

WORKING PAPER

Cooperation in the framework of 16+1: position of Croatia

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Abstract

Croatia participates in the Chinese-led 16+1 initiative that aims to bring under one roof sixteen countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe that was officially launched in 2012. Relations between these two countries date back to 1992 when diplomatic relations were established. Although both countries pledge support for more intensive cooperation, primarily in the area of economy, these intentions have not materialized in any large-scale project. Why this is so and what we can expect in the future regarding the relations between the two countries is explained in this article.

Key Words: China, Croatia, 16+1, Southeast Europe, European Union

Introduction

China and Croatia are two sovereign states. This is probably a beginning and an end in similarities between the two countries. China is the most populated country on this planet, the second largest world economy, a member of the UN Security Council. In short, China is a world power in its own right. Croatia, on the other hand, is a small country in Southeast Europe with just over four million people that gained independence following a violent break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

Analyzing relations between these two countries has to take, first and foremost, the asymmetric power relationship that exists between these two states. However, the asymmetry acknowledged, let us delve deeper into this relationship to explain why and how China and Croatia are cooperating and what can be inferred from this cooperation regarding bilateral relations between the two countries and its possible reference to broader, regional and global, developments.

The paper proceeds in the following way. The first chapter will explain the foreign policy priorities of both Croatia and China with the focus on points of mutual interest in nurturing cooperation. The second chapter will look into bilateral political relations, followed by chapter three that looks into economic relations between the two countries. Chapter four describes cultural relations or what the Chinese usually describe as people-to-people relations. The conclusion sums up the analysis and points to possible developments regarding bilateral (and multilateral) cooperation in the near future.

Croatia – a profile of the country

Croatia's territory of 56,594 km², the population of 4.17 million with GDP of just over 50 billion USD and 1,4% of GDP military expenditure (World Bank 2017) places it in a category of small state states by most measurements. Although there is no fixed criteria for categorizing states as small (Maas 2009, Archer *et al.* 2014), Croatia refers often to itself as a small state (MVEP 2017a, Pavlic 2016, Hina 2014). The auto-reference to a small state by Croatian politicians and diplomats usually serves to highlight that Croatia, despite being a small state, has strategic geographical position that places it on the world map in the context of transport and energy infrastructure. It has a long coastline and clean water resources, another asset that contribute to its visibility and a positive image in the world. As a member of NATO and the EU, it punches above its weight. As many other small states, Croatia also exhibits a propensity to be most active in its neighborhood (Šelo Šabić 2014). In other words, the crux of its foreign policy activity, just as that of many other small states, is basically local.

However, Croatia also feels that after it completed the three key national strategic goals, it is now in a position to take its rightful place among other nations and confront challenges that it faces individually and as a member of global community (An. S. 2013, Jandroković 2008). The earlier strategic goals of Croatia were gaining international independence which was realized by 1992. The second goal was recapturing occupied parts of the territory and exercising full sovereignty throughout the country which was realized in 1995 and 1997 respectively. The third national strategic goal was membership in NATO and the EU. These goals Croatia achieved by joining NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013. A series of single-directed foreign policy goals would be, by necessity once they are completed, replaced by multi-directional foreign policy (Jović 2011).

The most recent foreign policy strategy lists functioning in the EU and NATO, activities in the region of Southeast Europe, commercial diplomacy and development of bilateral and multilateral relations as key priorities for Croatia in the current period (MVEP 2017b). For the purpose of this paper, it is important to highlight that the last two – commercial diplomacy and development of bilateral and multilateral relations – are most relevant. It is a question if the 16+1 framework can help Croatia achieve some of its foreign policy goals.

For a small country challenged by multiple post-war transitions, global financial crisis and the process of globalization, securing national interests is not an easy task. Croatia has sought to access markets beyond those of the neighborhood and the EU. It also has pledged to continue implementing structural reforms at home in order to attract FDI and develop its economy. Cooperation with China in this framework is a part of the foreign policy orientation (MVEP 2017b).

The 16+1 cooperation

China's foreign policy, reflecting its growing power, has become more assertive in the last decade. As a part of its *go global* strategy, China initiated cooperation with 16 countries in Central, East and Southeast Europe. Eleven of them are EU Member States (Bulgaria,

Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) while the other five are candidates for EU membership (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina¹, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). The goal of the initiative is to advance cooperation in the fields of investments, transport, finance, science, education, and culture.

Croatia reacted positively to the 16+1 initiative and has been represented at a high level at summits that have taken place so far (Warsaw 2012, Bucharest 2013, Belgrade 2014, Suzhou 2015, Riga 2016). However, its enthusiasm is milder compared to other participating countries in the initiative. For example, Croatian foreign minister represented the country at the Belgrade summit and the Speaker of the Parliament was in Suzhou on behalf of the government. Other countries are traditionally represented by prime ministers or presidents, holders of executive power. Croatia seems not to have shown enough readiness to use potential that lies in the initiatives proposed by China (Podgornik 2017). Its presence at summits seems to be more of formal nature rather than of active contribution to the Initiative (Hina 2017).

The methodology used in research for this paper has been desk research – the use of available documents, speeches, official statements, academic papers and newspaper articles. The goal has been to collect information, describe the relationship between China and Croatia and assess its development in light of expressed desires of both countries to enhance bilateral cooperation and contribute to the development of the 16+1 multilateral framework.

Political relations between Croatia and China

A first record of friendly communication between Croatian and Chinese people is usually referred to a Venetian seafarer Marco Polo who, allegedly, reached China in the 13th century and wrote a travelogue describing he encountered. Although the authenticity of the travelogue and Marco Polo ever actually visiting China has been questioned by historians, a sign on the house in which Marco Polo, it is claimed, was born is still found at the Croatian island of Korčula.

Due to thousands of kilometers of physical distance and language barriers, contacts between Chinese and Croatian people has been minimal in the past. Relatively friendly relations that the former Yugoslavia and China built in the second half of the 20th century were ended by the violent break-up of the first. However, China re-established friendly relations with all Yugoslav successor states², including Croatia. China and Croatia established diplomatic relations in 1992. Ever since, the two countries pledge commitment to cooperation in the fields of international relations, economy, culture, education and science. In 2005, China and Croatia have signed a ‘Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Comprehensive and Cooperative Partnership’ (Baković 2005).

During the war in Croatia, China retained a largely neutral position towards warring sides. Although the four other UN Security Council members (USA, UK, France and Russia)

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate for membership in the EU.

² China does not officially recognize Kosovo although the two have established trade relations.

took part in the negotiations to end the wars in Yugoslavia, China remained aloof. Following its policy of non-interference, it kept itself at safe distance from Yugoslav turmoil. Some humanitarian assistance was provided such as in 1993 aid to refugees in Croatia worth RMB 1.4 million. (Chinaembassy 2014a). However, within a broader picture of regional developments, China and Croatia kept aloof.

There are no open bilateral issues between Croatia and China now. A review of official statements of Croatian officials in the last two decades do not reveal criticism directed at China with respect to its human rights record, a strongly debated issue between China on one side and the EU and the US on the other. As a member of the UN Security Council, relationship with China carries considerable additional weight to the Croatian government.

Meetings between the two countries

A lack of discussion on ending the wars in the former Yugoslavia in a multilateral context did not prevent, however, bilateral meetings. High-level bilateral meetings between Chinese and Croatian officials took place ever since the two countries established diplomatic relations. Already in June 1993 Croatian then President Franjo Tuđman paid an official visit to China. In 1998 Tuđman and Chinese President Jiang Zemin exchanged official notes on developing bilateral relations between the two countries.

Mutual visits continued in 2000 and 2001. On the occasion of Croatian President Stjepan Mesić visiting China in May 2002, the two countries signed a ‘Joint Statement on Deepening of Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Croatia.’ The visits continued annually thereafter. In 2005, when the Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader paid an official visit to China, the two countries signed an earlier mentioned ‘Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Comprehensive and Cooperative Partnership’. Visits continued thereafter annually (with the exception for the year 2011) by different officials. The latest occasion for a meeting between Chinese and Croatian officials was the 16+1 summit in Riga which was attended by the current Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

Main messages from these meetings were calling for more cultural, economic and political cooperation, having and maintaining good relations that would benefit both nations. Both sides lately also expressed a view that the Three Seas Initiative (Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Sea Initiative), to which Croatia officially subscribes, is compatible and complementary with the One Belt, One Road (OBOR)³ of the Chinese government (Vlada 2016). China’s President Xi Jinping was reported to have said that the development of the European North – South corridor, whose basis is connecting ports at the Adriatic and the Baltic seas, is complementary with China’s OBOR (D.I. 2017).

It is a question, though, how exactly the Three Seas Initiative and OBOR are compatible. If seen in a strictly economic terms, then there is indeed possible compatibility on building transport, energy and telecommunications network which will connect the eastern part of the European North and South. Without going any deeper into the nature of the Three Seas

³ One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) is often referred to also as a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as a New Silk Road and a Maritime Silk Road. OBOR has been officially presented in 2013 and 16+1 initiative is seen as an integral part of it.

Initiative, let us just note that there are different interpretations of the Initiative which show how political ramifications impact economics (Krasnec 2017). China would find it hard to navigate among versatile interests of states that have expressed intention to participate in the Three Seas Initiative. OBOR is quite an ambitious framework already encompassing vast territories and peoples, their histories and presents. Integrating a Three Seas Initiative with its political agenda into OBOR seems not a safe path.

Economic relations

A Sino-Croatian Joint Committee for Economy and Trade between the governments of China and Croatia was established in 2009 with the special support of the then President, Stjepan Mesić. Nine regular working meetings have been held by now. China and Croatia have signed the following agreements such as ‘Agreement on Economy and Trade’, ‘Agreement on Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments’, ‘Agreement on Avoiding Double Taxation and Prevention of Tax Evasion’, ‘Memorandum of Understanding between Croatia and China on the Establishment of Croatian – Chinese Economic and Technological Zone’ and others (Chinaembassy 2014b).

Economic and trade relations are described as stable. Croatia has been China’s largest trading partner in southeast Europe for seven consecutive years from 2003 – 2009, however these figures have been low (Stats.gov.cn 2012). The trade is picking up slowly though and it amounted around \$ 1.2 billion in 2016 (Zhaoming 2017). China’s main imports from Croatia are timber, olive oil, wine, sardines, aluminum, stone, etc. while Croatia’s main imports from China are textile, household appliances, computers and other electronic goods (Chinaembassy 2014c, Zhaoming 2017). China’s direct investments in Croatia in the last two decades were very low, they do not even show in statistics data (HNB 2016).

A discussion on the investment in transport infrastructure has been going on for years without any concrete agreement. China has repeatedly expressed interest for the port of Rijeka, but this has not materialized in a form of any specific project. Despite numerous meetings between the two countries, a take-off regarding any large infrastructure project has not taken place. As a latest development, a consortium led by the China Road and Bridge Corporation submitted a lowest bid for the construction of the Pelješac bridge in the south of Croatia for which 85% of financing comes from the EU structural funds. The EU earmarked EUR 420 million for the bridge which should be completed by 2023. The current bid was for the first phase of the construction projected by the government to cost just below HRK 1.8 billion (around EUR 240 million)⁴. All three bids exceed the projected cost. The Chinese offer is the lowest (HRK 2.08 billion) with the commitment to complete the project within the designated time frame and with additional bonus of offering a 10-year maintenance.⁵ The other two bids have come from an Austrian and Italian-Turkish consortia, but both bids are more expensive –

⁴ The Pelješac bridge is to be built in four phases.

⁵ Interview with a Chinese diplomat in Zagreb, October 2017.

HRK 2.6 and HRK 2.5 billion respectively. The decision has not been taken by the end of October 2017 (Varošaneć 2017).

In relation to other infrastructure projects, Chinese investors usually require sovereign guarantees which Croatia, under strict monitoring of EU fiscal rules, is unable to provide (Pavlic 2017).

Yet, an upward trend in economic cooperation is noticed. Trade volume between the two countries grew 30 times in the last 25 years since the two countries established diplomatic relations and amounted to 1.2 billion USD in 2016. Chinese FDI in Croatia reached 150 million USD in 2016 (Zhaoming 2017). The two most recent projects in 2017 are investment in a rehabilitation and spa center Krapinske Toplice worth 30 million USD (Paparella 2017) and an investment of another 27 million USD in Croatian high-tech company Rimac Automobili. and 3 million USD in Rimac Greyp Bikes (TheDubrovnikTimes.com, 2017).

Tourism is also one of prospective areas for economic cooperation. 100.000 Chinese tourists visited Croatia in 2016. By September 2017 the number of tourists increased by 60% (Zhaoming 2017). Chinese Ambassador has on many occasions said that Croatia is quickly becoming one of the top new Chinese tourist destinations in Europe. A focus until now has been mainly on Zagreb, Plitvice Lakes and Dubrovnik, but there is effort to diversify the offer to include other locations (D.I. 2017). Chinese Ambassador proposed establishment of direct flights from China to Croatia in order to boost the number of tourists

In 2017 the Croatian and Chinese interior affairs officials signed a memorandum that grants Chinese policemen, next to their Croatian colleagues, to patrol the streets of tourist town during a summer season. This memorandum is part of a project 'Safe tourist season' which has been implemented for 13 years and has 17 countries participating in it. China is the first non-European country that joined this project (Mint.hr 2017).

Another area for economic cooperation is agriculture. Chinese customers express growing demand for Mediterranean produce such as wine, olive oil and sardines. Chinese investors expressed interest for the sector of agriculture. Online sale platforms such as Taobao and Alibaba could boost sales between two countries. China is also interested in investing into education, health and culture (Hina 2017b). High-speed trains and electric cars, as well as investment in green technology are other areas of interest to the Chinese side (Zhaoming 2017).

Reasons for a relatively low economic cooperation ties between China and Croatia stem from several sources. Croatia is a relatively modest market with limited investment opportunities. Many investors continuously complain of complicated administrative procedures in opening or running a company (Šunjerga 2017). Legal certainty, low corruption and overall rule of law facilitate investments in general. Thus, a combination of a small market and bureaucratic hurdles reduce investment attractiveness of Croatia.

Brussels also fears that the 16+1 initiative may lead to geopolitical competition in this part of Europe which consequently would weaken the EU as a whole (Makocki 2017). Could more intense cooperation of China with countries of 16+1 initiative create a separate block that would undermine decision making in the EU? Can 16+1 present an alternative to EU

membership of countries in the process of accession and of those hoping to become candidates for membership?

Cultural relations

In 1993 China and Croatia signed the ‘Agreement on Cultural and Educational Cooperation’ which led by 2013 to additional five agreements and intergovernmental executive plans on cultural cooperation. (Chinaembassy 2014d).

With the swift development of China’s economy and its opening to world market and international exchanges, the global demand for studying Chinese language and culture has been greatly increasing in past few decades, and Croatia was not an exception (Yidailyilu.gov.cn, 2017).

University of Zagreb introduced Sinology studies program in 2004 which offers a comprehensive view of contemporary and traditional China. There are also a number of language schools that teach Chinese language in Croatia.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Zagreb was established in 2012 with a goal of promoting Chinese language and culture and a vision to become the main source of knowledge about China in Croatia (together with the Sinology studies program). They offer a wide array of language, cultural and business programs. Language programs include standard, business and youth classes. Cultural programs include many different classes which teach students different aspects of Chinese culture including calligraphy, martial arts, chess, Chinese kitchen and Chinese medicine. Business programs include classes about Chinese economic and legal systems and seminars and workshops about China for Croatian business community. They also offer translation services for business purposes and language classes for tour guides (Ki.unizg.hr).

There are also Confucius Institute branches in Dubrovnik, Varaždin, Rijeka, Split, Zadar and Pula which for now only offer language programs and there are plans for opening one branch in Osijek (Ibid.).

Chinese Embassy in Croatia organizes a number of events during the year that are aimed to public and to promote China in Croatia. Those events include the celebration of Chinese New Year and the National Day of China. Other activities include presentation of Chinese universities, visits of Chinese officials, exhibitions, gastronomy festivals, interviews for newspapers, “open day” events in the Embassy, concerts of Chinese music performed by both Chinese and Croatian artists. A Spring Lantern Festival and a Chinese Language Contest are held in Zagreb. The Women Group of the Chinese Embassy participates in cultural and humanitarian activities in Croatia. (Chinaembassy 2014e).

During 2017 Chinese Embassy organized a number of events to celebrate the 25 years of Chinese – Croatian relations. The events took place across all of Croatia with the main event held in amphitheater in Pula on 29 September. It is described as to be among the best such events in 2017 along the ones in New York, Paris and Rome. The 15-minute firework was the longest firework show in the history of Pula and a milestone because it is a first event of its kind organized outside Zagreb (Ban 2017).

In 2005, Beijing Foreign Studies University initiated the major of the Croatian language in its curriculum. In May 2013, China and Croatia signed a ‘Plan for Cooperation in Education for the Period of 2013-2016’ providing yearly scholarships to Chinese and Croatian students, with Chinese side granting tuition for various educational fields. China pledged to grant 200 governmental scholarships in the period of five years for the purpose of promoting youth exchanges and educational cooperation between the two countries (Chinaembassy 2014f).

Local exchanges have been active between many Chinese and Croatian towns, cities and regions. Up to now, sister cities have been established between the following cities (regions) such as Shanghai to Zagreb, Qingdao to Rijeka, Dalian to Rijeka, Ningbo to Rijeka, Yangzhou to Korčula, Sanmenxia to Zabok, Sanya to Dubrovnik and Zhejiang Province to Istra State (Chinaembassy 2014g).

In 1994, both countries signed the “Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation”. The year of 1997 saw the signature of the ‘Agreement of Founding of Inter-governmental Croatian – Chinese Scientific and Technological Co-operation Committee’ whose members have held six regular meetings by the end of 2013. In 2014, the Chinese – Croatian International Research Center for Environmental Protection was established in the National Park of Plitvice (Chinaembassy 2014h).

Conclusion

Croatia and China have been partners for 25 years, but the partnership was not as fruitful as it had the potential to be. Last few years have shown a rise in trade and in FDI from China. Croatian economist Ljubo Jurčić says that Croatia needs more preparation, organization, strategy and clear goals for cooperation with China to be successful (Hina 2017).

However, economic interests aside, there remain political obstacles which relate to intensified Chinese activities in the Croatian neighborhood and the reaction to these from the EU. What causes some reservation on the Croatian side is Chinese friendship with Serbia. Looked from the Croatian side, any state developing friendly relations with its eastern neighbor is viewed with unease. However, it is worth repeating that Chinese non-interference in the Yugoslav conflict is a sort of assurance that China is a cautious actor in the international arena and the one which pursues primarily its own interests. Therefore, the non-recognition of Kosovo is understood in Zagreb to reflect more Chinese domestic concerns than an outright support for Serbia. Chinese recognition of Montenegro immediately following its declaration of independence in 2006 shows that China is not dogmatic about recognition of newly created states. Rather, as a rational international actor, it approaches every issue in its own right and context. Still, historical friendship between China and Serbia intensified within the 16+1 is one of the reasons why Croatia may remain hesitant to intensify its own bilateral relations with China.

The second reason for Croatia’s hesitation in engaging more intensely with China is external in nature. As a member of the European Union Croatia has to respect, for example, legal and administrative procedures when deciding on implementation of infrastructure

projects. Although the argument of EU membership may not hold strong when countered by the argument that EU membership does not prevent countries like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic from developing more intensive economic relations with China, the bottom-line position taken by Croatia, which can only be sensed and not confirmed by any official statements, is to 'sit and wait'. As the newest member of the EU, as a small country grappling with various challenges, as a country which still has to finish a full membership integration (entry in the Schengen area and the Euro zone), as a country which has identified successful functioning within the EU as one of its foreign policy priorities, as a country which takes note of more or less open critical remarks at some Chinese policies in the EU and in countries acceding to the EU, Croatia feels that its position is safer if it remains on the sidelines of recent Chinese activities in its neighborhood. At least for the time being. Adding to this the growth of Chinese presence to the south and the east from where Croatia historically feels that troubles have come, it is even more reluctant to intensify its relations with China.

There are, of course, those in Croatia which advise opening up to China, of defining national interests primarily in terms of economic benefits that a country could gain from cooperating with China, but their voices are not prevalent. Not because there are some adamant and fixed notions against China, on the contrary, but because there is no clear economic gain that are defined at the moment. The trade imbalance between the two countries is only growing, Croatia does not have its own funds to invest in infrastructure projects that China is interested in. Therefore, Croatia has to rely on sources of funding from outside which require adherence to prescribed conditions if Croatia is able to use the money. Small steps in expanding trade and observing the global and regional developments seems as a safe path in the near future.

Croatian governments, as in the past, will continue to earnestly commit to cooperation but will most probably remain either unable or unwilling to be proactive about it. This is a pragmatic, not an ideological approach. Looking at the past two decades, consecutive Croatian governments have taken a similar approach to China, i.e. there has been no major difference between governments led by conservatives or social democrats.

What can be concluded so far is that China has come to Croatia, Southeast Europe and Europe to stay. Long-term benefits for both sides can be made if there is political stability as a precondition for economic development. China, thus, from the position of Croatia would do better if honoring EU standards and tender procedures in bidding for infrastructure projects and supporting structural reforms in countries expressing intention to join the EU. China and the EU both have the reasons and capacity to nurture productive and peaceful relations.

With respect to Croatia, this path is emerging but it is slow. Cultural relations serve as a welcome framework for two countries to get to know each other better. Emotional relations are an important thread that link people – one loves what/who one knows. Student exchanges, scientific cooperation, city-friends partnerships, and tourism create a soft and smart path to bring the two nations closer. Croatia cannot act alone as China can, but it can find its place in the Chinese global outreach approach if China proves to be benevolent to this country and its partners.

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