

# WORKING PAPER

## **Romanian Attitudes and Perceptions towards the 16+1 Cooperation Platform**

Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai, Costin Lianu, Cristina Ilie, and Irina Rădulescu

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyze Romanian citizens' attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 framework, their determinants and effects. The influencing factors are correlated with the general perception of China and its image, while the effects are seen from the perspectives of the engagement and level of participation in joint initiatives. Recent literature underscores that although this platform offers a range of opportunities in each of the nine pillars of sectoral cooperation, Romania has adopted a passive attitude as regards large-scale projects developed with Chinese partners. Beyond EU specific technical barriers to such projects, the Romanian attitudes towards the 16+1 strongly affected cooperation intensity with China. Positions towards this initiative (opinions from general public, elites, politicians and experts) are identified through three main channels: mass media research, individual interviews and focus groups. The quantitative analysis, combined with qualitative research, emphasizes that in spite of the recognition by some groups of the potential benefits offered by the cooperation in the 16+1 format, reluctance remains. This is not due to China's assets-liabilities balance or the lack of capacity to understand China, but on both insufficient information on 16+1 and political inertia.

**Key Words:** China, Central and Eastern Europe CEE, 16+1, attitude, perception, country image, cooperation

## **Introduction and motivation for this research topic**

Writing an academic paper on the 16+1 platform<sup>1</sup> is not an easy task. There are several strong arguments supporting this assertion, outlined from (yet small-sized) debates in Romania. First, this initiative still does not have enough substance as regards the economic side. The high-level summits, meetings on specific topics, forums, fairs and even the organizational structure have not generated a strong impetus to trade, investment and bilateral projects with impact at the economic level. As a matter of fact, the economic cooperation cannot be significantly intensified until the "spirit of doing business" in the partner country/region is not enough understood.

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym refers to the Central and Eastern European countries which cooperate with China under the 16+1 platform, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, plus China. We use the CEE-16 acronym for the sixteen CEE countries participating in the 16+1 and CEE-11 for the group of countries which are already EU member states.

Second, the heterogeneity of the group does not enable a unitary approach, which means that the bilateral format is the main alternative of cooperation between China and CEE-16, on a “case to case” basis. The 16+1 framework remains in the exploratory phase, even if its objectives have become clear enough through the successive Guidelines of cooperation. These Guidelines underline the focus on enhancing cooperation in each of the nine pillars (economy, finance, industrial capacity and manufacturing, connectivity, agriculture, research-development-innovation-science-technology-environment protection, culture-education-youth-sport-tourism, health, local level) and recent Declarations (including that of Riga of 2016) add more detailed goals, such as developing transportation hubs involving ports and industrial parks in the coastal areas of the three seas – Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea –. Besides, without a doubt, this platform enables a better understanding of partners, it clarifies which are participants’ expectations of cooperation, and also which are the barriers, risks and possible misunderstandings in the process of joint actions. However, the results are disproportionate in relationship with the efforts and also the discrepancy between results and expectations remains large.

The CEE countries passed through a drastic geopolitical turmoil after the collapse of the Soviet Union and even now they are within different geopolitical contexts. This region brings together states with various ambitions and interests, some in the European Union (EU), some aiming to join the EU (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), and in the Eastern neighbourhood there are some potential members of the 16+1 most definitely outside, including even a participant in a competing bloc, Eurasian Economic Union (Belarus). Among the EU members one may find non-resistant and less critical countries to EU policies and strategies like Latvia, Lithuania or Romania and more critical members like Hungary and Poland.

Third, even the historical argument – namely the shared communist past, which brought together China and CEE-16 – was accompanied by weaknesses. Because of the region’s communist past, associated with dramatic experiences, the CEE-16 willingly adhered to the EU values and adopted the *acquis communautaire*. Based on this, Chinese and EU norms and values are seen as contradictory, even if this view is not correct. Therefore the Chinese soft power is associated with propaganda and this leads to a negative stance towards it (Lilei, 2013). Moreover, the EU and its strategic partner the United States have become more critical to China, especially after 2012-2013, when China’s attitude of self-confidence became evident through bold “initiatives” called “strategies” by most Western scholars and experts (Belt and Road, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 16+1 etc.).

Having this geopolitical landscape the question that arises is how this mixed grouping, with so many differences between the members, may be convinced to get more from the opportunities coming from China in the context of diverse expectations toward China, which might be difficult to be managed by the rising brand of “Global China”.

The literature incorporates already significant conclusions about the economic and political aspects related to 16+1, including how this structure is seen by other European countries, especially the old member states. Investigations by Liu (2013, 2016), Lilei (2013), Simurina (2014), Szczudlik-Tatar (2013, 2014), Turcsányi (2014, 2015), Kong (2015),

Kaczmariski, Jakóbowski (2015), Jaroch (2016), Góralczyk (2017), Jacopo (2017) belong to the relevant research papers on this topic. What remains indeed less explored is related to the following questions: *How are the attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 framework? Which are their determinants and effects? Are the influencing factors correlated with the general perception of China and its image?*

### **Research objective and methodology**

The main objective of this paper is to find the answers at the above mentioned questions from the Romanian perspective. In Romania there is no in-depth research on attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1. We identify the main positions towards this initiative (opinions from general public, elites, politicians and experts) through several main channels: literature review, mass media screening, individual interviews and focus groups.

Finding out *how are the attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 framework, their determinants and effects and whether the influencing factors are correlated with the general perception of China and its image* might explain whether Romania's still low level of *cooperation intensity with China* is influenced by the psychological factor. There are many other determinants influencing cooperation intensity with China: cultural differences, associated with the still low level of understanding the "spirit of doing business" in the partner country/region, economic, regulatory and geopolitical aspects, but also own political will and external factors, such as European Union and United States' positions towards China and its initiatives. External factors present different degrees of influence at psychological level and in Romania's case they play a considerable role.

Our research includes the following hypotheses: (1) Attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 are influenced by the general knowledge and understanding of China but not totally. (2) Strengthening the cooperation relations with China is beneficial for all the participants at 16+1. (3) The large scale initiatives adopted by China since 2012, including 16+1 and their potential effects are known only by a handful of Romanians. (4) Only several politicians and decision makers know in detail the 16+1 mechanisms. (5) There are many potential factors affecting the results of the 16+1: very diverse interests of the participants, excessive gap between expectations and outcomes, EU legislation (and specific restrictions in terms of state aid, public procurement etc.), the low level of confidence in this initiative and low degree of trust among the participants

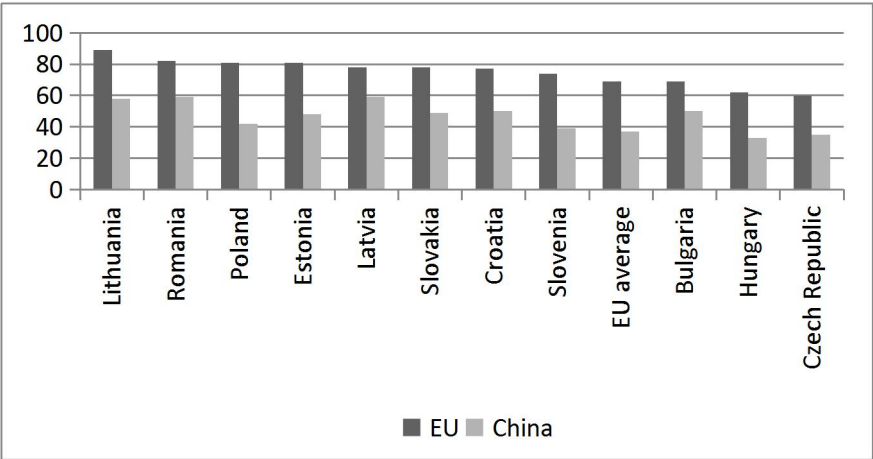
### **Research results**

Romania is one of the most sensitive countries among the CEE-16 as regards external influences. As a firm euro-optimist, it is one of the most fervent supporters of the EU institutions and initiatives. Romania is recording high levels of trust and even "blind faith" in the EU, as a compensation for the strong distrust in national entities. In Romania, EU is still seen as a "watchdog of democracy", "a problem solver" and "a legitimate actor" in internal political affairs, in spite of the setbacks. Moreover, the EU is considered a prosperity enabler, as it offers access to "the civilized world", "peace and democracy", "freedom of movement",

“European funds” and other “financial advantages” (Durach, 2016, pp. 44-46). Taking such arguments into account, it is evident that Romania is sensitive at any negative signals from Brussels or other Western European capitals towards China.

A recent analysis based on the surveys carried out by the European Commission in 2016 (Oehler-Şincai, 2017) underlined that: (1) the general attitude in CEE regarding China is much critical as compared to the attitude towards the EU (Chart 1) and (2) surprisingly, among the countries with the most negative opinions on China there are exactly those which are the most active participants at the 16+1 platform, namely Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland. (3) Romania is one of the countries with the highest percentages of positive views on China. Nonetheless this does not translate into practice through a high level of bilateral cooperation intensity. (4) The recent Chinese initiatives, including 16+1 have not ensured automatically a positive attitude towards China. (5) The CEE-16 countries are ready to intensify their cooperation with China as this represents a complementary factor leading to economic growth. This framework generates a networking pushing effect, stimulating the CEE participants to keep the pace with the active players, in order not to be left behind.

**Chart 1: “Total positive” views about the EU and China among the citizens of the CEE-11 countries (% of the total number of interviewees)**



Source: Oehler-Şincai (2017), based on European Commission (2016).

Romania has recognized that there is a significant potential of cooperation with China. According to official declarations, Romanian authorities support bilateral cooperation and “One Belt, One Road”<sup>2</sup> and “16+1” are seen as important channels of cooperation and mutual understanding (Oehler-Şincai, 2016). In spite of that, even if there have been proposed concrete investment schemes in a public-private partnership no large-scale project has been implemented until now. In our opinion, it is needed a critical level of political will, understanding and trust between China and Romania in order to start significant bilateral

<sup>2</sup> In this paper we mainly refer to the 16+1 platform and do not make a distinct analysis of the attitudes and perceptions towards the “Belt and Road”. In November 2015 at the Suzhou summit, the Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the goal of fully integrating the “16+1 Cooperation” into the “Belt and Road” initiative as both are guided by the “Silk Road Spirit” of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit”.

projects. Besides, the EU legislation with all its limitations and constraints must be taken into account.

In Romanian mass media, China and its wide-ranging initiatives are present but they are not at the forefront. Beyond general aspects, there are given no details and the official declarations by Romanian authorities are dominated by standard keywords such as “importance of cooperation under the 16+1 framework for Romania”.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese representatives (for instance the Chinese ambassador in Romania) set the focus on concrete and potential cooperation projects and underline what should be done in order to accelerate the pace of negotiations in the case of stalled projects.<sup>4</sup> *The overwhelming majority of the population has not heard about 16+1 and even among the elites, this platform is little known.*

As a complementary way to outline the attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 cooperation platform we resorted to individual interviews and focus groups. The 22 questions attached importance to the following issues:

- If the interviewee visited China, how often, how long and which was the purpose (in order to correlate a better understanding of China with a better knowledge and optimistic stance towards the Chinese initiatives);
- General perception of China in Romania, taking into account political, economic, social and environmental factors;
- Own opinion on China, taking into account political, economic, social and environmental factors;
- Information about China in Romanian mass media, whether it is mainly positive, negative, or there is a balance between the favourable and unfavourable information;
- Objectivity of the information about China;
- China’s degree of visibility in Romania;
- The most important component of China’s image in Romania (economic efficiency and performance, negative economic aspects, such as distortions, political system, attractiveness through culture and touristic destinations, norms and values, fascination and enthusiasm towards China);
- Usefulness of consolidating Sino-Romanian cooperation;
- Actual government and political parties’ stance towards strengthening collaboration relationship with China;
- General degree and politicians’ degree of knowledge about the Chinese initiatives such as 16+1 and their potential economic effects in Romania;
- Own knowledge and understanding of the 16+1 mechanisms;
- 16+1 contribution to the consolidation of Sino-Romanian relations during 2012-2017 and in the future (on medium and long term);
- The main winners among the participants at 16+1;

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<sup>3</sup> Please consult <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2017/10/11/gheorghita-mae-evidentiaza-importanta-formatului-de-cooperare-16-1-pentru-romania-21-30-08>.

<sup>4</sup> Please consult <https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2017/09/27/interviu-ambasadorul-chinei-speram-sa-consolidam-coordonarea-politica-si-de-strategie-dintre-china-si-romania-12-00-33>.

- The main operating principle: CEE-16 establish jointly with China the priorities/projects; China imposes priorities/projects according to its own interests; China has the initiative; the initiative belongs to CEE-16 and they make proposals to China (from the authors' perspective, it is evident that CEE-16 establish jointly with China the priorities/projects);

- The main factors affecting the results of the 16+1: very diverse interests of the participants, excessive gap between expectations and outcomes, EU legislation (and specific restrictions in terms of state aid, public procurement etc.), the low level of confidence in this initiative, low degree of trust among the participants, lack of interest in participating in this platform, others;

- Benefits of 16+1: access to advantageous loans; the rapid infrastructure development; trade acceleration; diminishing trade imbalances in relation with China; attracting Chinese investment; increasing trust; understanding cultural, economic, social, political realities of the partner countries; others;

- The most important pillars of 16+1 from Romania's perspective: economy (trade, investment, energy); infrastructure development; industrial and production capacity; financial sector; agriculture; science, technology, research, development, innovation, environment protection; culture, education, youth, sport, tourism; health; cooperation at local level;

- Open question on what should the Chinese authorities undertake in order to stimulate the cooperation under the 16+1 framework and improve its perception;

- Own attitude towards the 16+1: optimistic, pessimistic, neutral.

Analyzing the 40 interviews of October 2017 on the topic of Romanian attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 cooperation platform one can remark several important aspects.

All the five hypotheses were confirmed by the results. It is worth noting the distribution of pessimists, optimists and neutral participants as regards 16+1: 17 optimists, 16 neutral and 7 pessimists. A favourable opinion towards China does not necessarily imply a positive attitude towards the 16+1 platform and a negative stance is not inevitably correlated with a negative/neutral attitude towards 16+1 mainly because the weaknesses of the platform in terms of efficient communication tools and channels and misunderstandings. Therefore *the stance towards 16+1 is not integrally correlated with the participants' image<sup>5</sup> of China and its assets (positive aspects) or liabilities (negative aspects)*. Among those who have been in China (13 of 40, out of which only one as a tourist), nine had an optimistic stance towards 16+1, one pessimistic and three neutral, while in the other group of 27, eight had an optimistic stance towards 16+1, five pessimistic, 13 neutral and 1 answered "I do not know".

According to respondents, the average of the general perception of China in Romania, taking into account political, economic, social and environmental factors on a scale from 1 to 7 (very unfavourable-very favourable) was 4.6 and the average of the own opinion on China,

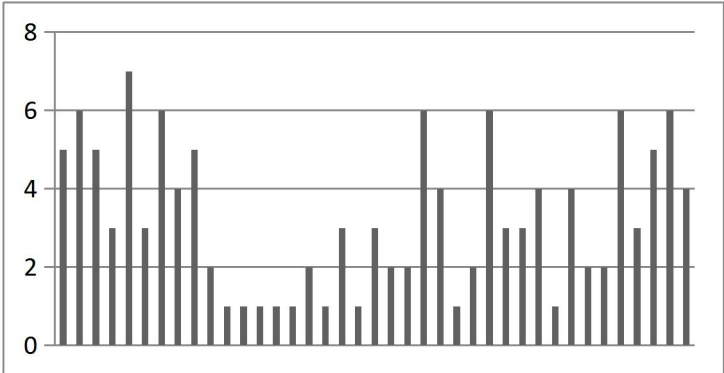
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<sup>5</sup> As indicated by the 4D model of a country image (Buhmann, 2016), each public has specific beliefs regarding a country from three perspectives, namely functional (competences and competitiveness of a country, its political and economic effectiveness and performance, technological progress, social desirability), aesthetic (attractiveness/beauty of a country as a cultural and scenic place) and normative (quality of governance, norms and values), which contributes to the formation of the emotional dimension.

taking into account political, economic, social and environmental factors was 5.2. However most of those who had been in China had a perception of this country close to 7. *Consequently attracting more Romanians to China will improve the perception of China's image however the perception of the 16+1 platform remains related to concrete results and a better understanding of its mechanisms.*

The platform is little known by the interviewees, including the participants at focus groups (Chart 2). All of them have a clear opinion on China and its image in Romania, but do not know exactly the mechanisms of 16+1. There is a strong need for public consultations and increasing awareness of the Chinese initiative and its potential impact on the Romanian economy.

**Chart 2: Own knowledge and understanding of the 16+1 mechanisms on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very high)**

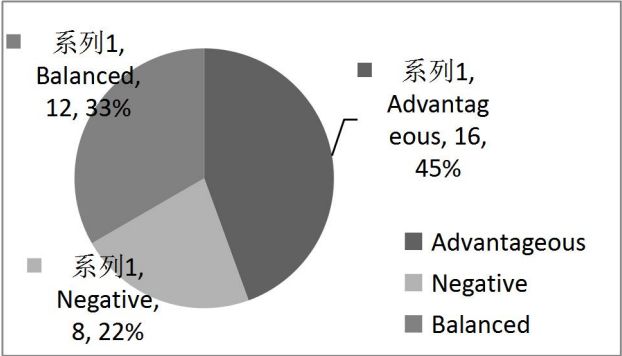


Source: Chart elaborated by authors.

Of those who know the operating mechanism very well,<sup>6</sup> the overwhelming majority responded that the platform has a growing contribution to strengthening China's cooperation with CEE over time.

Most of the respondents (but not an overwhelming majority) considered that information about China in Romania is advantageous to the former (40%) and it is objective (also 40%) (Charts 3 and 4).

**Chart 3: Information about China in Romanian mass media**



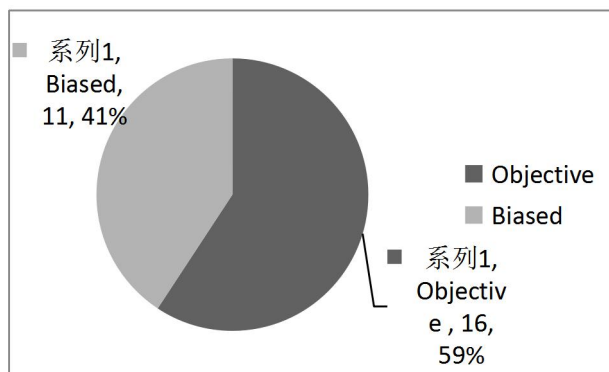
<sup>6</sup> Regarding the degree of knowledge of the 16+1 mechanisms on a scale from 1 to 7, one respondent has answered “7”, six answered “6”, four “5”, five “4”, seven “3”, seven “2” and nine “1”, with an average of 3.2.



Notes: The interviewees were asked to answer whether information is mainly objective of biased. Several respondents answered with “I do not know”.

Source: Chart elaborated by authors.

**Chart 4: Objectivity of the information about China**



Notes: The interviewees were asked to answer whether information is mainly objective of biased. Several respondents answered with “I do not know”.

Source: Chart elaborated by authors.

According to the results of the interviews, most answers (52% but not the large majority) pointed to the fact that China is visible enough in Romanian mass media.

Referring to the usefulness of consolidating Sino-Romanian cooperation, it was only one negative answer and one comment: strengthening the cooperation between private economic agents is useful. At the question related to the actual government and political parties’ stance towards strengthening collaboration relationship with China, there were only 6 “yes”, five answers indicating the Social Democrats as active supporters of a strong relationship with China. The general degree of knowledge about the Chinese initiatives such as 16+1 and their potential economic effects in Romania is very low and politicians’ degree of knowledge about them is even lower (2.5).

The following table underlines the following conclusions. The most relevant component of China’s image in Romania is its economic efficiency and performance (mentioned by 70% of interviewees) and another one is attractiveness through culture and touristic destinations (30% of total answers). China is considered the winner among the participants at 16+1 by the majority of interviewees as most of them believe that either China imposes priorities/projects according to its own interests or China has the initiative. Among the main factors affecting the results of 16+1 are mentioned: very diverse interests of the participants, excessive gap between expectations and outcomes, lack of interest in participating in this platform, EU legislation and the low level of confidence in this initiative. Only three respondents included the low degree of trust among the participants as a barrier for cooperation in the framework of 16+1. The three major benefits of participating at 16+1 are (listed in order of importance): the rapid infrastructure development, attracting Chinese investment and trade acceleration, options supported also by the findings related to the most important pillars of 16+1 from Romania’s perspective: infrastructure development and economy (trade, investment, energy).

**Table 1: Distribution of answers at six relevant questions (multiple choices)**

<i>The most important component of China's image in Romania</i>	
Economic efficiency and performance	28
Negative economic aspects	3
Political system	5
Attractiveness through culture and touristic destinations	12
Norms and values	3
Fascination and enthusiasm towards China	2
<i>The winners among the participants at 16+1</i>	
China	22
Visegrad countries	7
Western Balcans	2
Hungary	2
Serbia	1
Bulgaria	3
Romania	5
Other: Those who engage most actively and implement most projects	
<i>The main operating principle</i>	
CEE-16 establish with China the priorities/projects	14
China imposes priorities/projects according to its own interests	7
China has the initiative	11
The initiative belongs to CEE-16 and they make proposals to China	2
<i>The main factors affecting the results of the 16+1</i>	
Very diverse interests of the participants	12
Excessive gap between expectations and outcomes	12
EU legislation	8
Low level of confidence in this initiative	8
Low degree of trust among the participants	3
Lack of interest in participating in this platform	10
Other: conditions imposed by China	
<i>Benefits of 16+1</i>	
Access to advantageous loans	0
The rapid infrastructure development	21
Trade acceleration	12
Diminishing trade imbalances in relation with China	5
Attracting Chinese investment	16
Increasing trust	2
Understanding cultural, economic, social, political realities of the partner countries	6

<i>The most important pillars of 16+1 from Romania's perspective</i>	
Economy (trade, investment, energy)	19
Infrastructure development	28
Industrial and production capacity	8
Financial sector	0
Agriculture	5
Science, technology, research, development, innovation, environment protection	8
Culture, education, youth, sport, tourism	2
Health	2
Cooperation at local level	2

Note: Several respondents answered with "I do not know" at different questions.

Source: Chart elaborated by authors.

As regards the recommendations in order to stimulate the cooperation under the 16+1 framework and improve its perception in Romania the interviewees (including those participating in focus groups) underlined the necessity of:

- Identifying common priorities;
- Sustaining the projects proposed by the CEE-16 (finding out the specific needs of each participant);
- Establishing and implementing viable projects, selected together by China and each country involved;
- Increasing the visibility of the platform, launching information campaigns, opening information offices, strong public relations campaigns and lobbying, suitable communication networks especially for the young generation, a good communication strategy;
- Encouraging China not to follow its own interests and adopt a win-win stance;
- Encouraging China to liberalize its trade and stimulating the private enterprises to invest in CEE (comment emphasizing a critic attitude towards investment made by state owned enterprises);
- Larger flexibility, increased transparency, stimulating EU participation in this initiative;
- Promoting best practices;
- Subsidizing export promotion events in China for Romanian exporters under 16+1 initiatives of Chinese government (which is also subsidizing this participation). The Romanian government should be more pro-active in this regard as it is in the benefit of Romanian exporters and may contribute to ameliorate the imbalance in bilateral trade relations.

## **Conclusions**

The results of individual interviews and focus groups underscore the following: (1) Attitudes and perceptions towards the 16+1 are influenced by the general knowledge and

understanding of China but not totally. The stance towards 16+1 is not integrally correlated with the participants' image of China and its assets (positive aspects) or liabilities (negative aspects). Attracting more Romanians to China will improve the perception of China's image however the perception of the 16+1 platform remains related to concrete results and a better understanding of its mechanisms. (2) Strengthening the cooperation relations with China is beneficial for all the participants at 16+1. (3) The large scale initiatives adopted by China since 2012, including 16+1 and their potential effects are known only by a handful of Romanians. The overwhelming majority of the population has not heard about 16+1 and even among the elites, this platform is little known. (4) Only several politicians and decision makers know in detail the 16+1 mechanisms. (5) There are many potential factors affecting the results of the 16+1: very diverse interests of the participants, excessive gap between expectations and outcomes, EU legislation (and specific restrictions in terms of state aid, public procurement etc.), the low level of confidence in this initiative and low degree of trust among the participants.

The most important aspects underlined by interviewees as regards the 16+1 platform are related to the (1) implementation of projects according to the participants' specific needs and (2) more communication, by using the suitable networks and by addressing more young people. There is a strong need for public consultations and increasing awareness of the Chinese initiative and its potential impact on the Romanian economy. All the events organized on the sidelines of 16+1 should be mediatised, for instance the first edition of 16+1 Energy Ministers Meeting, followed by the first 16+1 Energy Fair and Conference, which will take place on 8-10 November 2017, in Bucharest, Romania. Not only the public servants and experts should know the objectives of such meetings, but also a large audience. Only if the large public knows such initiatives and their potential impact on the Romanian economy they will sustain them.

At least at present, in Romania, Global China initiatives through the lenses of 16+1 appear to be rather insignificant. While it is clear that China's message is offensive, the way China is dealing in bloc all these CEE countries is not very well understood and even accepted by the Western European countries and EU institutions. In this regard, decision makers in China dealing with perceptions and attitudes should avoid considering this region as a cohesive block. One alternative may be to explain better why China is regarding these countries as a bloc, defining better for example the geographical and geopolitical approach. Another alternative may be also the keep 16+1 high on the agenda inside decision making mechanism in China and to have more bilateral approach regarding its global ambitions at the level of the countries involved. In other terms, is about "selling China" based on every individual country perceptions and based on stronger bilateral commitment and brand building rather than over explaining the global engagement for such a heterogeneous region.

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### **About the authors**

**Iulia Monica Oehler-Șincai, Institute for World Economy (IWE),  
Romanian Academy**

**Costin Lianu, Spiru Haret University**

**Cristina Ilie, Spiru Haret University**

**Irina Rădulescu, Oil and Gas University of Ploiești**