

WORKING PAPER

China-CEE Cooperation in the eyes of the Beholder: Perceptions of the BRI Initiative and Attitudes towards China in Slovenia

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the awareness, understanding and attitudes towards current and future cooperation between the Republic of Slovenia and the People's Republic of China against the backdrop of 16+1 China-CEE cooperation and the opportunities and challenges the Belt and Road Initiative offers for CEE and Slovenia. The paper presents an analysis of Google searches in Slovenia related to China, China-CEE cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative. A study of 293 Millennials in Slovenia shows that much work needs to be done in raising the awareness related to the BRI and the 16+1 China-CEE cooperation initiative in Slovenia. While the biggest opportunities in strengthening China-Slovenian relations are seen in the areas of trade, international relations and FDIs, there is very high public support for Chinese investments into selected infrastructure projects. National stereotypes of the Chinese in Slovenia tend to be predominantly positive (over 80%) and show a strong economic component. Interestingly, a large share of respondents do not believe that China has an appropriate image in the media.

Key Words: China, CEE, 16 +1 China-CEE cooperation, Belt & Road initiative, attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, foreign direct investment

Introduction

The infamous One Belt One Road (hereinafter OBOR) initiative¹ has become an important “buzzword” in the international community, since the first mention of the land part of the so-called New Silk Road in September 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit in Kazakhstan (Huang, 2016) and + the maritime part in October in Indonesia.

However, beyond all the talk and buzz surrounding the BRI, surprisingly little is still known about BRI in the West, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter CEE). This is in no small part due to a lack of a common identity or a clear meta-regional political and economic strategy. The somewhat artificial 16 CEE group seems to be least prepared and most confused in the myriad initiatives and mechanisms surrounding China's activities in Europe (Góralczyk, 2017). Additionally, China's “experimental and innovative approach” in engaging with the 16 countries of CEE may also show that both sides are still in the process

¹ Also commonly referred to as the Belt & Road Initiative (hereinafter BRI), or as the New Silk Road (NSK).

of figuring out how to develop this new form of cooperation, and how to position it vis-à-vis China-EU relations (Vangeli, 2017, p. 101). Despite the appearance of a unified strategy towards CEE, the 16+1 cooperation initiative seems very much a bottom-up approach and in fact consists of a patchwork of different kinds of bilateral relationships and projects (Vangeli, 2017; Zeneli, 2016). Adding to this, is the lukewarm and reserved stance of the European Union (hereinafter EU) towards the 16+1 China-CEE cooperation (Turcsányi, 2014; Zeneli, 2016), which seems to be only partially connected to the BRI.

Even beyond China-CEE cooperation, it is often not clear whether the BRI is a geopolitical or geoeconomic initiative (Cai, 2017). Is it focused more internally and aimed at promoting the development of China's western less developed regions, alleviating its excess capacity challenges in certain industries (i.e. steel, construction) and at upgrading China's position in global value chains? Alternatively, does the BRI focus lay more externally in facilitating connectivity, promoting trade and investments, and at ensuring mutual development? Is the BRI China's new globalization strategy (Jin, 2015), a grand economic development strategy (Men, 2015), or a new model of so-called inclusive globalization for the world (Liu & Dunford, 2016)? May it be just a well-branded geo-political project of Chinese current leadership? Is the BRI a game changer (Amighini, 2017), or simply one in a series of initiatives to revive Eurasian integration?

Like with many other issues connected to China, the BRI seems to be misunderstood, contested and fraught with many inherent paradoxes. It is from this perspective, that perceptions, attitudes, misconceptions and stereotypes play a particularly important role (Ma, 2017). Failure to both understand and articulate what the BRI actually stands for and what kind of benefits it actually offers may as well make or break the future success of the BRI, despite all its intentions (PwC, 2016). For in the end, people and their perceptions drive international business and relations (Aharoni *et al.*, 2011; Rašković & Vuchkovski, 2016). This is also the case when it comes to both the BRI and the 16+1 China-CEE cooperation initiative (Ma, 2017; Cai, 2017). It is precisely because of this that the public, not just policy makers and businessperson need to have a better awareness and understanding of the BRI in Europe (van der Putten *et al.*, 2016) and 16+1 China-CEE cooperation (Beijing Review, August 31, 2017). Existing analysis on the BRI shows that it remains a relatively unknown or unfamiliar concept to the general publics in Europe (Suetyi, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the awareness, understanding and attitudes towards current and future cooperation between the Republic of Slovenia and the People's Republic of China against the backdrop of 16+1 China-CEE cooperation and the opportunities and challenges BRI offers for CEE. As a EU, Eurozone and OECD member, Slovenia may be particularly interesting to observe in the context of China-CEE cooperation, given its generally reserved attitudes to any kind of foreign direct investments (hereinafter FDIs) (Jaklič & Rojec, 2014; Jaklič, 2016) and access to the Adriatic sea through the geo-strategically located Port of Koper. This presents a potential for Slovenia to become an important logistics hub within the BRI in CEE (Xinhua, 19 May, 2017).

In doing so, this paper presents the results of a study conducted in November 2017, ahead of the 16+1 China-CEE high-level meeting in Budapest among Millennials in Slovenia.

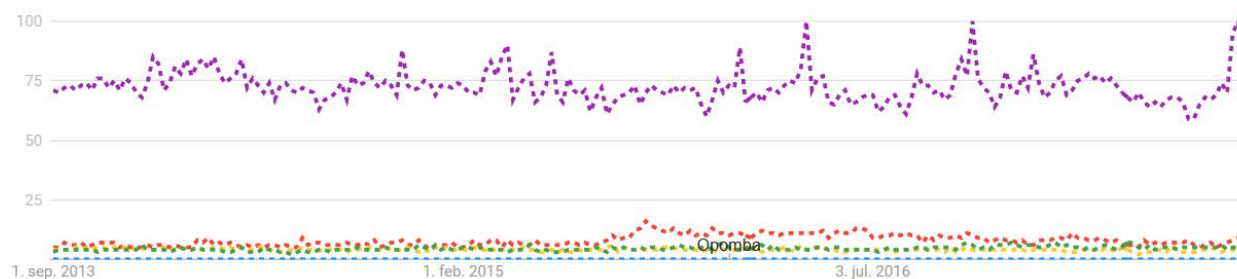
This segment of the population has been deliberately selected in this study. Millennials will represent the future businesspersons, policy makers and leaders who will shape the further development of China-CEE cooperation and the next-stage implementation of BRI projects in CEE. They are also a good and “neutral” yardstick in terms of measuring stereotypes, perceptions and attitudes in social psychology, as well as international business and relations (Rašković *et al.*, 2017; Rašković & Vuckovski, 2016).

BRI: A Contested and Misunderstood Initiative?

1) What are Slovenians Googling when it comes to China and China-CEE relations?

Figure 1 displays Google searches of key terms related to China and China-CEE cooperation in *Slovenia* since September 2013, when president Xi first introduced the concept of the BRI. This date also coincides with the emergence of a clearer China-CEE cooperation agenda from the Chinese side. The analysis is provided by *Google trends* analytics and shows Google searches for *Slovenia* in both English and Slovenian language.

Figure 1: Google searches of China-CEE related terms for Slovenia (powered by Google trends for period 1 September 2013 until 19 November 2017)



Source: Own analysis of keyword searches in Google trends for Slovenia, 19 November 19 2017.

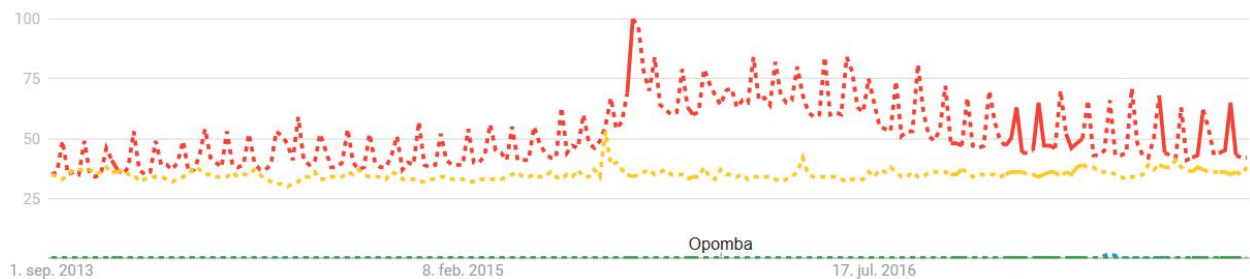
The *purple* line corresponds to the search term “*iniciativa 16+1*” which is the most commonly used term for the 16+1 initiative in local Slovenian language. In the period between 1 September 2013 and 17 November 2017 Google trends shows an **average popularity index** of **73** (weekly searches) on a 0-100 search popularity scale, where 100 corresponds to the top 1% of **most popular searches** in that week and 0 to the bottom 1% of **least popular searches** in that week. With the exception of several peaks between 2015 and 2016, which coincide with important events in China-CEE relations, we cannot observe a distinctly positive trend in the popularity index of searches for this term in the period between 1 September 2013 and 19 November 2017.

This is followed by the term “*16+1 initiative*” in English language, which displays an average weekly popularity search index of 8. The remaining two searches correspond to terms

“China” (yellow line) and “Kitajska” (Engl. *China*) (green line) and display an average weekly popularity search index of 4, meaning that both terms rank in the bottom 4% of searched terms in an average week for the period between 1 September 2013 and 19 November 2017. No data exists for “One Belt One Road” and “Nova Svilna Cesta” (Engl. *New Silk Road*) terms in Google trends for Slovenia.

For comparison, Figure 2 presents search popularity of the terms “China”, “One Belt One Road Initiative” “China-CEE” and “16+1 initiative” for the *whole world*.

Figure 2: Google searches for China and BRI related terms worldwide (powered by Google trends for period 1 September 2013 until 19 November 2017)



Source: Own analysis of keyword searches in Google trends for Slovenia, 19 November 19 2017.

As we can see from Figure 2, a distinctly different search popularity structure emerges at the worldwide level. The highest average weekly search popularity index of **52** emerges for the term “16+1 China-CEE” (red line), followed by the term “China” (yellow line) with an average weekly search popularity index of **35**. The search popularity of the two terms appears to be converging since September 2015, prior to the 16+1 China-CEE high-level political meeting in Suzhou, China.

Both other terms display average weekly search popularity indices of 0 mean they rank among the bottom 1% of most popular searches in the given period worldwide.

2) The role of perceptions and public opinion

A Pew Research Center *Global Attitudes Survey* (Spring 2017) shows a profound shift in global attitudes connected to China, which is in no small part also the result of huge international public backlash over the Trump presidency and some of its actions (i.e. withdrawal from the Paris Climate agreement, abandonment of TPP etc.). In the aftermath of the Trump presidency, China has not only managed to strengthen its favorable image as an economic powerhouse in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, but is since 2016 viewed as a “leading [global] economy” also in the EU, despite worries of a China economic slowdown.

In its study of soft power, the USC Center on Public Diplomacy highlights the BRI as “China’s flagship international initiative” which has importantly contributed to a more favorable attitude towards China across the world (2017, p. 18). It shows that the BRI should

also not only be seen as a tool, which combines hard and soft power in international politics and economics, but also as a platform to facilitate more favorable attitudes towards China and project a new kind of global powerhouse image in the global community. It clearly shows that an important function of the BRI is to drive a favorable perception of China in the international community by drawing on soft power and international relations (re-)branding. It is because of this, that PwC (2016) describes the BRI more as a slogan, and less than a unified strategy beyond an umbrella of existing, current and future projects. As pointed out by van der Putten *et al.* (2016, p. 3) the BRI is seen from a European perspective as a “malleable” and “evolving” concept defined by a lax and evolving array of policies, activities and (more recently) supporting mechanism determined by the Chinese side.

Similarly, US understanding and opinion regarding the BRI remains at best ambivalent (Mafinezam, 2016) and largely dismissive (Luft, 2016).

Zhao (2016) from IPP Review and Ma (2017) from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of European Studies have perhaps most explicitly acknowledged the important role of perceptions concerning the BRI and their important impact on relationships with specific countries engaging with China through this initiative, as well as the overall success of specific projects under the BRI umbrella. His analysis shows that such perceptions are not determined so much by a lack of awareness and understanding, but more driven by fears regarding inequality due to China’s large size and economic influence. This perception problem is not only present in Europe (van der Putten *et al.*, 2017), but also in Central Asia (Pantucci & Lain, 2017) and South-East Asia (Le Hong, 2017).

3) *The BRI: a contested idea subject to various interpretations*

The European Think-Tank Network on China (ETNC) in my opinion provides the best overview of the BRI by acknowledging that “*no official definition of OBOR exists*” and the evolving concept is largely driven by the Chinese side. Regardless of that, they see the BRI as (van der Putten *et al.*, 2016, p. 3):

“[A] very broad conceptual framework for policies that aim at contributing to greater economic integration within Asia, between Asia and Europe, and between Asia and Africa through a diversity of activities and projects. At the heart of OBOR is a strategic approach to infrastructure development in a very broad sense.”

This perspective may in fact appear a bit bold, since from March 2015 the so-called Visions & Actions plan connected to OBOR has been rolled out by the China’s National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), which constitutes a sort of quasi strategy (Greiger, 2016).

While PwC (2016, p. 2) deliberates whether the BRI is “*a concept, a strategy, or a slogan*” and sees it mostly as an umbrella concept of past, present and future projects and initiatives, Johnson in the North American political-economic tradition sees the BRI as the CCP’s “*roadmap for China’s global resurgence*” (2016, p. 1). Cai (2017, p. 5) importantly emphasizes how “*analysts tend to overstate geostrategic dimensions of the project, while*

underappreciating the economic agenda of OBOR". This view is supported by the fact that the BRI became a cornerstone part of China's national economic development strategy in 2014. More recently, the initiative also became a centerpiece within the 19th National Congress of CCP and has been incorporated into the Chinese constitution (Shepard, 2017).

Huang (2016) emphasizes the contested nature of the BRI in terms of it being seen by some as a Marshall plan-inspired post-Washington consensus alternative, while other emphasize its complementary role and see it as a new platform for international economic cooperation. Liu & Dunford (2016) pay greater attention in highlighting the BRI as an outcome of both globalization-related processes interaction with China's socio-economic development crossroad. Both these sets of forces "*are driving China to seek a new and active role in global markets*" which has manifested itself through the bottom-up emergence and gradual evolution of the BRI (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 2).

Ma (2017) outlines three sets of motivating factors behind the BRI: (1) legitimacy seeking within existing international economic and financial order, (2) support seeking on "sensitive issues" and avoiding interference, and (3) multilateral cooperation with the EU to gain political support. Interestingly, however, despite US' reserved stance towards the BRI, they still acknowledge it as an alternative to the existing Washington consensus neoliberal world order (Johnson, 2016) or a direct "attack" on US dominance in the world and particularly in Asia-Pacific (Cai, 2016; Zhao, 2016), while the EU tends to think of the BRI still as a regional integration initiative (Grieger, 2016).

Beyond the heated discussion over the motivations, concepts and principles (i.e. inclusiveness, openness, mutuality and flexibility) associated with the BRI, scholars and policy makers tend to highlight its multidimensional nature. Scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for European Studies tend to emphasize the following dimensions of the BRI (Chen, 2016): (1) policy coordination, (2) infrastructure and connectivity, (3) trade promotion, (4) financial cooperation and (5) people-to-people exchange. A similar classification has also been adopted by Huang (2016). Despite this, infrastructure and connectivity attract the most focus from the international public, despite the fact that the BRI also serves as a platform for national development through promotion of western regions in China and industrial upgrade in global value chains (Cai, 2017).

This section has by no means provided a comprehensive analysis of the various issues surrounding the BRI. However, it has highlighted the strongly contested nature of the initiative, which opens it up to different perceptions and myriad interpretations. The next section of the paper presents the results of a study examining the awareness, understanding and specific attitudes towards current and future cooperation between the Republic of Slovenia and the People's Republic of China against the backdrop of 16+1 China-CEE cooperation and the opportunities and challenges BRI offers for CEE.

Data and Methodology

1) Data

Data in this study was collected through an on-line questionnaire in November 2017 ahead of the 16+1 China-CEE high-level meeting in Budapest, Hungary. The respondents in the study were students of either business and economics, or international relations studying at the University of Ljubljana, the leading university in Slovenia. The analyzed sample included 293 university student respondents belonging to the so-called group of Millennials (people born in the 1980s and 1990s). The mean age of the respondents was slight under 25 years old. 59% of the respondents were female and 37% of the respondents have already been to China. The education background of students was quite balanced in terms of business and management studies vs. international relations.

The use of university student samples is consistent with studies in the fields of social psychology and international behavior studies (Hampton, 1979). Student samples have also been widely employed in testing attitude-preference relationships (Yavas, 1994).

2) Methodology

The on-line questionnaire included a mixture of open-end questions to elicit top of mind associations related to Chinese according to the Katz & Braly (1933) seminal approach of ethnic stereotypes. This was accompanied by semantic differential-type questions evaluating various dimensions of respondents' attitudes towards the Chinese and 7-point ordinal Likert-type questions measuring the level of agreement with various statements connected to China and China-CEE cooperation, as well as the familiarity with specific concepts related to China and China-CEE cooperation.

Key Results

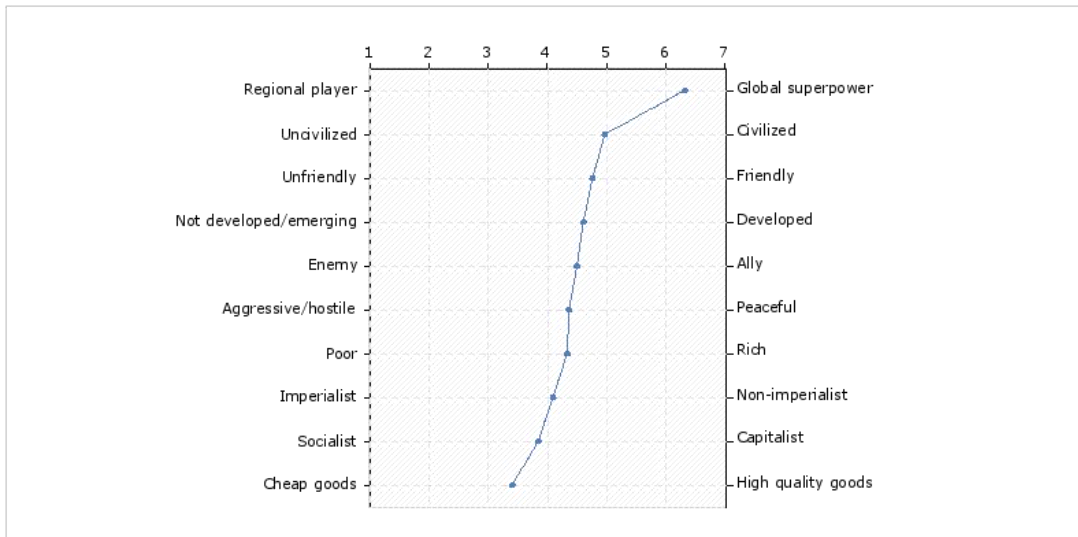
1) Most common associations related to the Chinese

In terms of top of mind associations, respondents were asked to provide three associations related to "the Chinese". The majority of associations (27%) were connected to size of the country and/or population. This was followed by associations connected to the economy and/or specific Chinese companies like i.e. Alibaba (23%). Associations related to Chinese food and culture followed next (19%). Over 80% of the associations were positive, with negative associations focusing on the issues of being "*cheap*", "*imitation* [copy catting]" or on "*pollution*".

2) Personal feelings towards China

Figure 3 displays respondents' personal feelings towards China regarding selected issues using 7-point semantic differential scales, where value 4 corresponded to a neutral feeling option, while values 1 through 3 corresponded to negative feelings and values 5 through 7 corresponded to positive feelings on a given semantic differential.

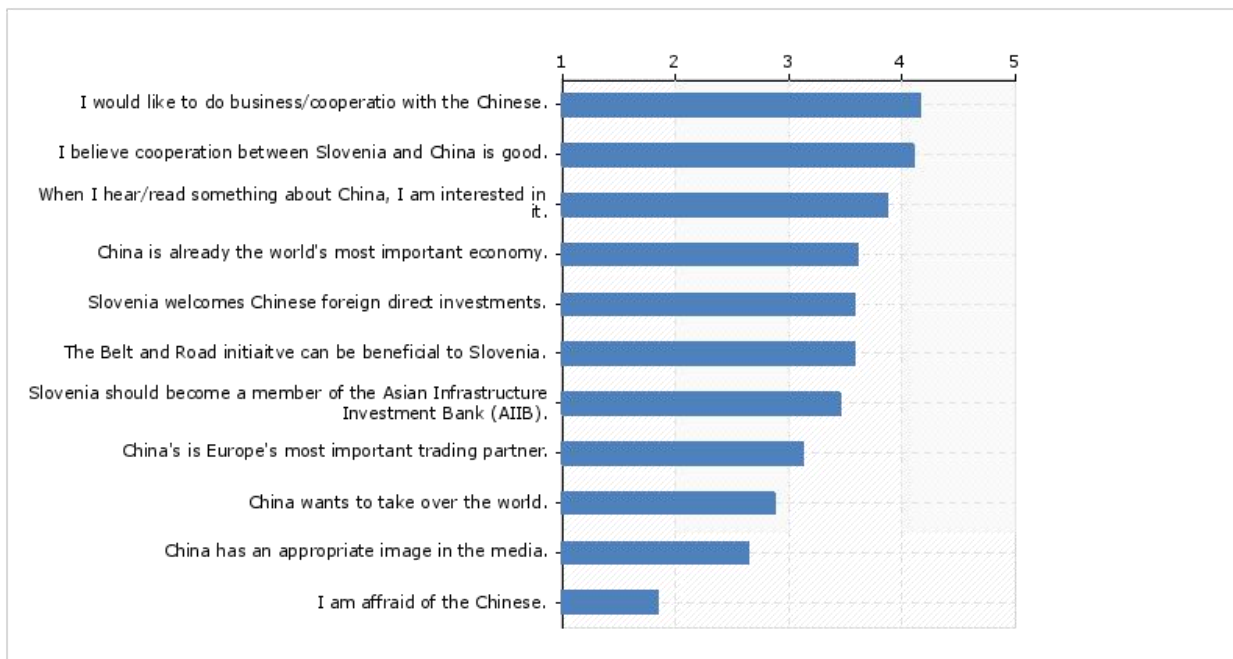
Figure 3: Perceptions of China using semantic differential scales



As we can see, the respondents most strongly feel that China is indeed a **global superpower**. This is followed by positive feelings related to China being a **civilized** nation, **friendly** and **developed**, as well as an **ally** and a **peaceful nation**. Respondents display neutral feelings towards China when it comes to **imperialism** and **socialism/capitalism**, while respondents displayed negative feelings when it came to the issue of **cheap goods**.

The results shown in Figure 3 are complemented by evaluation of various statements related to China on a 5-point ordinal Likert-type scale indicating the level of agreement with the statement (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree).

Figure 4: Level of agreement with various China related statements (5-point ordinal Likert-type scale)



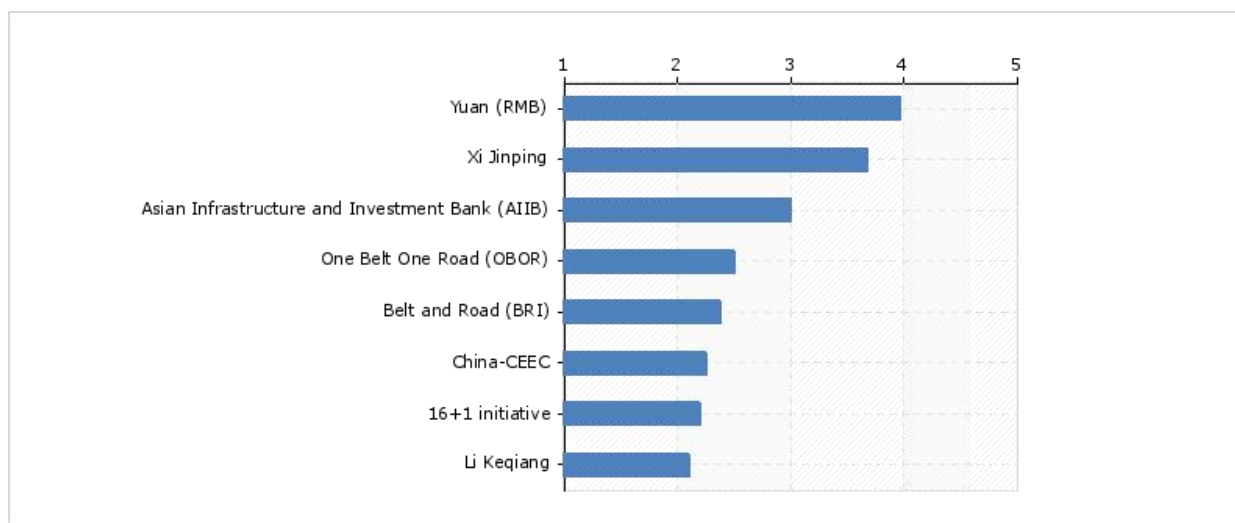
While the majority of the respondents would like to do more business/cooperation with the Chinese, they also assess the current level of cooperation between Slovenia and China as

“good”. They display a general interest towards China and China related issues, and see China as the world’s most important economy. Despite the fact that respondents were mostly poorly familiar with the BRI (see Figure 5), they believe it can still be beneficial to Slovenia. Interestingly, the respondents had some reservations regarding the appropriateness of China’s image in the media and generally showed little fear of the Chinese.

3) Familiarity with concepts

Figure 5 displays the level of familiarity with selected concepts on a 5-point ordinal Likert-type scale, corresponding to: 1-never heard of it; 2-heard of it, but not familiar; 3-heard of it, somewhat familiar; 4-understand it to a degree; 5-very familiar.

Figure 5: Level of familiarity with selected concepts (5-point ordinal Likert-type scale)



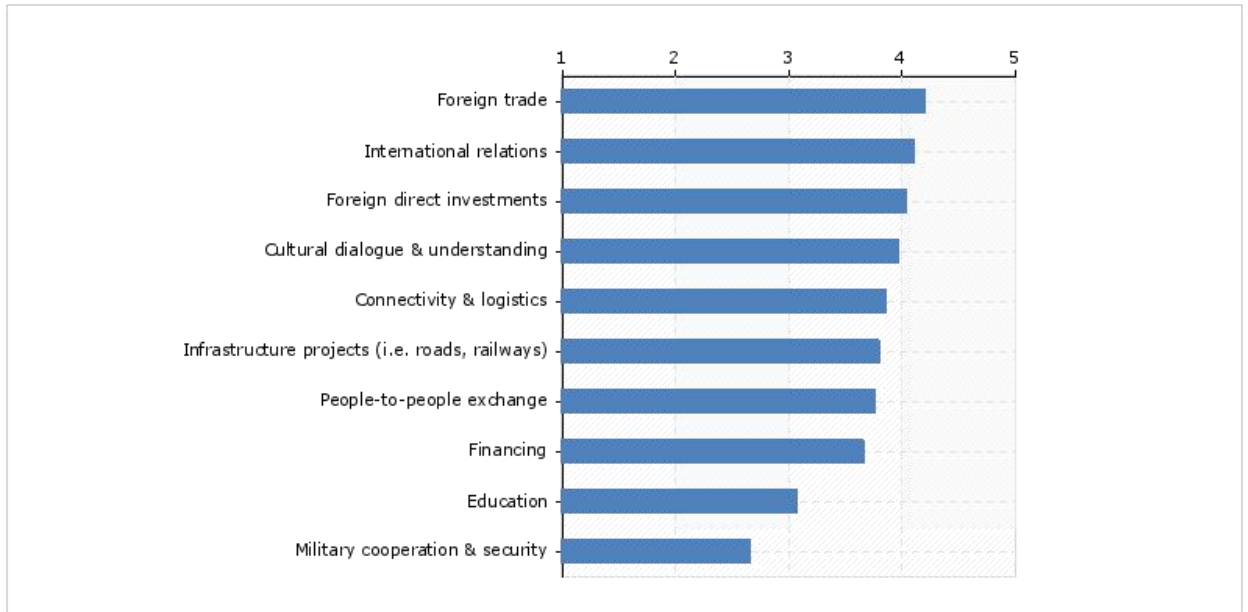
Note: 1-never heard of it; 2-heard of it, but not familiar; 3-heard of it, somewhat familiar; 4-understand it to a degree; 5-very familiar.

As we can observe, the respondents displayed quite a low to moderate levels of familiarity with concepts such as “*One Belt One Road*”, “*Belt and Road*”, “*China-CEE*” and the “*16+1 initiative*”.

After a brief general description of the BRI² the respondents saw the biggest opportunities and benefits for Slovenia in terms of cooperation with China within the BRI in the following areas: (1) foreign trade, (2) international relations and (3) foreign direct investments (FDIs). Military cooperation and education laid at the bottom of the list in terms of identified opportunities and perceived biggest benefits for Slovenia within the BRI. Interestingly, infrastructure projects, as well as connectivity and logistics were not seen as the biggest opportunities or as the biggest benefits in cooperation with China.

² The BRI was described as: “*The Belt and Road (BRI) initiative was proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013 and aims to strengthen cooperation and mutual development between China and over 60 countries along the ancient Silk Road by land and sea.*”

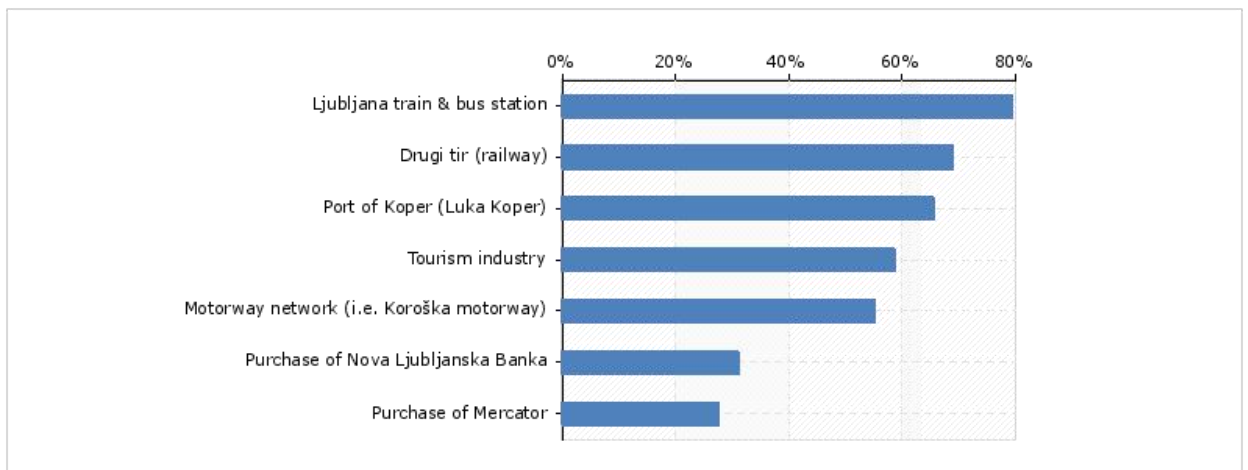
Figure 6: Assessment of the biggest opportunities and benefits for Slovenia in the BRI cooperation with China (5-point ordinal Likert-type scale)



4) Support for specific potential investment projects in Slovenian connected to the BRI

Lastly, Figure 7 shows the level of support for either specific investment projects, which have been mentioned in the media in terms of cooperation with China within the BRI, or projects, which could be potentially interesting to China.

Figure 7: Support for potential investment projects in Slovenia under the potential “umbrella” of the BRI



Note: Measured as a binary variable (Support: Yes, No).

As we can see, over 80% of the respondents would support a Chinese investment into the Ljubljana train and bus station. Strong support (over 60%) can also be observed for the second railway track (Slov. *Drugi tir*) and a Chinese investment into Port of Koper. The majority of respondents would not support the purchase of Nova Ljubljanska Banka (Slovenia’s biggest bank, which is going up for sale), or Slovenia’s biggest retailer Mercator.

This shows that public support is much stronger for infrastructure projects than for acquisitions of flagship Slovenian companies.

Conclusion

The Slovenian Millennials have a generally positive attitude towards China, seeing it as a global superpower, a civilized, friendly and developed nation, which can (to a degree) also be seen as an ally. The results of a survey of 293 Millennials in Slovenia shows that the awareness and familiarity with the BRI and 16+1 China-CEE cooperation initiative remains quite low in Slovenia. Thus, more efforts need to be made in this area to change this. Despite relatively low familiarity with the 16+1 China-CEE cooperation initiative and the BRI, the respondents evaluate current level of cooperation with China as good, and show general interest in China-related issues and topics. The majority of respondents sees the BRI as a platform to strengthen foreign trade, international relations and attract FDIs to Slovenia from China. Surprisingly, infrastructure, connectivity and logistics rank somewhere in the middle.

There is, however, overwhelming support for selected infrastructure projects from the Chinese in Slovenia, first and foremost into the Ljubljana train and bus station. The majority of the respondents do not support the acquisition of either Slovenia's biggest bank (Nova Ljubljanska banka) or its biggest retailer (Mercator) from the Chinese, indicating limited support for investments into the private sector in Slovenia, despite the recent billion-dollar acquisition of Outfit7 by a Chinese company.

Our results show that much work needs to be done in raising the awareness related to the BRI and the 16+1 China-CEE cooperation initiative in Slovenia. While the biggest opportunities in strengthening China-Slovenian relations are seen in the area of trade, international relations and FDIs, there is very high public support for Chinese investments into selected infrastructure projects. These should, however, be very targeted and avoid acquisitions in the private sector where public opinion is much more reserved.

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