

WORKING PAPER

Slovak policy towards China in the age of Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 Format

Kristína Kironská and Richard Q. Turcsányi

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



Abstract

Although Slovakia was among the first countries to sign the memorandum with China on Belt and Road (BRI) initiative in 2015, the involvement of Slovakia in the initiative has been minimal until now. Slovakia is also located outside the six main economic corridors planned by the Chinese side as the backbone of BRI. However, some Slovak experts and officials see a potential that a new transport corridor from China via Russia, Ukraine and entering Eastern Slovakia could be opened and serve as an alternative option to the Northern route going via Poland. The Slovak government started to pay more attention to China in 2017, and it remains to be seen whether its newly drafted strategy may bring some fruits with regards to these plans. As for the Slovak media, however, the BRI is not much known, and there is relatively little coverage of the initiative.

The presented paper aims at answering the question of how Slovakia has approached China in the recent years, particularly in the contexts of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 format. This paper addresses the perception of BRI at the official and media levels in Slovakia and sheds light on projects that Slovakia wishes to see come to light.

The structure of the paper will begin, firstly, with the context in which the current Slovak-China relations are taking place. For that reason, the trade and investment statistics will be briefly presented, together with the relevant media information and the information received from the interviews regarding the most recent development. Secondly, the analysis of the two crucial strategic documents of the Slovak government vis-à-vis China will be offered, to understand what is the official position towards China. Following that, thirdly, we will look at the media image of China, notably how the Slovak media reported about the BRI and 16+1 format. In conclusion, a discussion about the potential development of Slovak-China relations will be offered.

Introduction

Until recently, Slovakia counted as the nation with the least interest in China in Central Europe. As a comparison, its three partners in the so-called Visegrad Group (V4) have been much further in developing relations with China. Poland established the strategic partnership with China in 2011 and is often regarded as the leader of the 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in their relations with China in the so-called 16+1 format.¹ Hungary competes for the title and argues that it started its 'Eastern opening' much earlier, already in the early 2000s. Hungary is also the host of the largest amount of Chinese FDI and also Chinese diaspora in the region. The Czech Republic, for its part, has much more turbulent

¹ Szcsudlik-Tatar, J., 2014. *Poland and China: a Strategic Partnership in Making?* In: Furst, R., Tesar, F. (Eds.), *China's Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*. Institute of International Relations, Prague, 25-44.

history when it comes to its approach to China.² Before 2012, the country was regarded as perhaps the strongest critique of China in Europe. Yet, since then a political reshuffling produced an almost perfect U-turn in its diplomatic relations with China and some Czech leaders now try to steal for themselves the position of being the Chinese bridge/gateway to Europe.³

While the three V4 neighbors of Slovakia have established strategic partnerships with China in the recent years (in the case of Poland and Hungary even *comprehensive* strategic partnerships), Slovakia attracted international attention just recently when its president met with the Dalai Lama, obviously leading to criticism from China. The country's Prime Minister Robert Fico (who, unlike the president, is the head of the government in the Slovak political system) was one of the very few ones missing at the 16+1 summit in Suzhou in 2016. Slovakia also did not send any high-level delegation to the Belt and Road summit in Beijing in 2017. Even the post of the Slovak Ambassador in Beijing was vacant for about a year in 2016. All in all, even though Premier Fico and other Slovak diplomats rhetorically confirmed that they see China as an important partner, there has been relatively little activity from the Slovak side to prove that.⁴

However, there seem to be changes taking place in 2017 in Slovakia when it comes to its relations with China. In April, the country's government approved a 37-page long 'Strategy of Development Economic Relations with China for 2017-2020' and at the moment an even longer 'Action plan' of this strategy is under negotiation and soon to be approved. At the same time, Slovakia might soon receive some significant Chinese investments.⁵

The presented paper aims to answer the question of how Slovakia has approached China in the recent years, particularly in the contexts of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 format. The character of the research goal substantiates the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The specific methodological tools employed include document analysis, media analysis, individual in-depth interviews, and observations; which are in accordance with Robert K. Yin's sources of evidence for case studies.⁶

² Turcsányi, R.Q., Matura, T., Furst, R., 2014. *The Visegrad countries' political relations with China. Goals, results and prospects*. In: Szunomar, A. (Eds.), *Chinese investments and financial engagements in Central Europe. Myth or Reality?* Institute of World Economics HAS, Budapest, 127-141. For more insights into Czech approach towards China, see for instance Furst, R., 2014, *The Czech Experience with Relations with China: Nothing to Win, Nothing to Lose*. In: Furst, R. and Tesar, F. (Eds.), *China's Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*. Institute of International Relations, Prague, 60-68; Furst, R., 2011. *Co počít s negativní českou konstrukcí zlé Číny?*. In: Stritecky et al. *Mezi politickým (ne)zájmem a byrokratickou efektivitou*. Institute of International Relations, Prague, 2011, 115-125.

³ Turcsányi, R. Q., and Andrea Bajerova, 2016, 'Defender of Values to Faithful Ally': The Czech Republic's Foreign Policy Approach towards China, In: *The Strategic Partnership Between China and Czech Republic: Status Quo, Problems and Policy Suggestions*, Beijing: CASS; Turcsányi, R. Q., "Is the Czech Republic China's New 'Bridge to Europe'?", *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2015, <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/is-the-czechrepublic-chinas-new-bridge-to-europe/>>.

⁴ Turcsányi, R. Q., "Fico pre rozvoj vzťahov s Čínou neurobil prakticky nič," *Denník N*, 7 November 2016, <<http://dennikn.sk/602336/fico-pre-rozvoj-vztahov-s-cinou-neurobil-prakticky-nic/>>.

⁵ The Government of the Slovak Republic, *Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020*, April 2017; The Government of the Slovak Republic, *Action Plan to the Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020*, September 2017.

⁶ Yin, Robert K., 1989. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. SAGE Publications.

Relevant data were collected through the study of primary (government documents, interviews) and secondary sources (academic and media articles, studies, reports). Between August and October 2017 we have conducted ten in-depth interviews with Slovak government officials to acquire detailed information about the undergoing Slovak initiatives regarding the BRI. Informants were handpicked on the assumption that they represent compelling cases for the study (purposive non-probability sampling). We relied on our personal connections to establish initial contact and then used the snowball method to recruit more respondents.

The interviews were all conducted in the Slovak language as one-to-one discussions in a semi-structured way with open-ended questions. One session typically took between one and two hours. For the respondent not to be severely inhibited by the presence of the recorder, we have opted against recording. Some critical information obtained during the interviews was verified by triangulation, a method using multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data. As requested, the interviewees would not be named throughout the text.

Moreover, a media content analysis of over 2600 articles dealing with Chinese politics and/or economy published in the period between January 2010 and June 2017 in Slovakia was conducted as part of another research project of the authors.⁷ Data were collected according to the key questions and coded neutral, positive, or negative. Keywords and themes added to the coding provide an instrument for “measuring” the depth of the discourse. Another data set, January 2017 - October 2017, analyses solely BRI media coverage concerning titles and mentions, and compares it to the previous years.

Based on the research goals and the designed methodology, the structure of the paper will be as follows. Firstly, to present the context in which the current Slovak-China relations are taking place, the trade and investment statistics will be briefly presented, together with the relevant media information and the information received from the interviews regarding the most recent development. Secondly, the analysis of the two crucial strategic documents of the Slovak government vis-à-vis China will be offered, to understand what is the official position towards China. Following that, thirdly, we will look at the media image of China and particularly how the Slovak media reported about the BRI and the 16+1 format. In conclusion, a discussion about the potential development of Slovak-China relations will be offered.

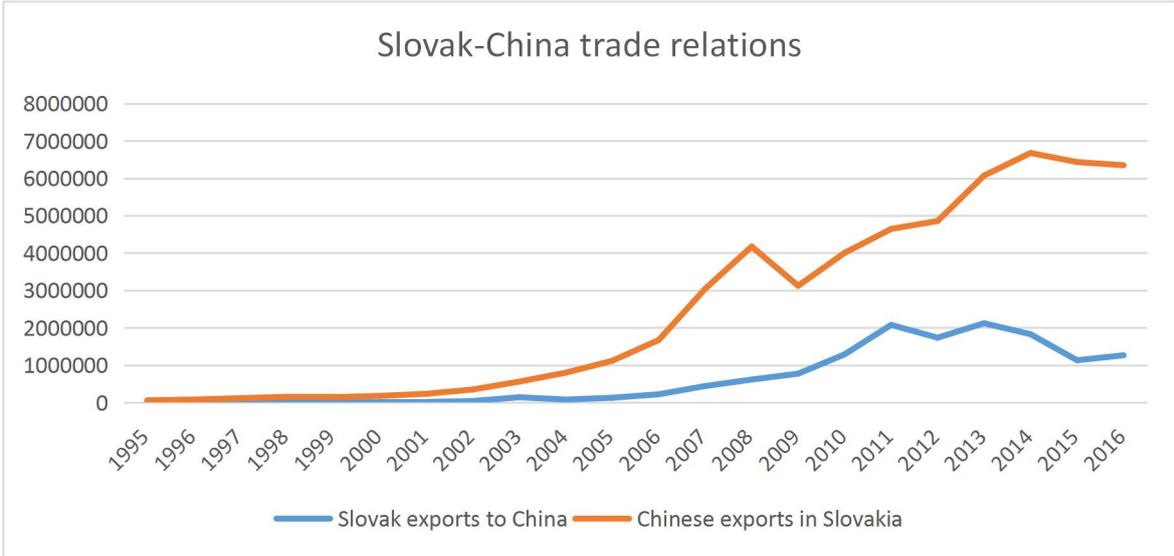
Building the context: Slovak trade and investment relations with China

From the Slovak perspective, similar to other V4 and CEE countries, China is above all a promising alternative economic partner – primarily serving as a source of exports and source of investments. Hence, to understand the experience of Slovakia in this regard, it makes sense to look at how Slovak-Chinese trade relations have been going. From the trade perspective, we see that Slovakia experiences a trade deficit with China – Slovakia imports from China currently more than four times as much as it exports to China. As the Figure 1 (see below) shows, Slovakia's trade position vis-à-vis China changed considerably – in 2016 Slovakia exported to China less than in 2010. We can see that Slovak exports to China grew since

⁷ See www.chinfluence.eu

about 2005 and in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis they increased rapidly, narrowing the gap between exports and imports. Yet, since 2011, Slovak exports to China have been decreasing.

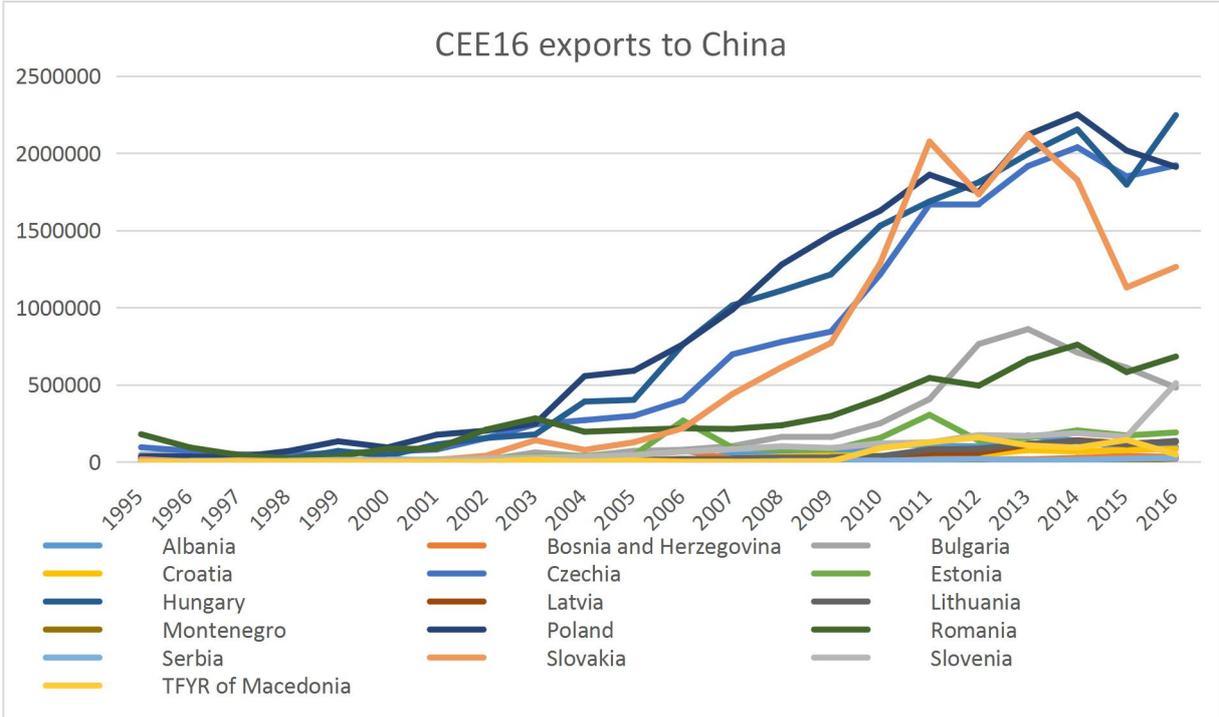
Figure 1: Slovak-China trade relations



Source: UNCTAD

The Figure 2 (see below) compares Slovak exports to China with those of all CEE16. Slovakia, together with its V4 neighbors, is from among the CEE16 the leading exporter to China. Yet, in the previous years, Slovakia's decrease in exports was from among the V4 the fastest, meaning that while in 2011 Slovakia was the most prominent exporter to China from among the CEE16, it lost its position in the subsequent years. Still, Slovakia has one of the smallest trade deficits with China from among the CEE16 countries.

Figure 2: CEE16 exports to China



Source: UNCTAD

China is a major import partner for Slovakia – more than 8 % of Slovak imports come from China, only surpassed by the Czech Republic (more than 10 %) and Germany (almost 17 %).⁸ As for the exports, China takes the 14th position with roughly 1.6 % of Slovak exports, with main export partners of Slovakia being the EU countries such as Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, but also the USA and Russia scoring above China.⁹ On the other hand, China is still by far the most dominant export destination for Slovakia in Asia. As for the composition of the Slovak export to China, it is dominated by the products of automotive industries – products of the Slovak medium and small enterprises take marginal share in the overall export from Slovakia to China.

Moving on to the investment relations, so far, the country has not attracted any considerable deal and it ranks much below its neighbors when it comes to the overall amount of Chinese FDI.¹⁰ Yet, a few projects under negotiation may change the regional picture entirely. The Chinese HeSteel Group – the world's second-largest steel producer – is allegedly near acquiring one of the major companies in Slovakia – the U.S. Steel-owned factory in Košice, Eastern Slovakia. The deal is expected to materialize in April 2018, when the agreement between the Slovak government and the U.S. Steel expires and the American company will be free to sell its assets without a threat of a financial fee.

The U.S. Steel's acquisition would amount according to media information to 1.4 billion EUR. Moreover, the factory would require 1-2 billion of additional capital investments in the years to come to retain its good production standing. If the deal really happens as described, it would be the biggest one in all of the CEE since Wanhua's acquisition of BorsodChem in Hungary in 2011. It would also instantly make Slovakia one of the CEE countries with the most Chinese FDI. Other Chinese deals are under consideration, although they are farther from concluding. They include a strategic 30 years rent of the airport in the capital city (Bratislava), investments in the spa tourism, or water energy.

Even more importantly, some in Slovakia hope that the country can become another terminal point for the railways connecting China with Europe. Today almost all the trains from China to Europe go via Russia, Belarus and then to Poland. Thanks to its position and already existing infrastructure, Slovakia might offer a new railway connection via Russia, Ukraine and reaching Eastern Slovakia, from where it could continue further West, South or North in the EU (see Image 1).

The advantages of this new line are a few-fold. The wide-gauge railway from Russia and Ukraine terminates in Eastern Slovakia, where existing intermodal terminals can transfer

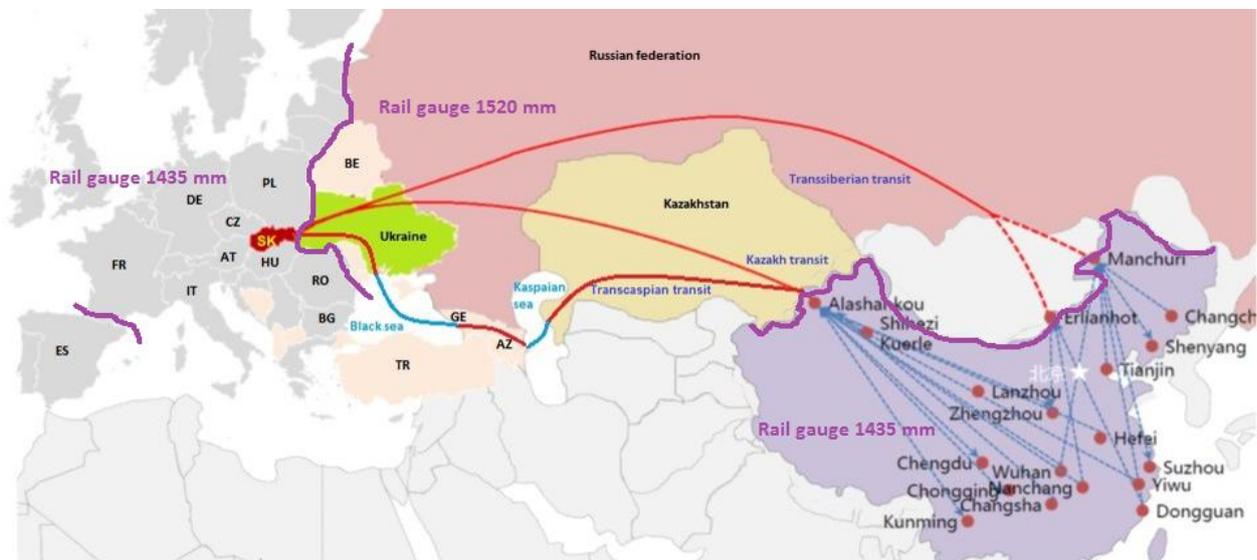
⁸ World Bank Group, World Integrated Trade Solutions, 2017, <<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/SVK>>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ MERICS and Rhodium Group, *Chinese investment in Europe: record flows and growing imbalances*, 2017, <<https://www.merics.org/en/merics-analysis/papers-on-china/cofdi/cofdi2017/>>; Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, *2015 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment* (Beijing, 2016). American Enterprise Institute, *China Global Investment Tracker*, 2017, <<http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>>.

goods to European-gauge tracks. Moreover, the second largest city of Košice (also the location of the U.S. Steel) would play the role here as it is a hub for highways and also hosts an international airport. There are also plans for the construction of a new innovation and industrial park here, next to the new intermodal terminal, which could grow here as well.

Image 1: Three possible routes from China to Slovakia



Source: Slovak Ministry of Transport and Construction, 2017.

These transport plans would probably require some additional upgrading were the transport line become used in higher volumes, but otherwise, the corridor is ready to operate. In fact, there have been already first trains utilizing this path on their way to Hungary, and there is the first one explicitly destined for Slovakia to arrive in November.¹¹ Overall, the primary challenge here is not so much a missing infrastructure, but the geopolitical tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which make it difficult for the trains to pass their borders smoothly.

The official Slovak approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping's first mention of the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013, the initiative has gained a lot of momentum and attention worldwide. Slovakia has had a positive although not very proactive stance to this cooperation framework until recently, although this started to change.

Slovakia was one of the first countries to sign the Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI with China back in 2015.¹² According to Slovak officials, immediately after the announcement of the BRI, the country offered various projects that could fall within the scope

¹¹ TASR, "Do Bratislavy smeruje nákladný vlak z Číny, očakávaný príchod je o 2 týždne," *SME*, 27 October 2017, <<https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/20682207/do-bratislavy-smeruje-nakladny-vlak-z-ciny-ocakavany-prichod-je-o-2-tyzdne.html#ixzz4xhJmNZM1>>.

¹² ---, "CEE countries sign memo to promote Belt and Road Initiative," *Xinhua*, 27 November 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/27/c_134859206.htm>.

of the initiative. However, the feeling on the Slovak side was that China did not react actively or that the Chinese offer was not applicable.¹³ This applies, for instance, to the water power plant on the river Ipel', which was discussed during the initial years of the 16+1 format, yet without any progress.

Officers of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs said they were open to the initiative, and their ministry supported it, however, they all emphasized they treated it as an economic and trade-oriented initiative, and did not consider political or other aspects.¹⁴ The Slovak Ministry of Finance has named a Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Negotiation of the BRI, Dana Meager.¹⁵ Together with her advisor, Štefan Adamec, they attend negotiations with the Chinese side. The Slovak Ministry of Transport and Construction has been promoting Slovakia as the transit zone at the east-west and north-south crossroad in several seminars and expos in China. One of such events, the Intermodal China 2017, was attended by 16 state-owned and private transport and logistics companies (ŽSR, ZSSK Cargo, Slovenská Pošta, Verejné prístavy, etc.) approached and invited by the *Working Group for the Implementation of the MoU between Slovakia and China for the Support of BRI*, under the leadership of Peter Hrapko from the Ministry of Transport and Construction, in cooperation with the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO).¹⁶

Slovakia is clearly interested in deepening the partnership with China and has offered collaboration on a number of projects in tourism, energetics, tourism and research and development that fall under the scope of BRI. The most vividly discussed plan, however, is the construction of a wide-gauge railway from the East to the West of the country and building of an intermodal transportation terminal. Transportation is one of the most viable BRI aspects in Slovakia. Transport and infrastructure are both services to trade and vice versa. The key to success of the project is an optimal customs information exchange between Slovakia and China based on the Memorandum of Understanding between customs authorities of both countries, signed by Meager in November 2016 in Riga. Based on this agreement, the result of a two-year effort, rail transport will speed up and computerize. It is, however, crucial that transit countries on this route, such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, join this initiative.

At the summit in Suzhou in 2015, the Slovak Minister of Transport and Construction expressed interest in cooperation with China. In May 2015, as part of the 16+1 Initiative, a Chinese delegation interested in organizing railway transportation from China to Europe visited Slovakia. In 2016, the same delegation visited again, this time to discuss cooperation between Slovakia and China. They expressed the need for promoting Slovakia, as one of the possible transit routes to Europe in China.

¹³ Personal interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁴ Personal interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁵ The government of the Slovak Republic, Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic no. 308 on the Nomination of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Negotiation of the Economic Belt of the Silk Road and the Maritime Way of the 21st Century, 21 June 2017.

¹⁶ Generálny konzulát SR v Šanghaji, "Pracovná návšteva štátnej tajomníčky MF SR Dany Meager v Šanghaji", 30 March 2017, <<https://goo.gl/UWTFQ6>>.

In January 2016, the EU and Ukraine have mutually opened their markets for goods and services (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), and thus enabled an easier passing of freight trains between Slovakia and Ukraine. Until then, transit and Chinese import to Slovakia were limited—there was the China-Europe International, one regular freight train (11,000 km in 15 days) that ran once a week between August 2015 and the beginning of 2016 between the port of Yingkou in China and the terminal Dobrá in Slovakia (now it passes through Belarus and Poland).¹⁷ After consultations with Ukraine, in which Kiev declared transport safety and interest in the project, and a series of events in China promoting Slovakia as one of the alternative routes to Europe (organized by the Slovak Ministry of Transport and Construction), a new regular 44-container freight train started running in June 2017 once a week from Changsha (Hunan province) to Budapest through Mongolia, Russia, Ukraine and Slovakia. The whole journey takes about 16 days (as opposed to one up to two months by ship) and is overseen by the Hunan Intermodal Railway Company. In Dobrá (Slovakia) the freight is transferred from wide-gauge to European-gauge rails and transported by the Slovak railway company Cargo Slovakia to Budapest.

The ministry is facilitating the preparation of another regular train service from the port of Dalian (China) via Russia to Bratislava (Slovakia), which started on 27 October 2017. Part of the freight will continue to Poland and Hungary, but most of it will end in Slovakia. The third train to Slovakia, still in the preparation phase, will run from Chengdu (China) through Kazakhstan.

The question is not only sending goods from China to Europe but also vice-versa. For now, just 45 % of the containers are filled with products, which makes this program much more expensive.¹⁸ Slovakia has, however, a huge advantage – it produces the most cars per capita in the world. Although China is speeding up its car industry, world's most luxury cars are manufactured in Slovakia. Last year, only Volkswagen alone exported to China 42 thousand vehicles.¹⁹ For now, most cars are shipped by sea, and those few that are shipped by train pass from Bratislava to Duisburg (Germany) and from there to Chongqing (China) through Poland, not yet using the direct route between Slovakia and China.

In 2017, the Slovak government put forward two documents related to the China strategy. Firstly, in April, the government approved the *Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020*.²⁰ Currently, it has been extended to the *Action plan*, which is now under negotiation.²¹ The two documents suggest that Slovakia enjoys good political relations with China, but it has not managed to use them for enhancing the economic relations – primarily regarding exports, investments, but also tourism. The central chapters of these documents deal

¹⁷ Intermodálne promočné centrum, "Hodvábna cesta otvorená," <<http://www.intermodal.sk/hodvabna-cesta-otvorena/785s>>.

¹⁸ Personal interviews, Ministry of Transport and Construction.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The Government of the Slovak Republic, *Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020*, April 2017.

²¹ The Government of the Slovak Republic, *Action Plan to the Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020*, September 2017.

with various issues, such as strengthening the political dialogue between the two countries, planning investment strategies, supporting Slovak exports (particularly those of small and medium-sized companies), planning transport cooperation, supporting tourism, and collaborating in the innovation sectors.

Some concrete measures of how to achieve these goals, are the opening of Slovak houses in various parts of China to promote Slovakia as an investment, tourism, and economic destination; strengthening the Slovak diplomatic presence in China; active promotion at multiple fairs in China; or attempts to create an appropriate context of how Slovakia could use Chinese investment funds. The documents also mention the possibility of emitting government bonds on the Chinese financial market. When it comes to the trade promotion, the materials emphasize the need to increase exports of Slovak medium and small size companies. A special mention is to agriculture products, where the documents assert that Slovakia has met all the required regulations from the Chinese side, and therefore it should be allowed to enter the Chinese market in these sectors.²²

Ministries involved in the elaboration of the *2017 Action Plan to the Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and the People's Republic of China for the Years 2017-2020* (Part VIII of the Action Plan is related exclusively to the implementation of BRI) include the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Transport and Construction.

The Action Plan, which demands adjustments to the state budget, has been submitted to the Slovak government and is waiting for the approval of the Ministry of Finance. Its objective is to strengthen the political dialogue as a prerequisite for the development of political and economic relations with China. It addresses investment, business and trade development, as well as the sectors of transport, tourism, research and innovation. In regard of BRI, it focuses on infrastructure building and customs.

As part of this plan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intends to actively develop not only bilateral high level, ministerial and regional political dialogue between Slovakia and China; but also to contribute to strengthening the EU's political dialogue with the China (in line with the EU-China Strategic Partnership Agenda from 2013 and the EU Strategy towards China adopted in 2016; and to intensify the use of regional formats, such as V4+China or 16+1, for political dialogue. The Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) and the Slovak-Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SČOK) are to organize bilateral and multilateral events in both Slovakia and China with an emphasis on BRI.²³ Another objective is to increase the number of Chinese top politicians' visits to Slovakia, with the help of the Slovak Embassy in Beijing, together with SČOK and the China Innovation Forum.

The Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Finance, in cooperation with SARIO, are to explore and design a strategy for increasing direct investment flows from and to China. In 2014, Chinese FDI to Slovakia reached 31.3 million €, and in 2015, it was only 11.2 million €, which is not even 1% of the total FDI (40.2 billion €) to Slovakia.²⁴ Although Chinese

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

companies are generally interested in energy and infrastructural projects, in Slovakia, public infrastructure has not yet been financed from Chinese sources, as Chinese entities are reluctant to enter public procurement competitions. Moreover, Slovakia's BRI projects aimed at modernization and building of new infrastructure in order to enhance the transport capacity, are to be linked with EIB's European Fund for Strategic Investments.

Since the share of small and medium enterprises in Slovak exports is marginal, the Slovak Ministry of Economy is directly engaging with the Chinese Ministry of Trade in order to improve the situation. To support business activities of Slovak companies, which are based in China's provinces, the cooperation of the Slovak Embassy in Beijing is required. To support the Slovak export, Slovakia has to continue working with its Chinese partners in the financial and banking sector and actively participate in promoting cooperation in this area within the 16+1 format. The aim for this year is the establishment of the Bank Union between China and 16 Central and East European countries. Also, Slovakia's Eximbanka needs to raise awareness of its existing products and their potential use for the Chinese market.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to negotiate and facilitate the signing a Memorandum of Understanding between SARIO and its Chinese counterpart, China Investment Promotion Agency (CIPA), as well as relevant organizations in Hong Kong and Macao, to streamline the inflows of FDI and intensify trade. Moreover, SARIO is to set up a branch in China.

According to the Action Plan, the Ministry of Transport and Construction is to work on the removal of the rail transport bottleneck—Slovakia's geographical advantages need to be supported by an appropriate infrastructure support system. For the purpose of constructing multimodal terminals, it is necessary to determine the way of financing their construction and operation, while respecting decisions of the EC and Beijing on BRI. The Ministry of Transport and Construction is in charge of designing ways to promote cargo ship transport, including the complex reconstruction of the Bratislava port. It is also in charge of developing an action plan for the construction and financing of transport and logistics projects related to BRI.

In the tourism sector, to strengthen tourism promotion, representative offices will be set up in Shanghai and Beijing and staffed with Slovak delegates, as well as the local labor force.

The objectives for developing cooperation in the sectors of information and communication technology, research and innovation, including supporting the establishment of a Technology Transfer Centre, as part of the 16+1 format, and establish its secretariat in Bratislava. Moreover, priorities in Slovakia's Strategy of Intelligent Specialization need to be identified and narrowed down (automotive, mechanical engineering, ICT, metallurgy and steel, biotechnology, agriculture, food and forestry).

As for BRI infrastructure projects, financing models using a combination of public and private sources are to be designed and the modernization of several tracks and terminals overseen, namely the 88 km long wide-gauge track Maťovce - Košice Haniska, the intermodal terminal Dobrá, the intermodal terminal Košice; the intermodal terminal Leopoldov, and the trimodal terminal Bratislava. Moreover, the Ministry of Transport and Construction will put into operation the Intermodal terminal Žilina and negotiate with the local government of Košice one of the most important of the Slovak initiatives in BRI, the construction of a

transport hub called the Global Logistics and Industrial Park Košice (GLIP).²⁵ Košice is a railway (both wide-gage and European-gauge) and highway intersection (nicknamed the double-cross) that could connect the East with the West and the North with the South (also called the Amber Road).

Coverage of Belt and Road Initiative in Slovak Media²⁶

Since the introduction of the BRI framework by Xi Jinping, there has been a steady increase in the number of mentions of BRI in the Slovak media (see Table 1). Only this year (beginning of January until the end of October), the topic of BRI was mentioned in the Slovak media (TV, radio, print, online) 704 times, out of which, in 106 cases the title explicitly named the initiative. Eleven TV shows (TV JOJ, TA3, TV Markíza, STV1) and two radio shows (Rádio Regina) were dedicated to this topic. Twelve articles appeared in the print media (Život, Pravda, Hospodárske noviny, SME, Plus jeden deň) with BRI in the title of the article. The initiative got the most attention from online media with 81 titles dedicated to the initiative, mostly on sme.sk, 24hod.sk, teraz.sk, and hlavnespravy.sk.

Table 1: Number of BRI titles and mentions in the Slovak media 2013-2017

Year	Number of BRI titles in the media	Number of BRI mentions in the media
2013	15	190
2014	15	300
2015	25	450
2016	51	585
2017 (Jan-Oct)	106	704

Source: ChinfluenCE

The overall picture of China, as presented in Slovak media, is not a positive one. The share of negative articles on China was almost 4.5 times higher than the percentage of positive articles. At the same time, the majority of the items examined were evaluated as creating a neutral image of China.

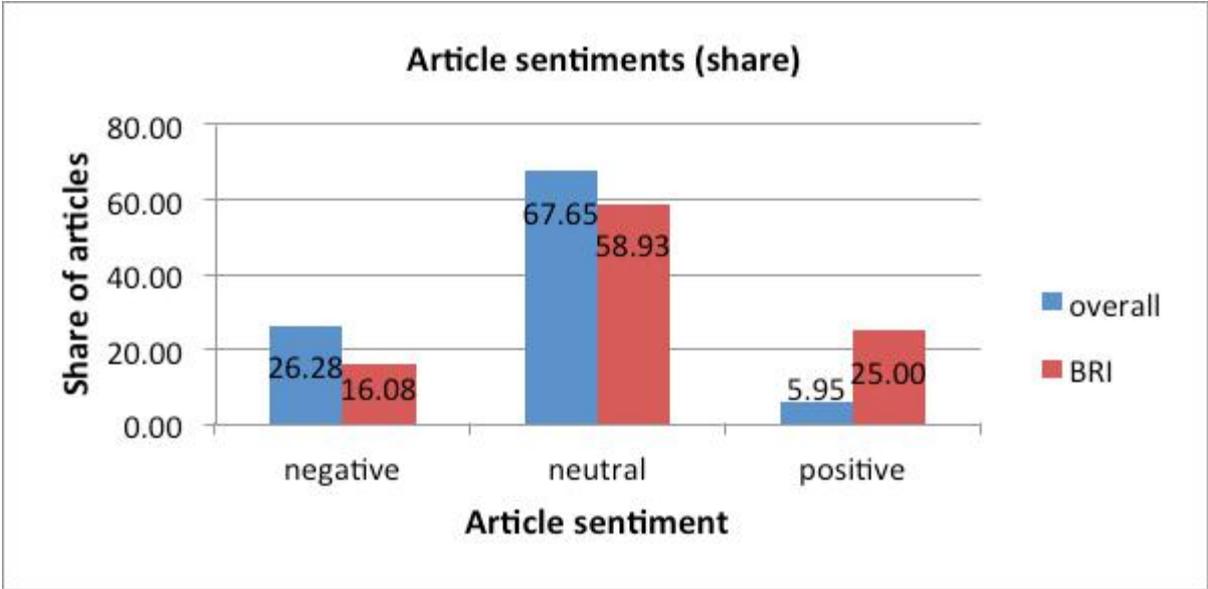
However, the media coverage of BRI in Slovakia deviates from the general trend. Opposite to the general direction, the share of articles, which mention BRI and create a positive image of China, is higher than the percentage of items holding a negative view of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The data presented in this section comes from the research by the authors, as part of the ChinfluenCE project (www.chinfluence.eu).

China and BRI. The share of positive articles is about 1.5 times higher than the share of negative articles. In other words, materials dealing with BRI tend to be more positive than the remaining items dealing with China (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of articles in Slovak media based on sentiment (2010-2017)



Source: ChinfluenCE

When it comes to the individual media – two of them stand out with regard to their highly positive coverage of BRI. The left-leaning Pravda, and economically oriented Hospodárske noviny, both had more than 50 % of articles showing positive sentiment towards China in their reports on BRI. In Pravda, 57 % articles were positive, while in Hospodárske noviny this share was as high as 71 %. Two media also stand out in their profoundly negative view of BRI - Denník N and Týždeň. Both of these media had a 100 % share of negative articles in the sample of examined articles. This is however not surprising since in the overall sample of articles discussing China both of them had a significant share of negative articles than the percentage of neutral items.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the discourse on BRI is developing in Slovakia, we can look at which themes BRI is being mentioned with. Most often, BRI is linked with the broader topic of Chinese investments, as well as the economic growth of China (including its slowdown), and Chinese power and influence in the world. These are the top three issues BRI was linked with, each appearing in more than 30 % articles dealing with BRI. In the list of top ten themes BRI was linked to, only one strictly political topic appeared—the issue of human rights in China was raised in 16% of articles on BRI. The remaining nine were either purely economical, such as Chinese exports, or mixed economic-political themes, like bilateral relations with Slovakia (see Table 2).

Table 2: Issue linkage in BRI articles

Theme	No. of mentions (%)
Chinese investments	46
Chinese economic growth	36
Chinese power and influence	30
Trade	27
Bilateral relations with Slovakia	25
Chinese economic policy	20
Human rights in China	16
Chinese export	14
Chinese influence in Slovakia	14
Chinese foreign policy	13
Relations with the USA	13

Source:ChinfluenCE

Conclusion

The first section of the paper presented the context of Slovak-Chinese relations. It was shown that Slovakia is one of the most successful CEE countries when it comes to exports to China, experiencing some of the lowest trade deficits. At the same time, in the previous five years, the Slovak exports to China have been decreasing. Contrary to that, regarding investments, Slovakia so far does not host any significant Chinese investments. Yet, this can change soon with some of the currently negotiated major deals, if successfully concluded.

In the following part, the paper discussed the official policy of Slovakia towards China, the 16+1 format and BRI. It was mentioned that although Slovakia signed the Memorandum of Understanding on BRI with China in 2015, it only started to be more active in 2017, with the two new government documents outlying the China strategy. The content of the documents is not revolutionary, but the mere fact that the country decided to approve such a specific strategy makes it unique in the region. While Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are highly active in developing relations with China, they do not have any comparable strategic documents.

One of the major hopes of Slovakia regarding BRI is to play a role of transport corridor between China and Europe. However, for now, Slovakia is located outside the six main economic corridors planned by the Chinese side as the backbone of BRI. Yet, some Slovak experts and officials see a potential that a new transport corridor from China via Russia, Ukraine and entering Eastern Slovakia could be opened and serve as an alternative option to the Northern route passing Poland. Tensions in Eastern Ukraine may, however, hinder this plan, since the trains from China would need to pass Russian-Ukrainian border.

The BRI summit in May 2017 as well as the initiative itself, received relatively little coverage in the Slovak media. Most mainstream media mentioned the initiative but only briefly. On the other hand, the BRI has a more positive image in the Slovak press than China in general, being most often linked to positively perceived areas such as economic cooperation, investments, or infrastructure collaboration.

To conclude, it must be acknowledged that Slovakia follows a somewhat different path from its neighbors, fuelled less by high-level political support and more by a pragmatic push from the business sector and economic ministries. Even though it was one of the first countries to sign the Memorandum of Understanding on BRI with China, its high-level political support has been significantly lower than has been the case in Hungary, Poland, or the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the smallest of the V4 group has recently started with a so-called ‘depoliticized’ approach towards China. Unlike in the neighboring countries, it is the ministries with the economic portfolio that are the driving forces behind the new strategies of developing relations with China.

It remains to be seen whether the Slovak case can be different. The country has some advantages when compared to its V4 neighbors – it is the only one using the Euro as its currency and it has been one of the frontrunners when it comes to economic reforms, attracting high amounts of FDI and generally experiencing a rapid economic growth. Even in terms of its trade with China, Slovakia has the lowest trade deficit in the region, mainly thanks to its automotive industry exports. It will be interesting to observe whether Slovakia's pragmatic approach will be more successful than attempts led by strong political support elsewhere.

About the Authors

Kristína Kironská, Ph.D. is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Asian Studies.

Richard Q. Turcsányi, Ph.D. is the Director of Stratpol – Strategic Policy Institute in Bratislava and Deputy Director of its affiliated Institute of Asian Studies. Besides, he is an Assistant Professor at Mendel University in Brno and Associate Research Fellow at Institute of International Relations Prague.