of the respondents from Albania and the least respondents, 15% of them, have considered the role of globalization to be influential in the spread of the pandemic.

In the last choice of respondents in the questionnaire, on the role of environmental damage, such as deforestation, in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found the following percentage: 25.6% from Serbia thinks that climate change may have caused the latest pandemic outbreak, 17% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 13.2 % from North Macedonia, 8.3% from Albania, 2% from Montenegro and 2% from Kosovo.

When the respondents of different countries of the Western Balkans were asked, based on the consequences of COVID-19, whether the states should be responsible for

their activity in the territory and with their population when that behaviour produces consequences for other states as well (International community), the answers also differed depending on the country of origin of the respondents (as seen in Table 2). From Kosovo comes the highest belief that the states should behold into account, with 62.5% being the highest number of respondents encouraging state accountability, 23% being the average percentage, with 8% slightly and only 6.5% disagreeing. From Albania, 48.6% also stand in favour of state accountability, 34% on average, 11.4% slightly and only 3% disapproved. Meanwhile, 52.4% of respondents from Serbia entirely discouraged state accountability, 28.8% slightly, with 16.7% being the average of those who agree, and 5.1% fully agreeing but significantly differing in contrast Albanians from Kosovo and Albania, who in 1999 had experienced international intervention during the war with Serbia, therefore it appears that for ethnic Albanians is easier to accept international intervention than countries like Serbia, which has been subject to NATO airstrikes as an international humanitarian response against the ethnic cleansing campaign of Serbian Armed forces of Yugoslavia in Kosovo. From Northern Macedonia, the answers were: 31.1% no, 15.6% slightly, 25.2% average, and 24.4% highly agreeing to state accountability. From Montenegro, 47% highly agreed, 31% average, 15.5% slightly and 7.5% disapproved. From Bosnia and Herzegovina, 18.2% was the highest number of respondents to agree, 54.5% on average, 11.8% slightly, and 15.5% said no.

Table 2. Attitudes towards international interventions within a state

Q: Based on the consequences of COVID-19, should the states be responsible for their activity in the territory and with their population, when that behaviour produces consequences for other states as well? (International community)?

States / Questionnaire alternatives	Kosovo	Albania	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia & Herzegovina
No	6.5%	3%	52.4%	31.1%	7.5%	15.5%
Slightly	8%	11.4%	28.8%	15.6%	15.5%	11.8%
Average	23%	34%	16.7%	25.2%	31%	54.5%
Highly	62.5%	48.6%	5.1%	24.4%	47%	18.2%

Source: Authors' representation

Regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the increase of ethnocentrism towards Chinese cultural and local traditions of eating bat meat and wild animals in general, the study suggests that the responses of respondents from different countries of the Western Balkans are mainly affected by the diplomatic relations that their countries have with China, rather than from the assessment of the

consequences of COVID-19. However, the effects of the pandemic on cultural relativism are much more influenced especially by the international relations of states and peoples, making important the national aspect in coherence with the pandemic, in the approach to cultural relativism.

Table 3. **Attitudes of the international community towards local food traditions in the post-COVID-19 world**

Q: When you read that a part of the Chinese in their culture, prefer the food of bats, and on the other hand, an attitude presented so far by scientists is that bats carry a larger proportion of viruses worldwide than some groups of other mammals, such as COVID-19. How should the International Community act in this case?

States *Questionnaire alternatives*	Kosovo	Albania	Serbia	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Bosnia & Herzegovina
To oblige the Chinese state to draft legislation to ban the food with bats	41%	16.7%	22.2%	14.3%	11.3%	21.3%
Sanction China on exports of all types of wildlife meat	17%	19.4%	16.7%	22.2%	18.2%	50%
The international community cannot interfere in the cultural food tradition of the Chinese, despite COVID-19	8%	30.6%	16.7%	30.4%	22.8%	5.7%
The international community can interfere in the cultural food tradition of any people, only for those animals that can be confirmed by science to carry pandemics	34%	33.3%	44.4%	33.6%	47.7%	23%

Source: Authors' representation

To the question that, when you read that a part of the Chinese culturally prefers to eat bats, and on the other hand, an attitude presented by scientists is that bats worldwide carry a larger proportion of viruses than some groups of other mammals, such as COVID-19, how should the International Community act in this case, respondents' answers varied depending on their country of origin. In response to the question- 'To oblige the Chinese state in drafting legislation to ban the food with bats', 41% of Kosovo respondents answered in favour, while those from Bosnia and Herzegovina 21.3%, Serbia 22.2%, Albania 16.7%, Northern Macedonia 14.3% and Montenegro 11.3%. In the alternative - Sanction China on exports of all types of wildlife meat, from 17% of respondents from Kosovo agreed, with 50% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 16.7% from Serbia, 19.4% from Albania, 22.2% from Northern Macedonia, and 18.2% from Montenegro also agreed.

As seen in Table 3, our respondents disagreed that the international community could interfere in the cultural food tradition of the Chinese, despite COVID-19, only 8% of the respondents from Kosovo agreed, from Bosnia and Herzegovina 5.7%, 16.7% from Serbia, 3-.6% from Albania, 30.4% from Northern Macedonia, and only 22.8% of those from Montenegro. While in the last optional choice, the international community can interfere in the cultural food tradition of any people, only for those animals that can be confirmed by science to carry pandemics, 34% of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo agreed, 23% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 44.4% from Serbia, 33.3% from Albania, 33.6% from Northern Macedonia, and 47.7% from Montenegro.

The research clearly shows the effect of the pandemic on attitudes towards cultural relativism and the sovereignty of a state, but this effect is again related to the aspect of international relations between the states themselves, different experiences of states from their past, and geopolitical alignments of states in international relations with China, from where the first case of COVID-19 was officially accepted by the World Health Organization.

3. Context of research

This research finds out that the answers of the respondents could also be influenced by the circumstances and the period when the research is being conducted.

It is highly probable that the period when we launched our research which was halfway through the 2020, at the time when there was a lack of information concerning pandemic outbreaks and general confusion, might have impacted the reasons behind the answers. The findings of this research suggest that another research has to be conducted following the ease of measures to curb the spread of the outbreak during 2021-2022. The influences of the geopolitical alignments of the diplomacy of the countries where the respondents came from, concerning either the culture of the state of China, have had an effect. For example, respondents from Serbia show more positive attitudes towards the doctrine of cultural relativism when asked about the effects of the Chinese cultural food tradition on the effects of the possible spread of COVID-19, compared to respondents from Kosovo, who oppose the doctrine of cultural relativism, judging the tradition of eating the meat of bats in a part of Chinese culture as something to be changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of all the CEECs, Greece and Serbia stand out as China's closest allies in the region, as they have had a comprehensive strategic partnership with Beijing since 2006 and 2009, respectively (Tonchev, 2020). Even the current leadership of Serbia is considered a leader that strengthens diplomacy with China. At the same time, aside from Vučić, there have been no other Balkan leaders nor authoritative knowledge elites who have pushed similarly enthusiastic discourse towards China (Vangeli, 2021). In important areas such as cooperation and transport and co-operation, Serbia enjoys a special relation with China. Serbia has attracted the largest

amount of Chinese funding not only in Southeast Europe but across the entire CEEC area. Serbia has also been considered as a host to the secretariat of a prospective China-CEEC Association on Transport and Infrastructure Cooperation (Tonchev, 2020).

Not only politically, diplomatically, economically, but also culturally, Serbia's relations with China are strong. There are also Confucius Institutes in Serbia, which have branches at the University of Belgrade and the University of Novi Sad, whereas in cooperation with the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the government of Serbia has carried out a pilot project for the introduction of the Chinese language into 31 primary and secondary schools in the country. This joint project started in 2012 and involved about 2,500 pupils in Serbia (Tonchev, 2020). In the most sensitive report on Kosovo, China supports Serbia in the none-recognition of Kosovo's independence. By focusing on the largest Western Balkan economy and population, China enhances its market share while emphasizing its political and diplomatic priorities and natural affinities with Serbia: China does not recognize Kosovo's independence, while Serbia supports China's territorial claims relating to Taiwan and the South China Sea (Conley et al., 2020). The agreement of Washington for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia states that both parties will prohibit the use of 5G equipment supplied by untrusted vendors in their communications networks. Where such equipment is already present, both parties commit to its removal and other mediation efforts in a timely fashion (American Society of International Law, 2020) but such strong geopolitical, trade, and cultural relations of Serbia with China are not shaken at all. Similar to the respondents from Serbia, the respondents from Kosovo were greatly influenced by Kosovo's diplomatic relations with China, who see China as less friendly, due to the non-recognition of Kosovo as a state; China's proximity to Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's Declaration of Independence on 17 February 2008 - a neighbour with whom it still has major differences after the armed conflict from 1999 by NATO military intervention and the placement of Kosovo under the protectorate and international administration of the UN and Western countries. Respondents from Serbia, since they had a bad experience with NATO attacks on the military and paramilitary forces of the former Yugoslavia, respectively Serbia, - have had more negative attitudes towards the interventions of international organizations in the internal affairs of a state, even towards China, despite the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. Albanians have expressed more opposition to the cultural relativism and sovereignty of a state, including China as a global superpower, from the experience of NATO military intervention in the former Yugoslavia. Thus, attitudes on cultural relativism and the sovereignty of a state from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, again depend on intercultural relations and geopolitical alignments of members of different communities, people, and states.

China supported the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the 1990s (and later Serbia following disintegration of Yugoslavia), especially during the opposition

of NATO when it bombed Serbian military targets of Yugoslavia in Serbia and Montenegro, culminating in Chinese anger, to the NATO's airstrike on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, although assessed by NATO as an unintentional attack. Serbia has also supported China, not taking sides with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other sensitive regions of its borders. Even in the first and second decades of the 21st century, Serbia deepened political, trade, and cultural cooperation with China. China invested in infrastructure, transport, industry, energy, and increased trade exports to Serbia. And in the last year of the official announcement of COVID-19 as a pandemic, it was supplied with the considerable assistance of Chinese vaccines. On the contrary, the Albanian majority in Kosovo, Albania, Northern Macedonia and beyond, did not agree with China's long friendly alliance with Serbia, with China's opposition to NATO and the US, with the non-recognition of Kosovo, with China's obstacles to Kosovo's membership in the UN and other organizations such as UNESCO. Recently, Kosovo has approved the US request not to be supplied with 5G by Chinese operators and the government of Kosovo has refused the supply of Chinese vaccines. Kosovo is one of the few countries on earth with almost no Chinese economic footprint to speak of. This is because when Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Beijing condemned the move, even entering written evidence against Kosovo at the International Court of Justice a year later (Mardell, 2021).

Although Kosovo, despite not being recognized as a state by China, maintains no diplomatic or political ties with Taiwan (Zweers et al., 2020). In the prism of the COVID-19 pandemic, international politics had a significant impact. The lack of recognition from China made the Prime Minister of Kosovo reject the offer of Albania to vaccinate Kosovo teachers with Chinese and Russian vaccines, claiming that the people of Kosovo will be immunized with vaccines of countries that have recognized Kosovo (Politiko, 2021). All these diplomatic, trade, economic, cultural, and educational relations between the countries have an impact on the attitudes of the citizens of these countries, including those towards the Chinese food traditions, blaming the Chinese Government for the lack of transparency about the virus and other issues, Therefore, more than COVID-19 in cracking down on cultural relativism and the concept of state sovereignty, the international relations of the Western Balkan countries with China, where the respondents come from, have had certain effects.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has also hit the doctrine of cultural relativism, according to which any culture (including local food traditions) cannot be judged and is equivalent to another culture, hardening the principle of no criticism of a specific culture. Also, the effects of the coronavirus have been on the other oscillation of the concept of national sovereignty; like infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, have closed the borders of states, but only temporarily, while re-emphasizing the need for

global cooperation, transparency of states, mutual assistance in health experience, and joint research by scientists worldwide to fight the SARS-CoV-2 virus, taking further the fragility of external state sovereignty and the need to open states and their governments, as well as the cooperation of international organizations.

The hypothesis that the pandemic has weakened cultural relativism and state sovereignty can be partially confirmed, as respondents have responded to the effects of the type of political system on the spread and control of the pandemic (political-pandemic system), depending on the origin of the country they come from and operate in. Even if the hypothesis on the effects of culture on the spread of the pandemic (culture / traditions-pandemic), can be partially confirmed, as interstate diplomacy has influenced the attitudes of respondents and the effects of the pandemic on cultural traditions. Even in the hypothesis that the conspiratorial ideas shaped by news like that from the second half of June 2021, as well as the request of the WHO to start with the second phase of the research, in the suspicion of the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from Chinese laboratories and markets, have influenced respondents from the Western Balkans in explaining the origin of the pandemic.

We can conclude that the diplomacy of the Western Balkans with China and the experience of the respondents with international interventions such as NATO Humanitarian intervention in the case of Kosovo, have influenced the attitude of the respondents in determining their answers to our research. The impact of globalization, industrialization and environmental damage on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned by a few respondents, although these factors above are the most common answers of scientists for the origin of the pandemic.

The research shows that the respondents' attitudes towards cultural relativism have not changed much due to the effects of COVID-19 but have been mainly influenced by the countries' diplomatic relations, depending on how the diplomacy of the countries where the respondents come from is with the Chinese state. The respondents who come from the Balkan countries, which do not have good diplomatic relations with China, or which do not have diplomatic relations at all like the case of Kosovo, had harsher attitudes towards cultural relativism when it comes to the local tradition of eating bat meat in some parts of China, while respondents from friendly countries to China, such as Serbia, had much more tolerant attitudes towards cultural relativism, namely the Chinese way of eating wild animals, as well as bats, despite the fact that it is assumed that they may have been factors of the spread of the new coronavirus. The study shows not only the effects of the coronavirus on criticism of cultural relativism and state sovereignty in times of pandemic but also the relations of states with each other (where members of different people of the Western Balkans come from), in their attitudes towards the doctrine of relativism cultural and state sovereignty.

The study concludes that the embrace of cultural relativism by different populations also depends a lot on the orientations and alignments of their countries of origin towards other countries, in this case, in relation to China. The attitudes of

the Balkan population towards the political and cultural sovereignty of China regarding the consumption of food from the wildlife market by a part of the Chinese population are also influenced by the diplomatic relations of the Balkan states with China and the West in particular, such as the European Union, the United States of America, influencing the foreign policy on the attitudes towards foreign cultures by the populations of these countries. It is important to affirm that the results presented in the conducted research confirm the influence of diplomatic relations, geopolitics and geostrategy of the respective states with other states in the construction of attitudes towards other cultures and the collective imagination of the peoples.

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