

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Faculty of Political Science

Belgrade, September 2026

At the meeting of the Department of International Studies, held on February 18th, 2026, the Master Thesis Defense Commission (hereby the Commission) for the candidate Andrijana Milojević was formed with the following members: prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović, prof. dr Aleksandar Milošević, and prof. dr Alexandra Perišić (advisor) The Council for the Second and Third Cycle of Studies has accepted the proposal made by the Department.

After reading the master thesis, the Commission is submitting the following report.

R E P O R T

The master thesis of Andrijana Milojević entitled “New Roads, Old Patterns: Examining the Belt and Road Initiative through a Neocolonial Lens” is comprised of five chapters, along with the Introduction, the Conclusion and accompanying list of references. The master thesis is checked with the plagiarism software Turnitin with the result of 3% of match. After further inquiry it was established this match was not result of plagiarism and that the thesis is written taking into consideration all relevant academic procedures.

The master thesis investigates the relationship between China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and dependency in Africa by employing a single-case study approach, centered around Kenya and its Standard Gauge Railway (SGR). Combining Neocolonialism Theory with Norm Backlash Theory, the candidate analyses how Chinese development finance reproduces dependency, whether that dependency amounts to neocolonial influence or to asymmetric interdependence alone, and how Kenya’s own backlash against Western development conditionality shapes the extent and character of this outcome.

In the Introduction, the candidate first defines the research problem and situates it within the broader debate on the BRI, which has been present since its launch in 2013. The thesis observes that the BRI is presented in official Chinese narratives as a platform for mutually beneficial, South-South cooperation, while critics contend that debt-funded infrastructure, unequal trade, limited technology transfer, and concentrated foreign control may reproduce patterns historically associated with neocolonial influence. Kenya is introduced as a particularly salient case, as its turn to Chinese financing followed decades of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment. The candidate then poses the primary research question: how China’s BRI engagement with Kenya reproduces dependency, and how Kenyan agency shapes whether that dependency constitutes neocolonial influence or asymmetric interdependence alone.

In the second chapter, the candidate reviews the relevant literature on China-Africa relations. The chapter opens with the debate on whether Chinese engagement constitutes neocolonialism or an alternative partnership, contrasting critical accounts (e.g. Carmody,

French, Boateng) with those that emphasize African agency and question the neocolonial label (e.g. Bräutigam, Addis and Zuping, Himmer and Rod). It then turns to scholarship on the BRI as a development project, and on the way Chinese finance is positioned against Western conditionality. Based on this, the candidate identifies three gaps: the polarization of the debate into binary positions, the lack of reliable data on Chinese lending, and the insufficient attention to how Chinese and Western development models interact within the same country.

In the third chapter, the candidate sets forth the thesis' theoretical framework, combining two complementary approaches. Neocolonialism, following Nkrumah, is used in a narrow, structural sense and operationalized through seven observable criteria: financial dependency, contractual and legal asymmetry, limited transfer of knowledge, dependency on foreign contractors, trade imbalance, political influence without formal control, and discursive concealment of asymmetry. Norm Backlash Theory, drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink and on Deitelhoff and Zimmermann's distinction between applicatory and justificatory contestation, is used to explain why Kenya turned away from Western conditionality. Importantly, the candidate does not treat strategic preference as normative rejection by default, and examines Kenyan contestation at two levels, the executive-diplomatic and the parliamentary. The chapter closes by linking the two theories through the distinction between agency-driven choice and structurally produced outcome.

In the fourth chapter, the candidate outlines the research's methodological design. The thesis is based on a qualitative, single-case study approach, in which Kenya, and the SGR in particular, are selected for analytical depth and for the unusual public availability of the SGR's loan agreements, and not for their representativeness. The study relies exclusively on secondary data from seven categories of sources (Kenyan state documents; Chinese official statements; financial and contractual documents; media; international organization reports and trade statistics; civil society sources; and judicial records) covering the period 2000–2024. Critical Discourse Analysis and thematic analysis are employed as complementary methods. The chapter also defines the limitations of the research, which include the absence of fieldwork, the inability of discourse analysis to establish causality, the uneven evidentiary weight of the seven criteria, and the general opacity of Chinese development finance.

In the fifth chapter, the candidate conducts the empirical analysis. The first section reconstructs Kenya's turn to China, from the establishment of diplomatic relations to the 2013 comprehensive cooperative partnership, and reads it as an agency-driven response to Western conditionality. The analysis of the SGR is then organized around the seven criteria. The first subsection examines the three publicly available Exim Bank loan agreements and shows that the financial exposure and the legal architecture are reproduced nearly clause-for-clause across the agreements. The second subsection shows that the financing contains no local-content or skills-transfer provisions, and traces the operation of the railway by a Chinese contractor's subsidiary and its gradual takeover by Kenya Railways Corporation.

The third subsection demonstrates that the trade imbalance is both contractually embedded, through the requirement of preferential Chinese sourcing, and persistent in the bilateral statistics. The fourth subsection compares Chinese and Kenyan official discourse and finds that Kenyan executive actors adopt “win-win” vocabulary absent from Kenya’s own foreign policy pillars, while Parliament openly contests the same relationship. The chapter further examines the social and environmental consequences of the SGR and the related litigation, and closes with a synthesis that grades the seven criteria according to the strength of the supporting evidence.

In the sixth chapter, the candidate discusses the broader implications of the findings. The first is that neocolonial dependency is better understood as a bundle of mechanisms of differing durability, “hard” mechanisms fixed at the moment of signing, and “soft” ones that remain open to correction through institutional capacity and political will. The second is a form of procedural asymmetry, whereby the pace of construction outstrips the pace of adjudication, so that successful legal challenges arrive too late to alter outcomes. The third is that norm backlash is better modelled as an ongoing and renewable posture than as a completed transition, and that the executive and parliamentary divergence points to a variation within the state which the state-level unit of analysis of the theory does not register. The fourth is that agency and dependency operate concurrently rather than sequentially. The candidate also situates the case within the China-Africa debate, arguing that it supports neither the strong “debt-trap” thesis nor the view that attributes dependency primarily to recipient-side governance failures, and cautiously discusses the generalizability of the findings.

In the seventh chapter, the candidate summarises the thesis’ central argument and answers the research question. Dependency in the SGR case is most robustly established where it is embedded in binding legal and financial instruments, while the neocolonial label fits mainly where this dependency is rhetorically downplayed; it is least entrenched, and most reversible, in operational matters. Four findings are put forward: that norm backlash convincingly explains Kenya’s turn to China; that dependency is real but unevenly distributed across mechanisms; that discourse performs legitimizing work but is not hegemonic within the Kenyan state; and that formal accountability mechanisms can succeed procedurally without altering outcomes. Moreover, the candidate concludes that Kenya’s backlash operated at the point of choosing a partner, not at the point of negotiating its terms, which is why the relationship reflects both Kenyan agency and structurally produced dependency. The candidate also proposes several directions for future work, including comparative multi-case studies, fieldwork with those involved in the negotiations, a systematic comparison of Exim Bank loan templates, and longitudinal research on the January 2026 Kenya-China trade arrangement.

Based on this report, the Commission concludes that the master thesis “New Roads, Old Patterns: Examining the Belt and Road Initiative through a Neocolonial Lens” by Andrijana Milojević fulfils all the formal criteria for the public defense.

The Commission:

prof. dr Nemanja Džuverović

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nemanja Džuverović', with a stylized, angular flourish at the end.

prof. dr Aleksandar Milošević

prof. dr Alexandra Perišić

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Alexandra Perišić', with a large, circular flourish at the beginning.