

WORKING PAPER

A Battle of Perceptions: The social representations of the BRI and the “16+1” in Macedonia

Adela Gjorgjioska and Anastas Vangeli

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



China-CEE Institute
中国—中东欧研究院



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
+36 1 5858 690
office@china-cee.eu
china-cee.eu

Introduction

Half a decade has passed since the formation of the 16+1 mechanism for cooperation between China and Central, East and South East European countries (CESEE) in 2012. During this period, the trajectory of progress in cooperation and communication between China and the CESEE has been heterogeneous across the region, given the geopolitical, socio-political, economic and cultural diversity between all of the participating countries. In the literature on China-CESEE relations, the differences between the various domestic circumstances among the different CESEE countries and their cooperation with China have been recognized and addressed – however, this has been often done in a non-systematic way, on a case-by-case basis, primarily using under-theorized, anecdotal approaches. In this paper, we set out on a mission to fill this gap by applying an innovative theoretical framework centred on the concept of social representations on the case of Sino-Macedonian relations.

One possible method for tracing out the comparative trajectories of the cooperation of the different countries of CESEE and China could be to count and compare the number of agreements signed or the number of concrete projects started and/or completed. However, such an approach is often limited as it is unable to account for spill-over effects - positive and/or negative externalities that extend far beyond the original reach of agreements and projects. Moreover, quantitative accounts are often blind to the causal mechanisms behind outcomes, which in turn lead to an absent or incomplete picture as to what causes certain outcomes to be realised in certain context and not others. More often than not, the realisation of concrete outcomes or the lack thereof can either be set off or obstructed by the specific perceptions held over the intentions and implications of specific proposals for enhanced cooperation and dialogue.

In the context of the 16+1, considering the varieties of actors and relationships involved, especially important is the role of interpretation and perception. Taking Macedonia as an illustrative case-study, the origins, meaning and function of specific perceptions regarding the 16+1 cooperation mechanism will be examined. The structure will run as follows.

First, we outline the theoretical framework of the paper, elaborating on the concept of “social representations” from the perspective of social psychology and its applicability to the central interests of the paper. Second, we analyse the discourse of the 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as conveyed by China. Then we turn to an analysis of how that image and message is perceived in Macedonia, with a view of two specific categories based on the level of their knowledge of and experience in interacting with China: laymen- understood as persons without professional or specialized knowledge in China studies, the BRI or the 16+1; and elites with access to networks and information in China studies, the BRI, the 16+1 etc. As part of this analysis, the role of mediating factors will also be introduced- specifically the role of the EU as a mediator of the message sent by China and/or the 16+1 platform and the message received and perceived by the layman or elite audience in Macedonia. Finally, we

examine some of the reasons for the gap between projected and perceived knowledge, along with recommendations for the possible ways to address this in the future.

Theoretical Framework: Social Representations

The question of perception is an epistemological one, which suggests the appropriateness of its study within the framework of a philosophical or a social (or cognitive) psychological framework of inquiry. At the same time however, the question of perception is a practical one as well, which is an attribute of the dual functions of interpretation, which are dialectically interconnected- the question of how different social groups and their members interpret new problems and how they position themselves in relation to them, is a function of the specific interpretative and normative meta-systems which they rely on; but it also functions as a guide of behaviour.¹ When perceptions are shared, they become *social* perceptions or *social representations*- “social because they are shared by many individuals and as such constitute a social reality, which can influence individual or collective behaviour.”² The concept of “social representation,” which originates from social psychology³ suggests that social representations differ from attitudes firstly because they are not “simply” cognitive phenomena and secondly because they cannot be formed by an individual in isolation as they take shape in interaction, in dialogue and in practice with others and are anchored in our traditions and ideologies.⁴ They are evident in social practices, institutional cultures and form the basis of socio-political behaviours and decision-making. In view of the present discussion, this suggests that in order to understand why a certain institution, state, group or an individual reacts or fails to react in a particular way towards aspects of cooperation that stem from the 16+1 platform, it is necessary to understand the social representation that this individual, group or institution holds and the social representation of the 16+1 and China that circulates or is “going on” around them- as well as how it is embedded in particular organisational and institutionalised cultures, social histories and ideological relations.⁵

The message behind the 16+1 and the BRI: Social Representations as Projected by China

In the last decade, China has gradually shifted from the keeping a low profile foreign policy to one that has been defined as “striving for achievement.”⁶ The 2008 financial crisis and the Eurozone crises were the critical junctures in the process, both leading to a new

¹ Howarth, Caroline (2006) How social representations of attitudes have informed attitude theories: the consensual and the reified. *Theory and psychology*, 16 (5). pp. 691-714

² Jaspers, J. & Fraser, C. (1984). Attitudes and social representations. In R. Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds.) *On social representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*. (2. éd. entièrement refondue. ed.). [Paris]: Presses universitaires de France.

⁴ Moscovici, S. (1998) The history and actuality of social representations. In U. Flick (Ed) *The psychology of the social*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Howarth, Caroline (2006) How social representations of attitudes have informed attitude theories: the consensual and the reified. *Theory and psychology*, 16 (5). pp. 691-714

⁶ Yan Xuetong, (2014). From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 2, 1 June 2014, Pages 153–184

situation whereby China became the focus of the world and changed its self-identity. According to Zeng, as China perceived the EU to be failing at appropriately addressing the crisis, it realised that it can play a more central role in global governance.⁷ Moreover, China's new domestic imperatives – upgrading its economy, adjusting to the “new normal” and growing overcapacity - have also propelled forward Beijing's quest for new global role. Nonetheless, it is in the tension in the relationship between China's newfound governance role and the EU's own diminishing governance role, that we will also see the key to the way in which the 16+1 and the BRI have been perceived in Macedonia- a state which aspires to become an EU member, and is one of the five non-EU members of the 16+1 initiative.

The substance of strategic narratives underlying Chinese-coined concepts such as the BRI is a combination of new ideas proposed by Chinese leaders, supplemented incrementally with input by China's scholarly and policy community in an incremental and subsequent manner.⁸ The projected meaning thus represents a mix of multiple influences. Nonetheless, in attempting to summarize some of the key messages that represent the discourse output of that combined input, it is the official speeches of leaders from Summits and meetings held within the framework of the BRI and the 16+1 that contain the most representative indicators of the messaging that is being sent.

Already in Hu Jintao's term (2002–12) early signs in the new global role that China was to play were evident in the four principles of China's diplomacy: “big powers are the key; China's periphery is the priority; developing countries are the foundation; multilateral platforms are the stage”. These principles gained materiality in Warsaw in 2012, at the first China-CESEE Summit, which gathered leaders from the sixteen Central and Eastern European countries, and marked the launch of the 16+1 Cooperation mechanism. At the meeting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao put forward a proposal on further promoting relations and deepening cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries out of which the 16+1 cooperation mechanism grew. Wen emphasized that China and the Central and Eastern European countries should all together grasp opportunities and confront challenges facing them.⁹ The following five summits built up on the spirit of that discourse with concrete outputs in terms of agreements, action plans and projects. In Bucharest in 2013 Chinese Premier Li Keqiang signed a number of agreements between China and CESEE countries, including an agreement to build a railway linking Budapest and Belgrade, with the idea of creating a “China-Europe Land Sea Express” corridor that would extend from Budapest to Athens. In Belgrade in 2014, Li declared that China and the CESEE countries enjoy broad prospect in their cooperation on infrastructure construction. Furthermore, during Li's stay in Belgrade, China, Serbia, Hungary and Macedonia agreed to build the express line, which links the Greek port of Piraeus in the south and the Hungarian capital of Budapest in the north, stringing the Macedonian capital of Skopje and Belgrade. At the summit in Suzhou

⁷ Zeng, Jinghan (2017) Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 55: 1162–1176

⁸ Zeng, Jinghan et al. (2015), Securing China's core interests: the state of the debate in China. International Affairs, 91: 245–266

⁹ http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/lchrhw_1/2012hs/hdtj/t1410550.htm

in 2015, a medium-Term Agenda for Cooperation between China and CESEE was agreed, in order to as it was stated on the official site of the platform:

“...The agenda aims to improve 16+1 cooperation and further unleash its potential by setting out directions and priorities for 16+1 cooperation from 2015 to 2020. Based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and understanding of each other's development choices, the Participants will actively implement the Agenda in light of their respective realities, needs and priorities, through equal-footed consultations, capitalizing on each other's complementarities and win-win cooperation.”¹⁰

In Riga, it was emphasized that the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Seaport Cooperation would serve the development needs of all 17 countries, contribute to closer EU-China relations, by synergizing their specific demands and advantages for infrastructure development and industrial upgrading, in particular construction of ports, roads, railways and inland navigation routes, with a view to facilitating economic growth of each country and across the region.¹¹

The common thread that extends across all Summits is a focus on “complementary development”, which is dependent to a large part on a momentous push from China, combined with an apparent conscious attempt to avoid conflict with the EU.

These characteristics are also apparent and consistent with the discourse on the BRI. The speech by Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, given on the 14 May 2017 contains some of the most widely circulated messages characteristic of both the BRI and the 16+1.¹² When challenges are mentioned, they serve the purpose to highlight the rationale behind the BRI.¹³ As in the case of the 16+1, conscious attempts are made to ensure that the initiative is not perceived as being in conflict with existing strategies and models of development.¹⁴

To conclude, five years following the establishment of the 16+1 cooperation mechanism and four years since the beginning of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it can be said that the

¹⁰ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1318038.shtml

¹¹ http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/lchrhw_1/2016lj/hdxw4/t1414325.htm

¹² “If we take the first courageous step towards each other, we can embark on a path leading to friendship, shared development, peace, harmony and a better future”, speech by Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 14 May 2017

¹³ “In terms of reality, we find ourselves in a world fraught with challenges. Global growth requires new drivers, development needs to be more inclusive and balanced, and the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be narrowed. Hotspots in some regions are causing instability and terrorism is rampant. Deficit in peace, development and governance poses a daunting challenge to mankind” speech by Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 14 May 2017

¹⁴ ‘I have said on many occasions that the pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative is not meant to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it aims to complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths (...)“We are ready to share practices of development with other countries, but we have no intention to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others. In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we will not resort to outdated geopolitical maneuvering. What we hope to achieve is a new model of win-win cooperation. We have no intention to form a small group detrimental to stability, what we hope to create is a big family of harmonious co-existence.”, speech by Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 14 May 2017

two interconnected projects demonstrate China's increasing global ambition to be a norm/system shaper rather than a norm/system taker or what Qui calls "from game player to game maker."¹⁵ This, however, needs to be seen in the context of China's rationale, whereby the efforts on the international stage are in line with the goals of adjusting to the new circumstances of the Chinese and the global economy, and creating conditions conducive to the achievement of the "two centennial goals" of the CPC - to create a moderately prosperous (*xiaokang*) society by 2021, and to "build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by 2049. The achievement of these two goals, then, depends also on how China will be able to use its clout to fulfil its objectives on the global stage.

In this sense, the foreign policy innovations also represent Xi Jinping's intentions to use China's economic power in order to build up discursive power, for both symbolic and geopolitical purposes.¹⁶ The most prominent characteristic of that messaging is the prevalence of positive and constructive language, with some of the most frequent words appearing being "cooperation"; "openness"; "development"; "connectivity"; "prosperity"; "inclusiveness"; "mutual learning"; "mutual benefit"; "win-win"; "harmony"; "better future"; "integration of development strategies"; "two-way cooperation"; "mutual treatment on an equal footing."

In the next section the case of Macedonia will be used to illustrate that sometimes there are gaps between on the one hand the constructive rhetoric that China is attempting to project in its efforts to place the spotlight on a vision of an inclusive, green and complementary development, and on the other hand what is received and perceived by the individual members of the 16+1.

Social Representations of the 16+1 in Macedonia

Social representations form a very important part of the backdrop on which concrete cooperation outcomes (or their absence) depends. In order to understand a certain (in)action it is first necessary to understand the social representations that circulate in a specific context, as they are embedded in particular organisational and institutionalised cultures, social histories and ideological relations.¹⁷ If we take the position that reality exists as a separate entity and that the perceiver's role is only to cognitively access this reality and that the object of perception does not depend upon the subject perceiving it, then we would assume that the perception of the 16+1 from the perspective of Macedonia should be the same as that projected by the Chinese discourse on either the BRI or the 16+1. However, as elaborated in the theoretical section, the differentiated anchoring of the BRI and the 16+1 need to be considered in light of the contextual reference and other symbolic systems.¹⁸ Therefore, the

¹⁵ <https://jamestown.org/program/from-game-player-to-game-maker-news-features-of-chinas-foreign-policy/>

¹⁶ Zeng, Jinghan (2017) Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 55: 1162–1176

¹⁷ Howarth, Caroline (2006) How social representations of attitudes have informed attitude theories: the consensual and the reified. Theory and psychology, 16 (5). pp. 691-714

¹⁸ Clemence, Alain, (1999). Human rights studied as social representations in a cross-national context, European Journal of Social Psychology, Vol. 29.1, p.1-29

perception on the BRI and the 16+1 in Macedonia would be mediated through various social interactions that develop independently of the official Chinese discourse which are also propagated and circulate in the media and socio-political space, as well as the specific Macedonian context within which such a perception takes place. In this process, as argued in the theoretical section, there are different levels of interaction and different actors that are engaged in perpetual interaction, thereby jointly shaping the social representations of the cooperation with China.

Social Representations of 16+1 by “laymen”

To understand how the common Macedonian population and the laymen see China and the cooperation with China within the 16+1, one first needs to understand the general profile of the Macedonian citizens and the context in which their political beliefs emerge. Macedonia is a country which can be described as one of the losers of the fall of Yugoslavia and the demise of the socialist system. In the 1990s, its economy shrank, a significant portion of its highly qualified working force left the country, its public services (including the education system) deteriorated and in 2001 it experienced an ethnic conflict whose effects are still felt in society. In recent years, the country has been locked into a political crisis that was a pinnacle of grand corruption/captured state/clientelism. These are all factors that lead to a rather inward-looking, self-obsessed political culture, with no sense of agency at the international stage.

This is interrelated with the country's historical context, as Macedonia is part of the Balkans, a region which has been a subject to Orientalism and in which the rather thrusting Western culture has shaped the consciousness of the population as European-in-the-making. Politically, this has been translated in a rather large consensus on the desirability of Macedonia joining the EU and NATO, which at the same time is treated not as a choice, but rather a destiny; it is not discussed critically, but rather in civilizational/survival terms.

Thus, the only meaningful interaction, political and cultural, which Macedonia has had in the past 25 years, has been with the West. At the expense of this, there has been little to no meaningful interaction with non-Western actors such as China. As a result, the average Macedonian citizens have vague out-dated impression of China, as a distant, backwards society of the Cold War era. China is often associated with cheap, low quality exports, even though advanced Chinese technological brands like Huawei or Xiaomi had made their way to Macedonian consumers. Racial stereotypes and, prejudice also play a role, which requires serious engagement in future empirical research. Unlike other CESEE countries, in Macedonia there are very few or no Chinese migrants in the urban areas. Most of the Macedonian citizens have themselves never personally had a meaningful interaction with a Chinese person. Some of the cultural distance is bridged by the newly opened Confucius Institute in Skopje, however it has no significant effect on the public discourse on China.

The media is also contributing to the broadening of this gap. A quick exploration of the media shows that also there are little to no original media reports on China. Projected messages of complementary and inclusive development through the BRI or the 16+1 are rarely reported in media. Most of the contents are imported and translated from international

media, with a significant portion of the news being offbeat and bizarre stories (that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice). While there is a notable presence of translated stories on Chinese politics and foreign policy, there is almost no coverage or substantial analysis on the relations between Macedonia and China.

As a result, the Sino-Macedonian cooperation is largely ignored, and when it becomes a topic in the public debate, it is perceived primarily through the lenses of domestic politics. What is more, as mentioned in the theoretical section, the representations of laymen are very important because of the way in which they influence experts and the elites. In fact, considering that the role of experts in different social situations also is assigned to laymen on the topic of China, they are embedded within the same absence of knowledge, while perpetuating prejudice and general unawareness about China and the 16+1 as the rest of the population. In effect, all of the above mentioned factors interact with the domestic political orientation and loyalty of individuals, and have a much stronger effect than the official projected discourse by China, causing the latter to go unnoticed.

The social representations of 16+1 by elites

Political elites, diplomats, businessmen, and some rare critical intellectuals can be said to encompass the tight circle of individuals with greater than average exposure to and knowledge on the 16+1, BRI and China. The greater the access to the 16+1 cooperation mechanism the greater the knowledge and such access has been reserved for government officials, bureaucrats and their private sector collaborators. As most decisions relevant to 16+1 cooperation take place on this level, the perceptions amongst these actors are also comparably more important, in part also due to their ability to influence laymen's representation as well. For this reason, when analysing perceptions in the CESEE countries it is necessary to place them in the context of electoral politics. Election cycles and their outcome may lead to changes in governance structure, which also affects the relevance of perceptions over time and between actors. This is due to the fact that in CESEE countries, and especially in non-EU member states often entire (public) administrations change with the change of government. The absence of a meritocratic de-politicized administration causes low institutional memory over what has been going on and a lack of incremental progress on certain issue areas- including 16+1.

Thus, depending on how one is located within the governance structure, will also affect the relevance and importance of their perception of the 16+1. With this in mind, the following part examines the two successive governments that have been in place in Macedonia over the course of existence of the 16+1 (since 2012): The VMRO-DPMNE-DUI coalition government in place from 2006 until late December 2016; and the incumbent Social Democrats led government in place since June 2017.

2012-2016 (VMRO-DPMNE led Government)

In order to grasp the China-Macedonia relationship under the Gruevski government one has to take into account the fact that China and the countries in the region only "rediscovered" each other in the period following the global financial crisis, with a particular impetus

provided by the establishment of the 16+1 platform in 2012. Owing to the push by Beijing, the Sino-Macedonian relationship is understandably at a much higher level than 11 years ago. Macedonia did indeed receive more Chinese investment, and reduced the trade deficit with China (which is an exception among the “sixteen” countries), opened a Confucius Institute and sent a number of students, officials and professionals on exchanges to China. Yet, for all the achievements, Macedonia’s approach towards China seemed mostly uncoordinated, lacked strategic determination, and to a great disappointment, was marred by corruption, which could not be more detrimental to the relations between the two sides given that since 2012 China has been undergoing what may be the largest anti-corruption campaign in history and has treated corruption cases extremely seriously.

The most significant elements of the cooperation between Macedonia and China in the last several years, and within the scope of the 16+1 mechanism and the BRI are in the field of infrastructure development. Macedonia has been included in the development of the “Europe China Land-Sea Express” passage, although works on modernizing the railroad have not commenced yet. In 2014, however, Macedonia purchased electrical trains from China Railway Rolling Stock Corp. with a 50 million dollar loan from the EBRD. In 2017, electric locomotives have also been purchased as a supplementary investment to the one from 2014, but the exact figures and the state of the investment is not available. The most significant instance of cooperation so far has been the building of two highways by Sinohydro Corp. to the value of 580 million euros with a Chinese loan. Later on, we examine this project in greater detail as a specific case study due to the important implications it has for the representations of the 16+1 in Macedonia.

Importantly, the socio-political context in which these projects were initiated and implemented was marked by high-level Government corruption that filtered down to most of the institutions of the State. A wiretapping scandal unleashed in February 2015 exposed the intricate methods through which public institutions and property had been corrupted by the governing coalition. The wiretapping scandal also indicated that it was on high-level corruption and money laundering schemes that most of Macedonia’s public debt (which rose from 1,55 billion to 4 billion or from 23 to 46,6% of GDP between 2008 to 2014, and is expected to reach 50% by 2017) was spent. Much of the Government’s financial operations are currently a subject of investigation of grand corruption. Instead of using the public debt to kickstart economic and social development in the highly impoverished post-socialist state, the debt was put into the private function and benefit of the ruling party.

2017- current (SDSM-led Government)

The 2015 wiretap scandal set off a crisis which brought the state into a gridlock for the following 2 years. It is partly to this status quo, that the relative inactivity (especially compared to neighbouring Serbia) of Macedonia within the 16+1 can be attributed. Thus, for instance, at the *Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*, which was held in Beijing in May 2017, Macedonia was the rare country from the region which failed to produce concrete outcomes. Meanwhile, at the Forum, the Chinese Government signed economic and trade cooperation agreements with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia,

Albania and Montenegro (all the other remaining non-EU member states of the 16+1), and promoted close cooperation with Greece (Macedonia's southern neighbour and significant economic partner).

However, a new Government has been in place in Macedonia since June 2017. Its key priorities are listed in the 3-6-9 action plan towards EU and NATO accession. The discourse of the new government and its foreign policy has been to reaffirm the country's path towards Euro-Atlantic integration as well as closer regional cooperation. This suggests that the current Government will have the tendency to integrate the EU's interpretations over the unfolding of the BRI and the 16+1.

In terms of finance, a more debt-conscious policy is being followed, which means that any future large loans for infrastructure projects will be carefully scrutinized. The new Government's Ministry of Finance efforts to cut down on irresponsible spending and the huge public debt will mean a more careful selection of funding priorities in the future. At the same time the new government has promoted an ambitious plan for infrastructure development. It has initially promised to expand the cooperation with China - with three large infrastructure projects announced in the infrastructure programme of the government, as it looks for ways to kick start development amidst a growing possibility of a recession due to the efforts to cut down the public debt.¹⁹

It is in within this context, of a new administration which is on one hand desperately attempting to present to the EU a credible record of transparency, stable institutions, accountability the rule of law and democracy- that Macedonia's intentions and actions within the 16+1 will be embedded. For now, however, EU standards have priority. Therefore, the perception towards China and the 16+1 will likely continue to be mediated through what the expected view over the EU is from the perspective of Macedonia.

The role of the President

Macedonia's President Gjorge Ivanov, who holds mostly ceremonial powers, is a professor of political science who has been supported in his presidential bids in 2009 and 2014 by the former Government led by VMRO-DPMNE. Even though the government of Gruevski has been removed from power, Ivanov is still in office and sans unforeseen circumstances, will stay until the end of his second term (2019). Ivanov has a penchant for world politics, ancient history and philosophy, and seems to hold high regard of the cooperation with China. His rhetoric is divergent from all other mainstream political leaders. He has continuously praised China and its development model, and has been actively involved in promoting Macedonia's relations with China. He himself has paid an official visit of China, and met the Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Ivanov in a way represents what is a small category of insiders who have a China-positive attitude, and who have taken and acknowledged the Chinese projection at a face value. His attitude is shared by a handful of academics and media personalities. However, Ivanov's rhetoric is at times confrontational and seems as if he aims to juxtapose China as a

¹⁹ <http://vlada.mk/programa/infrastruktura>

competitor to the West, or to instrumentalize China in order to criticize the West. For instance, at the opening of the recent Belt and Road Conference in Ohrid he stated:

“Macedonia wishes to become a member of an EU in which there is a free flow of people, goods, services and capital. But, in order for us to join the European economic space on an equal footing, it is necessary that we should also be a part of the European road, rail and energy corridors. Since the EU is not yet supporting great infrastructure projects we have decided for Chinese loans on better terms from the initiative 16+1 in order to build a large part of Corridor 8.”²⁰

Such rhetoric coming from the President has attracted negative attention. This has been not only a result of the choice of his words, but again rooted in the domestic political context. Namely, Ivanov has been not only associated with the Gruevski government, but he has also pro-actively used and allegedly abused his presidential powers in order to protect the former ruling elite on at least two occasions: once by pre-emptively pardoning everyone charged for corruption by the Special Prosecutor’s office including Gruevski and his closest associates in 2015; and the second time, by complicating the transfer of power in early 2017 by not awarding the mandate for government formation to the then Prime Minister in waiting Zoran Zaev. This has led Ivanov to become highly unpopular and contested official; therefore, whatever Ivanov supports is often seen as negative by default.

External influences on the representation on China, BRI and 16+1

In the European context, Macedonia is a subaltern element where external voices, in particular those coming from authoritative sources from the West - the EU and the US - carry a particular weight in shaping the discourse and social representations on key issues, such as anything related to China. The case of the cooperation with China, here, is not an exception. As argued already, to a great extent, Macedonians get their information about China through external channels. The lack of own knowledge and experience is compensated by relying on external input.

The division of labour among external actors (or stakeholders) in Macedonia is that the US is concerned with security issues, while the EU, and EU member states - in particular Germany - is concerned with geoeconomics. Given the predominantly economic overtone of the Macedonia, China then belongs to the “portfolio” of the EU. This is corroborated by the emerging new liberal, pro-Western ruling elite around the SDSM government, which closely follows the Brussels line in all policy sectors.

Therefore, more often than not the origin of the negative projections on China seems to lie within close normative and institutional proximity to the EU bureaucratic apparatus, and often they incline towards seeing China as a “threat” rather than “opportunity.” The interpretations of China’s intentions behind the BRI and the 16+1 contain a combination of “fears” or “suspicions” over Chinese “real” versus its “spoken” intentions. This plays into an existing European fear that China is using a “divide and conquer” strategy in Europe. In the

²⁰ <http://republika.mk/830930>

aftermath of the EU financial crisis when, EU member states have increasingly disregarded the common EU policy priorities on China due to the economic pragmatism of national governments in attracting Chinese investment.²¹ After the establishment of 16+1, the CESEE countries got a particular negative attention, even though in reality they have a much smaller level of economic cooperation with China compared to Western Europe (i.e. in February 2017 China became Germany's largest trading partner, but Germany often blames CESEE for being too close to China).²²

This rhetoric is then internalized by pro-EU voices in Macedonia, and is often perceived as interrelated with EU's conditionality (stick and carrot) approach towards the candidate countries such as Macedonia. In that sense, one can often notice an emerging pattern of thinking that juxtaposes China and EU in a zero-sum constellation, which is framed as irreconcilable. While certain contradictions arise from the fact that EU and China promote different approaches to development, such thinking creates predispositions for developing an antagonistic relationship in the future. In sum, while not explicitly faced with the choice between China and the West, due to the ways in which external influences are manifested and interpreted, Macedonian actors (predominantly laymen) impose a binary thinking upon themselves. This also has an effect of side-lining those who advocate for a more open, constructive and collaborative approach to China. While such constructive voices do exist among elites who have had experience in collaborating with China, they are currently at the margins of the Macedonian political debate.

Case study: the Sinohydro highways and the role of external mediators of perception

The biggest project since 2012, has been the financing (to the value of a 574 million euros Chinese loan) of the construction of a 110 km motorway on two sections in Macedonia-(Kicevo - Ohrid and Miladinovci-Stip). At the same time, it has been a rather infamous one. One of the wiretaps that revealed and the grand corruption of the Gruevski government, also uncovered that Sinohydro corporation (contracted for the building of the 574 million euro worth Motorway Construction Project) was implicated in the misconduct. According to the recordings, the two sides (Gruevski and Sinohydro representatives) reached a deal beyond the standard procedures of law and there are significant differences between the costs announced by the Macedonian government and by China's state-owned enterprise. It also showed that the former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski sought personal benefits from the contract.²³ It is highly likely that the main motif behind this government's perceptions and intentions for cooperation was another opportunity for private profit from corruption which stands in stark contrast to the developmental intentions and objectives inherent in Chinese

²¹ http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/chinas_scramble_for_europe%20

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-economy-trade/china-steams-past-u-s-france-to-be-germans-biggest-trading-partner-idUSKBN1622SO>

²³ Liu Zuokui (2017) Europe and the Belt and Road Initiative-Responses and Risks: <http://cdinstitute.eu/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Liu%20Zuokui%20-%20Europe%20and%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative.pdf>

official's' statements on the BRI and the 16+1. At the time of the writing, an investigation by Macedonia's Special Prosecutor's Office against the former Prime Minister is in place, but there is no outcome yet.

In a follow up to the corruption scandal, one of the two sections, the Kichevo-Ohrid highway later turned out to also be based on a flawed feasibility study (the section Miladinovci-Shtip had also problems – with land rights of the locals). As a result, serious omissions in the projection and construction of the roads have occurred. This also implies a particular responsibility of the Macedonian public enterprise in charge of road construction which according to insiders was the one that provided the study without the due diligence. The fallout of this controversy has resulted with a significant delay of the works, and additional costs that are speculated to reach about 140 million euros, which according to the contract terms, the Macedonian government should pay to the Chinese contractors. At the time of the writing of the paper, a solution has not been found.

This makes the Ohrid-Kichevo highway a particularly important case due to the wider perceptual implications it holds for the 16+1. Expectedly, it has attracted hugely negative PR both inside Macedonia and outside. Outside Macedonia, the European Union Institute of Security Studies (EUISS) published a hugely damning report alleging that "The Chinese investments in infrastructure in the Western Balkans are fuelling the already widespread corruption in the region."²⁴ Another article published by the European Council on Foreign Relations states that "China's Silk Road project may give a short term economic boost but it is undermining the EU reform agenda in the Balkans."²⁵ According to Liu, as a result of the case, Europe and the US have strengthened their coordination and cooperation on infrastructure investments in the Western Balkan region and have taken advantage of the Macedonian crisis to restrict the increasing influence of any third party (mainly Russia and China) on the Western Balkan region.²⁶

In Macedonia, a large report on the Sinohydro scandal (commissioned by the National Endowment for Democracy, The Balkan Trust for Democracy, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, which has also funded the diffusion of materials with an explicit anti-Chinese stance) reported on similar misconduct of the same company across other countries globally including Ecuador, Zimbabwe and Uganda. Furthermore the report highlights that the company had been blacklisted by the World Bank, African Bank of Development and the EBRD.²⁷

The common feature of these reports seem to be highlight the inferiority of Chinese development projects compared to the ones financed by the West, and to argue, that there is negative rising influence of China: "While EU institutions try to promote clear rules for spending every 500 euros to make sure public money is used in the most efficient way, contracts for Chinese-built highways worth up to 500 million euro are decided without any

²⁴ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/07/24/euiss-chinese-investments-hinder-transparency-western-balkans/>

²⁵ http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_in_the_balkans_the_battle_of_principles_7210

²⁶ <http://cdinstitute.eu/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Liu%20Zuokui%20-%20Europe%20and%20the%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative.pdf>

²⁷ <https://okno.mk/node/65363>

tender,” is explained in one publication. Another one implies that the region helps Chinese constructors get European references to later access the EU railway construction market, while at the same time large scale investments and the opening of new routes still serve as a conduit for political and normative influence, thereby increasing the risk of undermining the EU’s reformist agenda.²⁸

In other media, one way to call the highways was “Aliexpress highways” making associations with out-dated and racist stereotypes of the bad quality of Chinese products. All of this led to perpetuation of an anti-Chinese discourse among the laymen, which was witnessed for instance on social media, and in everyday discussions.

At the same time, the reports failed to mention several important facts that could have prevented the development of an anti-Chinese discourse: a) while Sinohydro has had problems in the past, the problematic projects by Sinohydro are an outlier of the overall Chinese experience abroad; b) that China in the last few years has tackled corruption seriously, including the corruption in overseas operations of its SOEs; c) that under the government of Gruevski there were not only problems with the Sinohydro highways in Macedonia, but also with highways done in cooperation with European firms; d) that when it comes to the technical difficulties with the Kichevo-Ohrid highway, the fault is likely to be sought at the Macedonian partner; g) that China does not have bad, low-quality “Aliexpress” infrastructure as it is often said, but rather one of the best of the world. Likewise, by ascribing the shortcomings of the EU to the involvement of China, the pro-EU voices ignore the fact that long before China started 16+1 and the BRI EU has been falling short of promoting and kick starting a real developmental momentum in Macedonia, for which China cannot be blamed.

All in all, the scandal with the highways remains unresolved and burdens the further advancement of Sino-Macedonian cooperation. The situation has been exacerbated with the prolonged silence by the official Chinese channels - while for the Macedonian public this has been a case of utmost importance, Chinese officials and experts have avoided any discussion about it. For the laymen in Macedonia, then, given the tone and discourse in the media, it has led to the perpetuation of many negative stereotypes about China. For the experts who are willing to engage with China, it has created an obstacle in conveying any constructive point about China as all discussion boil down to the question of the highways. For those who have been willing to criticize China, it has provided ample ammunition, as it has also served to promote the idea that as a partner, China is not reliable. This has also provided arguments for those who pushed for the idea of a zero-sum politics: that Macedonia has to choose between the West and China, and given the experience with the Ohrid-Kichevo highway, it should stick to the former and avoid China not to complicate its relationship with the EU.

The case of the Ohrid-Kichevo highway, then, while being a source of concern and a challenge, also resembles an opportunity to test new strategies and new approaches to improving the interaction and facilitate the creation of more favorable social representations - but also repair the faults done in the past. While Macedonia and China could shelve the case

²⁸ http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_in_the_balkans_the_battle_of_principles_7210

on the side and develop their cooperation independently, finding a win-win solution could have a re-energizing effect on the cooperation.

Discussion, recommendations and future research

The discourse of Chinese high officials seems to reveal a conscious effort to present China as a constructive and cooperative partner, and the BRI and 16+1 as platforms which aim to complement instead of clash with existing developmental models. Nonetheless oftentimes it is in the reception or interpretation of this projected message where we can locate a mixed perception on the BRI and the 16+1 initiatives.

On one hand, China has managed in a very short period of time to engage Macedonia in a complex multi-channel diplomacy, and make it a part of its global vision. The repetitive practices of interaction within the China-led platforms, already resemble a potentially transformative experience. As the accumulative knowledge and experience with the 16+1 is growing so will the potentials for development that can arise from the cooperation become clearer and the fears of possible clashes with the EU be mitigated.

On the other, the paper has shown that the combination of the lack of knowledge and experience with China, the stereotypes and sometimes prejudices and the particular domestic political situation - but also instances such as the case of the Ohrid-Kichevo highway - steer the social representations in a different direction. Intra-European power relations, and particular the position of the CESEE as a subaltern element, have contributed to this as well. Macedonia, even though not an EU member state, has been exposed to external influence that affected the social representation of its cooperation with China.

Yet, the end result is that Macedonia is starting to have a nascent China debate - something that Macedonia never had before. In this debate, for now, at the juncture of the change of government from VMRO-DPMNE to SDSM, the most prominent voice is the one of external actors, primarily the EU and its associates, as well as domestic voices that due to ideological (pro-EU) convictions, or simply lack of knowledge are unaware, sceptical, critical or outright prejudiced towards China, and create a fallacious dichotomy between the West and China. Smaller, and less prominent are actors in the position of experts, elites and even the President of the Republic (despite his general unpopularity), who have more knowledge or at least are more open towards China. For now, however, the emerging debate is not based on any information about China itself, its global vision, the China-led platforms for cooperation or the general nature of Macedonia-China relations. Dominated by a particular strand of the European discourse that is critical towards China, and catalysed by the complications related to the murky case of the Ohrid-Kichevo highway, the emerging China story in Macedonia is one that is insular from the broader picture.

In that sense, while acknowledging the progress made, at this point the relationship is at a crossroads. The contradiction which will need to be pondered upon and carefully managed is the one between the different social representations of the 16+1 prevail amongst elites, experts and the general public. A constructive outcome of that tension will steer the wheel towards deeper mutually beneficial cooperation, and this is something worth pursuing.

In this respect, four key recommendations can follow from the discussion and the conclusions reached:

1. Greater knowledge on China, BRI and 16+1 needs to be circulated in Macedonia's socio-cultural and media space. Key opinion leaders, such as reporters, academics and bureaucrats will need to be encouraged and stimulated to engage more with China through the establishment of specific knowledge hubs that focus on creation and dissemination of knowledge on the 16+1 or the BRI. At the same time, greater sensitivity to the domestic and external circumstances of Macedonia is needed in China, and among Chinese experts and elites.

2. There needs to be a comprehensive and consistent publicity strategy for the 16+1. This includes both the need to improve the current online resources as the first window of knowledge on the platform. The website is the first point of entry of new interested parties to the Platform. As it appears now, it send the message of an underdeveloped, frivolous, unplanned project - which is even more underwhelming taking in account China's profile as a champion of internet technologies. The new website could include at least three key functions: the mapping out of projects, the mapping out and the matchmaking between Key Opinion Leaders from different issue areas across the 16+1, and be the main source of content from both Summits, but also what happens in between Summits, which is of relevance to the platform, presented in a systematic and user-friendly manner, which would also increase its transparency. Finally, not only China has an edge in internet technologies, but a lot of the CESEE countries - including Macedonia - have potentials in this sphere.

3. The best publicity strategy would be a credible developmental model which produces perceived positive outcomes. In view of a) the bad perception because of Sinohydro, b) the debt-situation in Macedonia, c) the strategic importance of the country as a link d) and the need to demonstrate a credible complementary developmental intentions instead of self-interested intentions, China needs to consider offering a combination of non-concessional and concessional loans, or loans on more favourable terms, which no longer require the same terms which contravene EU tendering regulations. That would help to improve the current perceptions and really lend legitimacy and credibility to its developmental agenda, in order to bridge the gap between the discourse and the perceptions in Macedonia. Additionally, encouraging greenfield investments and mergers and acquisitions can do wonders in a small economy such as the Macedonian one. With comparatively little effort and resources, Macedonia can become a success story of 16+1 and the BRI.

4. Finally, a potentially big role in diffusing constructive representations on the 16+1 is to be played by the Culture Cooperation Centre for the 16+1 is soon to be launched in Skopje. Culture can play an important supporting role in facilitating mutual recognition, trust and cooperation. If one takes the example of Macedonia's neighbor, Greece, in the case of Sino-Greek relations, a close cultural cooperation was a precursor to burgeoning economic relationship. A careful consideration by both Macedonian and Chinese actors is therefore required, in order to utilize the potential of this venture optimally.

About the Authors

Gjorgjioska M. Adela, PhD, recently completed her doctoral degree in Social Representations and Communications as a Marie Curie fellow, at Sapienza University, Rome. Previously she studied in London, where she completed two masters degrees, one in Development Studies, another in Comparative Politics, as well as an undergraduate degree in International Relations at the London School of Economics. In addition to critical social psychology, her research interests include: international political economy in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, and particularly the relationship between different models of economic development in the post-Yugoslav space.

Anastas Vangeli is a Doctoral Researcher at the Graduate School for Social Research and a fellow at the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. Previously, he has studied and worked in Skopje, Budapest, Brussels and Beijing. His research interests include post(socialist) politics in China and Europe and the relationship between them, and the diffusion of ideas in global politics, especially through China's Belt&Road Initiative.