

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES: THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF SINO-CONGOLESE COOPERATION UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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**Abstract:** The Belt and Road Initiative has become a signature instrument for the Chinese government in promoting global trade and economic integration. A new model of cooperation based on the Belt and Road Initiative, such as "infrastructure-for-resources" agreements, has been utilized in China's collaboration with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The article examines the economic feasibility and repercussions of the model by using the copper mining sector in the DRC. By using the case study of Sino-Congolese cooperation, the study demonstrates how investments in road, railway, and public utility infrastructure have unleashed the potential of mineral resources to the benefit of both parties.

**Key words:** Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure-for-resources, Sino-Congolese cooperation, copper mining, economic development

**JEL:** F21, O13, O55

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### Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has evolved into a visionary international development strategy aimed at fostering global trade, infrastructure connectivity, and economic integration. Essentially, the BRI tries to address the problems of global economic imbalances through enormous infrastructure investments and novel cooperation models. Among the cooperation models of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is a "infrastructure for resources" model that has attracted widespread attention, especially in countries and regions like Africa where infrastructure is very scarce but resources are abundant.

In this case, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with some of the world's most valuable copper and cobalt reserves, is at the heart of the BRI plan. Both minerals are vital to China's manufacturing sector, especially for green technology such as electric vehicles and renewable energy. From 2000 through 2020, demand for cobalt to manufacture batteries grew 26-fold. Eighty-two percent of this growth occurred in China

and China's cobalt refinery production increased 78-fold (Gulley, A. L., 2023). At the same time, China's demand for copper has also increased significantly, and the annual demand outlook shows that copper demand will peak in 2030 (Eheliyagoda et al., 2019). However, the DRC's mining sector is faced with a lack of infrastructure, political instability, and environmental degradation that have historically under-developed its resource potential.

China's involvement in the DRC under the BRI has introduced a new model of cooperation. As per the 'infrastructure-for-resources' model, Chinese firms put money into developing large-scale infrastructure - roads, railways, and power plants, among others - in exchange for access to mineral resources. Apart from ensuring China's resource needs, the model also plugs the DRC's infrastructure deficit, with space for win-win results.

This paper examines the economic viability, current dynamics, and future prospects of Sino-Congolese collaboration in copper mining under the BRI framework. It outlines the key drivers for such collaboration, examines the current state, and evaluates the risks and opportunities for both parties.

### **1. Current Status of the Sino-Congolese Cooperation**

The Democratic Republic of Congo plays an important role in the global mining industry because it has the world's richest reserves of copper and cobalt. Possessing these minerals, which are very important for the new energy and electronics industries, makes Congo one of the main destinations for international investment.

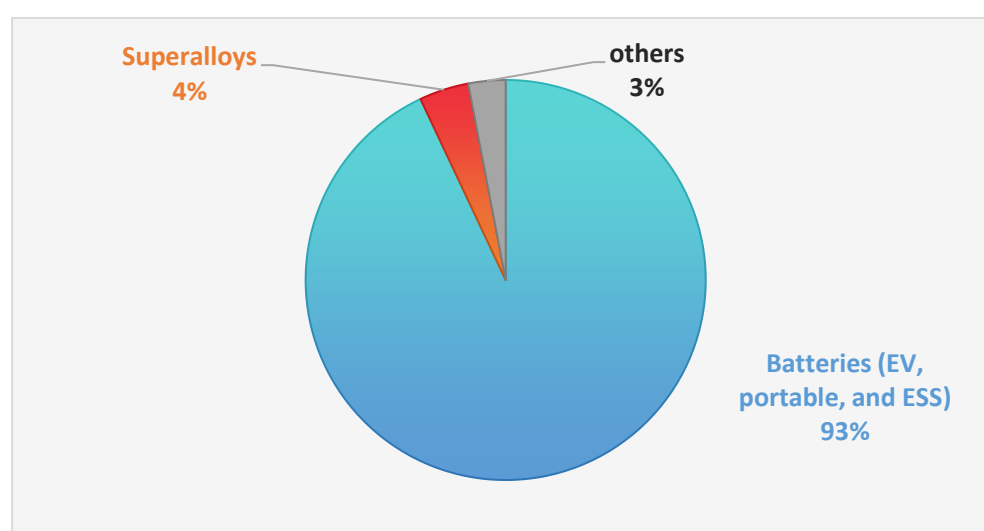
The DRC possesses approximately 35 million metric tons of copper reserves, accounting for about 10% of the global total, and it leads the world in cobalt production. Key mining regions include the Copperbelt, a resource-rich zone spanning southern DRC and Zambia, and the Lufilian Arc, home to high-grade deposits such as the Kamoa-Kakula and Tenke-Fungurume mines.

The DRC, however, had always struggled to develop its vast resources due to under-invested infrastructure, political instability, and a dysfunctional regulatory environment. The other issue is logistics as inefficient usage of road and rail limits resource extraction and export. As in recent years, China has been having problems of overcapacity and lack of domestic demand, which requires further expansion of exports for economic growth.

In recent years, the total trade volume between China and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has shown a rapid growth trend. According to data from China's Ministry of Commerce, in 2022, the bilateral trade volume between China and the DRC reached approximately \$19 billion, with an average annual growth rate of over 10% in the past five years. Among this, China's imports of copper and cobalt from the DRC account for more than 40% of Africa's total mineral trade. Meanwhile, the DRC's imports of machinery, consumer goods, and construction materials from China have also significantly increased.

According to reports and data from the Cobalt Institute, in 2021, China imported 80,000 tons of cobalt resources from the DRC, accounting for over 70% of global cobalt demand. Since battery applications account for 73% of total cobalt demand, they drove 93% of the growth in demand, with electric vehicle (EV) demand alone growing by 23% to reach 90,000 tons, representing 45% of global cobalt demand. As a major EV-producing country, China requires a large amount of cobalt resources annually. By 2030, global cobalt demand is expected to double, exceeding twice the level of 2023. The DRC, as the world's largest cobalt producer, achieved a total production of over 176,000 tons in 2023, marking a 17% year-on-year increase. CMOC alone accounted for 24% of global cobalt supply in 2023, becoming the largest producer (Cobalt Institute, 2024).

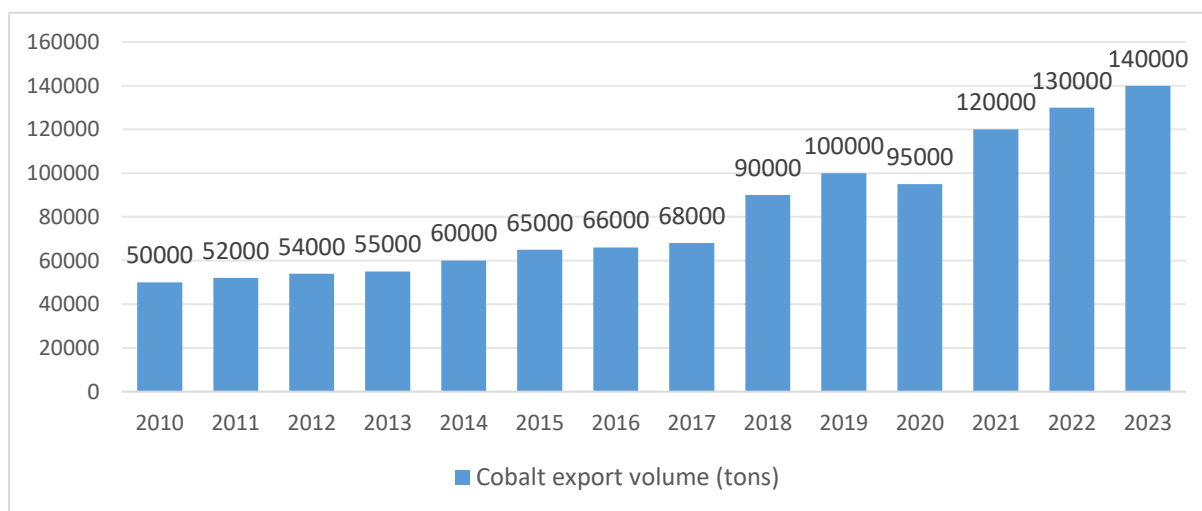
Figure 1. Share of cobalt demand growth in 2023



Source: (Cobalt Institute, 2024)

One of the core objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to promote infrastructure development in participating countries. The DRC has long faced bottlenecks due to underdeveloped transportation infrastructure, which has hindered the full utilization of its mineral resources. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese state-owned enterprises have invested in the construction of many large-scale infrastructure, especially railways connecting mining areas and ports, and upgraded the original road network. These infrastructure construction projects have greatly improved the efficiency of mineral transportation and improved the overall logistics network in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For example, the “Congo Copper Belt Railway” constructed by Chinese enterprises has connected mining areas with export ports, shortening mineral transportation time by an incredible 30% while greatly cutting logistics costs. This infrastructure upgrade has directly improved the DRC’s mineral exports. Cobalt exports, for instance, increased from 55,000 tons in 2013 to 140,000 tons in 2023 (Shen, W. & Fu, C. 2024).

Figure 2. Cobalt exports from the DRC from 2010 to 2023



Source: (International Trade Administration, 2025)

The resource complementarity between China and the DRC has driven the growth of trade. The BRI emphasizes the complementarity of resources and markets. The DRC’s copper and cobalt resources are essential raw materials for China’s new energy industry, while China provides the DRC with much-needed machinery and consumer goods. The mutual needs of China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have fully driven the steady growth of trade relations between the two countries.

The cooperation between China and the DRC under the BRI holds significant strategic importance. For China, the DRC provides a stable supply of critical resources, as it is a major global supplier of copper and cobalt, contributing 76% of the world's cobalt supply. Cobalt, a key raw material for new energy batteries, is crucial to China's electric vehicle industry and renewable energy development. Zijin Mining and CMOC manage the Kamo-a-Kakula and Tenke Fungurume mines in the DRC, respectively, ensuring China has a consistent, long-term, and high-quality supply of copper and cobalt. By means of this collaboration, China has lessened its reliance on alternative cobalt-producing nations, like Indonesia and Australia, thus guaranteeing the safety of essential mineral resources (Яструбський, М., & Чжунцзюнь, В., 2024).

The huge demand for Chinese machinery and engineering technology in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has created a valuable market for Chinese manufacturers. Large infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese enterprises in the DRC, such as highways, railways, and ports, not only boost exports of Chinese engineering machinery but also enhance the global influence of "Made in China." China's export-oriented economy relies heavily on exports, and its cooperation with the DRC allows China to export its surplus production capacity.

For the DRC, this cooperation brings funding and technical support for infrastructure development. The country has long faced challenges due to inadequate infrastructure. Through the "resources-for-infrastructure" model, China has built critical transportation networks and energy facilities in the DRC.

The cooperation between China and the DRC under the Belt and Road framework has achieved remarkable results. China's investments in key infrastructure have improved the efficiency of the DRC's mineral exports, meeting China's demand for critical resources like copper and cobalt, while also expanding the global presence of "Made in China." Meanwhile, the DRC has improved its infrastructure, integrated into the global supply chain, and enhanced its economic competitiveness through its partnership with China.

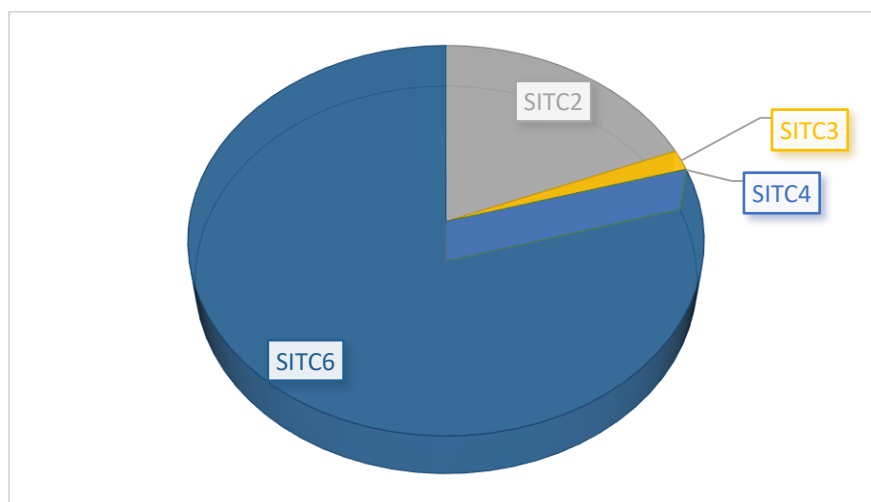
## **2. Challenges and Risks in China-DRC Cooperation**

Despite the significant achievements of China-DRC cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of challenges and risks remain, potentially affecting the sustainability and mutual benefits of the partnership.

### *(1) Trade and Economic Risks*

Firstly, the trade structure between China and the DRC is highly unbalanced. In fact, the current mutual trade and economic relations between the two countries are heavily dependent on the export of ore raw materials from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the export of industrial products and machinery from China. This unbalanced relationship limits the ability of Congo itself to develop high value-added industries and hinders its economic diversification.

*Figure 3. DRC's Export Structure to China in 2023 (SITC Classification)*



*Source: (United Nations Comtrade Database, 2025)*

According to data from the United Nations Comtrade Database, we can see that the main export commodities of Congo (DRC) to China are SITC6, manufactured goods, mainly materials, which account for most total exports. Next are SITC2 (raw materials, except fuel) and SITC3 (mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials). It can be clearly seen that Congo (DRC)'s exports to China are highly concentrated in raw materials and mineral resources, especially metals such as copper and cobalt. The exports of other categories (such as food, chemicals, machinery and equipment, etc.) are almost negligible.

Over 90% of the DRC's trade revenue comes from copper and cobalt exports. However, due to a lack of local processing capacity, even though some Chinese enterprises engage in local processing, the export and primary processing of resources fail to create significant employment opportunities or retain value locally. Secondly, this trade pattern could lead to debt dependence. It is worth noting that many projects currently being carried out in DRC are financed through the Belt and Road, which will definitely increase

DRC's loan repayment burden. If DRC cannot solve this problem well, then this debt dependence will lead to DRC's resources or strategic assets being used for negotiations in future cooperation negotiations, exacerbating DRC's own economic vulnerability.

### *(2) Environmental and Social Risks*

Environmental deterioration may result from the DRC's resource exports. Deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination are only a few of the major environmental effects of copper and cobalt mining. Inadequate environmental protection measures in certain mining projects have drawn criticism because they could cause long-term ecological harm. Local water sources have been contaminated by waste discharge from some mining locations, endangering agricultural output and having an effect on population health.

Furthermore, socioeconomic inequality has occasionally been exacerbated by China-DRC cooperation. Despite the fact that mining investments have enhanced infrastructure and produced jobs, disagreements about how to divide the financial gains persist. Compared to the significant financial gains from mining operations, many local populations only receive a small percentage of the benefits from resource exports. Conflicts and protests have arisen in certain mining communities as a result of insufficient land compensation or environmental harm.

### *(3) Governance and Political Risks*

Extreme policy instability is another very serious problem in the DRC. In the DRC, government corruption, uncertainty about government regulation and rapid policy changes are very prominent features. Under these conditions, it is a great challenge to maintain long-term, clear-cut and stable cooperation agreements, which has become a major obstacle to attracting long-term investment. Chinese enterprises and other foreign organizations face increased investment risks as a result of the DRC's renegotiation of mining contracts (Anderson, P. 2023).

Businesses that operate in the DRC also have significant security obstacles. Mining operations and infrastructure projects are at risk due to armed conflicts and instability in some DRC districts. Armed organizations' activity and illegal mining can interfere with project operations and jeopardize worker safety.

### *(4) Reputational and Geopolitical Risks*

International scrutiny also surrounds the China-DRC collaboration. Citing unsustainable practices, a lack of transparency, and charges of "neo-colonialism,"

international groups and the media have attacked the Belt and Road Initiative and China's involvement in resource extraction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Pressure like this could harm China's reputation abroad and impede the balanced growth of China-DRC cooperation.

At the same time, other influential nations are looking to increase their influence in the DRC as geopolitical rivalry heats up and the demand for vital mineral resources rises globally. Competition for resources may cause geopolitical tensions, raising doubts about China-DRC collaboration.

Although the China-DRC partnership under the Belt and Road Initiative has produced notable outcomes, there are still many dangers and difficulties involved. A mutually beneficial collaboration must be strengthened by both sides addressing current difficulties through measures including industrial upgrading, environmental governance, community participation, and transparent policies in order to maintain the cooperation's long-term sustainability.

### **3. Prospects of Economic Cooperation between China and the DRC under the Belt and Road Initiative**

China and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have demonstrated multi-level, multi-sector economic integration under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompassing policy alignment, infrastructure development, technological innovation, industrial cooperation, and sustainable development. In addition to helping the DRC's economy flourish, the two nations' cooperation gave China a steady supply of raw materials for the manufacture of new energy and other goods.

#### *(1) Prospects for China-DRC Cooperation under the BRI Policy Framework*

As a major African player in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is crucial in terms of strategic alignment and policy coordination.

China and the DRC can establish deep policy coordination and broaden strategic collaboration across numerous fields thanks to the BRI's defined framework for cooperation. The building of infrastructure and the exploitation of mineral resources have been specifically designated by the DRC government as the main goals of its economic growth. This approach has laid a good foundation for long-term cooperation between China and DRC.

First, under long-term planning, both sides should establish an economic cooperation committee, develop long-term development plans, and sign multilateral agreements to ensure that cooperation goals are clear and implementation is efficient. These mechanisms ensure that policy coordination extends beyond the macro level and into the implementation of specific projects, providing institutional guarantees for bilateral cooperation.

The China-DRC Economic Cooperation Committee holds regular meetings to evaluate and optimize key projects in bilateral economic cooperation, while also coordinating the flow of funds, resource development, and infrastructure construction to maximize mutual benefits.

Next, China should continue to provide financial and technical support. Policy coordination under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has enabled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to secure large-scale financial assistance, particularly in infrastructure construction and mineral development. These funds have addressed the DRC's long-standing development financing gaps. Financial institutions such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank have provided the DRC with billions of dollars in low-interest loans for critical projects, including the construction of railways, highways, and hydropower facilities.

It is foreseeable that, through China-DRC cooperation, the DRC will receive further financial support from China to complete its infrastructure projects and upgrade its mining industry.

### *(2) Infrastructure Upgrades and Future Prospects*

Infrastructure development is a core aspect of China-DRC cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework and a critical pillar supporting the DRC's economic growth. For a long time, the DRC's economic development has been constrained by underdeveloped transportation and energy infrastructure. China's involvement has addressed these infrastructure deficits and laid a solid foundation for the future growth of China-DRC cooperation. There is a lot of room for collaboration between the DRC and China in a number of areas, including regional connectivity, energy development and use, and logistics and transportation. The advancement of these cooperations will provide a foundation for DRC to better integrate into the global supply chain and regional economic integration.

In recent years, Chinese enterprises have actively participated in the construction

of railways, roads, and ports in the DRC. It is foreseeable that cooperation in the transportation sector will deepen further. Under the BRI framework, the DRC is likely to develop larger-scale cross-border logistics networks, achieving “seamless connections” for mineral resources from mining areas to ports.

The DRC has long been plagued by energy shortages, which has led to slow industrialization, especially in the mining industry, which requires a lot of energy support, which has undoubtedly hindered its development. At present, China and the DRC have made progress in the construction of energy infrastructure, and it is foreseeable that cooperation on energy will continue further, especially as the DRC has abundant hydropower resources. In order to provide the DRC with a more varied energy system, China and the DRC may work together in the future to create large-scale hydropower projects that are supplemented by renewable energy sources like solar and wind power (Akele-sita, A., & Chowdhury, S., 2015).

In addition to meeting the demands of mineral development, improved energy infrastructure will help build industrial parks and enhance the quality of life for locals, furthering the DRC's overall industrialization process.

### *(3) Upgrades and Prospects in Technological Innovation and Industrial Cooperation*

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have expanded their collaboration beyond resource development and infrastructure construction to include technological innovation and industrial chain extension. In addition to increasing the DRC's economic diversification, this cooperative approach speeds up its industrialization process and gives China-DRC ties more room to grow. In the future, localized cooperation, industrial chain improvements, and technology transfer will be the main forces behind China-DRC cooperation.

Innovation in technology is essential for optimizing industrial structures and increasing the efficiency of resource development. Through the introduction and use of cutting-edge technologies, Chinese businesses have greatly accelerated the development of the DRC's mineral resources in the context of China-DRC collaboration, making substantial strides in efficiency and environmental protection. In addition to lowering production costs, this has greatly increased mining efficiency and established a global standard for productive mining (Feng, C.-Y., Yang, X., Afshan, S., & Irfan, M., 2023).

Promoting localized cooperation is essential to the success of industrial upgrading and technology transfer. China-DRC cooperation is developing the DRC's technological

capabilities and talent reserves by providing skills training and local job opportunities. Numerous local workers have been employed by Chinese companies operating in mining areas, and they have received systematic skills training that has allowed them to become proficient in the management and operation of contemporary machinery. (Wang, D., & Zhao, P., 2019).

By creating vocational training facilities and university collaboration projects to generate more skilled and management talent, China-DRC cooperation may further expand technological exchanges and talent development in the future. Chinese enterprises can gradually relocate parts of their production processes to the DRC, increasing local economic participation and competitiveness.

### **Conclusion**

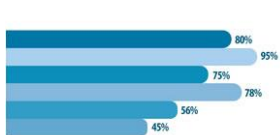
The cooperation between China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a typical example of infrastructure and resource exchange under the Belt and Road Initiative. China improves the efficiency of resource extraction and export in Congo through infrastructure investment, while laying the foundation for its industrialization and economic diversification. This complementary cooperation meets China's industrial needs and fills the infrastructure gap in Congo.

However, both sides still need to deal with challenges such as environmental impact, fair distribution of benefits and political stability, while Congo should pay attention to the risks of debt dependence and resource depletion. China-Congo cooperation provides experience for the Belt and Road Initiative projects in the context of growing global mineral demand, promotes a positive cycle of economic development, and provides reference for future cooperation models.

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Първата конференция е проведена през 1996 година по идея на проф. д-р ик. н. Иван Стойков и на гл. ас. д-р Симеон Момчев, преподаватели към катедрата. Участници са студентите от трети курс на специалност МИО към Стопанската академия, а тематичният фокус е върху международните инвестиции.

От 2014 година към събитието се присъединяват преподаватели и студенти от катедра „Международни икономически отношения“ при Икономически университет – Варна, а през 2015 година и от катедра „Икономика и международни отношения“ при Русенски университет „Ангел Кънчев“.

През годините конференцията се утвърди като форум за научна изява на студентите и докторантите извън учебната аудитория и създаде възможност за разчупване на формалните отношения лектор-обучаем, обмяна на опит в провеждането на мероприятия, свободно споделяне на творчески идеи. Постепенно тематиката се разшири и обхваща широк спектър от области, влизащи в сферата на международните икономически отношения и международния бизнес.

Пленарната сесия на *Двадесет и деветата конференция* се проведе на 10 май 2025 г. присъствено в Базата за обучение на Стопанска академия в с. Орешак и в дистанционен формат чрез платформата BigBlueButton.

**Journal “Global and Regional Dimensions of International Economic Relations”** (abbreviated **GRDIER**) is the legal successor of the publications with the scientific results of the annual *student scientific-practical conference*, organized by the *Department of International Economic Relations* at Dimitar A. Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov. Until 2020, the editions are conference proceedings with independent ISBN numbers, and from 2021 to 2023 they are periodical collections with a permanent ISSN number - available in the Academy's Virtual Library at [dlib.uni-svishtov.bg](http://dlib.uni-svishtov.bg).

The first conference was held in 1996 on the idea of Prof. Ivan Stoykov and Head Assistant Simeon Momchev, lecturers at the department. The first participants were the 3<sup>rd</sup> year IER students at the Tsenov Academy of Economics, and the thematic focus was on international investments.

Since 2014, the event has been joined by professors and students from the *Department of International Economic Relations* at the University of Economics – Varna, and in 2015 from the *Department of Economics and International Relations* at the Angel Kanchev University of Ruse.

Over the years, the conference has established itself as a forum for the scientific expression of students and doctoral students outside the classroom and has created an opportunity to break the formal lecturer-student relationship, exchange experience in conducting events, and freely share creative ideas. Gradually, the topics have expanded and cover a wide range of areas, entering the sphere of international economic relations and international business.

The plenary session of the *Twenty-ninth conference* was held on May 10, 2025 at Dimitar Tsenov Academy's Training and Recreation Center in the village of Oreshak and online through the BigBlueButton platform.

**СЪДЪРЖАНИЕ / CONTENT:**

INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES: THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF SINO-CONGOLESE COOPERATION UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE .....	7
<i>Jingxin Hu</i>	
THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICAL RISK AND LIRA DEFLATION ON INVESTMENT DECISIONS IN TURKEY.....	19
<i>Mohammad Omar Araiqat</i>	
СОЦИАЛНО-ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ ФАКТОРИ ЗА ТРАНСГРАНИЧНО СЪТРУДНИЧЕСТВО КЪРДЖАЛИ-ДРАМА-РОДОПИ В КУЛТУРНИЯ ТУРИЗЪМ ....	35
<i>Антоанета Миткова Петрова</i>	
SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS FOR CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION KARDJALI-DRAMA-RHODOPE IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL TOURISM .....	35
<i>Antoaneta Mitkova Petrova</i>	
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN COCOA PRODUCING COUNTRIES ....	50
<i>Melisa Byulent Ismail</i>	
УПРАВЛЕНИЕ НА ВЗАИМООТНОШЕНИЯТА С ДОСТАВЧИЦИТЕ В ГЛОБАЛНАТА ВЕРИГА ЗА ДОСТАВКИ.....	62
<i>Калин Михайлов Климентов</i>	
SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN.....	62
<i>Kalin Mihaylov Klimentov</i>	
ИНОВАЦИИТЕ – ФАКТОР ЗА УСТОЙЧИВОСТ НА МЕЖДУНАРОДНИТЕ КОМПАНИИ .....	79
<i>Петьо Божинов Божинов</i>	
INNOVATION – A FACTOR FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF INTERNATIONAL COMPANIES .....	79
<i>Petyo Bozhinov Bozhinov</i>	
УЯЗВИМОСТИ В КИБЕРПРОСТРАНСТВОТО И ВЪЗДЕЙСТВИЕТО ИМ ВЪРХУ МСП.....	92
<i>Бетина Диянова Минкова</i>	
VULNERABILITIES IN THE CYBERSPACE AND THEIR IMPACT ON SMES .....	92
<i>Betina Diyanova Minkova</i>	
РАЗВИТИЕ НА АВТОМОБИЛНИЯ СЕКТОР НА ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЯ СЪЮЗ В ПЕРИОДА 2014-2024 Г. ....	105
<i>д-р Даниела Тинкова Маринова, Мариян Симеонов Великов</i>	
DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR IN THE PERIOD 2014-2024.....	105
<i>Daniela Tinkova Marinova, PhD, Marian Simeonov Velikov</i>	

УПРАВЛЕНИЕ НА ОРГАНИЗАЦИОННИ КОНФЛИКТИ В МЕЖДУНАРОДНА ФИРМА.....	115
<i>Емилия Георгиева Ахтаподова – Стоянова</i>	
ORGANIZATION CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AN INTERNATIONAL FIRM.....	115
<i>Emilia Georgieva Ahtapodova – Stoyanova</i>	
ВЛИЯНИЕ НА УСТОЙЧИВИТЕ ПРАКТИКИ ВЪРХУ ДОБРУВАНЕТО НА СЛУЖИТЕЛИТЕ В МЕЖДУНАРОДНАТА БИЗНЕС СРЕДА .....	130
<i>Гергана Цветанова Цветкова, Александър Георгиев Данаилов, Габриела Руменова Димова, Веселина Руменова Борисова</i>	
IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING IN THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT.....	130
<i>Gergana Tsvetanova Tsvetkova, Aleksandar Georgiev Danailov, Gabriela Rumenova Dimova, Veselina Rumenova Borisova</i>	
БИЗНЕС МОДЕЛЪТ НА LIDL ЗА УСТОЙЧИВО МЕЖДУНАРОДНО РАЗВИТИЕ.....	144
<i>Яница Мариянова Димитрова</i>	
LIDL'S BUSINESS MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	144
<i>Yanitsa Mariyanova Dimitrova</i>	
ПРИЛОЖЕНИЕ НА ПРИНЦИПИТЕ НА ГЕЩАЛТ В ДИЗАЙНА НА ВИЗУАЛНИ МАРКЕТИНГОВИ КАМПАНИИ.....	155
<i>Емилия Веселинова Петрова</i>	
APPLICATION OF GESTALT PRINCIPLES IN THE DESIGN OF VISUAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS .....	155
<i>Emilia Veselinova Petrova</i>	
МАРКЕТИНГОВИ СТРАТЕГИИ В МОДНАТА ИНДУСТРИЯ ЗА ПРИВЛИЧАНЕ НА МЕЖДУНАРОДНА АУДИТОРИЯ.....	170
<i>Анета Иванова Лазарова</i>	
MARKETING STRATEGIES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY TO ATTRACT AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE.....	170
<i>Aneta Ivanova Lazarova</i>	

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- Eligibility criteria: current bachelor's, master's and doctoral students in Bulgarian or foreign universities studying in Economics.
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- The text of the article should be structured in parts, following the format for writing scientific texts **IMRAD** (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion). Additional sections are allowed if they fit the research concept.
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