

Mapping the Obstructive Narratives on China-CEEC Cooperation

Aleksandar Mitić

Abstract

Since 2012, rising cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries has induced both enthusiasm among participating countries and worry in the West about its economic, geopolitical and normative implications. Particularly over the last half-decade, China-CEEC projects have faced intensive monitoring, increasing criticism and attempts at derailment. These projects have been depicted as a “concrete threat” to Western liberal democracy, as being “non-transparent”, “undermining EU regulations” and supporting “illiberal regimes in Eastern Europe”.

How is the obstructive narrative on China-CEEC cooperation crafted? The paper analyses critical think-tank, media and policymaking reports focused on China-CEEC cooperation in order to discern frames and to map the resulting contending narratives. Furthermore, the analysis extends to the methods used to construct the narratives and their ramifications. It draws from research on strategic communication, framing and narratives, referring also to securitization and the concepts of hybrid threats and resilience.

The results show that the construction of the obstructive narrative is based on frames exploiting the crafted imagery of China’s “systemic ills” and “geopolitical ambitions” and their projection to China-CEEC cooperation and projects.

Our findings could enrich understanding of the current and potential future dynamics of the China-CEEC cooperation network, as well as of the external influencers and their tactics. From the point of view of China-CEEC, these results can serve both as a lesson and an insight into the way towards better monitoring, evaluation and crafting of strategic communication response.

Keywords: *China, Central and Eastern Europe, Belt and Road Initiative, China-U.S. relations, strategic communication, strategic narrative*

1. Narrative Roadblocks on the New Silk Road

Since 2012, the expansion of China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) cooperation has attracted widespread interest in Western policy circles, enlisting reactions from awe to distrust. While the China-CEEC platform provided considerable results and brought forward unprecedented levels and channels of cooperation, its perception and portrayal in Western media and think-tank reports, policy papers and debates has turned incrementally negative, in line with the overall depiction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

As implementation of BRI grew both in Asia and Europe, Western European and U.S. media, think-tanks and officials, in fact, started using a negative critical discourse on the initiative. Several frames could be distinguished in these assessments (Mitić, 2017). First, that the BRI is “illiberal” and “authoritarian” or promoting “illiberal” international order and values. Second, that the BRI is “disruptive” – disrupting and changing global structure of “value chain”, and thus impacting on the world economy. The third set painted the BRI as “divisive” or stirring division among countries vying for Chinese investment. The fourth set of frames depicted BRI as “geopolitical” or aiming to increase influence in regions such as Central Asia and the CEE. Finally, the fifth depicted BRI as “ineffective”, either arguing about a lack of concrete implementation results or predicting a dark future for the project.

Such portrayal has been at full odds with China’s own BRI strategic narrative, as envisaged by its president Xi Jinping since he revealed the initiative in Almaty and Jakarta in 2013. China has framed the initiative as “win-win”, “mutually-beneficial cooperation”, “sharing the fruits of development”, with the objective of building a “community of shared future for mankind” (Xi, 2014, 2017). This vision, in the words of Xi Jinping, encompasses “cooperative, collective and common security”, respect for multilateralism and the complexities of multipolarity, the central role of the UN, and calls for respect of “territorial integrity”, “sovereignty” and “non-interference in internal affairs”. Furthermore, it rules against “Cold-War mentality”, “zero-sum-games”, “winner-takes-all”, “unilateralism” and “law of the jungle”.

The Belt and Road Initiative is, indeed, a complex narrative which can be seen as a system narrative (as it presents an alternative vision to the existing world order), an identity narrative (about the projection of China’s values and power) and an issue narrative (about specific infrastructure and investments objectives envisioned by the BRI).

In practice, cooperation with CEE countries mirrored China's efforts in other BRI regions. At the same time, it raised enthusiasm among participating countries and worry in the West about its economic, geopolitical and normative implications. Indeed, over the last half-decade, China-CEEC BRI-related projects have faced intensive monitoring, increasing criticism and attempts at derailment.

Based on observation and analysis of BRI framing by critical Western media, non-governmental and policy circles, we can distinguish several phases in the projection of this negative strategic narrative. These phases have evolved from the (1) original identification and early monitoring of the initiative, towards (2) the questioning of its strategic intent, (3) the expression of worry about its effect, (4) warning about the “BRI threat” and, finally, (5) the call to action against BRI-related projects. While the phases of identification and questioning were more present in the first three years of the project, since 2016 we are witnessing a shift towards worry, warning and call to action against BRI projects. The BRI-related projects are depicted as a “concrete threat” to Western liberal democracy, as being “non-transparent”, “undermining EU regulations” and supporting “illiberal regimes in Eastern Europe”.

The construction of threat frames to form obstructive narratives has been particularly active and damaging in relation to BRI-related initiatives in CEE countries. Appeals have been made to apply stricter regulations of Chinese investments or altogether avoid them, with the prospect of reconsidering participation in the network. In Berlin, German analysts warned that “China's rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe's values and interests” (Benner et al., 2018). In Washington, China was labelled, along with Russia, a “sharp power” – one that “that pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries” (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). In Brussels, then European Union Commissioner Johannes Hahn warned that Beijing could turn countries in the region into “Trojan horses” that would one day be European Union members (Politico, 2018). In the context of EU membership or candidacy of CEE countries, such framing puts a considerable strain on cooperation with China (Zakić & Šekarić, 2021; Vučić, 2020).

How is the obstructive narrative on China-CEEC cooperation crafted? The intention of this paper is to analyse the frames and map the resulting contending narratives on China-CEEC cooperation which are present in the discourse of Western think-tanks, research institutes, media, NGO and policymaking circles. Furthermore, the analysis will extend to the methods used and the implications of narratives. Strategic frames will be sought within a dozen think-tank, policy and media reports focusing on China-CEEC cooperation.

2. (De)constructing Strategic Narratives

We live in an era of geopolitical disruption. True, the world order has not arrived at a critical juncture, but the dependence paths are not anymore solely leading through the post-World War II Western liberal norms, even less through the *rapport-de-force* of the post-Cold War American-led US world order. Consensus is growing about the end of the “American century” and about the end of the “old order”. Yet, despite China's rise, Russia's awakening, the EU's identity crisis and the US decline, we are equally away from the transformation of the “old order” into a new one, albeit likely a multipolar one. In the CEE region, and particularly in the Western Balkans, major geopolitical players aim to extend their influence and garner local support. In such context, it is understandable that various players wish to legitimize their international status and leverage through political, military, economic or cultural might – and project it to the world public through strategic communication.

Strategic communication, a concept of organized persuasion, represents a „system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organizations in order to advance their missions, by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, developing and implementing ideas and attitudes which, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behavior or opinion”. (Mitić, 2016, p. 9). To achieve legitimacy through strategic communication, organizations need trust, social capital and networks to project their discourse, narrative and power (Mitić & Atlagić, 2017). They do so through framing processes, which are „critical to the two fundamental aims of strategic political communication” – campaigning and governing (Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2015, p. 391).

“Framing” – as “selection and salience” in order “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52) is a rational rhetorical strategy used by politicians to “angle” arguments presented to the general public (Leimbigler & Lammert, 2016) as frames have the capacity to provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding.

Hallahan argues that “strategic framing involves the purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates, and communications professionals” which goals are “to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain a favorable response” (Hallahan, 2008, p. 4855). Strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication campaigns which seek to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan, 2008, p. 4856). Selectively punctuating some elements and hiding others points to the importance of strategic action in framing and to the potential conflict that might arise among different actors promoting their frames (Fiss & Zajac, 2006, p. 1174).

Yet frames cannot be fully understood without narratives, just as narratives cannot function without frames. In the process of strategic communication, organizations thus use frames and discourse to shape strategic narratives – “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behavior of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 248). These narratives are a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 3). Strategic narratives, however, also face limitations: from the formation of the strategic narrative, to its projection and reception. This is particularly true in international environments, in which great powers must face not only a complex international environment but also a complex media ecology as well as frequent or even permanent contestation by other actors.

Frames are largely used as either “opportunity” or “threat”. In the case of BRI and China-CEEC cooperation, while the intention of Beijing has been to frame cooperation as an opportunity, it has largely been defined as a “threat” by Western policy and media circles. This is in line with the constructivist theory of securitization, which implies a “securitizing actor” who mobilizes “an articulated assemblage of

practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.)” in order to “prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object” (Balzacq, 2011, p. 3). The actor presents it with “such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development”. (Balzacq, 2011, p. 3). Through the perception created in the process, the “securitarian actors could find the legitimacy to address an issue through the tools they present as adequate” (Balzacq et al., 2016). Thus, as Roselle argues, “a potential threat, such as the rise of China, is only seen as a threat when the audience believes it to be so and accepts this interpretation” (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 79).

In this context, two further concepts are of importance, as they are prominently used in relation to China’s and Russia’s influence – “hybrid threats” and “resilience”. The Helsinki-based European Center for Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, supported by EU and NATO member countries, argues hybrid threats are “coordinated and synchronised action, that deliberately targets democratic states’ and institutions systemic vulnerabilities” – which are created by “historical memory, legislation, old practices, geostrategic factors, strong polarisation of society, technological disadvantages or ideological differences” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2017). The aim is to “influence different forms of decision making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level to favour and/or gain the agent’s strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2017).

In order to fight these hybrid threats, EU/NATO political and security mechanisms point to the importance of “resilience” – an “ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks” (European Commission, 2012, p. 5).

3. Mapping the Obstructive Narratives on China-CEEC Cooperation

The results of our analysis show that obstructive frames used to describe China-CEEC cooperation fall largely into two categories – crafted imageries of Beijing’s “systemic ills” and “geopolitical ambition”. They also allow to distinguish some of the key methods used to construct the narratives, as well as their ramifications.

3.1. “Systemic ills”

The “systemic ills” grouping includes representations of flaws which are perceived by the authors of critical frames as endemic to China’s political and economic structure, values, rules, norms and practices, and considered as inherent and embedded in BRI-related projects. In this grouping, we can identify several strategic frames.

3.1.1. “China identifies weak states where it can foster (pre-existent) elite capture”

According to this frame, particularly vulnerable to Chinese influence are states which have “weak state institutions” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 1), where China can “exacerbate governance shortfalls, undermine political and economic stability” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 5). These are countries which feature “elite capture” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 1), where “business deals are mostly negotiated with political and economic elites” (Smith & Juola, 2020, p. 9) which are thus rewarded. According to this frame, “elite capture” and “Chinese influence” are mutual “facilitators”: “chronic crony capitalism, where elites have embraced China for personal or financial gain, has facilitated Chinese political influence” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 13), but also “the ease with which Beijing has facilitated elite capture plays an important part in China’s ability to cultivate key decision-makers” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 27). Indeed, the framing argues, “Chinese leaders have capitalised on a political affinity with elites in captured states” (Shopov, 2021, p. 2).

3.1.2. “China encourages the illiberal and authoritarian practices of the elites”

According to this frame, state elites in “vulnerable countries” seek “political ties” with the “leaders of authoritarian regimes” (Smith & Juola, 2020, p. 13). Thus, according to this frame, “in his search for partners in advancing his illiberal model of governance at home” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 27) and as “Hungary slides toward authoritarianism, the government of PM Viktor Orban has embraced Beijing” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 12), which he views as “an alternative to the West, where his counterparts have been highly critical of Hungary’s democratic backsliding”, while “he and other Hungarians speak warmly of China’s economic development model” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 27). In Serbia, relations with China are “bound to have serious political consequences, especially for democracy, media freedom and other liberties”, as “China will not call out (Serbian President Aleksandar) Vucic’s increasingly autocratic regime” (Hartwell, 2021, p. 15). Indeed, China’s influence “has facilitated Serbia’s tilt toward soft authoritarianism by bolstering the fortunes of illiberal Serbian leaders” (Shullman, 2019, p. 29). Thus, China is “potentially able to severely disrupt political and civic systems in the region” (Hajdu et al., 2021, p. 16), and “Beijing’s support for illiberal actors, the presentation of its model as a superior catalyst of industrial development, and its export of authoritarian tools and practices have the undeniable effect of eroding democratic norms in many countries” (Shullman, 2019, p. 7). China’s “no strings attached finance makes no distinction between authoritarian and democratic governments, and does not condition aid on reform and compliance with Western development practices” (Mardell, 2019). As a result, “Beijing’s footprint is a normative challenge to EU influence (...) it does provide an alternate model of non-conditional development that many in the region find appealing” (Mardell, 2019).

3.1.3. “China profits from non-transparency which corrupts the elites”

According to this frame, “China’s business model thrives in environments where local institutions and regulatory frameworks are weak” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 6), where it is “hard to vet or monitor Chinese economic and political activities” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 13). Thus, “there is a lack of public scrutiny and transparency that often accompanies Chinese investments” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 6), such as poor investment screening mechanisms, weak regulatory, law enforcement, anti-corruption or judicial agencies (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 13), no regard to environmental impact

assessments or to engagement with local communities (Prelec, 2021, p. 6). China takes advantage of these processes (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 10), which, in turns, “fuels local corruption and kleptocracy” (Brattberg et al., p. 6). As a result, it has “corrosive effects” (Shullman, 2019, p. 44).

These “deals (...) contradict the EU’s standards of transparency” (Smith & Juola, 2020, p. 9). “China’s economic practices (...) fail to meet European standards, threaten to undermine EU conditionality and regulatory standards” (Mardell, 2019) and increase “the region’s overall susceptibility to corruption” (Hänsel & Feyerabend, 2018, p. 6).

Both Beijing and the elite’s profit. Of particular concern, according to the framing, are China’s key investments, such as the Port of Piraeus and the Budapest–Belgrade railway. Indeed, countries such as Hungary have even “resisted tightening investment screening or abiding by EU requirements on public tenders for fear of turning off Chinese investments” (Brattberg, 2021, p. 62).

The “opacity” of projects leads to “inflated costs” and “risky debt”, undermines “sustainable development”, “nourishes kleptocracy” and “threatens the independence of countries that have welcomed Chinese investment and either turned a blind eye to malign interference or remain unaware of its consequences” (Shullman, 2019, p. 71).

Furthermore, “it does squeeze EU business interests and fuel practices that are at variance with efforts to combat corruption and promote EU standards in the region” (Mardell, 2019).

3.1.4. “China funds activities which lack regulation and endanger societies, such as problematic energy/ecological investments”

According to the frame, the Chinese investments are not respecting national and EU legal requirements and obligations. In Serbia, several towns “affected by high levels of pollution have one thing in common: their plants have been taken over by Chinese investors over the past half-decade” (Prelec, 2021, p. 4). These investments have led to “manifest increase in pollution levels, sparking great concerns among local populations and turning many citizens into environmental activists” (Prelec, 2021, p. 3). Beijing “is good at funding projects that other have turned up their noses at. Coal plants, for instance” (Mardell, 2019) – its “loans have financed coal-

fired power plants in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina that have been criticized by the EU for worsening the region’s air pollution” (Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans, 2021).

3.1.5. “China shuts down critical voices and exploits low levels of resilience”

This frame argues that China’s activities are affecting pluralistic, economic, technological and cyber-security resilience. Beijing exploits “weak civil society”, “oligarchic influence and control over media and nongovernmental organizations” (Brattberg, 2021, p. 6). Furthermore, in these societies, “underfunded research institutions that accept Chinese funding provide Beijing-friendly voices and help justify questionable business arrangements” (Brattberg, 2021, p. 13). As a result, Beijing “has been able to steer public and elite discourse in favour of China’s goals” (Shullman, 2019, p. 39). There is a lack of discussion, public scrutiny and understanding of China, its motives and tactics. These include “pervasive official propaganda, funding of research and academic institutions, and use of seemingly innocuous cultural and other soft power institutions to cultivate foreign partners and squelch anti-China narratives” (Shullman, 2019, p. 5).

Ways through which China seeks to control the “China narrative” include a variety of “official propaganda”, research funding and “soft power institutions” (Shullman, 2019, p. 5). These include Confucius centres, the Belt and Road centers, the 17+1 network, funding of think-tanks such as Asiaskop in Prague, creation of the China-CEEC Institute in Budapest, ownership of media, such as the Empresa group in the Czech Republic, as well as attempts at academic influence at Charles University in Prague.

Furthermore, attempts are made to exploit technological vulnerability, with the Huawei 5G network (Hajdu et al., 2021, p. 82) and the potential role of Chinese technology firms in Serbia’s surveillance ecosystem, “which presents another avenue of potential CCP influence in the country”. (Shullman, 2019, p. 28). In turn, this “undermines governance, prosperity and open discourse, encouraging democratic backsliding” (Shullman, 2019, p. 6).

3.1.6. The “systemic ills” strategic narrative

These strategic frames, thus, form a strategic narrative on China’s cooperation in the CEE. According to this narrative, China (1) first identifies weak states where it can foster elite capture, (2) then promotes the illiberal and authoritarian practices of the elites (3) profits from non-transparency which corrupts the elites, (4) funds activities which lack regulation and endanger societies, such as problematic energy/ecological investments, and then (5) shuts down critical voices (weak civil society, media, academia) and exploits low levels of resilience.



Graph 1: “Systemic ills” strategic narrative

Source: author’s compilation
Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

3.2. “Geopolitical ambition”

The “geopolitical ambition” grouping includes representations which are considered as part of China’s geostrategic objectives in its rise to global leadership. Several strategic frames could be identified.

3.2.1. “China is sowing division within the EU and in the transatlantic relationship”

According to this frame, China “aims to assert its political influence – not just in individual states but on the geopolitical stage – by stoking problems and complicating consensus in the West on policy issues of importance to Beijing” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 69). It seeks to leverage “political influence to have a wider regional impact such as indirectly influencing European consensus and transatlantic alignment on particular issues of concern to Beijing such as human rights and the situations in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or Taiwan” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 6). Thus, Hungary and Greece several times blocked critical EU statements on China.

3.2.2. “China is using malign influence to either distract EU candidate states from EU integration or to prepare them for Trojan horse roles”

According to this frame, “China expects some Western Balkan states to join the EU in the foreseeable future. Today’s investments mean that more ‘friends of China’ will be sitting around the negotiating table in Brussels and defusing problematic issues for China, such as human rights” (Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018, p. 34). On the other side, “some observers express concern that deeper cooperation of a dubious nature with China could, in the medium to long term, threaten Serbia’s prospects for EU integration” (Hartwell, 2021, p. 15). Serbia is “one of the only countries in Central and Eastern Europe that defends China on highly controversial political matters, especially human rights” (Hartwell, 2021, p. 14).

3.2.3. “China is encouraging debt traps”

According to this frame, China seeks to profit from debts owed by its partners, particularly in the cases of infrastructure projects, such as highways and railways. Hungary’s “growing debt burden to Beijing will be left for some future leader to deal with” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 37). Montenegro has become a “textbook example of debt-trap diplomacy, with its debts amounting to an excruciatingly high 80 per cent of GDP” (Shopov, 2021, p. 10). This will lead to “financial dependence on China” (Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018, p. 37).

3.2.4. “China is exploiting the pandemic to yield influence through vaccine diplomacy”

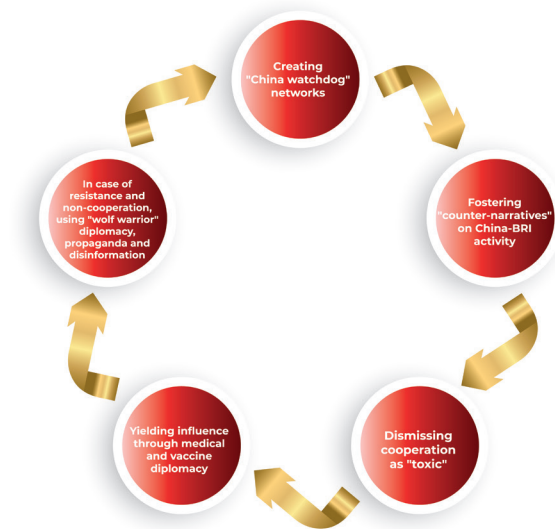
According to this frame, “China quickly sought to take advantage of the (COVID-19) pandemic to promote its influence abroad” by sending medical supplies and teams around the world (Is China’s COVID-19, 2021). A “Chinese Medical Diplomacy Index” by the Washington D.C. Center for Strategic and International Studies, measuring the success of China’s efforts, indicated that Serbia ranked first in the world, with Hungary being third and the Czech Republic seventh, while the “Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy Index” had Hungary at the eighth place (Is China’s COVID-19, 2021).

3.2.5. “China is adopting an aggressive anti-Western ‘wolf warrior’ discourse through propaganda and disinformation”

According to this frame, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s “propaganda (...) gained an offensive edge, spreading disinformation over the origin of the virus, engaging in ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy including attacking other countries’ responses and fighting social media ‘battles’ with representatives of foreign governments” (Karaskova et al, 2020, p. 7). “Wolf warrior diplomacy” is “the most aggressive form of high-profile diplomacy carried out by Chinese state actors (...) held in a confrontational manner and does not avoid aggressive rhetoric and direct or indirect threats (...) a specific case of coercive diplomacy employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” (Urbancova, 2021, p. 4). These methods have been used in the CEE primarily against those engaged in “challenging the One-China policy”, calling for “exclusion of Huawei from 5G networks” and “support of the pro-democratic movement in Hong Kong”, “reporting the PRC’s abuse of human rights” and criticizing “the PRC’s role in the COVID-19 pandemic” (Urbancova, 2021, p. 6–13).

3.2.6. The “geopolitical ambition” Strategic Narrative

These strategic frames, thus, form the following strategic narrative: China is (1) sowing division within the EU and the transatlantic community in order to obtain policy favours; (2) using malign influence to either distract candidate states from EU integration or to prepare them for Trojan horse roles if they adhere to the Union; (3) entangling partners with debt traps, and/or (4) medical and vaccine diplomacy; and (5) in case of non-cooperation, adopting an aggressive anti-Western “wolf warrior” discourse through propaganda and disinformation.



Graph 2: “Geopolitical ambition” strategic narrative

Source: author’s compilation
Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

3.3. Methods of Fostering the Obstructive Narrative on China-CEEC Cooperation

The analysis can help point to the methods used to foster the obstructive narrative on China-CEEC cooperation.

3.3.1. Creating “China watchdog” Networks

A number of frames point to the necessity to create internal, bottom-up and transnational networks of “China watchdogs”: “fostering a cross-national network of influencers who will continue to compare notes, learn across national boundaries, and spur a genuinely regional conversation about China’s rise and its far-reaching implications” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 2). In order to fight China’s influence, there is a need to strengthen civil society capacity – “labor unions, environmental groups, robust media, vocal opposition parties and local communities” – to ensure “accountability” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 71). Since, in Serbia for example, “all but one of the ‘China experts’ appear to parrot the rhetoric of Chinese Communist Party officials (...) an effective step Brussels could take to counter potentially pernicious effects of Chinese influence is to simply fund more research on China” (Mardell, 2019). Furthermore, “the U.S. and its partners should raise awareness of

CCP influence tactics within private enterprise, academia, and government, and bolster the capacity of civil society, political parties, and independent media to expose and counter such tactics” (Shullman, 2021, p. 9). The first response for EU and NATO should be to “map out” China’s activities (...) through “regular, well-structured and comprehensive monitoring and analysis” (Shopov, 2021, p. 21). The CEE countries should “support the expansion of the East StratCom Task Force” – an EU-based network of “disinformation watchers” – “to vigorously counter Chinese propaganda”. (Karaskova, 2021).

3.3.2. Fostering Counter-narratives on China-BRI Activity

Frames point to the necessity to foster counter-narratives on China and BRI activity in the CEE. Some of these include “countering China’s claims about its economic benevolence by pointing out that long-term economic cooperation with China has generated few tangible results”, and “enhancing awareness that Beijing’s mask and vaccine diplomacy was largely conducted on a commercial –not humanitarian –basis” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 73). Furthermore, China’s “assertiveness” is painted as a “wolf warrior type of Chinese diplomacy” (Shopov, 2021, p. 47).

3.3.3. Dismissing Cooperation as “toxic”

Cooperative countries and leaders in the CEE are dismissed as “authoritarian” and willing to work with the “alike authoritarian” authorities in Beijing. They are being criticized for being flawed, with weak institutions, fragile civil societies and elite capture, with “clientelistic” and “kleptocratic” practices (Prelec, 2021, p. 3). Concrete projects and proposals are labelled dangerous and inappropriate – such as cooperation with Huawei on 5G or “smart city” systems: “In contrast to the United States, Europe only fully woke up to the dangers of Chinese technology during the COVID-19 crisis (...) in short, Chinese tech suppliers cannot be trusted because of the illiberal nature of the People’s Republic” (Larsen, 2020).

3.3.4. Escalating Diplomatic Confrontation

The critical discourse on cooperation with China escalated in several CEE countries. Streets are being renamed after a variety of political opponents to the Beijing authorities, thus raising “city-level” politics “to become an official state-level diplomatic

issue” (Shopov, 2021, p. 24). Abandonment of the China-CEEC cooperation is encouraged, and there are calls for increased anti-China sanctions on grounds of human rights and values: “national dignity and values in policy, which should not be sacrificed to business (Shopov, 2021, p. 24)”. In some countries, such as Poland, parliamentarians and officials have prepared resolutions and published op-eds in international media targeting China-related projects. There is an increase of political contacts with “the Dalai Lama, Tibetan exile representatives and Chinese dissidents” (Dams et al., 2021, p. 21) (...) stirring up of “China-unfriendly public environment and rising wave of anti-communism” in the Czech Republic (Dams et al., 2021, p. 23); officials from Baltic countries, such as Estonia, are meeting with authorities in Taipei, in challenge to the “One China” policy (Tammik, 2021). Lithuania has given a green light to a “Taiwan representative office” in Vilnius (Agence France-Presse, 2021). All these events are provoking the ire of Beijing and leading to China’s retaliation, such as cancelling city cooperation or lowering diplomatic relations – as in the case of Lithuania – thus contributing to the worsening of bilateral relations and the weakening of the China-CEEC cooperation network.

3.3.5. Raising International Pressure Coalitions

Calls are made to raise international coalitions – at the EU and transatlantic level – against China’s influence: “If the Biden administration is serious about tackling global corruption and kleptocracy (...) pressure must continue at a sustained pace.” (Prelec, 2021, p. 8). “The Biden’s upcoming Democracy Summit provides an opportunity” in this sense (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 71). Successful examples of U.S. involvement is hailed: “increased pressure on regional European governments to reduce their dependence on Beijing and toe the line on issues such as 5G, Chinese ownership of ports and other strategic infrastructure, and investment screening” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 11); Romanian President Klaus Iohannis “consulted closely with the previous U.S. ambassador to Romania, Trump political appointee Adrian Zuckerman, who apparently lobbied heavily against Chinese influence” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 47). Furthermore, “United States should not shy away from pushing the EU and key member states (especially Germany, which is Hungary’s most important trading partner) to impose greater pressure on Orbán” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 72), while “Taiwan and the CEE countries can work together to counter Chinese influence operations (...) further establish regular interactions, such as

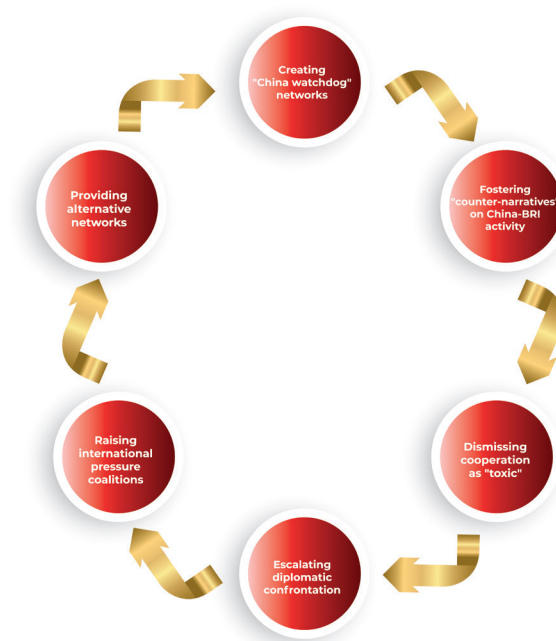
exchange scholar programs, co-hosting conferences, and research projects to provide advanced information on related issues for policymakers and the general public” (Bachulska & Pu, 2021). At the European Parliament level, cross-party coalitions have been particularly encouraged by Members of the European Parliament, who have raised on two occasions in 2021 the problem of environmental and worker rights related to Chinese investments in Serbia (Prelec, 2021, p. 8). There is even an encouragement to turnaround the China-CEEC framework into “platforms for countering, limiting or even curbing China’s heft (...) offensive instruments for targeting China with their specific demands” (Karaskova, 2020).

3.3.6. Providing Alternative Networks

Alternatives to the BRI-related China-CEEC cooperation are encouraged. In order to cope with China’s influence “efforts such as the U.S.-led Three Seas Initiative are particularly relevant and should be scaled up and expanded in scope jointly with the EU and wealthy member states like Germany” (...) and “there is a need to bolster investment in the regional infrastructure projects through the European Investment Bank, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (Brattberg et al, 2021, p. 72). For non-members, membership in international organizations, such as EU and NATO, should provide “greater resilience from the perspective of common policy solutions, centers of excellence and collective defense” (Hajdu et al., 2021, p. 16). Indeed, during 2021, two vast alternatives to the BRI have been presented – the “Build Back Better World” by the U.S. at the G7 Summit in June and the “Global Gateway” by the EU in December. Although geared at regions outside of Europe, both projects underline the line of BRI being a competitor and the necessity to challenge it.

3.3.7. The Methods of Fostering Obstructive Narratives on China-CEEC

Thus, the following methods of countering Chinese influence in CEE countries could be identified in the analysis: (1) creating “China watchdog” networks, which can monitor, identify soft spots and amplify threats, leading to the (2) “fostering of counter-narratives on China-BRI activity, (3) “dismissing cooperation as toxic”, and thus providing incentives for (4) “escalating diplomatic confrontation”, (5) “raising international pressure coalitions” and (6) “providing alternative networks”.



Graph 3: Methods of fostering obstructive narratives on China-CEEC cooperation

Source: author’s compilation
Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

3.4. Consequences of the Obstructive Narrative on China-CEEC cooperation

Consequences of the obstructive narrative in the CEEC have been different. Several countries have publicly boasted their disillusionment with Chinese investments, some have bowed to U.S. pressure over the 5G network cooperation with Huawei. Lithuania has withdrawn from the China-CEEC cooperation network. The Prague city authorities have encouraged a series of actions supporting China critics, thus attracting the ire of Beijing. On the other side, despite pressure and criticism, countries like Hungary and Serbia continue to boost cooperation with China bilaterally, but also trilaterally in the case of the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway.

In our analysis we have identified several frames regarding the consequences to the obstruction of the China-CEEC cooperation.

3.4.1 “Growing disappointment with China-CEEC cooperation in CEE countries”

According to this frame, CEE countries have “gradually become disillusioned with Beijing’s ability to deliver on its promises or the specific terms of certain investment deals” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 7). “Frustration and discontent are mounting” over cooperation, which has “disappointed all sides” and “turned out to be an empty diplomatic shell” (Brattberg et al., p. 10). Romania, meanwhile, is revising its agreement with state-owned China General Nuclear for the construction of two nuclear reactors on security consideration grounds. Similarly, in Estonia plans to build an underwater tunnel connecting Tallinn and Helsinki have been halted over security concerns about the involvement of Chinese SOEs (Stec, 2020).

3.4.2. “China is increasingly seen as a threat”

There is a rising perception of Chinese activities being perceived as “a geopolitical expansion that poses a challenge to the Western democratic system and its security” (Dams et al., 2021, p. 21.), while coverage of China-related projects in some countries is “worsening because of the China’s rising global assertiveness” (Dams et al., 2021, p. 70).

3.4.3. “Bottom-up and activist backlash rises against China-related projects”.

Municipal authorities, non-governmental groups and activists are increasingly against Chinese projects, adding pressure on national government to reverse cooperation. Chinese projects have been “rejected”, “cancelled”, “interrupted” or “reversed” by “bottom-up approaches”, “pushbacks from local and subnational actors such as trade unions or municipal politicians” (Brattberg et al., 2021, pp. 7–66). There has been a push to reverse cooperation at the city level, with the Prague-Beijing rift being the most exposed and demonstrating that “even local cooperation is not insulated from political tensions” (Hajdu et al., 2021, p. 33). Labor unions and other stakeholders protested against COSCO plans at the Port of Piraeus, suspicions were expressed over the Budapest-Belgrade railway, ecological groups have manifested against key Chinese investments in the energy sector in Serbia, “environmental concerns” have been expressed over the highway construction in Montenegro (Shopov, 2021, p. 17).

3.4.4. “Relations with China are gradually becoming an internal political matter”

According to this frame, the political shifts in some CEE countries have “replaced more China-friendly parties with governments that are more sceptical of China and keener on reaffirming ties with the United States and the EU” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 7). In Prague, “Czech public opinion now stands against China in almost all aspects, even including the economic perspectives” (Dams et al, 2021, p. 21). In Slovakia, the new government and current Slovak President Zuzana Čaputova “have already shown that they are willing to stand up against China and criticize it” (Dams et al., 2021, p. 90). In Hungary and Serbia, where cooperation with Beijing is deemed very intense, there has been a growing criticism by opposition parties on China-related matters and projects.

3.4.5. “The China-CEEC cooperation network is shrinking”

In several CEE capitals, renaming streets with political figures and connotations, as well as boosting cooperation with Taipei, has been used to provoke the ire of Beijing. Relations between China and the Czech Republic took a considerable blow in the process. According to some analysts, a “shift in alignment is certainly making waves”, signaled by Lithuania’s decision first to withdraw from the China-CEEC cooperation network and then to allow Taiwan Island’s authority to set up a representative office in Vilnius, thus violating the principle of One China and leading to the downgrading of diplomatic relations (Koleszar, 2021).

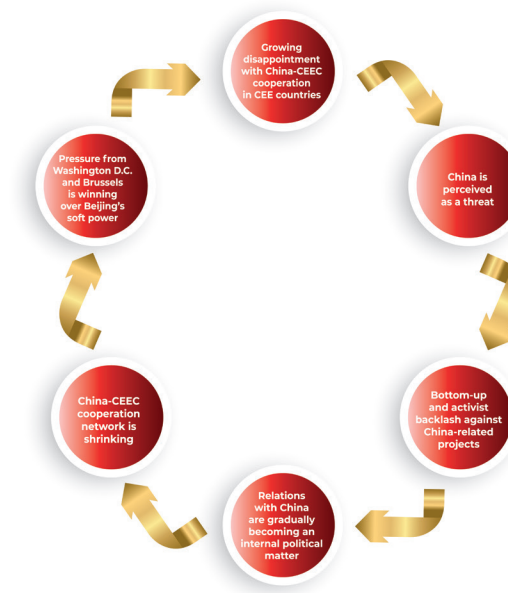
3.4.6. “Pressure from Washington D.C. and Brussels is winning over Beijing’s soft power”

According to this frame, “several (though not all) of the countries in the region have pivoted away from China and back toward the United States and the EU in recent years, due to existing security partnerships and pressure from Washington and Brussels” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 10). Some of these countries have “tightened up their investment screening frameworks in recent years after being urged to do so by the EU and the United States” and “growing pressure from Brussels and Washington has also influenced decisions to grant Chinese companies major tenders and contracts involving critical sectors or assets” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 66). “Lobbying pressure from the United States, a staunch and traditional ally of Albania, may have had something to do” with the cancelling of a deal to construct

the Albanian Arber highway “using a loan facility from Exim”, while “it is possible that a lot of concern about China in the Western Balkans stems from the lobbying efforts of Austrian and German construction companies that are worried about losing ground to newcomers from China” (Mardell, 2019). A number of CEE countries signed with the US the 5G memorandum cutting off Huawei, even drafting, like Poland, “some of the harshest regulations on 5G, proposing excluding infrastructure providers from countries with poor human rights record” (Stec, 2020). On the other side, “China’s soft power efforts appear to have had fairly little impact on improving China’s image in the region” – possibly due to “China’s inability to deliver on its economic promises, the growing international criticism of Beijing’s domestic and foreign policies, and China’s perceived role in the pandemic have all reduced the effectiveness of its public diplomacy” (Brattberg et al., 2021, p. 7). Even the considerable efforts by China during the COVID-19 pandemic have been interpreted in some countries as “propaganda hidden behind mask diplomacy”, and some have criticized China for “spreading the virus and its propaganda” (Dams et al, 2021, p. 86).

3.4.7. The Narrative on the Ramifications of Obstruction

The following strategic narrative is being constructed: (1) There is a growing disappointment with China-CEEC cooperation in CEE countries, where (2) China is increasingly seen as a threat, which leads to (3) an increasing bottom-up and activist backlash against China-related projects, while (4) relations with China are gradually becoming an internal political matter, resulting in (5) the China-CEEC cooperation network shrinking, which means that (6) pressure from Washington D.C. and Brussels is winning over Beijing’s soft power”.



Graph 4: The narrative of the consequences of obstruction

Source: author's compilation
Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

4. Concluding Remarks

In the era of increased geopolitical and ideological competition, organizations, countries – and particularly major powers – strive for international legitimacy in order to strengthen their influence capabilities. Competition between strategic narratives is even more amplified in the current international communication environment largely scented by online media and social networks. Such an ecosystem is marked by both vast opportunities for spreading messages and, at times, even more powerful threats of counter-operations of information obstruction, distraction and manipulation. Strategic communication thus plays a crucial role in today’s international affairs. Analysis of actors’ strategic communication, in particular of strategic frames which form the narratives, thus gives a considerable insight into dominant perceptions, but also potential methods of coping with arising challenges.

The aim of this paper was to synthesize the critical argumentation used against China/BRI-related projects in the CEEC. We analysed contending strategic frames present in think-tank, policy and media reports and statements focused on China-CEEC cooperation. The results show that – stemming from strategic frames – the construction of the obstructive narrative is based on the exploitation of the crafted imagery of China’s “systemic ills” and “geopolitical ambitions” and their projection to China-CEEC cooperation and BRI-related projects. We have explored the key elements of these representations and outlined a resulting narrative.

The argument is that the obstructive narrative fosters negative sentiment and views China-CEEC cooperation as toxic, undesirable and dangerous for the CEE countries. Such narrative encourages repulsion of cooperation, fosters disappointment, facilitates crippling criticism and smooths the way towards backlash against cooperation and concrete projects. We furthermore analysed the methods which are being used to craft such frames and narratives, as well as the impact on China-CEEC cooperation stemming from these activities. The analysis identifies a comprehensive, systematic and active approach aimed at obstruction.

Our findings could enrich understanding of the current and potential future dynamics of the China-CEEC cooperation network, as well as of the external influencers and their tactics. From the point of view of China-CEEC, these results can serve both as a lesson and an insight into the way towards better monitoring, evaluation and crafting of strategic communication response. The issue of strategic communication of the China-CEEC cooperation will have to be addressed at the highest political level. The response is not the sole responsibility of Beijing – the CEE countries are an undeniable factor for the communication resilience of the network. Nevertheless, it is China which faces the key dilemma on how to find right the approach. The analysis shows a concerted attempt to corner Beijing. Yet, a purely defensive approach in strategic communication is unsustainable. The dilemma is how to find the right compromise between the objective challenges and limitations – demonstrated by our analysis – with the need to find the right tone, argumentation and dynamic in the battle of narratives. That will require necessary diplomatic readjustments and addressing of weaknesses and grievances. The latter process should not be underestimated. Aligning words and deeds is of prime importance for successful strategic communication and the first barrier to obstruction, no matter how powerful the actors on either side.

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Albania's Demeanor in the China-CEEC Cooperation: Overcoming the "3S" Dilemma

Marsela Musabelliu

Abstract

In 2012, after the signing of the Agreement of the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) mechanism in Warsaw, ambitions for a platform that would intensify cooperation were at the highest levels. Almost a decade later, there can be conducted a "reality-check" and achievements and shortcomings can be placed into a clearer perspective. This paper analyzes the role and position of Albania into the "16+1" cooperation in a political context. Albania is one of the founding members of the China-CEEC cooperation, yet, throughout the years Albania's role in it has been quite marginal. Little is known in the country about the platform, and many have argued that there is plenty of untapped potential, particularly from the Albanian side. The initial enthusiasm of the Albanian political establishment on the platform and the several signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) has been slowly transformed into a more subtle and noninvolvement role, especially in the past 4 years.

Inexplicably, the current Chinese economic and political importance on the world stage is not properly perceived or portrayed in Albania, thus the actions and reactions of Albanian political establishments (previous and present) appear hesitant when dealing with People's Republic of China (PRC) as a whole, or with regards to Chinese initiatives in the region. By observing the behavior and declarations of Albanian politicians there can be individualized some patterns that fit the events. There are identified three main features of this Albanian demeanor in the China-CEEC mechanism: symptomatic, *sui generis*, and suggestive (3S).

Keywords: *China-CEEC, China-Albania relations, "3S", political developments*

1. Introduction

In the China-CEEC platform, some countries are performing better and are benefiting to a greater degree than others are – and Albania is somehow lagging behind. From a small country perspective and from a developing country perspective, what the China-CEEC platform has to offer should be alluring for policymakers, and if it this is not the case, then it means that politics dictates a different trend.

Small countries face some deep dilemmas in their behavior in international relations, especially if there is present a great powers rivalry. The main dilemma is the one of being forced to take sides, especially if there is present a great power rivalry. Keohane (1969, p. 296) suggests the following definition with the caveat that in all cases statesmen's attitudes must have considerable basis in reality:

"A Great Power is a state whose leaders consider that it can, alone, exercise a large, perhaps decisive, impact on the international system; a secondary power is a state whose leaders consider that alone it can exercise some impact, although never in itself decisive, on that system; a middle power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution; a small power is a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system... The small and middle powers' leaders realize that although they may be able to do little together, they can do virtually nothing separate."

He argues that in analyzing the attitude of a given power (be this great, middle or small power) there cannot be relied only on purely objective criteria, the psychological dimension must be added for the sake of clarity as well as in recognition of the fact that "objective reality" does not determine statesmen's behavior directly.

The statesmen of Albania have a very intense history when dealing with Great Powers, and this attitude is perpetuating also in current times. The need of Albania to be under the good graces of any Great Power has been justified by local political elites as the absolute need of a small country to be in a given sphere of influence for security, political and economic stability, as well as international support. The most used phrase by any Albanian politician since 1991 is "Euro-Atlantic orientation". In a fluid international system, however, the small state must still maneuver in order to prosper, if not to survive. Maneuvering involves making alliances or finding an

appropriate alternative policy (Keohane 1969, p. 300). Nevertheless, Albania is not maneuvering in the 21st century, even though it has been in the waiting list of the European Union membership, for at least 20 years.

2. Albania, PRC and the China-CEEC Cooperation Mechanism

China and Albania share a long and unique history in cooperation and bilateral relations. The political and ideological common backgrounds of China and Albania set the very start of their close relations in the mid-50s. The origin and further strengthening of political relations between China and Albania are to be found in the common interests and understanding of the two ruling parties in the respective countries at the heights of the Cold War. In almost two decades, China prioritized Albania as a recipient of foreign aid, and no other country in times of peace received from China such economic and military assistance, proportionate to population (Marku, 2017, p. 4). After the 1990s, Albania had difficulties re-adjusting the social, economic and political structures. Concerning PRC, the only reminiscences Albanian people had been the "tales" of the elderly about the Chinese support. Albanian officials and specialists who visited China during the "Golden Age" of the Sino-Albanian relations could now speak freely and share their experience.

At the beginning of the 21st century, perception and attitude started to shift especially from the business circles. For the first time in decades, Albanians were traveling again to China, this time for business opportunities and in the majority of cases, the trip to China entailed purchase of locally produced merchandise. From 2001 to 2010, Albania witnessed an ever-growing presence of Chinese commodities in its markets, and this is the decade when China made some headlines in the local media, however, these were isolated cases and did not have any considerable impact on the people's perception of PRC (Musabelliu, 2019, p. 3).

In 2013, the Socialist Party led by Edi Rama won the election of by substituting the Right-wing Democratic Party in power since 2005 becoming so the Prime Minister (PM). In Albania the "16+1" is linked in every aspect of commentaries and opinions to PM Edi Rama. In fact, for Albanian media and politicians, the China-CEEC summits are the occasion where PM Rama and some of his cabinet, meet their Chinese counterparts and discuss potential cooperation (Kryeministria, 2019).

Being the Albanian Prime Minister a very polarizing figure for the public opinion, his actions and behavior are scrutinized based on his political persona and not based on the deeds of the day. However, if we try to separate the policymaker from the person, the results are the same – there is plenty of untapped potential in this Sino-Albanian relation. When analyzing the timeframe and official declarations of both parties it can be implied that if in the first four Summits (2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015) there was still some possibility of concrete cooperation especially in large scale project, from 2016 onwards there is mainly bilateral talks on general protocols and potential areas of cooperation in the future. It is our argument that starting from the Riga Summit in 2016 the situation is different. The Albanian PM appears less positive in his declarations, and he does not mention any of the projects exposed in years prior (Arbri Road or the Blue Corridor).

Most importantly, as of 2021, Edi Rama is the only Albanian leader since 1991 that has not had a one-on-one meeting with a Chinese leader and no official state visit in PRC.

3. A Symptomatic Behavior

The attitude of the Albanian political establishment towards PRC and the China-CEEC mechanism is symptomatic of deeper developments in the internal political scene. In the Albanian public discourse, when concerning foreign nations, the characters of public domain are in the overwhelming majority politicians. Be they in position of power or opposition, current or previous, known or relatively unknown to the public, they are the first to comment and analyze and to a certain extent, they are the ones who shape public perception via their actions, reactions and declarations. The country's political scene might be polarized internally, however when the relation with major powers is under scrutiny, the Albanian political class is all united in on the Euro-Atlantic front. This attitude has deepened a "Cold War Mentality" or the presentation in Albania of the West versus East narrative, where they encompass values, political direction, or strategic alliances. This line of approach is visibly strong and persistent: the either/or, with/against, which does not fit a multipolar world and especially a political rigidity which could lead to enormous missed opportunities in the framework of the China-CEEC mechanism.

During 2014 and 2015, Edi Rama visited PRC on three different occasions: first in Tianjin for the occasion of the annual Summer Davos Forum (MFAPRC, 2014) next in Suzhou for the China-CEEC High-Level meeting (SCPRC, 2015). However, what the media reported extensively was an exhibition of his paintings during a visit in Hong Kong (Koha, 2015). These were also the times when it was made public by the Albanian Government that one of the most important arteries of the country's roads would be built by a Chinese company. "Arbri Road", part of the old Egnatia Road and now an important segment of Pan European Corridor VIII, is considered one of the most important investments to modernize the country's road infrastructure (RTSH, 2019). Labeled in Albania as a political saga, the run for the construction of this highway was one of the major electoral promises of Edi Rama and in 2015, the Albanian government that he led, approved a special law offering China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) the competences for completion of the Arbri Road under a concession deal. China EXIM Bank would provide the financing of the project (Erebara, 2015).

In signing the Memorandum of Understanding with Exim Bank, PM Edi Rama would note in his online social platform: "The Memorandum of Understanding with Chinese Exim Bank for the opening of a Chinese-funded project site in Albania was signed last night. The first project to open a new era of cooperation between Albania and China will be the Arbri Road, which will launch next year." The title of the posting was an auspicious "the first fruits of a new era" (Musabelliu, 2019, p. 7). However, two years later, the winner of the tender for the construction of this road was "Gjoka Konstruksion" – an Albanian-run company was the apparent winner of the late October 2017 tender, facing no rivalry from two other Albanian companies disqualified for not submitting financial bids, according to the Public Procurement Agency (Contract negotiations to, 2017).

The political controversy around this sour deal was trivial; the former leader of the opposition was blaming the government for corruptive practices, which ultimately made the Chinese company abandon the project, and claiming that the Chinese Government had started an investigation on the issue. Rama initially stated that what his government wanted was a Private Public Partnership (PPP) and not a loan type of involvement. Ultimately, from other experts it was declared it was not feasible financially for the Chinese company since they expected a return on investment for 12 years (15,000 vehicles per day) which is not possible for a small country like

Albania. The other major deal that initiated but did not go through between China and Albania was the project for the construction of the Blue Corridor motorway. This project is projected to connect the entire eastern shore of the Adriatic and Ionian – from Trieste in Italy to Greece via Croatia, Montenegro and Albania. In the Suzhou High-Level meeting in 2015, Albania (and Montenegro) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China Pacific Construction Group for the construction of this motorway (Garaca, 2015). There are two major projects, backed by two MoUs that never materialized into actual deeds. From 2016 and onwards there is always less information and discussions on Chinese investments and/or Chinese backed projects in Albania.

The COVID-19 pandemic put a hold to all exchanges, however, in many separate occasions medical supplies arrived in Albania during the lockdown period and beyond (China donates medical, 2020).

This help during the outburst of the pandemic did not stop Albanian politics to be again quite antagonistic towards PRC, especially by the end of the year.

The political turmoil of 2020 was an escalation of events besides the pandemic. On October 2, 2020, Albanian PM received a letter from the President of the United States (US), Donald Trump. It was not difficult to understand the clear note sent by the White House and there was no necessity of reading between the lines, the message was loud and clear and by all considerations, the final target of it was China and its initiatives in Albania. The letter started by commending Rama's leadership role for the Balkan region and throughout Europe in exposing China's influence in the region. The letter continued: "Your outspoken support for secure telecommunications networks is setting a strong example...that paves the way for others in the Balkans to do the same. I am also pleased by Albania's strong role in the Three Seas Initiative – as a fair alternative to China's 17+1 format, which I urge you to exit." (ATA, 2020).

Feng, Chen & Xu (2019) argue that the US is "back" to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and with the theme of competition between great powers returning to a geopolitical center, China has become a "major player" in CEE. In 2018, Wess Mitchell, an Assistant Secretary from the U.S. Department of State, declared that the US would intensify its efforts in Central and Eastern Europe in 2019. He further argued that part of the reason why "their (US) rivals are gaining ground in Central and Eastern Europe is that for too long the West did not take competition seriously there."

And so it happened, in 2019 the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Hungary, Slovakia and Poland and in 2020 again in Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland. As he urged Eastern European countries to reject Huawei, he also made sure to warn that China is in "some ways worse" than their former Soviet Union rulers – emphasizing so another trait of the Cold War mentality. Chen (2019, p. 3) argues that the US puts its emphasis on CEE to curb Huawei, because small and medium-sized countries in CEE are much easier to "deal with" than developed Western European countries. This quotation has proved to be accurate, apparently for the Trump administration, Albania is easier to "deal with" and especially to start handling a previously not expressed idea, the one of direct opposition to the China-CEEC mechanism. Nevertheless, this letter did not stand alone and without actions; by trying to reinforce the message the US Under-Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Keith Krach, visited Albania the day after the letter was sent to Rama. If the message from Trump was not clear enough, the narrative of Krach was ever more pungent. While his official visit to Tirana was with the aim of financing one of the major Albanian hydropower plants (Skavica), the headlines in the press were mainly on the revamping Albania and the US economic cooperation, yet, there was no single declaration of the US Under-Secretary that did not target China. The discourse consisted in words such as "urgent threat to democracies", "intensified its aggression", "China challenge" "deception strategy" and so on (US Embassy in Albania, 2020). Immediately after this statement the Chinese Embassy in Albania, reacted by clarifying: "We noted that Keith Krach, the Undersecretary of State of the United States of America, has made malicious and baseless attacks and slanders against the Communist Party of China, the Chinese Government and Chinese companies, deliberately provoking China-Albania relations, during his visit in Albania. To those words, we express strong opposition. China's contribution to world peace and development is visible and seeable to all. China adheres to the principle of mutual respect, mutual interests and mutual benefits in relations with different countries of the world, and never interferes in the internal affairs of other countries. Relations between China and Albania are also based on these principles, and stem from the long-standing friendship between our two peoples that is worth being proud of" (PRC Embassy to Albania, 2020).

Another step that properly displays the symptomatic nature of this Albanian relation with China is the singing of the "Joint Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang and the Recent Developments in Hong Kong" delivered by Germany on

Behalf of 39 countries, and Albania was one of those countries. However, in a group of 39 countries, for the same resolution there were 10 members of the China-CEEC cooperation (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Apparently, Albania was not isolated in this endeavor; however, the Albanian political establishment made it very clear, immediately where they stand. Moldicz (2020, p. 13) confirms that in the first half of 2020, the American foreign policy messages called out for a stronger stance on China, and apparently most of the members of the China-CEEC did respond to this call, and Albania did so very zealously.

4. A Sui Generis Case

The Albanian demeanor in this cooperation is sui generis due to a series of factors, but the most influential of all is the taking sides in the bigger China-US rivalry. The local media is fueling this discourse. In the era of "fake news", the pursue of truth and fiction is a chase against time. It is noted that the media is more interested in creating heat than shading light – and most of the time in Albania the media is following or explicitly translating the Western Media outlets. In Albania, it is of common knowledge that exists a particular kind of pro-Americanism. The roots of this behavior are historic as well as recent, and all Albanian political forces of the present regard the US as the highest strategic partner of the country. From NATO membership to EU accession talks, the US is an intrinsic part of every decision-making process of Albania. In many cases, the conditionality is a knowledge of public domain. From conditionality to explicit warnings, the US presence in Albania is omnipresent. This decade can be also denominated the "American momentum" in Albania. The US has always been present since 1991, first as an ideal, afterwards as a partner, and finally as the Albanian PM Rama would say at every chance possible, the most important and strategic of friends". On 16th September 2021, the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEPJ, 2021) presented to the Parliament the program for foreign policy where she stated: "The consolidation of Albania will continue as a key factor for peace and stability in the region, while emphasizing that the relationship with the US remains a cornerstone in Albanian foreign policy." The strengthening of relations with the strategic partner the United States of America – this was the most

highlighted sentence from the Albanian press after the speech of the Minister. Needless to argue that the US presence in Albania is ubiquitous. From the Justice Reform, to every aspect of both major political parties, the US dictates almost every considerable political decision in the country.

On the other hand, China appears to be a polarizing topic – this is mainly due to the fact that what is known about PRC in Albania, remains in the margins of one-day-news as well as the majority of the controversial writings are a mere copy-paste of foreign media. Indeed, these are well-known buzzwords especially in Europe, such as China “invading” the Balkans with infrastructure, debt-trap diplomacy, national security concerns, etc., and these are headlines and declarations coming from the Left and the Right-wing commentators. And these headlines are present in country where there is no infrastructure (or other large scale) project from Chinese enterprises; a country that has never, from the establishment of the Credit Line for CEECs, requested a loan, and a country that declared that is not willing to use Huawei for 5G services (Musabelliu, 2029, p. 17).

The China-US relations is the most important and consequential great power relation of the 21st century. Kuik (2021, p. 161) calls the current state of affairs the emergence of the “twin chessboards” of US-China rivalry. He argues that it has long-term implications for both big-power contestation and small-state interactions with them. The greater the US-China rivalry appears – he argues – the stronger should be the inclination of smaller states to avoid being entrapped by unnecessary, premature, and self-fulfilling polarization. Nevertheless, what Kuik is trying to warn to small states, is already taking shape in Albania.

The key words with regards to small countries in relations to China, including Albania appear to be: over-dependency, internal alienation, external entrapment, security dilemma, increased influence, and so on. These words however are placed into a future, potential scenario, and the most used words are China could/might/be capable of/possibly/etc.

In terms of relations with Great Powers, Albanians are conscious that some of the best and some of the worst decisions ever made to seal the nations fate, were made by Great Powers. Therefore, it is normal that in popular culture, this gratitude and acknowledgment sometimes borderlines servility, and antagonism borderlines fanaticism. However, it is noted that many times the Albanian political elite takes this

reverence or animosity for a Great Power a step too far. Be this for personal interests or political dogmatism, deep approval or disapproval for a given power is never in a small nation's interest. As mentioned above, small states should avoid being entrapped by unnecessary, premature, and self-fulfilling polarization.

The immediate ramification of the high polarizing of the East vs. West topic has created a fertile environment for the so-called “Cold War mentality” in Albania. In this line, while analyzing the Western Balkans, Vangeli (2020, p. 17) argues that the quest for defining the region and positioning it in the West or the East (or in between them) – driven by both the internal debates on identity, belonging, and orientation as well as the external agendas of European, Euro-Atlantic, or Eurasian integration – has been the central historical force that has (re)shaped the region.

Yet, in Albania, it appears that there is an escalation, from Cold War mentality to Cold War paranoia. All states pursue security, prosperity, and autonomy, but they cannot have them all at the same time, regardless of which policy option they prioritize. The first pillar boosts weaker states' capacity to maximize security, but complete reliance on the US umbrella runs the risks of eroding autonomy and foregoing prosperity that can be gained from China (Kuik, 2020, p. 169).

5. Suggestive Behavior of the Past

Albania's demeanor in one decade of China-CEEC cooperation is also suggestive of how Albania might react in the next decade, or at least until 2025 when the next general elections will be held. To understand the dialogue on a political level, this section analyzes the participation, declarations, commitments and commentaries concerning the yearly High-Level Summit of the China-CEEC mechanism. The presence of Albanian PM in the High-Level Meetings of the “16+1” involved considerable media attention, especially his one-on-one meetings with Premier Li Keqiang; however, these meetings remained in the ranks of one-day-news, no further analyses of outcomes, declarations or commitments were present in the public discourse. Since 2013, Albania has had the same ruling party, and with the past elections, it is sealed another four years, thus, there are the same politicians since the very beginning of the platform. Indeed, their predecessors signed the participation in this cooperation with

China, but the new ruling party went in the same line, at least initially. In Albania the "16+1" is linked in every aspect of commentaries and opinions to PM Edi Rama. In fact, for the Albanian media and politicians, the China-CEEC summits are the occasion where Rama meets the other leaders and discusses potential cooperation.

5.1. Warsaw 2012

Starting from 2012 in Warsaw, the then Prime Minister of Albania did not participate; sources indicate that there was present the Deputy-Prime Minister of Albania (Prime ministers' summit, 2012). Deputy PM, Edmond Haxhinasto as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs is a political figure linked to the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the third political force of Albania, which in 2012 was in the governing coalition in with the Right and one year after was in the governing Left. From the same political party, it noticed the presence of Selim Belortaja, the first Coordinator for Albania in the China-CEEC cooperation and as of 2019, Ambassador of Albania in PRC.

5.2. Bucharest 2013

In the occasion of the Second High-Level Summit, held in Romania, Rama had one-on-one time with Premier Li Keqiang. During this meeting, while recognizing the profound traditional friendship of the two countries Premier Li expressed China's readiness into: "[...] strengthen cooperation with Albania in the fields of transport infrastructure, agriculture and resources and to encourage Chinese businesses to join in the reconstruction of national railway network as well as the construction of roads, power stations and ports in Albania, so as to turn traditional friendship into more cooperation outcomes and to better serve their respective development." From his side Rama declared: "Albania agrees China's cooperation proposals and is ready to work with China to tap potentials to the full, to leverage Albania's geographical advantages." It appears that this was the occurrence, where expectations were high and the optimism from the Albanian side was visible. It was widely publicized in the media as a meeting where potential deals in transport and energy sectors were discussed (MFAPRC, 2013).

5.3. Belgrade 2014

For China-Albania relations 2014 seemed the year of great hopes, new ties and potential deals seemed closer than ever. As the Third High-Level Summit of China-CEEC was being held in Serbia, Premier Li and PM Rama meet once again and held one-on-one talks. The focus this time in the words of Premier Li, besides the pillars mentioned one year earlier was targeted on finding ways for expanding bilateral financial approach and encouraging Chinese companies to invest in Albania with focus on mining, tourism and cement plants. From his side, Rama was quite enthusiastic on the initiative by claiming that this event was an opportunity for all countries in the region because it is a concrete initiative and concrete projects (MFAPRC, 2014). He stated, "I believe and hope to finalize a 1-year effort that has led us to a new innovative formula for financing the Arbri Road."

5.4. Suzhou 2015

For Rama the Fourth High-Level Symposium, besides the multilateral platform held in Suzhou, was also the chance to have a one-on-one meeting with Premier Li at the Great Hall of People in Beijing. It is noted that during this visit Premier Li stresses on tangible results of cooperation and expresses his hopes for the start of works in Arbri Road. The focus was also placed in the possibilities of construction of power grids and industrial parks. From his side Rama expressed that Albania welcomes China to participate in its infrastructure construction and expand agricultural product trade and tourism cooperation. When speaking for Albanian media, Rama declared that in his view the main purpose of this initiative is economic cooperation and continuity of political dialogue. He stated further (Dita, 2015): "Relations between China and Albania are very positive now and I am pleased to note that they are strengthening in other directions; the "16+1" initiative and the Belt and Road projects are two other platforms that strengthen our relationships. The connection of Shantou City, where the Silk Road to China begins, with the city of Durres, our second largest city, will pave the way for the development of the Durres port." Furthermore, he was also more direct in his expectations when stating: "Together with the government of Montenegro, as well as with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, we look forward to funding the Adriatic-Ionian Motorway which we otherwise call the 'Blue Corridor'." It can be observed from the words of the Prime Minister that at this point in time optimism was prevailing and likelihoods for intensifying bilateral and multilateral economic projects were high.

5.5. Riga 2016

The fifth Summit of China-CEEC held in Latvia was an important one for the "16+1" platform, however for Albania, there were no high expectations and the reluctance to engage in further talks was clear." The one-on-one meeting this year between Li and Rama was held in a hotel (MFAPRC, 2016) and the main inscription was: "It is hoped that the two countries could continuously strengthen cooperation under the "16+1 cooperation" framework to better achieve mutual benefit and win-win results." However, even if there was a stagnation in big scale projects, 2016 marked the conclusions of two major brownfield investments (mergers and acquisitions) by Chinese State-Owned Enterprises: China Everbrite Limited (CEL), which acquired TIA, and manages Rinas Airport and Geo-Jade Petroleum Corporation that has taken over Bankers Petroleum. Rama thanked Premier Li for the encouragement the Chinese Government gives to state-owned and private companies to invest in Albania.

5.6. Budapest 2017

In the sixth Summit held in Hungary, Rama did not participate. Instead, Deputy Prime Minister Senida Mesi was the one attending. In the final declaration emitted after this summit the only lines referring Albania was: "The Participants ...welcome Croatian and Slovenian progress on Mediterranean railway corridor from Port of Rijeka and Port of Koper towards CEECs and seek to investigate, on the basis of feasibility studies, the possibility of extending the railway line Belgrade-Budapest through ports of Montenegro and Albania." In this stance, Deputy PM emphasized Albania's readiness to continue engaging with concrete national and inter-regional projects in road and rail infrastructure, energy, tourism or agriculture, things that will further improve the quality and effectiveness of this partnership. During the summit, two cooperation agreements were signed with China, one in the field of customs and one in the field of energy, which would contribute to the further development of relations between the countries (MFAPRC, 2017).

5.7. Sofia 2018

In Bulgaria, after the multilateral Summit a bilateral meeting was held as well. This time Rama was present as well as group of his closest councilors where discussion was held on the cooperation programs and concrete projects in agriculture, tourism, water

and port infrastructure and culture (MFAPRC, 2018). From his side Premier Li hailed the good development momentum in the relations and practical cooperation between China and Albania and expressed that China is ready to deepen practical cooperation on the basis of mutual respect and equality, and import more quality and specialty agricultural products. He added that China would work with Albania to build an agricultural mechanization cooperation demonstration center in the European country, and enhance cooperation in water resources utilization and disaster prevention.

5.8. Dubrovnik 2019

The High-Level Summit of China-CEEC held in Croatia had two major implications, first that a new member was added to the group: Greece is the first addition to this platform, thus since April 2019 it is "17+1" and also because the same year marked the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Albania (as well as all other members of the platform). The highlights on the bilateral level meetings in this stance were agricultural products, bilateral visa exemption process (MFAPRC, 2019), as well as for the first time Albania was appointing as the host country for a secretariat of this mechanism. The text of the final document promulgated after the Summit notes in point 5.3: "Participants support Albania establishing the China-CEEC Youth Development Center and are encouraged to participate in related activities organized by the Center to enhance mutual understanding between youths of China and CEECs." However, the most important achievement of this Summit was the visa exemption for all Chinese citizens traveling to Albania.

5.9. Beijing [Virtual] 2021

As the year 2020 put a halt to all activities, the High-Level Summit of the China-CEEC cooperation was postponed and was held online in February 2021. On this occasion, Chinese President Xi Jinping chaired the China-CEEC Summit and delivered a keynote speech via video link in Beijing. The theme of the Summit was to promote the sustainable and steady development of the cooperation. PM Rama attended the meeting online; however, there is no portraying of his presence in the local media and no official press release from his attendance in this event. This month was one of the harshest Albania has faced in fighting and containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.10. The Turmoil of the Procuring the Vaccines

Since the beginning 2021, the Albanian PM Edi Rama could realize that the European Union (EU) would not help the Western Balkans, thus his country, in providing the COVID-19 vaccines. The disappointment was visible in his words when he labeled the EU's actions as "morally and politically unjustified" – while accusing the union of only thinking of themselves. Yet, with the virus ravaging the country the Albanian government stated that they will not receive from China and Russia as long as the EU has rejected them (Musabelliu, 2021). In the beginning of March, when the situation was still critical, there were some hints of future possibilities on acquiring the Chinese vaccine.

On February 12, during the China-CEEC High-Level Meeting, it was the best opportunity for Albania to actually ask China for the vaccines. However, it did not happen (at least for as far as the public knows). Some weeks later Rama stated that he asked the Turkish government for help and his needs were met, with Chinese vaccines procured via Turkey.

By the end of March 2021, members of the press asked Rama on why the government did not ask China for vaccines, comparing the situation with Serbia. He stated that Albania is ranking second in the Balkans after Serbia in being able to procure this amount of vaccines. Furthermore, he added: "Serbia succeeded because they have another type of (geopolitical) conjuncture. They praised China and they got the vaccines directly...we do not have those kind relations with China, and we do not have any problems about this state of affairs..." (Musabelliu, 2021). This phrase alone can tell plenty on where the Albanian PM and consequently his government, stands in relation to PRC. Essentially, even in times of acute need, in a true matter of life and death, dogmatism prevailed. It is acceptable to ask Turkey, but not China. Apparently, this is not only an Albanian isolated case. Long (2020) argues that undoubtedly, the pandemic has intensified major power competition, and Kavalski (2021, p. 50), while analyzing the Chinese presence in the CEEC argues that COVID-19 outbreak has made conspicuous how divisive China's presence has become in the region.

6. Conclusion

Once again, as decades ago, China is dealing with a rigid Albanian leadership. In observing behavior of the Albanian political establishment, some patterns are obvious; there is dogmatism in the ways of handling the relations and detachment in the general political attitude of Albania towards China. Most probably, the Albanian political establishment is being a proxy for the interest and inclination of the other major players, but this could entail many missed opportunities for deepening cooperation in the framework of the China-CEEC cooperation and beyond.

Overcoming the "3S" dilemma for a better understanding of the two countries is not an easy task, yet, it has to be faced, sooner rather than later. The situation in the past decade is symptomatic of deeper, underlying issues that need proper and timely response. The cooperation in the past decade does not have to be indicative or suggestive for the future. It is our argument that if there is a political will to intensify cooperation in the future, there will be found a practical way. The Albanian *sui generis* attitude – in terms of Cold War mentality – might be a more arduous burden to remove. Since Albania changed its political system in 1991, there has been three decades of persuasion from media, academia, elites and so on, into the West versus East narrative, thus overcoming this impediment will need time and patience.

This bilateral relation might stand in a crossroad of unknowns but there will not be any reverse course, neither in the two countries relations, nor in the China-CEEC mechanism. China and Albania share a long and unique history of intense cooperation. Albanians' collective memory has enshrined China as a helping friend in times of need, independently of what the ruling force of the moment might impose as narrative.

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Opportunities and Challenges for the Further Development of the 16+1 Framework

Gergely Salát

Abstract

The 16+1 framework was established ten years ago, and the anniversary provides all the parties involved an opportunity to evaluate the results of the cooperation, reconsider its future, and make the amendments necessary to ensure the success of the project. The framework, from the Chinese side, was part of a series of creating multilateral forums of cooperation throughout the globe, while for the side of Central and Eastern European countries it meant an opportunity to diversify their economic relations after the 2008 global economic crisis. Business and economy were the focus of the initiative from both sides. In the first phase of the cooperation (2012–2013) the institutional structure of the cooperation was created. In the second phase (2014–2018), the framework was started to be filled with contents and was linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. In the third phase, a serious setback took place. The problems leading to the setback were caused by unfounded expectations, structural factors, cultural differences, the narrow economic focus of the cooperation, outside pressure, the politicization of China relations in the Central and Eastern European countries, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all these problems, the framework should be maintained, as it has provided and will further provide advantages for all sides in the fields of politics and diplomacy, business and economics, as well as people-to-people relations. For operating the 16+1 mechanism successfully in the future, certain modifications are suggested. The EU should be more involved in 16+1 projects, China should apply a sub-regional approach to diversify its policies, Central and Eastern European states ought to cooperate more with each other, the whole framework must be made more transparent, issues related to China should be depoliticized, some multilateral flagship projects should be launched to promote the advantages of the cooperation, and more attention must be paid to soft power. With these changes, a new phase of the 16+1 cooperation can be started, one that is adapted more to the challenges and opportunities of the new era.

Keywords: *China, Central and Eastern European states, 16+1 framework, challenges, opportunities*

1. Introduction

The 16+1 cooperation framework was established ten years ago, when the 1st Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries was held in Warsaw, Poland in 2012.¹ China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) states jointly issued the Press Communiqué of the Meeting between the Prime Ministers of China and Central and Eastern European Countries, and China put forward its Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries. It was decided that a Secretariat for cooperation between China and the CEE countries would be set up in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and summits of the heads of government of the participant countries will be held every year. Many similar documents, guidelines, and communiqués have been published ever since (Goreczky, 2017, p. 5). The 16+1 framework thus established contributed greatly to the development of the relations between China and the CEE countries.

From a historic point of view, ten years is a very short term, but the anniversary brings all the parties involved an opportunity to evaluate the results of the cooperation, reconsider its future, and make the amendments necessary to ensure the success of the project. In the present paper, I examine the context and history of the 16+1 framework, assess the challenges it is facing, and make some suggestions about its future development.

2. The Context and Background of the Formation of the 16+1

Ten years ago, in 2012, the first summit of China and CEE countries was held in Warsaw, and the 16+1 cooperation framework was established. The idea of the cooperation first came up one year before, at the CEE-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum held in Budapest in June 2011 with the participation of Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao (Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 317–318). The context and the timing of the initiative explain many of its characteristics.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I will use '16+1' throughout this paper, though it was called '17+1' between 2019 and 2021.

2.1. 16+1 in China's Global Strategy

From the Chinese side, the 16+1 was far from being a new type of cooperation framework. China, a great country with a global outlook, started to form transregional cooperation mechanisms more than a decade ago for enhancing its communication with the outside world, streamlining its diplomatic activities, and developing its international relations. A series of mechanisms were created in which China partnered with a group of countries from a certain region. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004, and the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China–CELAC Forum) in 2014 (Horváth, 2020, p. 630). Formal dialogue with ASEAN and the EU was started even earlier. This means that the formation of the China–CEEC Cooperation Framework was just one step in a series aiming at facilitating China's cooperation with different regions of the world. These mechanisms make it possible for China to deal with whole regions, not with small countries one by one, and follow a more strategic approach to different parts of the world, avoiding problems of coordination in its network of almost two hundred bilateral relations. The establishment of the 16+1 caused some misunderstanding in the CEE region, as some leaders and the public interpreted it as a sign of China treating its relations with the CEE region as a priority, while it was just a logical part of the process of the formation of China's new global diplomatic mechanisms.

For China, the focus of the 16+1 cooperation is economic relations. While the CEE region with its population of more than 120 million and its relatively underdeveloped economy is not of primary significance for China, its huge growth potential, and its need for investment and infrastructure development make it a region worth upgrading contacts with, not to mention the fact that most of the CEE countries are EU members. Critics of the cooperation emphasize the geopolitical nature of the framework, but there are no proofs that China has any serious geopolitical interests or intents in the CEE region. No Chinese investment in any strategic sector has been made in the region, and CEE does not play an important role in China's global grand strategy. If we compare Chinese trade and investment data in Western European and CEE countries, we can conclude that even ten years after the formation of the 16+1 Chinese presence in the CEE region is marginal, as several small and medium-size Western European countries receive more Chinese investment and trade more with China than the whole CEE region combined (Horváth, 2020, p. 635–640; Karásková et al., 2020, p. 35–47).

2.2. The Impact of the 2008 Crisis

From the side of Central and Eastern Europe, the timing of the establishment of the 16+1 framework is of utmost importance. In the 1990s and the 2000s, most countries in the CEE region have been preoccupied with either nation-building or Euro-Atlantic integration. The majority of the 16 CEE states succeeded in joining the EU and NATO by the first decade of the new millennium. The region has grown to be heavily dependent on its Western partners and has become a semi-periphery of the traditional West. This brought about great economic opportunities but also a certain level of vulnerability. The 2008 global financial crisis led to the realization of this overdependency on the West. The crisis caused a serious economic downturn in the CEE region, and its main export markets and sources of investment, Western Europe and the United States also struggled with problems. GDP levels fell and unemployment rose in the whole region, and leaders strove to find alternative export markets and investment sources. As China was not as heavily impacted by the crisis and maintained a healthy growth level, its weight and prestige grew significantly. It was reasonable that in the years following 2008 CEE countries turned to the main engine of global growth when trying to diversify their economic relations. China was not only a logical choice because of its economic performance, but certain CEE leaders considered developing their relations with China as a way to gain more room for maneuver and ease their dependence on the West. Thus, when China initiated the 16+1 framework, CEE countries joined it with great enthusiasm.

The huge role the 2008 crisis played in the CEE countries' decision to welcome China's overtures underlines the fact that the CEE countries also consider the 16+1 framework mostly an economic opportunity, so similarly to China, the 16 European states focus on the economic contents of the framework as well. It should have been, however, clear from the outset that China cannot and will not substitute the West in the relations of the CEE countries. It can only play a subsidiary role as a source of investment and export market for some niche products. Most CEE countries are so deeply integrated into the Western ecosystem that China is not a real alternative for them.

3. Phases of Development of the 16+1 Framework

China's efforts to create regional mechanisms of 'bilateral multilateralism', and its increasingly global outlook on one hand, and the CEE's countries' ambitions to diversify their economic and, to some degree, political relations, find new business opportunities, FDI sources, and export markets, on the other, provided the context of the formation of the 16+1 cooperation. While the mechanism achieved considerable success, such as the development of trade, investment, educational, cultural, and scientific cooperation, the short history of the 16+1 framework is not that of continuous linear development. After the idea of the framework first came up in 2011, and 16+1 was formally established in 2012, the cooperation went through three different phases of development.

3.1. 2012-2013

In the first years following the 2012 Warsaw Summit, in the first phase of the evolution of the cooperation, the institutional structure of the cooperation was created. The participant countries, the format, and the main areas were agreed upon, and it was decided that summits of the heads of government would be held every year. The Twelve Measures put forward by Wen Jiabao set the direction and content of the 16+1. The 2013 Bucharest summit issued the first joint document, and the participants established the Secretariat for cooperation between China and CEE in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the system of national coordinators, the system of regular meetings, and the system of sectoral coordination centers. 16+1 became a flexible mechanism but has not turned into an international institution or legal entity (Richet, 2018; Liu, 2020, p. 30-31; Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 318-319).

3.2. 2014-2019

In the second phase of the cooperation from the 2014 Belgrade summit to the 2018 Sofia summit, the 16+1 framework began to be filled with content. The cooperation was linked with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Goreczky, 2017, p. 6-7), the sectoral coordination centers were finalized, and some concrete projects, such as the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway were launched or agreed upon (Zhu, 2017). To answer critiques about the possible division of the European Union, in

this phase it was frequently emphasized that participants will try to integrate the 16+1 cooperation more closely into the framework of China's relations with the EU and increase the synergy between 16+1 and other Eurasian connectivity projects (Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 320-325).

3.3. 2019-Present

The third phase, starting around the 2019 Dubrovnik summit, brought about a setback in the cooperation, and a need for a comprehensive recalibration surfaced (Kavalski, 2021; Jing, 2020). The intensification of the US-China rivalry since 2018, its impact on EU-China relations, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the general disappointment in the framework in the CEE region, and some other factors had a negative effect on the 16+1 framework. As a result, while Greece joined the mechanism in 2019, founding member Lithuania left it in 2021, and six CEE countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovenia) decided to send ministers instead of their heads of state or government to the 2021 virtual summit, signaling its relative unimportance to them (Sharma, 2021).

16+1 was established with a high level of expectations and enthusiasm, its institutions and mechanisms, necessary for its functioning, were created, and some projects were started, but its development lost its momentum even before the COVID-19 pandemic made international cooperation difficult. In the following sections, I attempt to identify the reasons for the slowing down of the development of the framework and put forward some suggestions to readjust it to ensure its future success.

4. Hurdles and Challenges in the 16+1 Cooperation

The setback of the 16+1 can be explained by several factors. The most important are the following:

- structural factors;
- cultural differences;
- economic focus;
- outside pressure;
- and the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Structural Factors

Expectations on both sides were unrealistic from the outset, as fundamental structural factors impede economic cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe. The latter has neither the natural resources nor the developed technology sought after by China, so export opportunities of CEE countries to China are limited due to the lack of demand on the Chinese side. The greatest part of CEE export to China is taken by Western multinational companies operating in the region, and their access to the Chinese market is not influenced by the 16+1 framework. Dismantling trade barriers leads to the increase of trade imbalance and China's surplus. Both China and the CEE are rich in cheap labor force capable of conducting medium-level assembly work, and on the international market, they are competing with, instead of complementing each other. A similar economic structure explains why Chinese FDI in the CEE countries is limited. On the other hand, the infrastructure development needs of the CEE countries do not fit China's expectations. The majority of the 16 states are EU-members, have a relatively developed infrastructure network, and have easy access to cheap EU funds to finance constructions. As a result, they do not show great interest in China-financed infrastructure projects. Only a few non-EU countries provide opportunities to Chinese companies (Karásková et al., 2020, p. 50; Sharma, 2021). Beijing has offered development packages to CEE countries (infrastructure projects financed by Chinese development banks and implemented by Chinese companies on market prices) similar to those applied successfully in developing countries in Africa and other parts of the world, without customizing them to local needs, which was not very appealing to most CEE partners.

4.2. Cultural Differences

Apart from the geographical distance, cultural disparities and the lack of information have led to several misunderstandings in China-CEEC relations. CEE leaders did not take into account the communication differences between Chinese and European people, tended to take usual Chinese courtesies and politeness as signs of deep commitment and promises, and overestimated the importance of the region to China. The Chinese side underestimated the huge differences between the 16+1 countries and tried to treat Central and Eastern Europe as a unified region, failing to consider their social, economic, political, and cultural disparities as well as their traditional rivalries. These all created too high expectations on both sides that inevitably led to disappointment.

4.3. Economic Focus

Because all parties, especially the European ones focused on the economic aspect of the cooperation, the lack of successful investment projects and the only moderate growth of CEE exports have overshadowed all other areas of 16+1. While fields of cooperation like student exchange, scientific and cultural projects, political contacts as well as tourism showed great development, the media and the public in the CEE countries focused solely on Chinese investment in the region and export to China. The lack of spectacular growth in these fields created the false impression that the whole 16+1 was not working and was thus not worth the efforts. The long-term effects of such developments as the exponential growth of students studying in each other's country or the formation of networks of sectoral cooperation have not been taken into account, as media only dealt with short-term gains or lack thereof.

4.4. Outside Pressure

The international environment has changed significantly since the time of the formation of 16+1. Most of the participant European countries are members of the EU, and ever since the inception of the 16+1, the cooperation was treated with some mistrust and suspicions (Jing, 2020, p. 174-175; Liu, 2020, p. 37-39). As mechanisms like the 16+1 are alien from the EU, the intents of the participants were misunderstood, and the initiative was portrayed by some Western European politicians and media as an attempt by China to 'divide and rule' the European Union (Karásková et al., 2020, p. 11; Sharma, 2021). European suspicions were mitigated after some years when it turned out that the mechanism was not a game-changer in China's European policy, the overwhelming majority of Chinese FDI still went to Western Europe, and the CEE region was not flooded by Chinese infrastructure projects. However, at the same time relations between the United States and China have become tenser, and starting around 2018, it has become part of US strategy to put pressure on its allies to scale back their ties with China. This included encouraging CEE countries to exclude Huawei and other Chinese companies from the building of their 5G network, stop construction projects that involve Chinese companies and reduce the intensity and level of political relations (Jing, 2020, p. 175-176; Liu, 2020, p. 39-40).

In great power competition, small countries can choose between bandwagoning and balancing, and the CEE region provides examples for both, moreover, the choice of

countries may change with the change of governments. The American efforts were successful in many cases, several countries joined the Clean Network Initiative, and Romania canceled the building of a nuclear block by a Chinese company. The practice of sending ministerial-level representatives to the 16+1 summits instead of heads of government can also be partially attributed to American pressure. The Russia card is used extensively. Countries that consider Russia a serious security threat and rely heavily on the US in their national security, tend to submit easily to American pressure in their China relations that are economically unimportant anyway. Baltic countries are the most spectacular cases (Jing, 2020, p. 175-176). At the same time, for non-EU member CEE countries China has become an important partner, and many projects have been completed in the Western Balkans with the participation of Chinese companies. This created a division in the 16 CEE countries as regards their China policies.

The US also put pressure on Western European states, and some actors in traditional EU countries started to treat China and Chinese initiatives like the Belt and Road and 16+1 as threats. China was labeled a ‘systemic rival’ in an official EU document, and a screening mechanism on Chinese investments in the EU was established. The governments of major European economies pushed through an agreement in principle on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China at the end of 2020, but the ratification of the agreement has been blocked by the European Parliament and postponed indefinitely. Relations with China are now a subject of debate in the EU, and while Western European decision-makers do not want their companies to stop conducting highly profitable business with China, many of them want to realign their political ties. This also increases the pressure on CEE countries to avoid establishing close cooperation with China. Maintaining good Chinese relations by some CEE countries is frequently portrayed as a betrayal of European values or acting as ‘Trojan horses’ of malign Chinese forces (Kavalski, 2021, p. 35).

The pervasive influence of American opinions is reflected in the narratives in the European press coverage on China. While most politicians, especially those in government positions tend to be realistic, the media, including those in the CEE region, adopt the general anti-China stance characteristic of mainstream American publications and usually portrays China in a negative light. Chinese ‘malign influence’, ‘debt-trap diplomacy’, ‘cyber threat’, ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, etc. have become stock phrases used repeatedly in reports on Chinese presence in the region. This has led

to the increase of negative perceptions of China in the public as reflected in opinion polls and studies (Dams, 2021).

4.5. Politicization of China Relations

Not independently of foreign influence, issues related to China have become topics of domestic political debates and election campaigns. China relations hadn’t played any part in political discourse before, but in recent years Chinese investments, infrastructure projects, trade, political and diplomatic actions served as the subject or pretense of political struggles, a phenomenon in which national interest sometimes became secondary in the competition for votes (Kavalski, 2021, p. 36-40). Typically, opposition parties criticize ruling politicians for maintaining too good relations with China, and some concrete projects are attacked as well. Such projects are, for example, the ill-fated highway project in Montenegro, frequently pictured as a case of China’s ‘debt-trap diplomacy’, the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrad railway and the planned establishment of a campus of Fudan University in Hungary, the activities of a shady Chinese company named CEFC in Czechia, etc. The frequent changes in government in the CEE countries are also a challenge for cooperation with China, as the change of the governing party frequently brings about a change in the China policy of these countries (Liu, 2020, p. 36-37).

The question of Chinese influence itself, invariably portrayed as malign, is also a topic of debate, and in some cases, scandals broke out concerning Chinese-financed projects in academia. These have led to a growing awareness of public sensitivity towards Chinese ties on the part of the decision-makers and scaling back Chinese relations to win voters has become the choice of several CEE politicians. There are, however, differences in this regard in the 16 CEE states, notably the Serbian and Hungarian governments remained committed to the further development of Chinese relations; for example, in Europe only they used Chinese COVID-19 vaccines.

4.6. COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic harmed both China’s prestige and reputation and China-CEEC ties. China is the country where the virus was first identified, and the dominant narrative in Western media is that the mishandling of the situation by Chinese authorities in Wuhan is the main cause of the global pandemic. Conspiracy theories

about the origin of the virus also appeared. Chinese efforts to counter the impact of the pandemic on the country's reputation had little effect, and the international 'blame game' about the virus continues until this day (Kavalski, 2021, p. 46–49). Chinese vaccines are heavily criticized for being less effective than American ones. Polls show that opinions about China have turned to the worse in the whole Western world, including Central and Eastern Europe (Silver, 2020; Dams, 2021), and this pushes many decision-makers to try to distance themselves from China. The pandemic has made people-to-people relations almost impossible, projects were halted, personal negotiations were postponed, student exchange programs were scaled back, and international tourism collapsed, so the positive effects of the 16+1 cooperation and its concrete results became almost invisible. The annual 16+1 summit was first postponed, then held online with less publicity and impact (Jing, 2020).

All these factors led to a visible setback in the evolution of the 16+1 framework, manifested in the low-level representation of six CEE countries on the 2021 virtual summit, Lithuania's decision to leave the cooperation altogether, and open criticism of the framework by some previously pro-China CEE leaders.

Thus the 16+1 framework faces many challenges, but these challenges can be overcome, and the cooperation can gain new momentum. It is important to recognize the advantages and achievements of the cooperation, as well as the opportunities it brings to all participants.

5. Advantages and Results of the 16+1 Framework

The 16+1 cooperation framework, despite all problems and criticisms, has been successful so far and will provide good opportunities for the participants in the future. There is one country, Lithuania, that considered these opportunities not worth the cost of staying in the framework, but Vilnius is in a special position because of the proximity of Russia and the tangibility of the Russian threat. This is understandable in the case of a nation that spent most of the 20th century under Soviet occupation. China, of course, has nothing to do with the historical vulnerability of Lithuania, but as the security of the country relies heavily on the United States, it is prone to succumb to American pressure in questions that are not of strategic importance, and relations with China belong to this category. It is hard to prove, but one can

suspect that the US played a crucial role in Lithuania's decision to leave 16+1. As the two other Baltic states are in a similar position, they may sooner or later follow the example of Lithuania or become more passive in their China relations. This, however, is more related to European geopolitics than the 16+1 cooperation framework itself.

In politics and diplomacy, the 16+1 platform makes it possible for Central and Eastern European countries to access the government of a major power directly, establish links on the highest level, get first-hand information on the plans, undertakings, and motivations of China, and form political ties that may facilitate cooperation on other areas such as investment, trade, and people-to-people relations. The framework also makes it possible for CEE countries to coordinate policies and concrete measures with China on such global issues as climate change and pandemic control.

While the participants frequently emphasize that CEE countries were among the first to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China right after its founding, contacts between the region and China have traditionally been weak in the past 70 years. Economic relations were underdeveloped, high-level visits were sporadic, policy coordination was almost non-existent, and people-to-people relations were minimal. CEE countries are simply too small to have fruitful relations with China on a bilateral basis. Thanks to the 16+1 framework, dialogue on many levels and in many sectors became institutionalized, and CEE leaders and officials gained the opportunity to exchange views and information on various topics with their Chinese counterparts. Without the 16+1 framework, CEE states would have much less room to maneuver, as their Western dependency would not be moderated by their direct links with one of the most important centers of our multipolar world. On the other hand, China created an opportunity to promote its interests in the CEE region, take part in meaningful cooperation with countries here, and enhance its presence in the European Union through the EU members of the region. Chinese decision-makers now have more information on this part of the world, something important for a major power with a global outlook. While the 16+1 cooperation did not replace bilateral relations, the former complements the latter and gives a new impetus for their development.

In the field of business and economy, while the development of relations has not met expectations so far, significant development did happen (Liu, 2020, p. 24–27). For example, when the 16+1 was established, one of the aims was to reach a trading volume of USD 100 billion by 2015; this did not happen in time, but the 100 billion

threshold was finally reached in 2020, and China-CEEC trade growth has averaged 8% annually since 2012 (China secured bumper, 2021). This is a substantial increase. Chinese FDI in the region has grown somewhat, and infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans played an important role in the development of those countries (Zhu, 2017, p. 99–100). Business forums and sectoral dialogues connected to the 16+1 made it possible for companies to establish direct contacts, CEE countries took part in events like the China International Import Expo, and interregional tourism flourished before the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments would probably be less significant without the 16+1 cooperation. The linking of the 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative will create synergies, and these may strengthen their effectiveness and provide more opportunities to develop ties.

The most important development happened in people-to-people and cultural relations, including student exchange programs (Zhu, 2017, p. 102–103; Jing, 2020, p. 167–168; Liu, 2020, p. 27–28). These do not create immediate gains and are hard to measure but are crucial in laying the foundation for the long-term improvement of China-CEEC relations. Apart from the geographical distance, the greatest hindrance in the relations is the lack of information and understanding between the parties. The intensification of educational, cultural, and other direct ties is the only way to overcome these problems. Efforts in these fields will only pay off in the long run, but they will surely have a positive effect on the China-CEEC ties. CEE students who study in China today will work on relations between their country and China tomorrow, and this is also true for Chinese students studying in the CEE region.

6. Suggestions

Because of the opportunities the 16+1 framework provides for the development of political, economic, cultural, and other ties between China and the CEE region, the maintaining of the cooperation would be beneficial for all participants. However, some changes should be made to increase its effectiveness and recognition, and the framework should be adapted to the new global and regional situation. The platform needs some readjustments, and a reboot may be necessary with modified content, methods, and aims after the pandemic. Working together in the past decade has provided the countries with enough experience and understanding to recalibrate

their cooperation to serve their needs and national interests better. Hereby some suggestions are made about the changes necessary for the further development of the 16+1 cooperation.

6.1. More Involvement of the EU

As we have seen, one of the main hurdles of the 16+1 cooperation is that it is treated with suspicion by many EU and Western European leaders. Naturally, Western European companies do not welcome a fearsome competitor, China on a market considered their dominion, and their antipathy is reflected in their political representatives' stance. Political and ideological differences between China and the West are also significant. However, suspicions could abate to some degree if EU institutions were involved in 16+1 projects and discussions. China-CEEC cooperation should be treated as a part of China-EU cooperation in which EU leaders should have a say. Though some CEE countries are not members, the EU has huge stakes in them, and what happens in the Balkans is of strategic importance for Brussels. Therefore, the participation of EU representatives in the 16+1 events should be institutionalized, and projects should be open to third parties. The cooperation of Chinese, Western European, and Central or Eastern European companies in infrastructure and other projects would make any 'divide and rule' accusation baseless and untenable. Such multilateral projects should be encouraged.

6.2. Subregional Approach

Another problem with the 16+1 cooperation is that while China treats Central and Eastern Europe as a unified region, in reality, it is deeply divided, and does not have a common identity. Most participants are members of the European Union, while others are not, and these two groups of states have different aims and room for maneuver. EU members are part of a larger system of policy coordination, and their sovereignty is limited in many areas, including those that may serve as fields of coordination with China. Non-EU members are freer, and, at the same time, more vulnerable. Countries neighboring Russia and having negative historical experiences with it are more prone to follow American recommendations on China to strengthen Washington's commitment regarding their security. Other countries tend to be more independent in their choices. CEE countries also differ in their size, level of economic development,

history, religious background, cultural and political traditions (Goreczky, 2017, p. 6.). In the past decade, it has turned out that the 16 CEE countries could not act in a unified way, and due to their different conditions China's approach to them should be diversified and customized. While the 16+1 format should be maintained, it would be more efficient to divide the CEE region into subregions in concrete projects. These could be the Baltic States, the Visegrad Four (V4) countries, the Western Balkan, and the Eastern Balkan states. Countries in these subregions have a lot of similarities, and the chance to complete projects with them successfully is larger.

6.3. CEE Cooperation

From the European side, the CEE countries should have more cooperation with each other, and their China policies should be harmonized, at least on a subregional base. It would be useful for all sides if CEE countries negotiated a common stance before 16+1 summits, initiated common projects, and were more proactive in the development of their China ties. The initiation of at least three-sided projects (China and two CEE countries) should be encouraged. The reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway is a good example in this regard, but more such projects are needed. While East-West connectivity projects, fitting for the present center-semi-periphery status of Western and Eastern Europe, are extensively funded by the EU, North-South projects, essential for CEE intraregional cooperation, are supported to a much lesser extent. The involvement of Chinese companies and financial institutions in such projects could contribute to the development of the ties between the different CEE countries, as well as between China and the CEE states, and could complement EU-sponsored projects.

6.4. Transparency

The 16+1 framework is frequently criticized for not being transparent enough, and finding reliable information on it is indeed a difficult task. As the framework is a rather flexible one, no founding document or charter has ever been issued, and the structure has evolved gradually with continuous modifications. A full description of the present structure of the framework is missing from the webpage maintained by the Secretariat (www.china-CEEC.org), and documents of the summits, a list of the national coordinators, and various news related to China-CEEC relations

are presented without context. The centers for sectoral coordination are not even mentioned. In most news coverage, bilateral and 16+1 events are not differentiated, and it is impossible to find a complete list of 16+1 projects. In both official documents and media reports, finished projects, projects under construction, projects already agreed upon, and planned projects are not treated separately, and it is quite hard to tell which project is finished, and which is only talked about. For those working in the cooperation, its structure and mechanisms are simple, but for outsiders, the system of different Dialogues, Forums, Mechanism, Meetings, and Symposiums is hard to unravel. Too much emphasis is put on formal reports of official events, and the real content of the cooperation frequently remains hidden. Putting forward concrete aims and projects is greatly needed, as the content of the cooperation in several areas is somewhat unclear. The cooperation is not branded well, and communication on it is not unified. Information on the 16+1 framework should be presented in a much more standardized, simplified, up-to-date, and comprehensible way, and public relations experts should be consulted to develop a more professional communication strategy. This strategy should take into account the customs, cultural background, and expectations of the CEE countries.

6.5. Depoliticization

As Chinese relations are becoming more and more politicized in the CEE countries, just as in the whole world, efforts should be made to depoliticize them. China and the CEE region do not have any kind of strategic rivalry, political dispute, or ideological conflict (Jing, 2020, p. 180), and none of the parties can win anything by burdening the relations with political issues. Participants can afford to maintain a pragmatic relation profitable for all and can refrain from linking the relations with their political agenda. For this, self-restraint is needed from all sides. CEE political parties should not make Chinese relations part of their campaigns, and it is advisable that China does not respond to all provocations. While depoliticization is a difficult task, developing relations between China and all political actors, including opposition ones, might contribute to it.

6.6. A Flagship Project

16+1 relations could be greatly enhanced if there were at least one successful flagship project that may serve as a model for other projects and as a reference for the public. This project should include more than one CEE country in the EU, be widely publicized, and clearly serve the public good. Financing must be transparent, and China's achievements in high-tech should be put on display by the project. This flagship project should be one in which short-term company interests and profits are secondary, and the public relations gains are fully recognized and taken into account when calculating the liabilities and assets related to the project.

6.7. More Focus on Soft Power

The knowledge of China in the CEE region and understanding of the CEE region in China is rather superficial, and misunderstandings are common (Zhu, 2017, p. 107). The soft power of China is low in the CEE countries, and CEE soft power is practically non-existent in China. This is a great hindrance to China-CEEC relations, as only mutual understanding and recognition can serve as the foundation of common projects and cooperation more sophisticated than simple transactions. States should invest in cultural diplomacy, student exchange, scientific cooperation, and similar fields. However, the most important would be the encouragement and support of individuals and institutions to form direct ties with each other. At present, most soft power initiatives are launched by official actors, such as embassies and national cultural and educational institutes, but their effectiveness is questionable. Official institutions represent the official culture that has limited effects, while popular culture is not promoted by them, even though it may make a much larger impact. Thus, the establishment of direct contacts between schools, universities, museums, festivals, cultural and music agencies, theatres, artists, and musicians should be encouraged, and official control must be minimal. An example of South Korea may be followed where cultural export is supported by the government, but its contents are left to those who create it. The most important would be the further expansion of student exchange programs, as these create an ever-growing community of people who have a stake in developing the relations and can be its agents in different fields of life.

7. Conclusion

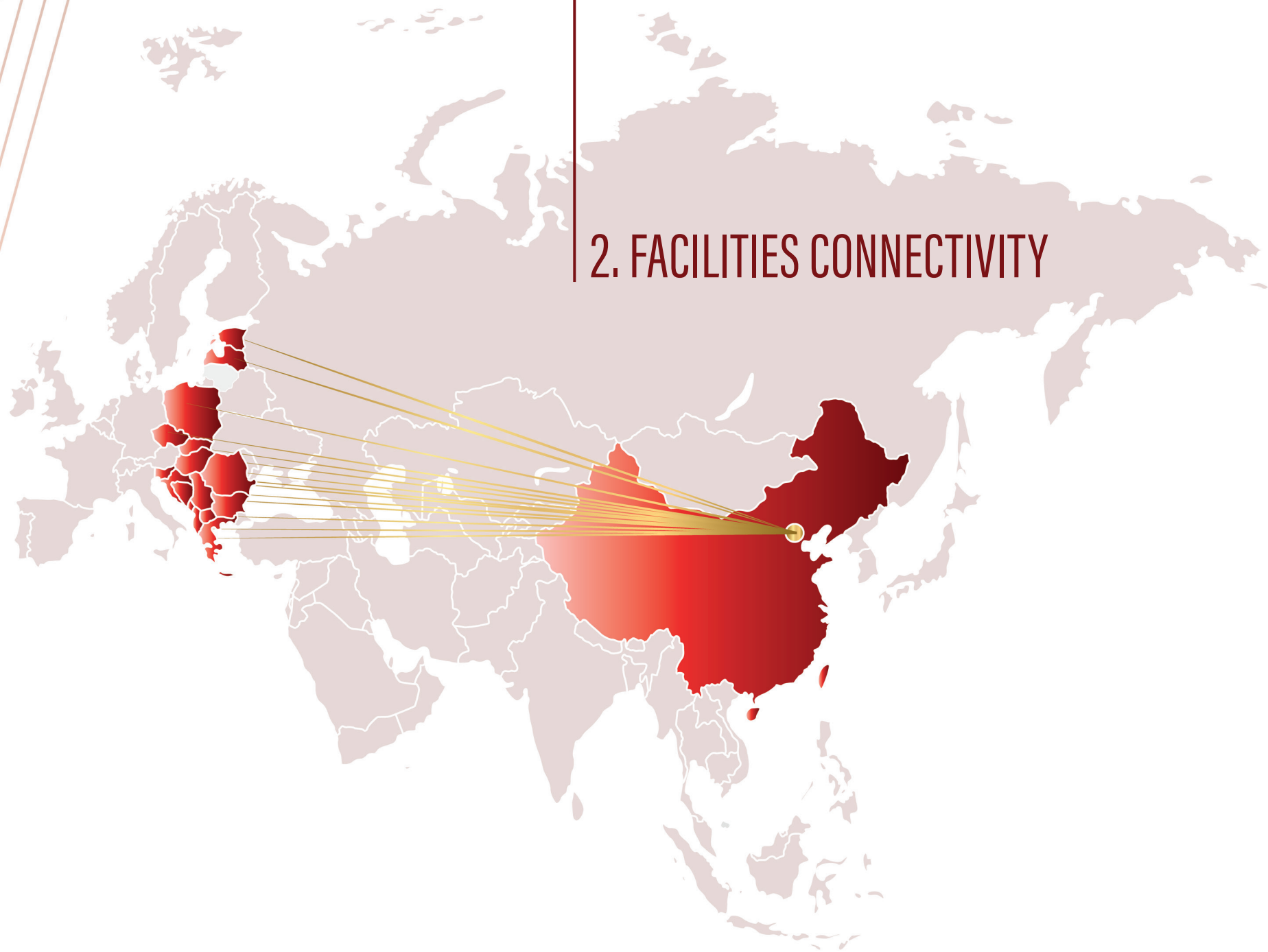
The institutional structure and the mechanisms of the 16+1 cooperation framework have been established in the past ten years. Substantial development has been achieved in the field of trade, investment, people-to-people relations, and political cooperation. The importance of China has grown significantly since the formation of the 16+1 and is expected to grow further, and China's Belt and Road Initiative created opportunities for all countries along its corridors. Global challenges appeared, such as the acceleration of climate change and the pandemic, which makes international cooperation essential. While the international situation is getting more complicated, mostly because of the tensions between China and the United States, the cooperation of CEE countries and China can be maintained and developed further.

The 16+1 cooperation is a flexible framework that can be easily adjusted to the changes of the global and regional situation and is suitable for the management of the relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe. Some modifications should be made, and a comprehensive reboot may be necessary after the pandemic, to ensure the long-term success of the framework. As an interregional and intercultural platform, the 16+1 cooperation can contribute to the stability of the world order, ease international tensions, and help create prosperity for all participants. Our world faces problems that cannot be solved by individual countries, and 16+1 can be one of the international mechanisms that play a substantial role in ensuring peaceful and sustainable development for all mankind.

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2. FACILITIES CONNECTIVITY



Scramble for the Western Balkans: On Why the Chinese are Interested in Enhancing Connectivity in the Region and What it Means for the EU

Zoltán Vörös

Abstract

The study focuses on the Chinese infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans, located in the central and southern parts of the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe. The importance of the region comes from its strategic location, from political and security factors and raw material reserves – and there are countries who are trying to compete with the EU for influence. China is among these countries through the BRI: the paper focuses on infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loans and in many cases, built by Chinese contractors, underlining the motivations for such initiatives as well as their potential future repercussions. The Chinese infrastructure projects have broader implications for the EU as well: while local politicians, interested in lifting tensions or the media often exaggerate the importance or relevance of such external actors in the Western Balkans, the competition can harm European interests as well, however, Beijing's presence is not only linked to challenges and threats, it can also open up possibilities and opportunities as well and can push for a rethinking of EU policies towards the Western Balkans.

Keywords: *China, Western Balkans, EU, railway, infrastructure*

1. Introduction

Western Balkans, a political-geopolitical phrase, and not a geographical terminology reflecting basically on the territory of Albania and former Yugoslavia, excluding Slovenia and lately Croatia as well. The phrase is intimately associated with EU foreign policy, and it refers to Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina – the candidate and potential candidate countries recently of the Community. The geographical and more accurate term is Southeast Europe,

but since on the level of different policies Western Balkans is still in use, the official communication from external powers continues to refer to these countries in this manner, and the ultimate goal of these countries is also similar, Western Balkans is still the dominant term to reflect on the region. Their ambition, as it was for all other CEE nations following system reforms, is to join the euroatlantic organizations, NATO and the EU – the latter being a more bureaucratic and time-consuming process. We should note that, in addition to the EU's outreach, other external powers are active in the region. Turkey is “geographically, historically, religiously and socially linked” to the region, according to Lechner (2019, p. 28), but due to the religious ties, Gulf States, most notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are also engaged, focusing on Wahhabi muslim populations.

The Russian presence is linked to the Cold War era as well as current security concerns. Despite the fact that Moscow does not normally oppose the EU's membership in the region, the country's criticism of NATO has led it to regard NATO's growth in the region as a danger. These worries about the security organization had already been raised by Boris Yeltsin, the first President of the Russian Federation, and were brought to light again in 1999 as a result of the NATO bombs in Afghanistan. As a result of the increase of military-security cooperation, as well as “the growing hostility of Russian-EU relations”, as Orosz put it, “has led Russia to slow down the enlargement process with the help of 'confusion'” (Orosz, 2018, p. 6).

Infrastructure and energy investments in the region, where EU funding are limited or non-applicable, and which are critical for the Western Balkans countries, are at the heart of the Chinese activities. The paper and subsequent chapters will examine the Chinese presence, particularly those dealing with the connectivity of the region. Although these above mentioned foreign actors are geographically separated, as a result of the repercussions, these external actors are not that far apart from one another.

2. In the Centre of the Chinese Attention

The Belt and Road Initiative has identified five cooperation goals, one of which is „Facilities Connectivity”, which includes enhancing and developing infrastructure building. China's foreign policy vision, unveiled in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, aims to promote economic integration between Asia and Europe, improve

relations with Africa, and strengthen interregional cooperation within Asia. “China will actively promote international co-operation through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).” – said Xi Jinping. “In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international co-operation to create new drivers of shared development” (Xi, 2017, p. 61). Though difficult to grasp, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the vision that will shape the future of Eurasia – one way or another. Corridors, orientations, and projects all have a common goal: to improve connectivity. The vision is primarily focused on Asia and the adjacent regions of China, but it also has a reach into Europe and Africa, among other places.

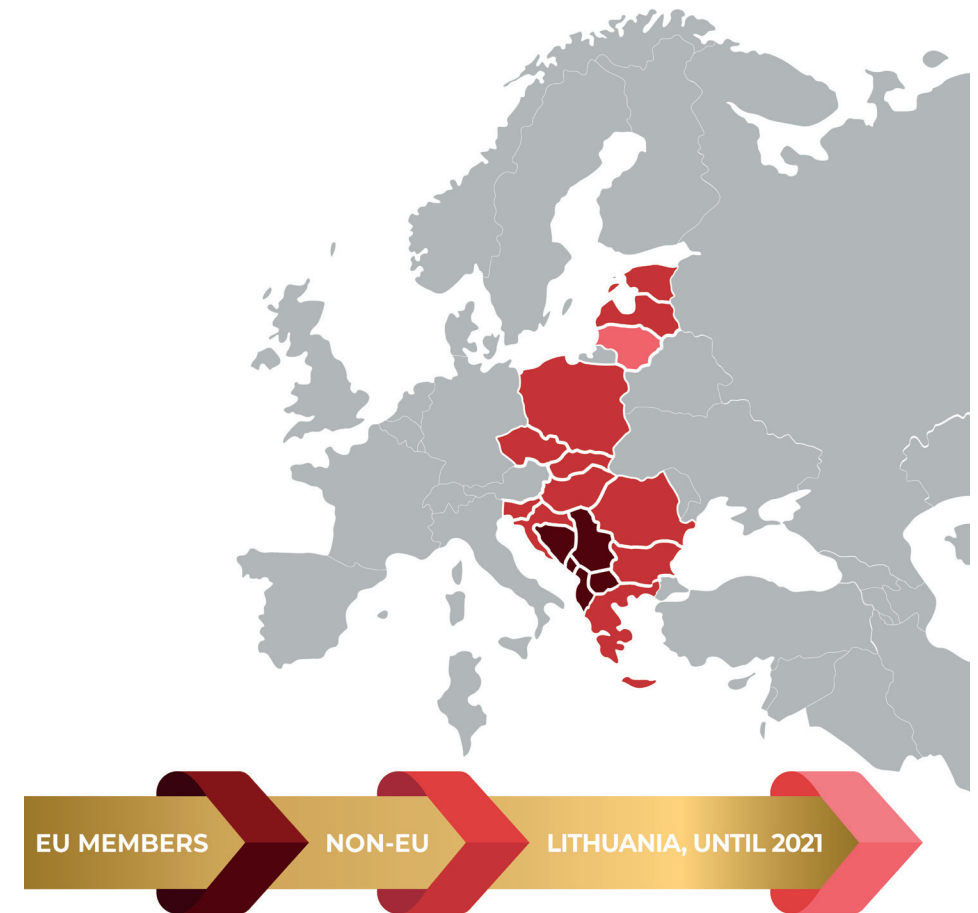
While the initiative has the potential (and the intention) to benefit China’s economic needs by exporting enterprises, expertise, and technologies outside of China, it is responding to a global need: infrastructure. According to a 2017 Asian Development Bank report, Asian countries “will need to invest USD 26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, or USD 1.7 trillion per year, if the region is to maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and respond to climate change” (ADB, 2017, p. vii). However, the investment deficit is a global phenomenon, as summarized in an OECD report, with “annual investment needs range between USD 2.9 trillion and USD 6.3 trillion” according to various sources. (OECD, 2018, p. 5). Within that report, the OECD highlights, in light of the BRI’s objectives, that there is a global underinvestment in transportation and infrastructure (Ibid., p. 6), providing a starting point and opportunity for those entities willing to finance such projects.

Accordingly, focusing on the BRI’s outreach to Europe rather than its worldwide reach, the region in-between: those Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) that are integrating China (and Asia) with Western Europe, becomes relevant. (See Fig. 1.) According to the figure, this region can serve as a trading hub for goods moving between the two continents, which is a trait that these countries could capitalize on in the future.

The CEE region is Europe’s periphery, comprising countries with EU membership (acquired in 2004, 2007, and 2013) as well as candidacy or potential candidacy status. Aside from economic outputs, the region is defined by a less developed or missing infrastructure: the China-CEEC Initiative, launched in 2012 and labeled as 16+1, was to deepen China’s relationship with eleven EU member states and five Western Balkan Non-EU member countries, later joined by Greece, focusing on transportation

infrastructure, trade, and investment, making it a cooperation of 17+1 countries.¹ The lack of infrastructure, for example, is more visible in the Western Balkans, where countries have low levels of motorway density and rank last in railway density statistics (Holzner & Schwarzhappel, 2018, p. 6). BRI emphasized the significance of this region, and China appeared with investments in infrastructure and energy. The position of these countries allows them to become a hub; the lack of infrastructure

Figure 1. Countries in the 16+1 scheme in 2021



Source: author’s compilation
 Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

¹Here it is important to highlight, that the scheme will be used as a 16+1 cooperation, since Lithuania had already left the cooperation by the end of 2021.

allows China to sneak into the region and appear not only as a contractor, but also as a financial contributor; and the periphery of these states makes them interested in such options.² According to Bastian, „prices for acquisitions are lower, while demand for preferential lending conditions is higher” (Bastian, 2017, p. 4), making the region an appealing destination.

When we consider the context of China’s connectivity projects and infrastructure investments in the Western Balkans, the picture becomes more complicated. First and foremost, the agreements are made on a bilateral basis. They do not have a regional platform specifically for these countries. If there is one area of cooperation worth mentioning, it is the 16+1 (17+1) scheme through which they deal with the Western Balkans. It is worth noting that, of the six Western Balkans countries, Kosovo is not a part of the scheme due to China’s non-recognition. When looking at Europe, the vast majority of Chinese infrastructure projects are located within this region, which adds to its complexity and relevance in comparison to the EU. “While the majority of Chinese outward FDI flows to core EU countries, infrastructure projects are implemented rather in European peripheries such as CEE. Similarly, within the CEE region, EU member CEE countries host relatively more Chinese outward FDI while already implemented or ongoing infrastructure projects are more common in the non-EU CEE states.” (Szunomár, 2020). So, Beijing’s presence here resembles its foreign policies with developing countries, though we should remember that the proximity of the EU defines China’s interest in the region for two reasons: (1) the EU is China’s main export market, and (2) China would like to see its companies competing for infrastructure projects financed by European funds within the EU as well.

We could see why and how CEE’s position was important in connecting East to West; the Western Balkans’ importance stems from connecting CEE and the Mediterranean Sea, or, as Conley et al. put it, providing access from the sea to Europe’s “inner core” (Conley et al., 2020, p. 3). Since COSCO took control of the Greek Piraeus port in 2009, it has been developing it into the largest Mediterranean Sea port, with further improvements planned. According to Lloyd’s List, Piraeus is the 26th largest port by 2020 (Lloyd’s List, 2020) – the port was 93rd in 2012 (Zakić & Radišić, 2019, p. 59). The port is linked to European networks via Budapest via a railway crossing the Western Balkans, explaining China’s interest in railway development.

² „The role of Chinese capital in Central and Eastern Europe, compared with all the invested capital is still very small, but in the last few years this capital inflow accelerated significantly. [...] There is a growing demand for attracting Chinese companies in the last two to five years.” (Éltető & Szunomár, 2016, p. 33).

The region is home to China’s infrastructure projects in Europe, but the process has been met with criticism, particularly from Western Europe. What makes this criticism salient is that the room for manoeuvre for China has opened up as a result of the EU’s inactivity and passivity in the region: „Over the past decade, Beijing has successfully taken advantage of the passiveness of the EU and gained both economic and political influence with loans and major projects across the region” (Đorđević, 2021), otherwise the gaps in development may open up further and further windows for China in the coming years, or even decades as well (Shopov, 2021, p. 10).

So, in summarizing the region’s importance and relevance, we must emphasize that

- the region’s location, in this case, linking the Mediterranean Sea with Central Europe;
- the region’s relatively underdeveloped or missing infrastructure;
- a lack of funds; and
- the region’s proximity to the EU

all played and continue to play an important role in attracting Chinese interests.

3. The Flagship and Further Projects of China Within the Region

The Belgrade–Budapest railway is the region’s flagship project, and it is one of the BRI’s official projects. On the Serbian side, a 343-kilometer rail line from Serbia’s capital to Hungary’s capital is being built and is expected to be completed well before the Hungarian section, which will not begin until the end of 2021. The railway would be the final section of the proposed railway link from Piraeus port, and it is not a traditional FDI project because local governments are supporting the project with Chinese loans.

The project was officially launched at a meeting of the 16+1 cooperation in Budapest. According to official media reports, the line has the potential to become the primary transport route for Chinese (and Asian) goods arriving by sea at the Chinese-owned Greek port of Piraeus and heading into (Central Eastern) Europe. While it can be an important link, two things must be stressed: first, it will not be able to realize its full potential without the rest of the railway sections all the way down to Piraeus. Second, it is important to note that it is only one of many possible transport options and trade corridors for Chinese trade. We can discuss other ports in the northern Adriatic Sea,

Figure 2. The Budapest-Belgrade railway and the future link between Budapest and Piraeus port



Source: author's compilation
 Edited by: Alexandra Érsek-Csanádi

such as Trieste in Italy, Koper in Slovenia, and Rijeka in Croatia. Southeast Europe is also accessible by rail from China, via Turkey and the other entry point, Poland, which has the largest chunk of block trains from China via Russia and Central Asia. Beyond the region, China has interests in Western European ports such as Valencia, Zeebrugge, Antwerp, and Rotterdam (Zweers et al., 2020, p. 10-11).

The Belgrade-Budapest railway, as a flagship project, attracts media attention as well, and Chinese needs are frequently highlighted³, but can we say that it is only

³ For example, in the case of Hungary, which is located outside of the Western Balkans, there are always questions about whether the Belgrade-Budapest railway will benefit Hungary or only China. While the numbers do not indicate a profitable investment, Hungarian interest can only be understood through a complex approach: Serbia and the Western Balkans region are important not only because of the expansion of Mol and OTP, but also because of small and medium-sized enterprises. We must not overlook the Hungarian minority in Serbia, as well as the region's interest in joining the EU, how the Hungarian Commissioner for Enlargement can assist in this process, and the fact that Hungary took over the largest NATO mission in Kosovo in late 2021. The ongoing migration and refugee crisis complicates Hungarian foreign policy toward the region.

about serving Beijing's interests? China is only putting its money where it has a direct interest? Apart from the railway, Chinese companies and loans have stakes in various sectors of the motorways within Corridors 10 and 11. A Chinese company is also building a section of the Bar-Boljare motorway in Montenegro, a project that will be discussed in greater detail later. Two motorways in North Macedonia, the Miladinovci-Shtip and the Kichevo-Ohrid, are also under construction, and sections of the Adriatic-Ionian motorway in Albania and Montenegro may be funded by China, according to an MoU signed in 2015.

What are the characteristics of these projects in common? None of these have been completed, and they serve no direct Chinese interests. "The only completed infrastructure construction project in the Western Balkans is the Pupin bridge in Serbia since 2016." (Zweers et al., 2020, p. 16-17). That is, we cannot see the outcomes of such projects, whether they will be profitable or not, and we can also learn that when President Xi spoke about international cooperation and people-to-people connectivity, he was not just referring to the main trade corridors, and China is willing to collaborate with Western Balkans countries to boost their economies through infrastructure projects.

4. Possible Threats and Consequences

First and foremost, among the possible threats and consequences, we must concentrate on the most critical aspect of the Chinese presence, whether it is the 16+1 or their projects in the Western Balkans: how it alters power relations within the region, how it affects the EU's control over these countries, and how realistic it is to talk about a divided EU as a result of Beijing's actions (see: Turcsányi, 2014;

Heilmann et al., 2014). We learned from the most recent meeting of the 17+1 scheme in 2021 that, while disappointments in EU policies can drive countries in the region towards China, it is not a one-way street, and China must suffer setbacks as well if they do not deliver according to regional expectations: the 17+1 scheme was reduced to 16+1 after Lithuania decided to leave the cooperation, citing concerns about the unity of the Community, the EU, but also many countries were represented by lower level politicians, not heads of states and governments.

Citing Eszterhai, he pointed out that while Beijing’s language about the scheme is upbeat, emphasizing the need of cooperation, the parties were unable to achieve the anticipated enhanced level of commerce that was predicted (Eszterhai, 2017). We should also keep in mind that Serbia is the primary target in the region, which has caused some consternation and dissatisfaction in a number of countries. (Holzner & Schwarzhappel, 2018, p. 17; Conley et al., 2020).

While ongoing concerns in Western European countries, possibly about the leverage and limited conditionality Beijing can offer to Central and Eastern European countries, should be addressed later, there is a threat that is more tangible and alarming in the Western Balkans, as Zweers et al. and Eszterhai have already highlighted: China could derail countries from their path towards the European Union. “China’s mere presence in the [Western Balkans] obstructs EU norm diffusion in political, economic and security terms. The legal approximation of the [Western Balkans] with the EU, as required in their path towards EU membership, requires the full adoption and implementation of EU standards on good governance, macro-economic stability, environmental protection, public procurement (transparency), corruption, human rights, privacy and data protection. In all these fields, engagements between China and the [Western Balkans] have frequently caused the latter to drift away from EU-intended reforms. As well as confronting the [Western Balkans] with deviating standards, China’s increased role in the Western Balkans has furthermore undermined the mechanisms of socialisation and conditionality through which the EU has sought to draw the region closer.” (Zweers et al., 2020, p. 3). It was also stated by Eszterhai that infrastructure investments are not transparent, and as a result, they violate EU norms, standards, and laws. This is also the reason why the Hungarian segment of the Belgrade-Budapest railway is currently under investigation, according to EU officials (Eszterhai, 2017). As a result, the states wishing to join the EU should be aware of this potential threat, and EU officials should be aware of this possibility as well: the longer the accession talks are delayed, the more citizens in these countries will be pessimistic or critical about the accession process in general.

In connection with this, we must state unequivocally that local politicians and the media are interested in exaggerating the influence of such outsider actors, like China. Matura points out that “one of the most important findings [...] is that national governments tend to offer an inflated picture of China’s presence in their respective

countries. Figures presented by governments tend to include investment plans previously proposed but otherwise never implemented by the Chinese side. [...] It must be emphasised that infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loans do not fit into the category of Chinese foreign direct investment, rather they are investments made by the host country and merely financed by a loan that happens to come from China” (Matura, 2021, p. 7).

Aside from overstated significance, the real picture in the Western Balkans is less China-dominated; in terms of FDI, it is difficult to conceal the EU’s dominance, and the situation in trade is quite similar. In terms of FDI, the EU “accounts for an average 60% of the total FDI stock across the six” (Holzner & Schwarzhappel, 2018, p. 15) Western Balkan countries and their trade situation are very similar. As shown in Table 1, the EU outweighs its partners, with China, for example, playing less important or minor roles.

Table 1. Western Balkans’ trade in goods with the EU and China, as percentage of the total trade, 2019

	EU		China	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
Albania	58%	76%	9%	2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	61%	72%	7%	–
Kosovo	49%	33%	10%	–
Montenegro	47%	37%	8%	4%
North Macedonia	50%	79%	6%	2%
Serbia	59%	68%	9%	2%

Source: Zweers et al., 2020.

Whether overstated or not, there is another issue that is frequently cited as an obstacle to China’s global influence (Xhambazi, 2021; Alloussi et al., 2020; Shopov, 2021, p. 11), and that is the so-called debt-trap diplomacy. While the concept is not new, as Eszterhai noted (Eszterhai, 2021, p. 4), Chellaney was the first to apply it to China and the financial underpinnings of BRI projects (Chellaney, 2017). The term refers to Beijing’s (or any other country’s) “supporting infrastructure projects in strategically located developing countries, often by extending huge loans to their governments.

As a result, countries are becoming ensnared in a debt trap that leaves them vulnerable to China's influence, [since] [...] the projects that China is supporting are often intended not to support the local economy, but to facilitate Chinese access to natural resources, or to open the market for its low-cost and shoddy export goods" (Ibid.). Chellaney also cites the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka as an example, possibly the most well-known, although Eszterhai refutes this perspective, claiming that the project was initiated by the Sri Lankan government, not China, and that the country's debt crisis was a result of a failing economic policy (Eszterhai, 2021, p. 5-9). The Montenegrin highway project, which received such labels in the Western Balkans, was portrayed as an example of debt-trap diplomacy. The project will connect the country's Serbian border with the Adriatic port of Bar, but only a 41 kilometer-long (25 miles), although the most difficult section is under construction between Smokovac and Matešev, with a total of 42 tunnels and 92 bridges. The motorway, dubbed "the road to nowhere" (Paszak, 2020), is financed by loans (85%) and government funds (15%): the government borrowed USD 944 billion from the Chinese Exim Bank, but the project has yet to be completed, and the debt has risen to 103% of GDP – also due to this loan. (Stojkovski et al., 2021). The government successfully repaid the first installment in the summer of 2021, but concerns remained about the fact that the motorway must still be completed in order to earn the revenues anticipated, and this section will also not open until 2022. Due to the high percentages of debt and reports regarding the Chinese interest in the port of Bar in the event of a renegotiation, the debt-trap diplomacy is widely utilized. However, the reality is a little more complicated: the project was initiated by the government, and the country's politicians were responsible for concealing and classifying reports about the section's expected (lower) costs (Kajosevic, 2021), as well as the fact that "the terms of the loan allegedly do not give China the right to seize territory or business interests in Montenegro in case of a loan default." (Montenegro ponders how, 2021) Internal political arguments also contribute to the criticism, given the current government was in opposition when the deals were struck.

The key lessons learned are as follows: first, corruption is likely the most challenging feature of the region, and the arrival of the Chinese may exacerbate the situation⁴; second, the EU should be more active in infrastructure projects

⁴ „In all [the] cases of China-financed infrastructural projects, Chinese companies have been awarded the contracts directly by the governments rather than through a competitive bidding process. Often countries had to legislate ad hoc for Chinese projects to meet Beijing's demands that contracts be awarded directly to Chinese contractors. This creates loopholes and exceptions in the legal system and delays the region's convergence with EU norms." (Makocki & Nechev, 2017, p. 1-2.)

outside of its borders, in potential future member states, to assist their economic needs while also maintaining stricter financial controls; and, most importantly, to assist and accelerate the progress of these countries towards EU integration. The second lesson is important since it appears that the EU is willing to take it into consideration. And this gets us to the first of the potentially beneficial effects of the Chinese invasion: the awareness of mistakes. We might examine the Chinese presence not only through critical and worrying lenses, but also as a wake-up call: the region is in desperate need of infrastructure, which has the potential to impact the future of these countries if not provided. However, while EU funding were not accessible for infrastructure development outside of the EU in candidate and potential candidate nations, that policy or concept should be reconsidered. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, announced that the EU is prepared to support construction of a railway line connecting Belgrade, Serbia, and Preevo, North Macedonia in two sections: from Belgrade to Niš and from there to Prešev. "According to the Serbian President, the European Union would provide a financial support covering between 35 and 50% of the project costs, resulting in a EUR 600 million funding. The project is expected to be also supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)" (RailwayPro, 2021). The project and the support become even more meaningful when we consider that this railway is another section of the planned Budapest-Piraeus connection, dispelling the myth that only Chinese needs are being addressed while also highlighting and acknowledging the needs of the local and regional communities.

We must also emphasize that Chinese SOEs and companies can use the Western Balkans as a study room in order to prepare for future projects within the EU and to gain the necessary experience, resulting in an increase in the number of Chinese companies capable of competing for tenders and projects in the future. While it is not a significant threat, because European citizens can simply benefit from a competition for projects, it can undoubtedly benefit Chinese corporations in the long run. For example, according to Musabelliu, "Chinese scholars call it a policy of 'hitching a ride', to draw in support from international assistance to push forward the economic development" (Musabelliu, 2017, p. 48) whereby these companies can function with the assistance of EU funds, for example. As an example, the Covic Group (China Overseas Engineering Group) joined the European market