

WORKING PAPER

The 16+1 Cooperation and China-EU Relations - Window of Opportunity for Sustainable Development?

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Abstract

The 16+1 Cooperation plays a pivotal role for the economic, cultural, educational, and academic cooperation, as well as for financial and infrastructure projects between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC). In addition to large investments by China in the CEE region and projects to strengthen ties between China and the 16 CEEC, many authors argue that the cooperation has had a significant impact on the China-EU relations and on the relationship between the CEEC and the European Union (EU) (Harnisch 2017; Pepe 2017; Van der Putten 2016; Zheng 2017). China has repeatedly affirmed its willingness to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the sheer scale of projects and investments as part of the 16+1 Cooperation suggests that a large potential for sustainable development exists. However, so far no relevant academic article has analyzed whether the already implemented, ongoing, or planned projects are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable. Moreover, China's initiative to foster cooperation with the CEEC may have an impact on overall investments by China in the EU as well as the EU's investments in and policies towards the CEEC. Whether this hypothesis holds true and whether it has an impact on the policies of China, the EU, and the CEEC to develop sustainably, will be tested as part of this article.

While research on potential political, economic, and social effects of the 16+1 Cooperation and strengthened China-EU Relations through the Belt and Road Initiative has recently started to take off, the question of how sustainable the cooperation is and whether it holds the potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs is significantly under-researched. Therefore, this article sheds light on the sustainability of the China-CEE initiative by asking the following question: Do the 16+1 Cooperation and its interdependencies with the overall China-EU relations constitute a window of opportunity for sustainable development?

To answer this question, the paper utilizes Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach (1984, 1995), which rests on Cohen et al.'s Garbage Can Model (1972), and further advancements of this theoretical tradition by Liebermann (2002) and Zahariadis (2003) to understand how policy windows emerge or can be created and how this can be applied to the field of sustainable development. Accordingly, this paper will assess whether multiple streams come together in case of the 16+1 Cooperation and open a window of opportunity for achieving the SDGs. Consequently, the paper will analyze which role sustainable development has played in the 16+1 Cooperation, which effects this China-CEE initiative has on projects for sustainable development in the China-EU relations and the EU-CEEC relations, and how a potential window of opportunity could emerge. As a result, the paper will discuss how

different projects under the 16+1 framework can have an impact on sustainable development and what the potential benefits for China, the CEEC, and the EU can be.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, 2030 Agenda, 16+1 Cooperation, China-EU relations, China, EU, CEEC, Multiple Streams, Multiple Streams Approach, MSA*

Introduction

In November 2017, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced that China will provide more than 3 billion US dollars to fund development and investment projects in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) (Szakacs/Dunai 2017). As one of the world's leading countries when it comes to investments in public transportation and renewable energy, China plays an outstanding role for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Baraniuk 2017; UN DESA). The 16+1 Cooperation, especially with regards to its crucial role for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative, is of particular importance for the efforts of China and the European Union (EU) to foster sustainable development since it entails a great number of areas that could lead to a more sustainable world, such as infrastructure, finance, agriculture, and research and development (Hrubec 2017: 35).

To understand the opportunities and challenges to the 16+1 Cooperation and the overall China-EU relations, it is important to comprehend how sustainable the cooperation and the therewith connected projects are. But why is sustainability important and what exactly is sustainable development? The concept of sustainable development has its roots in the Brundtland Commission's report „Our Common Future“ from 1987, in which the commission states: *„Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: Art. 27). Accordingly, the concept of sustainable development rests on the idea that future generations shall have the same opportunities to develop as present generations. Following this, in 2012, the outcome document of the United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), *The Future We Want*, specified three different dimensions of sustainable development: the economy, the society, and the environment (UN General Assembly 2012). The most recent international framework document on sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda, and the SDGs, which were adopted in 2015, specify in a very clear and precise way what the international community needs to do to achieve a more sustainable world by 2030 (UN General Assembly 2015). The 17 SDGs and their specific targets highlight essential elements of sustainable development, such as eliminating poverty (SDG 1) or combatting climate change (SDG 13) and focus on mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development across all SDGs (UN Division for Sustainable Development). Consequently, in the understanding of the UN and the majority of influential scholars on sustainable

development, the concept does not only focus on protecting the environment or combatting climate change but includes the entire development agenda and is equally important for the economy, the society, and the environment (UN General Assembly 2015).

China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is part of the Voluntary National Reviews of the 2030 Agenda, indicates that China takes sustainable development and its potential for the economy, society, and the environment very seriously (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2016). In the document, the Chinese government suggests to focus on the implementation of 9 key areas of sustainable development, which include among others „*Implementing innovation-driven development strategies and generating momentum for sustainable, healthy and stable economic growth*“ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2016). At the same time, the European Union seeks to become one of the world's leading regions on the implementation of the SDGs and many European states pursue a leadership role when it comes to sustainable development (European Commission 2018).

Despite the fact that academic literature on the 16+1 Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, which provides the broader context for the 16+1 Cooperation, is quickly taking off and numerous aspects of the projects have been already analyzed, sustainable development has not been an essential component of the academic discourse in this field yet (Andžāns 2016; Kowalski 2016; Liu 2017; Szczudlik 2016; Vetrovcova 2017). To the author's knowledge, no seminal work exists so far that analyses whether and how sustainable development is incorporated into the 16+1 Cooperation. Accordingly, a large research gap exists, which will partially be filled by this paper. Additionally, this paper is highly relevant for the society and politics since it helps to understand which areas of sustainable development are addressed already, where further work needs to be done, and whether further potential for sustainable development as part of the 16+1 Cooperation exists and can lead to substantial benefits for the economy, the society, and the environment.

Applied to the 16+1 Cooperation and the China-EU relations, the recent developments in the international community as well as the initiatives and concrete projects of the 16+1 cooperation entail a high potential for sustainable development, yet it is unclear whether this potential will be used. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: *Do the 16+1 Cooperation and its interdependencies with the overall China-EU relations constitute a window of opportunity for sustainable development?*

To understand how such windows of opportunity or policy windows occur and whether and how they can lead to a new momentum for sustainable development, the following chapter will discuss how the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) can be applied to the topic at hand. It is followed by the research design and methodology and three chapters that apply MSA to the 16+1 Cooperation's potential for sustainable development, structured by the three fundamental streams of MSA: the problem stream, political stream, and policy stream. The focus of the empirical chapters will lie on the effects of the China-CEE initiative on projects for sustainable development with regards to the China-EU relations and the EU-CEEC relations.

Theoretical Background: Multiple Streams and Sustainable Development

Behind the research question of this paper stands a more general question, which Kingdon phrases in his influential book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984, 2014: 1) as: „*How does an Idea's Time Come?*“ Unlike other scholars, Kingdon does not focus on how decisions are made or how they are implemented, but rather how ideas for those decisions get on the agenda or become policy alternatives (ibid: 2). Zahariadis (2003: 10), who further developed Kingdon's model, argues that agenda-setting and decision making can actually be understood as two components of one overall process in which decision makers choose from a set of policy alternatives on what they want to focus on.

Considering the large amount of different competing ideas that decision makers are exposed to every day, they need to filter and decide what to pay their attention to. With regards to the numerous decisions that need to be made in the context of the 16+1 Cooperation, such as choosing the specific projects that should be funded or deciding on the overall strategy and communication, a great number of different alternatives exist, yet in the end only a few succeed and reach the agenda of the key decision makers. MSA, which rests on Kingdon's works on different policy streams, can help to understand whether the concept of sustainable development taken into account in the 16+1 Cooperation and consequently also on the agenda of the China-CEEC Relations and the China-EU relations.¹

MSA's major achievement was the identification of three streams (problem stream, political stream, and policy stream) that are normally separated from each other but can come together to open a policy window, which „*is an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems*“ and lead to a decision on the topic (Kingdon 1984, 2014: 165). In political systems, different conditions and ideas compete for the attention of decision makers (Cairney/Jones 2016: 39). According to what Kingdon describes as the problem stream, focusing events, changes of indicators, or feedback can lead to different perceptions and increased attention for certain topics and become part of the political agenda (Herweg et al. 2015: 436; Kingdon 1984, 2014: 19). Such developments within the problem stream can for instance be natural disasters, terrorist attacks or developments within the political system (Kingdon 1984, 2014: 19) The political stream on the other hand, is characterized by key characteristics that shape the political system, such as current majorities in the government, the division of power within the political system, the national opinion or the general influence of interest groups on the political system (Kingdon 1984, 2014: 20). The policy stream constitutes an ongoing competition of different ideas and policy alternatives, which are developed by policy experts, such as bureaucrats, representatives of interest groups or scientists (Cairney/Jones 2016: 40). To put it in a nutshell, policy windows or windows of opportunity can open if certain developments in the political or problem stream lead to increased attention for the specific topic (problem stream) or political majorities change so the interests of the new majority become more influential (political stream). If designated ideas and solutions for the problems exist (policy stream) and

¹ Kingdon's theoretical framework rests on and has further developed Cohen et al.'s Garbage Can Model (1972) (Kingdon 1984, 2014: 84).

are combined with the problem and political stream, it is more likely that there will be a decision on the subject (Lieberman 2002: 449).

Based on the theoretical reflections above and applied to the research question, the hypotheses, which will be tested in the following chapters read as follows:

A window of opportunity for the incorporation of sustainable development within the 16+1 Cooperation can open and decisions on the mainstreaming of the concept across the projects of the 16+1 Cooperation can be made, if:

H1: Political, economic, societal, or environmental events and developments raise awareness for the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development **AND**

H2: The majorities within the political system or influential interest groups change towards key actors that advocate for the incorporation of sustainable development in the context of the 16+1 Cooperation. **AND**

H3: Feasible and well-developed ideas and policy alternatives exist to incorporate sustainable development in the context of the 16+1 Cooperation.

Testing the Hypotheses: Process Tracing and Qualitative Content Analysis

To answer the research question, this paper follows the logic of process tracing and will look for clues in certain aspects of the research subject to find conclusions on the overall causal relations (Beach/Pedersen 2013: 163; Bennett 2008: 704; Blatter et al. 2007: 158; Collier 2010: 2).² The hypotheses will be tested by Hoop and Smoking Gun Tests since Doubly Decisive Tests are very rare in social sciences and Straw in the Wind Tests can neither confirm nor eliminate hypotheses, which is not expedient for this study (Bennett 2008: 706f.; Collier 2010: 3; Van Evera 1997: 31). Hoop Tests are based on the logic that the hypothesis needs to jump through an imaginary ring to be further considered as a potential explanation for the research question (Collier 2010: 5; Mahoney 2012: 571). As a consequence, it does not constitute a sufficient, but a necessary condition for the research subject. Hoop Tests can therefore help to eliminate hypotheses, but they are not capable of verifying them. Smoking Gun Tests on the other hand lead to sufficient, but not necessary conditions (Mahoney 2012: 572; Van Vera 1997: 32). The terminology is based on an analogy to methods Sherlock Holmes used and it claims that discovering a suspect with the smoking murder weapon in their hand, can lead to the conclusion that he or she can be guilty, but there may also be other reasons for him holding the weapon (ibid).

The data for the process tracing comes from a systematic and structured review of secondary literature on the topic, as well as official websites of the Chinese government, the European Union, think tanks, and research institutes. Moreover, a qualitative content analysis of all outcome documents of past meetings of the 16+1 Cooperation, such as The Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries and the Riga Declaration has been conducted (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2017; Ministry

² For an introduction into process tracing see Beach/Pedersen 2013; Bennett 2010; Bennett/Checkel 2015; Collier 2010; Collier 2011; Mahoney 2012.

of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2016). Additionally, numerous speeches of key decision makers, such as President Xi Jinping's speech to the 9th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 and Premier Li Keqiang's speech at the At Fifth Summit of China, Central and Eastern European Countries in Riga in 2016 have been analyzed (Li 2016; Xi 2017).

Problem Stream - The Need to Act

Following the first hypothesis, which shall be tested in this paper, the concept of sustainable development can gain the attention of key decision makers and be considered as a potential solution for the 16+1 Cooperation and the overall China-CEEC and China-EU Relations, if focusing events, such as environmental disasters or large societal challenges, are associated with the opportunity to make the initiative more sustainable and thereby solve and prevent many factors that might have caused these focusing events. To find hoop or smoking gun evidence for this hypothesis, policy problems that are associated with sustainability challenges, need to have gained significant attention in the countries of the 16+1 Cooperation in recent years and the nexus between the opportunities of the incorporation of sustainable development in the 16+1 Cooperation and these challenges needs to have been established by the countries. Among the strongest focusing events in recent years for China and the CEEC with regards to sustainable development were significant changes in the international community, especially through the newly elected US government, and severe health issues due to air pollution and other environmental issues.

Within a comparatively short time period, the new US government under Donald Trump reversed hitherto existing US policies and resigned from previous agreements. On the 1st of June 2017, President Trump announced that the USA will withdraw from the Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Shear 2017). With almost 15 percent of the global greenhouse gas emissions, the US is currently the second largest polluting country in the world and without strengthened mitigation efforts by the USA, it will be almost impossible for the international community to achieve the Paris Agreement (Friedrich et al. 2017). After the announcement of the USA to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, the European Union showed signs of its willingness to cooperate further with China on reducing global greenhouse gas emissions (Krukowska et al. 2017). China's Premier, Li Keqiang, announced after a meeting with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, following the US decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, that China will „*stand by its responsibilities on climate change*“ (Emmott/Bartunek 2017). As a matter of fact, China, which is already one of the greatest investors in renewable energy, announced in January 2017, that it will invest 2.5 trillion yuan (\$361 billion) into renewable power generation by 2020 (Reuters 2017). As a consequence, the focusing event of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the overall denial of climate change by the Trump Administration have led to more potential for closer cooperation between China and the European Union in their efforts to combat climate change. This serves as hoop evidence for the potential of the 16+1 Cooperation and the China-EU relations to foster sustainable development, because with their initiatives to combat climate change and invest in renewable energy, China and the European Union largely contribute to the successful implementation of SDGs 7 and 13 and their ideas

and strategies could potentially be integrated into the 16+1 Cooperation (UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs).

Another significant development in recent years was the occurrence of massive air pollution in many Chinese and European cities (Bloomberg News 2018; Greenstone 2018; Vidal 2013). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 4.2 million people die every year due to air pollution, with 91 percent of the world's population living in places that exceed WHO guideline limits (World Health Organization 2018). Based on WHO data, the areas around Beijing, Shanghai and other major Chinese cities are massively affected by ambient air pollution (World Health Organization 2018). Numerous cities in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, such as Skopje, Sarajevo, and Belgrade have equally high pollution levels (ibid). At the same time, the issue has gained great attention in China, with the Chinese government declaring „war against pollution“ in 2014 (Greenstone 2018). As a consequence, the air quality in many Chinese cities has become much better and especially the population of Beijing has benefited from much bluer skies and cleaner air in 2017 and 2018 (Bloomberg News 2018; Greenstone 2018). Yet the policies that have led to improved air quality have not always been entirely sustainable since instead of completely relying on renewable energy, there was a major shift from the use of coal energy to natural gas (Greenstone 2018). As a consequence, much more potential for sustainable development exists with regards to China's measures to reduce ambient air pollution. Central and Eastern European states have meanwhile fallen behind in their initiatives to improve air quality and have shown much less efforts in this regard than China (Bertrand 2017; Bytyci 2017).

Although severe health issues due to air pollution in China and Europe have led to increased awareness for the topic, the connection to sustainable development has not always been made. Nonetheless, the problem stream has opened in recent years towards more awareness for issues that are essential parts of the concept of sustainable development, such as climate change and air pollution, but also international migration, quality education, reducing poverty and guaranteeing universal access to health care. For a policy window to open for the inclusion of strategies and projects on sustainability in the 16+1 Cooperation however, the political stream needs to open at the same time as the problem stream.

Political Stream - Changing Opinions and Majorities

For the political stream to open in favor of the inclusion of sustainable development within the 16+1 Cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative and the overall EU-China relations, key factors that influence the majorities and dynamics within the respective countries and the cooperation, such as the public opinion in the states, the influence of interest groups, and majority and power relations within the political system, need to change towards a situation where more key actors are conscious of sustainable development and advocate for the inclusion of sustainable practices within the 16+1 Cooperation.

The concept of sustainable development has gained increased attention in politics and society, both in China and the European Union (European Commission 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2016). The Chinese government has shown their dedication to key issues in the field of sustainable development, such as reducing air pollution, which is

connected to SDGs 3,9, 11, 13, and 15, by implementing a large-scale program on reducing the use of fossil fuels for heating and replacing coal ovens in local homes by air-conditioning systems that are powered by natural gas or renewable energy (Wyns/Wecker 2017). Moreover, China is the country with the fastest growing solar industry in the world and thus largely contributes to the implementation of SDGs 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 15 (Baraniuk 2017; UN DESA). The Chinese government's policies in this field as well as the overall public opinion on the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, indicate the potential for sustainable development in China as well as the transfer of sustainable policies to the 16+1 Cooperation. Furthermore, the principles of innovation-driven and green development, which mirror SDGs 7, 9, 13, 14, and 15, as well as the principle of peaceful development, which reflects on SDG 16, are part of China's guiding thoughts on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2016; UN DESA). Most importantly, sustainable development is an essential part of President Xi Jinping's influential speech to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China October 18, 2017, which sets the general guidelines for Chinese politics in the next years (Xi 2017: 20). The concept of sustainable development is mentioned several times in the speech, for instance when it comes to strengthening the social security system or ensuring harmony between human and nature (Xi 2017: 20; 41). When it comes to the future development of the People's Republic of China, Xi (2017: 31) stated: „*We must inspire creativity and vitality throughout society, and strive to achieve better quality, more efficient, fairer, and more sustainable development.*“

Based on the above presented evidence, the hoop test for hypothesis H2 passes since the general philosophy and guidelines of the majority of the key decision makers in China includes the concept of sustainable development. As a consequence, the political majority for the inclusion of the concept of sustainable development in the 16+1 Cooperation exists on the side of China. For the CEEC, however, it needs to be noted that, despite the European Union's overall policies on sustainable development, the concept has gained less awareness in the CEEC than in other European countries and investments in projects and technologies for sustainable development, such as renewable energy, or public infrastructure and transportation for sustainable cities, are significantly less developed than in other European countries or in China and it is currently not a priority of most of the governments in the region (Akanle 2012; European Union 2016).

Moreover, the qualitative content analysis of the official communiqués of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China showed no clear signs that the concept of sustainable development will be mainstreamed across the projects of the 16+1 Cooperation. Although the importance of sustainable development was mentioned in the Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries and briefly in Premier Li Keqiang's speech at the Fifth Summit of China, Central and Eastern European Countries in Riga in 2016, no clear evidence exists on which role sustainable development will play for the implementation of the projects of the 16+1 Cooperation and the overall impact of the cooperation on the China-CEEC relations and the China-Europe relations (Li 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2017). Topics related to sustainable development, such as agriculture and environmental protection, have been on the agenda of

events related to the 16+1 Cooperation, such as the China-CEEC Business Forum 2017 in Budapest and the importance of sustainable development for the Belt and Road Initiative has been mentioned several times, but the evidence does not suggest a clear link to sustainable development (China–Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation 2017; Hrubec 2017: 35). Consequently, although numerous political actors and key decision makers, especially in China, are more aware of the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development, a policy window for the inclusion of sustainable development in the projects of the 16+1 Cooperation can only open if the majorities will change even further towards a sustainability aware group of decision makers, especially in the CEEC. The political stream is very close to open in China, but much more work needs to be done in the CEEC to foster sustainable development within the 16+1 Cooperation. Another key component for actual decisions on incorporating sustainable development as a general guideline for the 16+1 Cooperation and mainstreaming the concept across the different projects, is the policy stream.

Policy Stream - Concrete and Feasible Solutions

With regards to the policy stream and hypothesis H3, well-developed, feasible, and concrete ideas on how sustainable development can be incorporated in the 16+1 Cooperation need to exist to increase the likelihood of policy makers deciding for such initiatives. The process tracing analysis has led to no clear evidence that a sufficient amount of feasible and well-developed solutions for the integration and mainstreaming of sustainability exists with regards to the 16+1 Cooperation and the overall China-EU relations. Although the SDGs and their specific targets provide an overall framework that could be applied to the 16+1 Cooperation and related projects, the goals and targets are not specific enough and lack concrete proposals on how they can be implemented (UN DESA).

In the area of cooperation on industry, energy, science and technology for instance, a large potential for sustainable development exists, because, according to The Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, numerous initiatives to foster dialogue and research on energy cooperation between the 16+1 member states shall be initiated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2017). Such initiatives could be directly linked to specific SDGs, such as SDG 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all), but the analyzed documents do not contain any evidence that this is the case. Moreover, the Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries state that *„possibilities for cooperation in the creation of smart cities in China and CEECs“* will be considered (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2017). Whilst this goal could be connected to SDG 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) and especially target 11.A (Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, per-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning), no clear signs for the actual inclusion of sustainability in the projects of the 16+1 Cooperation exist in this regard (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China 2017; UN DESA).

It needs to be recognized however, that projects both within China and the CEEC to foster sustainable development, such as the large-scale production and installation of solar

panels (SDGs 7 and 13) or infrastructure projects to make cities more sustainable (SDGs 7, 9, 11, and 13) exist (Baraniuk 2017; China Daily 2017; Perchel 2016). However, the existing policy ideas and concrete projects are currently not effectively transferred to the projects related to the 16+1 Cooperation. Consequently, the 16+1 Cooperation is currently not able to use the great potential it has to foster sustainable development. A focus on sustainability by the 16+1 Cooperation could spark more sustainability initiatives within the CEEC, the overall European Union and China and it bears a large potential for the strengthening of economic, social, and political ties between China and the European Union. Yet to enable effective political decisions in this regard, clear, feasible, and well-developed ideas on the implementation and inclusion of sustainable development within the existing and planned projects need to emerge.

Potential Benefits for the China-EU Relationship

The successful incorporation of the concept of sustainable development in the overall strategies and specific projects of the 16+1 Cooperation would not only lead to large economic, social, and environmental benefits for the members of the cooperation themselves, but also to strengthened cooperation between China and the EU as well as potential policy diffusion and policy learning by other regions and organizations in the world. As Vetrovcova (2017: 74) argues, the 16+1 Cooperation and especially the Visegrad Group (V4) can be used as a testing ground for further cooperation between China and the EU. Accordingly, if the „zoom in strategy“, which Vetrovcova (2017: 73) proposes, is applied to the concept of sustainable development in the 16+1 Cooperation, it could be tested whether the concept of sustainable development can be mainstreamed across the existing projects of the cooperation and how new projects with a focus on sustainability could be developed and afterwards transferred to broader cooperation agreements and specific projects between China and the European Union. Moreover, if the incorporation of sustainable development into the 16+1 Cooperation is successful, the cooperation can serve as a role model for other regions in the world. Consequently, a focus on sustainable development could not only lead to direct material and social benefits for all involved parties but also to enhanced reputations of China and the CEEC worldwide.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 16+1 Cooperation, especially within the overall framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, contains a large potential for sustainable development. The high amount of investments in trade, finance, infrastructure, research and development, and other areas of cooperation could lead to large benefits for the economy, society, and the environment in China and the CEEC. However, if this potential will be effectively used, depends, from the perspective of MSA, on the opening of a policy window for sustainable development. For such a policy window to open, the problem, political, and policy streams need to come together and open at the same time.

The analysis of the three different streams with regards to the current situation in China and the CEEC, as well as the strategies and plans for the 16+1 Cooperation and the Belt and

Road Initiative, in which the 16+1 Cooperation is embedded, suggests that the political stream and the policy stream are not strong enough for a policy window to open and significant decisions to mainstream sustainable practices and projects across the 16+1 Cooperation will be made. The analysis has also shown that the problem stream has opened in recent years through international and national focusing events, such as the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement or severe incidences of air pollution and effective reactions to the issue by the Chinese government. However, the political and policy streams are not yet strong enough for a policy window to open. Most importantly, the cooperation is lacking concrete solutions to implement sustainable development in its specific projects as well as in its general strategies and guidelines.

Cooperation in the field of sustainable development bears high potential for strengthened relations between China and the EU. However, for them to effectively use this potential, key decision makers in China, the CEEC, and the overall EU need to gain even more awareness for the benefits of the concept of sustainable development for their countries as well as a clear solutions on how to implement sustainable development with the 16+1 Cooperation. The public opinion and political majorities in China have started to gain momentum for a shift towards more sustainable development, but, especially in the CEEC, much more needs to be done. With regards to the policy stream, although the SDGs set clear guidelines and their targets and indicators are useful tools to monitor progress, the overall concept is often still too abstract to be implemented effectively across different projects, such as the 16+1 Cooperation. As a consequence, concrete solutions tailored to the needs of the 16+1 Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative need to be developed and implemented. This would benefit not only China and the CEEC but the entire world.

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