

WORKING PAPER

16+1 in China-EU Relations **A vehicle for a sustainable connectivity platform**

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Abstract

Since the creation of the partnership between the Popular Republic of China (PRC) and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, also called the 16+1 format, in 2012, the Chinese presence in the region is intensifying in a worrying way for Brussels. Although this platform is created on the basis of bilateral investment agreements, the first years of cooperation show that the political achievements overpass the economic progress. As a result, the 16+1 is the subject of multiple studies aimed at identifying threats and risks for the EU. In this context, this paper points out potential opportunities that EU and CEE can draw from China's rising interest in the EU's Eastern periphery.

The core of this research project is to analyze Chinese policy in the CEE region since the 2004 EU's enlargement and to study the impact of this strategy on the EU-China relations, in order to identify the opportunities the 16+1 platform brings for Europe. There is very little study on the Chinese perception of this part of Europe. Thus, my research contributes to fill this gap by proposing an analysis of the Chinese perception of the CEE region, different from the perception of Brussels. It also contributes by offering a unique study of the 16+1's contribution to the sustainable implementation of the EU-China connectivity platform - a platform meant to be the framework for China's Belt and Road Initiative in Europe.

Documents research and field studies were carried out in China, France and Romania. Research was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, English, French and Romanian.

Keywords: *China-EU Relations, 16+1, Central and Eastern Europe, One Belt One Road, Connectivity platform*

1. Introduction

The cooperation between China and sixteen Central and Eastern European countries¹ (also named "China-CEE" or "16+1 platform") was inaugurated in Warsaw in 2012. Therefore, since 2012 China is continuously increasing its presence in the CEEs in a framework of economic cooperation organized around the three main sectors: trade, investment and human exchanges. Apart from these three cooperation sectors, China declares itself reluctant for any cooperation in the political or military fields.

Whereas post-Maoist China's first economic ties with the CEEs date back to 1999, as part of Beijing's diplomatic strategy "Go out policy" *zǒu chūqù zhànlüè* 走出去战略, China-CEE relations made very little progress in the first decade of the 2000s. The 16+1 cooperation is created within the framework of the new "multilateral diplomacy" of the President Xi

¹ Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia

Jinping, as a manifestation of China's big power strategy *dàguó wàijiāo* 大国外交, promoting win-win relations *shuāngyíng* 双赢 and inter-nation friendship *huǒbàn guānxì* 伙伴关系. Often referred as being one section of the broad One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), the 16+1 is the typical product of multilateral diplomacy, inseparable from China-EU relations.

Even though initially designed as a platform to organize and welcome bilateral investment, trade and people to people exchange cooperation, the platform's first five years results clearly show that the political and cultural cooperation achievements largely overpass the economic ones. And namely this political implications and the increased diplomatic relations between China and the CEE countries set the basis of Brussels' worries. On the top of it, there is China's original way to look at the European continent, offering a totally new approach different from the one proposed and promoted by Brussels. When setting its strategic partnerships in Europe, China doesn't necessarily follow the EU borders, nor the Eurozone ones. For instance, the 16+1 includes both EU and non EU member states, and from both inside and outside the Eurozone. However, the non-EU countries are, according to the EU statutes, either official candidate countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia) or potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina)². Moreover, the 16+1 format betrays the borders of the former Eastern bloc, "including" the countries of the former Yugoslavia (not aligned after 1948) and "excluding" former Soviet countries such as Moldova, Ukraine or Belarus. Two common concurrent features appear to link the sixteen CEE countries: a socialist past and a current pro-European orientation. This highlights China's intention to retrieve and explore historical ties in the framework of its relations with the EU. Whereas Beijing conceives the 16+1 as an integrated part of the China-EU relations, Brussels shows itself reluctant about China's motivation in institutionalizing a cooperation with sixteen former socialist countries at the EU's Eastern borders. However, EU welcomes Chinese investments and closely supervises the respect of the EU regulatory system both in the eleven member states and the five candidate countries.³ Therefore, it appears that while the 16+1 topic cannot be tackled without referring to the EU, the China-EU relations cannot be assessed without referring to the 16+1.

The current ongoing literature is mostly focusing on identifying the potential threats that the 16+1 represents for the EU. While these commonly evoked analysis results are an integrated part of the rationale of this study, this paper focuses on opportunities and not on dangers. Moreover, this study tackles only opportunities related to China-EU cooperation; it doesn't assesses specific national and local cooperation opportunities that could rise apart from the China-EU relations framework. In addition, this analysis operates with data referring to three main actors (China, EU and the CEE states) and it doesn't assesses data concerning other major actors (e.g. Russia, United States) or observer countries (e.g. Greece, Belarus, Moldova, Austria, and Switzerland).

² See: European Commission's Official Website Country Profile list [online] < https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries_en>

³ See for example: GODEMENT François, VASSELIER Abigaël, "China at the Gates. A new power-audit of EU-China Relations", European Center of Foreign Relations ECFR, December 2017, London, [PDF online] < http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_eu_power_audit7242>

After a particular attention to the origins and challenges of China-CEE cooperation (I), this study analyses some features of the CEE-EU debate with regard to the 16+1 platform (II). It results a list of opportunities (III) to be considered by both the EU the CEE. Then the listed opportunities are assessed with regard to the major China-EU cooperation axis: the connectivity platform designed to be the framework for the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe (IV). It appears 16+1 not only brings unexpected positive outcomes and cooperation opportunities, but it also greatly contributes in forging the basis for a sustainable connectivity platform.

2. China-CEE (16+1 cooperation)

The 16+1 cooperation started in 2012, a few decades after the establishment of China-EU diplomatic relations in 1975. Most of the CEE countries joined the EU in 2004, during the EU's biggest enlargement wave, followed by the 2007 wave (Romania and Bulgaria) and Croatia's accession in 2013. The other five Western Balkans countries are currently registered as EU candidate states. Due to its pro-EU orientation, next to its socialist past and within the context of the 2008 financial crisis, the CEE region appears to Beijing as a fertile ground for China's economic and diplomatic ambitions in Europe. However, while most of the CEE countries had very little contacts with post-Maoist China before 2012, some of them developed strong ties with China on the basis of historical or economic rationales. It is, for instance, the case of Serbia⁴, whose relations with Beijing have greatly deepened especially since the late 1990s, after the episode of the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Another case is represented by Hungary who started to develop its economic ties with China, next to Russia and India, within the launch of its "Eastern opening policy"⁵ in 2011, aiming to reduce its heavy economic dependence of the Western Europe. Encouraged by the rapid growth of China, little before 2012 other CEE countries have already begun to develop or revive their trade relations with China, favored by their membership of the EU's single market. In this context, the institutionalization of the 16+1 format was welcomed with the greatest hopes in the CEE region. From the very beginning the 16+1 was perceived as the unique opportunity to do business with China, "this economic giant with whom, otherwise, we have very few opportunities to discuss"⁶.

Five years later, the enthusiasm of the sixteen countries appears to be one of the very few common attitudes within the 16+1 cooperation platform. Diverse from the very beginning in their relations with China, the sixteen CEE countries have deepened their differences and developed numerous particularities in their relations with China during the years following the launch of the 16+1 platform. Now, on the basis of the CEE's region diverse history,

⁴ See, for example, PAVLIĆEVIĆ Dragan, " 'China Threat' and 'China Opportunity': Politics of Dreams and Fears in China-Central and Eastern European Relations", *Journal of Contemporary China*, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458057, May 2018, [PDF online] < <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458057> >

⁵ MOLDICZ Csaba (Istvan), NOVAK Tamas, "China's Effort to Boost Globalization in a Hungarian Perspective: How Hungary Perceives the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 Cooperatio", *China-CEE Institute Working Paper*, 2017, No.15, [PDF online] < https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/chinas-effort-to-boost-globalization-in-a-hungarian-perspective-how-hungary-perceives-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-161-cooperation/ >

⁶ Interviews within CEE Embassies in Beijing, April 2018

economy and culture, the 16+1 format's structure and functioning are designed to encourage the CEE states to express and cultivate their strengths.

Under the label of a sub-regional cooperation, the 16+1 mainly operates on the basis of the bilateral cooperation China undertakes with each of the sixteen countries. This makes the 16+1 platform look like a sum of bilateral cooperation, what some would name as "16x(1+1)"⁷. In order to still guarantee a link between the bilateral basis and the regional label, each of the 16 CEE countries has taken the management of one or more cooperation sectors (Hungary-tourism; Romania - energy; Macedonia - cultural cooperation; Serbia -transport infrastructure, Bulgaria – agriculture etc.)⁸. Next to the bilateral relations, 16+1 cooperation is organized around several sub-regional cooperations between China and the different subgroups of the 16 CEE states (e.g. cooperation with the Višegrad countries, with the Baltic countries, etc.). In addition, the local cooperation makes the unique feature of the 16+1 format, designed to address the asymmetry of market sizes between China and the CEE states. But, despite the numerous local level meetings between China-CEE countries (e.g. Local Leaders' Meeting, Forum of Capitals' Mayors; Association of Governors of Provinces and Regions⁹) and local cooperation results (about 160 pairs of sister-cities¹⁰, development of direct flights, China-Europe Express between cities in China and the CEE), the local cooperation doesn't make headlines in Brussels.

Seen from Brussels, 16+1 cooperation is particularly noticeable by the abundance of high-level meetings and the bilateral agreements¹¹. Summits at Prime Ministers' level (one per year, rotating in different member countries); meetings of the Ambassadors of the sixteen CEE countries in Beijing (four per year in Beijing); National Coordinators' meetings (two per year, one in Beijing, the other one in the country designed to host the annual summit) are the main high-level events driving the 16 +1 platform. In addition to these, thematic meetings or academics are organized at different frequencies in different CEE countries or in China, within think tanks or thematic cooperation forums. This abundance of meetings, seen as the manifestation of an increasing political cooperation stands in contrast with the little genuine sub-regional business cooperation results. While some countries keep maintaining bright hopes with regards to the 16+1 potential results as a sub-regional cooperation (Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania etc.)¹², other show little hope choosing to stay focused on bilateral relations and use the 16+1 as a platform of discussion with China (Slovenia, Czech Republic etc.)¹³. Therefore, the delays in achieving the business results that have been announced at its launch, next to the rise of political achievements fuel one of the main challenges for the 16+1 platform, namely a possible shift in the CEE countries' common interest and enthusiasm in the platform.

⁷ Interviews within CEE Embassies in Beijing, April 2018

⁸ LIU Zuokui, "China-CEEC Cooperation: China's Building of a New Type of International Relations", *Croatian International Relations Review*, 23(78), 2017, pp. 19-34, [PDF online] <<https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/cirr.2017.23.issue-78/cirr-2017-0005/cirr-2017-0005.pdf>>

⁹ HUANG Ping, LIU Zuokui, "The Cooperation between China and Central & Eastern European Countries (16+1) 2012-2017", *CASS Report on China-CEEC Cooperation · 02*, Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2017

¹⁰ Idem

¹¹ See: GODEMENT François, VASSELIER Abigaël, *op.cit.*

¹² Interviews 2016-2018

¹³ Idem

3. CEE-EU debate on the 16+1 platform

The first years of cooperation show that, indeed, the political achievements overpass the economic progress. As a result, the 16+1 became the topic of multiple studies aimed at identifying threats and risks for Europe. These diverse attitudes towards China's 16+1 initiative create tensions among EU members and fuel a climate of mistrust over the Sino-European relations.

The pro-EU orientation of the sixteen CEE countries is a vital factor that Beijing is cultivating for its projects in the region. However, Brussels is worried about the Chinese presence in this region. EU's specific concerns mainly refer to the respect of its regulatory system and treaties. These concerns specifically refer to transparency, public procurement and sustainability norms designed to guarantee concurrency and open market. In the case of the Western Balkans, concerns are expressed with regards these countries' capacity to meet the Maastricht convergence criteria such as the public debt rate limits. Moreover, in the current tense context of the Sino-European relation (trade deficit, debate on the status of a market economy, human rights dialogue, intellectual property rights, South China Sea international disputes, etc.), Brussels is worried about the evolution of the political position and about the possible political shifts that the eleven EU member states could manifest within the EU decision making forums.

EU's concerns point out not only to China but also to the CEE States. In this context, a relatively tense relationship and an unprecedented tight control dialogue take place between EU and the CEE countries. With regard to Brussels' remarks, the CEE states manifest as keen to reiterate their commitment to the EU values and the European project. A series of mechanisms have been implemented in order to guarantee transparency and to include Brussels in their negotiations with China. The 16+1 platform's observer system¹⁴ is a good example. The EU and the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) both attend the 16+1 annual summits as observers. In addition, the EU is regularly consulted by different CEE states during negotiations with China in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, beyond efforts to respond to criticism and to reiterate their commitment to the European project, the CEE states encounter a wave of mistrust coming up from Brussels. They now see the EU doubting about their credibility and ability to meet their commitments. Moreover, facing increased EU controls over their relationship with China, some CEE countries note a lack of reciprocity in data sharing. While the CEE states give Brussels access to all sort of information related to their contacts with China, the information on EU strong member states' relations with China remain difficult to be accessed by the CEEs.¹⁵

On the background of the general mistrust and negative critics of the 16+1 platform, the above mentioned points could rapidly shape an uncertain and unstable climate over the CEE's relations with Brussels. In order to avoid such unhealthy situation that could harm both sides' interests, more focus should be granted to the 16+1 format's contributions and opportunities.

¹⁴ HUANG Ping, LIU Zuokui, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Interviews 2016-2018

4. 16+1 Opportunities - for both the EU and the CEE states

The most advertised 16+1 contribution, highlighted on both Chinese and CEE states side points out to China's strong support to economic development in the CEE region. And these results are supposed to be achieved by strengthening economic ties and investments in transport infrastructure. These will definitively bring a great contribution for both the CEE states and the EU. However, faced with the slow progress of investment projects, opinions about Chinese projects' reliability are very diverse. The overall idea is still an optimist one, saying that results will not be long in coming and that delays are mainly due to unrealistic timeline objectives¹⁶.

Meanwhile, non-business related positive results and new opportunities for both CEE states and the EU show up when assessing the 16+1 cooperation platform. At first, the 16+1 platform brings new knowledge in and with regard to the region. The Chinese presence is considered to boost the European integration of Central and Eastern Europe and this could benefit to both CEE countries and the EU. Despite criticism, the Chinese presence in Central and Eastern Europe favors a certain centrifugal dynamic in the region. Within the format, the CEE states meet regularly around annual summits and many other meetings organized at different frequencies during the year. As a result, CEE states end up by meeting way more often than if they were not part of this cooperation with China. Despite the divergence and the competition rising up among the 16+1 CEE members, the Chinese presence spur the sixteen countries enrich their reflection on their EU membership and to reconsider their geopolitical position in the international affairs. A concrete example is the recently launched study managed by the Center for Dialogue and Cooperation on Energy Projects 16+1 based in Bucharest. Aiming to identify different energy opportunities in the region, the study is very well received and enjoys the full participation of the 16 CEE countries.

At second, 16+1 gives the CEE states the opportunity to play a new role in the European affairs. CEE states have now the opportunity to assert themselves as bargaining power between China and the EU and this position could benefit to both EU and CEE states. The rotating Presidency for the Council of the EU is one of the frameworks providing favorable conditions for asserting such opportunity. This mainly depends on the country's profile within the EU. While it seems difficult to realize to small EU states (such as Bulgaria, Slovenia, Czech Republic), it is more easily approachable by CEE large states. For instance while Romania sees the forthcoming Presidency (planned for January-June 2019) as a unique opportunity to assert itself as a bargaining vector with China within the EU decision-making forums, Bulgaria didn't express a strong interest in exploring the EU Presidency role in its relations with China.¹⁷

At third, 16+1 enables both CEE states and the EU to pursue internal reforms in order to better address new challenges and adapt the international changing order. Due to the obvious asymmetries between the two sides, most of the CEE states face new challenges when dealing with the Chinese partner. This represents a new exercise for the CEE states, facing tight

¹⁶ PAVLIĆEVIĆ Dragan, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Interviews 2016-2018

economic and diplomatic ties with the world's second power. For some CEE states, the obstacles and delays they face within the bilateral relationship with China point out internal slow-burning problems. Driven by the huge stakes of the bilateral cooperation, CEE states call up the necessary resources to solve these problems and thus make the most of the opportunity to do business with China. In this sense, Romania makes a good example. In order to consolidate a common voice in dealing with China, at the beginning of this year Romania retrieved up its Inter-ministry Committee for relations with China. The main purpose of this committee is to coordinate the various ministries involved in the different bilateral projects, and thus provide an internal platform enabling Romania's Ministries to effectively interact with each other before interacting with China.

Following the same rationale, the 16+1's existence itself can be interpreted as the manifestation of a problem that the EU has with its new members. If only looking at the current amount of critical literature coming along with warnings on potential threats the 16+1 represents for the EU's unity, 16+1 turns out to be a clear expression of EU's urgent need to reform and reinforce in order to better address the international changing order.

5. Towards a Sustainable Connectivity Platform

The EU-China connectivity platform should create synergies between EU policies and projects and China's "One Belt One Road" initiative, as well as between respective sources of funding, in the field of transport and other kind of infrastructure.¹⁸

According to the international relations' realist paradigm¹⁹ each country pursues its own interest (economic, political and/or strategic). The EU and China both agree that each one's economic growth can in no way exclude cooperation with the other one. Therefore, the lack of alternative solution set a favorable context where the two actors will relatively easily agree to join the connectivity platform. But when looking at China's rapid growth and its geopolitical ambitions, alternative solutions are very likely to rapidly stand out. Then questions arise on the sustainability of the connectivity platform for EU's relations with China. This study asserts that, if not built on the basis of mutual understanding and openness, the connectivity platform is designed to fade out.

After a careful analysis of the 16+1 format in the context of the China-EU relations and considering both China and EU's external action's ambitions, three main features appear to be essential for a lasting connectivity platform. The 16+1 cooperation not only highlights these three main necessary features, it also greatly contributes to the implementation of a sustainable connectivity platform.

At first, connectivity goes beyond sharing rules and adhering to a common regulatory system. If based only on sharing and adhering to common rules (coming from different partners), these practices then lack a solid base and so will slowly move away from the initial deal. In this sense, there is no sustainability. If there is no through understanding about the

¹⁸ "Elements for a new EU strategy on China", European Commission Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, 2016, p. 9, [PDF online], <http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_-_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf>

¹⁹ See, for example, WALTZ Kenneth, *The Theory of International Politics*, University of California, Berkley, 1979

origins, the use and the interest of the shared norms, the partners will sooner or later stop obeying these rules. And here is where the 16+1 could bring its contribution, namely by the valuable mutual knowledge and understanding it accelerates in the CEE region. Therefore, despite critics for not having reached its economic goals, the 16+1 has numerous non-business results that can design new cooperation opportunities and set the basis for a sustainable connectivity platform.

At second, connectivity points out internal affairs problems. Connectivity demands readiness to discover and face internal slow-burning problems. When connecting and interacting with new players, entities are very likely to discover internal slow-burning problem that didn't make headlines before. 16+1 is the manifestation of a problem EU has with its new member states. And in this sense, risks and critics associated to the 16+1 platform tell us less about Chinese threats than about EU's weaknesses. And if a threat, then a sustainable solution might be reinforcing its unity than reducing the threat. In this guise, 16+1 could be regarded as a blessing for the EU, throwing light on slow-burning issues that did not make headlines before. It can represent an opportunity for the EU to acknowledge and address internal issues, in line with the changing international order. The same happens for the 16 CEE states, where 16+1 encourages some of them to undertake internal reforms.

At third, connectivity implies openness towards the partners' business and diplomacy traditions. In this sense the 16+1 and OBOR are a good exercise for both CEE and EU. If assessed using western lens, the two projects could be regarded as unlikely to succeed, lacking concrete design, without a blueprint, transparent and fixed budget and no concrete steps to follow. Moreover, the two initiatives are defined and act as open, compatible and complementary to any local or regional project, what make them too flexible and not coherent enough comparing with the Western European countries' diplomacy traditions. And namely this contrast fuel a series of misunderstanding, bidding the EU to identify and foresee all the additional unplanned results and opportunities. Now from Chinese point of view and considering the Chinese past 40 years of reforming and opening up experience, despite the critics and unsatisfying economic results, the two initiatives appear as still promising. Despite the obstacles and slowness in reaching the initial economic goals of OBOR and 16+1, Chinese side identifies, reports and highlights the up to here side results such as cultural cooperation, knowledge and know-how sharing. In order to enhance and stimulate more projects and ideas, China promotes the OBOR and the 16+1 openness, inclusiveness, complementarity and compatibility. But when dealing with the EU regulatory system, the two initiatives face the challenge of containing their flexibility and obeying to the EU rules.

In this context, 16+1 appears as a showcase of different business and diplomacy traditions clash. In this sense, and considering both China and CEE countries' commitment for and need of a strong EU, 16+1 in China-EU relations is definitely more a treasure to be explored than a threat to be contained.

6. Conclusion

After a reading of the origins, structure and challenges of the China-CEE cooperation (I), this study assess the main features of the ongoing CEE-EU debate with regards to the 16+1

cooperation platform (II). Therefore, a list of opportunities and positive effects (III) followed this analysis, with regard to the 16+1's contribution and impact on both EU and CEE states. Next to the high potential of economic development through increased trade and investment in the regions, the listed opportunities first refer to a better European integration of the CEE region, by the increased mutual understanding. Second, the 16+1 enables the CEE to play a new role in the European affairs. Third, 16+1 enables both EU and CEE to pursue internal reforms and therefore to adapt to a new changing world.

Then the study assesses the contribution of the listed positive effects to the sustainable implementation of one of the major China-EU cooperation axis - the connectivity platform (IV). After a careful analysis of the 16+1 cooperation in the context of the China-EU relations, three main features appear to be essential for a lasting connectivity platform. First, connectivity goes beyond sharing rules and adhering to a common regulatory system; second, it points out internal affairs problems; third, it implies to stay open to the partner's business and diplomacy traditions. The 16+1 cooperation not only highlights these three main necessary features, it also greatly contributes to the sustainable implementation of the connectivity platform for EU's relations with China. In this sense, and considering both China and CEE countries' commitment for and need of a strong EU, 16+1 in China-EU relations is definitely more a treasure to be explored than a threat to be contained.

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