



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia External Relations briefing:
Macedonia and the Seventh 16+1 Summit Held in Sofia:
Perceptions and Evaluation**
Anastas Vangeli

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Macedonia and the Seventh 16+1 Summit Held in Sofia: Perceptions and Evaluation

Introduction

On July 7-9, Sofia hosted the seventh annual summit of the platform for cooperation between China and the sixteen Central-East (and Southeast) European Countries (16+1). As every year, Macedonia was represented at the highest level, with the delegation being led by Premier Zoran Zaev. He was accompanied by the Vice Prime Minister Kocho Angjushev, the Minister of Transport and Connectivity, Goran Sugareski, and the First Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Macedonia's National Coordinator for 16+1 Viktor Dimovski (some media also reported an activity of the Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi, but most of them had omitted him from the reporting). Zaev gave a speech at the plenary session in Sofia, and also had a bilateral meeting with Premier Li Keqiang of China. In this paper I first provide a general overview of the official and media positions on the Summit, and in the second part I contextualize and evaluate the developments.

Macedonia at the Summit

The main objective of the Macedonian delegation was to pitch transport and rail infrastructure projects to the Chinese side, building on the previous experience of the construction of highways under the tied-loans scheme offered by China under the 16+1 framework. In his speech to the delegates at the Summit, Zaev argued that Macedonia as a small country has no choice but to prioritize connectivity, which is why it embraces the 16+1 platform. He also called on the CESEE countries to work jointly towards common economic prosperity and share their knowledge on China, and jointly make the region attractive destination for Chinese companies and Chinese tourists.

The second objective was to explore the possibilities for advancing cultural cooperation between Macedonia, China and the other fifteen countries. Zaev informed the delegates that the Center for Coordination of Cultural Cooperation of 16+1 was launched in March 2018 in Skopje; the center is seen as offering a number of possibilities to advance and deepen the relations between the participating countries in the field of culture, which can facilitate mutual understanding and dialogue. It is noticeable that since the launching of the center, Macedonian officials do not miss an opportunity to praise cultural cooperation with China.

During their bilateral meeting, Zaev and Li Keqiang and their professional associates discussed the process of establishing a visa-free travel regime between Macedonia and China. The process of abolishing the visa requirement, according to official information, is advancing and is in its last stages, and soon Macedonia is expected to join Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as the third country that has abolished visas for travelers from China in the Balkans (Montenegro has an advanced visa-facilitation mechanism as well). The Macedonian government expects a boost in the two-way movement and interaction between Chinese and Macedonian citizens. This is expected to first and foremost impact tourism (especially the flow of Chinese tourists to Macedonia), help in advancement of cultural cooperation (which is already singled out as a priority for Macedonia) and in general, help in the advancement of Sino-Macedonian relations in all other areas (i.e. entrepreneurs and investors will also benefit from visa-free travel).

In Sofia, Zaev also mentioned the 25 anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations between Macedonia and China and thanked China for the continuous support and Beijing's commitment for advancing and deepening the bilateral cooperation. It is however unclear whether there will be any special events in celebrating the anniversary of the relationship; 2018 happens to be a year when Macedonia celebrates 25th anniversary of the

establishment of a number of bilateral relationships and due to the limited resources may organize a joint celebration party.

In addition to the political delegation, the Macedonian Chambers of Commerce was also present in Sofia, represented by its president Danela Arsovska, who took part in the business events, and presented the initiative for establishing a Macedonian-Chinese investment platform, focused on attracting Chinese investors in Macedonia and overall, facilitating business-to-business relations. The logic of such project would be to take advantage of Macedonia's strategic geographic location, and turn the country into one of the hubs for transportation and distribution of Chinese products not only to CESEE but also to Western Europe as well. Over 20.000 Macedonian companies are believed to join and directly benefit from the platform. The representatives of the Macedonian Chambers of Commerce have also participated in promotional activities of the Belt and Road Initiative, which they see as particularly beneficial for Macedonia.

In the aftermath of the summit the First-ranked Vice-Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Zhang Qingli visited Macedonia where he met Radmila Shekerinska, a long-standing high-ranking member of SDSM, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. They had a general discussion on the bilateral relations between Macedonia and China, where they reaffirmed the commitment to advancing and deepening cooperation in a number of areas, and in particular the regional cooperation, as well as cooperation in defense and security.

Evaluation

The Summit in Sofia was the second Summit in which the Macedonian delegation was led by Prime Minister Zaev; it was also the second time he had a bilateral meeting with Li Keqiang. However, it seemed that there has been no meaningful change in the relations between Macedonia and China, and no change in the discourse, nor change in the media perception compared to the

November 2017 Summit that took place in Budapest. Most of the statements coming from the Macedonian officials were vague and almost identical to the ones made last year in Budapest.

The fact that the summit took place in Bulgaria, was of particular importance for Macedonia's government for a reason that has nothing to do with China: namely, SDSM and DUI government see Bulgaria as their closest ally in the region. In 2017, Macedonia signed an agreement on good-neighborly relations with Bulgaria, and in the past year, the Bulgarian government led by Boyko Borisov had continuously expressed its support for Macedonia's bid to join the European Union (EU) and NATO. The summit also took place shortly after Macedonia signed the agreement on solving the name issue and deepening cooperation with Greece, at a time when Athens sought ever-closer relations with China and greater involvement in China's regional initiatives, including 16+1. So, for Macedonia, this summit was more of an opportunity to advance its relations with the European participants in 16+1, portray itself as a pro-active and constructive country in the region, rather than to achieve a particular breakthrough in the relations with China. For example, Zaev used the opportunity to have a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Romania, Viorica Dăncilă. From the reports in the media, it seemed that they discussed bilateral Macedonian-Romanian affairs and no joint coordination on China, despite the meeting taking place during a 16+1 summit.

Macedonian media themselves did very little original reporting from Sofia. In fact, aside from the official news which predominantly focused on the words of Prime Minister Zaev, there was very little to none in-depth reporting of the 16+1 summit. There were no additional reports or even translated articles that would recap or explain what 16+1 is about. There were no interviews with experts and commentators, and there was virtually no coverage before or after the Summit. The visit of Zhang Qingli to Macedonia was also under-reported. Admittedly, the Macedonian news cycle was dominated by domestic issues and the Agreement with Greece.

Nevertheless, as seen in the official discourse and statements, and especially in the reporting of the media, it is obvious that six years after the establishment of 16+1, the majority of political and media elites know very little about the platform and in fact, still know very little about China (and have no significant interest to deepen their knowledge). This is not to say that Macedonia has no China insiders who have developed significant knowledge and experience in recent years – however, the debate is altogether absent, and whatever little input is there, comes in a very rudimentary way. To illustrate the level of ignorance about China – even six years after the establishment of 16+1, a number of media reports still confuse the name order of Chinese officials (i.e. they say “Prime Minister Keqiang” for Li Keqiang) showing that there is a huge gap in knowledge and understanding of even the most basic things.

On the other hand, in July Macedonian media started showing more interest about the trade war between the US and China. Macedonia's public discourse is heavily influenced by the Western media and one could find much more articles on the trade war than on 16+1 or Belt&Road. Furthermore, by the end of July, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn has made a statement saying that China attempts to turn the “Western Balkans” countries in Trojan horses. As in light of the country's prospective EU accession, Macedonia's government, the pro-government media, and large swaths of society are pursuing a pro-European discourse on all questions, Hahn's statement echoed in domestic media and effectively took over the discourse on China. While there is still no original Macedonian “China Threat Theory” it is to be expected that, as the Macedonian government is still very slow to advance its relations with Beijing, the discourse on China will be increasingly shaped by the impulses from the US and the EU – which currently are highly critical of 16+1 cooperation.

This will not necessarily lead to negative developments, but it is to be expected that will in some ways affect (and is already affecting) the content of Sino-Macedonian relations. For instance, in Sofia Zaeu during his plenary

speech greeted the alleged readiness of Chinese companies to respect European laws and regulations and take part in public tenders and bidding, instead of pursuing negotiations behind closed doors. This statement by Zaev showed that the Macedonian government is well aware of the concerns of the EU regarding the cooperation between China and the EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans regarding transparency, competitiveness, and fairness, and suggests that perhaps future projects done in cooperation with China will not be implemented through special legislation, but by the regular procedures and regulations when it comes to public spending and procurement. It remains to be seen if this will become the new norm of Sino-Macedonian relations, and whether it will lead to reduction of the critical commentary coming from Brussels.

All in all, the Sino-Macedonian relations remain at a very low level, with little pro-activity from the Macedonian side, and with seemingly stagnating or even lowering enthusiasm from the Chinese side. There are two events in the near future that can fix this. First, the High-Level Think Tank Symposium of 16+1 that is to be held in Skopje in September (which Zaev announced in Sofia) may lead to opening more discussions on China and 16+1 in Macedonia. Second, the long-awaited bilateral exchanges at a high level are expected to take place in the Fall of 2018 – this would perhaps mark the first trip to China of Macedonia's high ranking officials, which may then create some breakthroughs.