



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia External Relations briefing:
Perceptions and evaluations of Sofia 16+1 Summit in Slovenia
Helena Motoh

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

Perceptions and evaluations of Sofia 16+1 Summit in Slovenia

Summary

The 7th 16+1 Summit in Sofia, Bulgaria was also attended by a delegation from Slovenia, led by the Prime Minister Miro Cerar, which also included the national coordinator for 16+1, Alenka Suhadolnik. Slovenian companies also participated at the business forum and B2B meetings. The media coverage of the 2018 Sofia 16+1 Summit in Slovenia, however, was not very extensive, mostly due to the fact that in foreign relations the United States new tariff policies cause a lot of debate and in internal politics the media stage was taken by the government coalition negotiations. The official reports mostly focused on stressing some new potential areas of China-Slovenia cooperation, while the media coverage focused a lot on the wider framework of the 16+1 development, including the Belt and Road initiative and international geopolitical frameworks.

Official reports

Two more detailed reports on the 16+1 have been published so far. The main report was the official government statement, which was published both on the government website and the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the introductory facts and details, the report makes it clear that 16+1 is an initiative related to the Belt and Road Initiative and stresses the importance of the new views on the connectivity between Europe and Asia. It also presents the Sofia Guidelines and then goes on to list Slovenian projects and cooperation within 16+1. It mentions the participation of Slovenia on all of the main events within 16+1 framework in the fields of education, culture, energy, transport and agriculture, especially stressing forestry, where Slovenia is leading the cooperation mechanism. It mentions the positive effects of the previous years of the 16+1 process on the overall relations with China in business and trade, up to

the current growth rate of the trade in goods, of 15%. The report also focuses on the Slovenian ambition to realize more joint projects in the field of high-tech. It also mentions new cooperation in the field of sport, especially in the light of the upcoming 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, a field in which Slovenia as a highly developed winter sports country, has a lot to offer. The report closes with several details about the bilateral meeting between the Prime Ministers of People's Republic of China and Slovenia, Li Keqiang and Miro Cerar.

More details about the mentioned meetings can be found in the other extensive official report, which is the one published on the website of Prime Minister's Political Party, Modern Centre Party (SMC). This report understandably mostly stressed the activities of Prime Minister Cerar in Sofia: the summit itself, the business forum and the meeting with Li Keqiang. The report also stressed a new emphasis on the Slovenian policy towards the cooperation with China, namely the importance of the Port of Koper as a relevant port in both 16+1 and the Belt and Road initiatives. The report also stresses the importance of the agreement signed between the Beijing Capital University of Physical Education and Sports with the Faculty of Sports University of Ljubljana which will enable the exchange of experience in winter sports. Cerar's meeting with Prime Minister Li Keqiang was also summarized in more detail, especially the emphases made by Prime Minister Miro Cerar in the talks. The main areas Cerar was stressing are pharmaceutical industry, civil aviation, tourism and development of Belt and Road Initiative.

The context of China – EU – USA relations

A competing theme in the news which thus also gave a tone to the media coverage of the Sofia summit was the controversial policy turn of United States' president Donald Trump to raise the tariffs for the trade exchange with Europe and also with China. A theme which has been debated ever since Chinese President Xi Jinping openly stood for globalization and free trade relations became a lens through which the Sofia Summit was also interpreted. In the sharp

contrast to the isolationist policies of Trump, China was seen as a protagonist of an alternative model of global relations, one which for a country of the size of Slovenia, is naturally seen as a favorable one. This alternative was especially stressed after the China-EU Summit in Beijing in Mid-July, where apart from the common opposition to the trade war scenario, another topic was also brought to the table where the policies of the USA were changing dramatically, namely, the climate change.

Li Keqiang was often quoted in the articles on these topics, especially the stress he made on the importance of the continuation of its open door policy and the lowering of tariffs. Li's assurance that Beijing will continue to open the market access to foreign investment was also seen as an important sign, while some disbelief was expressed due to the unclear prognosis of when and how China attempts to pursue the opening its own markets, or at least some sectors of them, to foreign investments from European Union. Some skepticism was also expressed in the media on the Chinese request for a joint legal action against United States, as for the agenda of China towards the stability of European Union foreign policies was questioned.

China in EU

Another question raised in the media coverage after the Sofia Summit was the overall strategy that China has in EU. As for the 16+1 framework the reassurance made by Li Keqiang that China will continue to invest in this region while following the legal requirements, free trade rules and regulations of European Union was seen as an important declaration. Some thought was also given to the relations within the region itself, especially between the EU-members and non-EU-members. The clear difference in the amount of Chinese investment between the two groups of countries is seen to be due to the looser regulations in the non-member countries. This trend, though, is debated as a new important and fairly unpredictable factor in the accession processes of the Balkans countries towards European Union membership. In addition, the

changing relations between European Union, Russian Federation, China and United States is seen in media as an important factor in the process of rethinking the alliances in foreign relations of the Balkan countries. At the utmost point of this process, one article even questioned whether 16+1 is seen as a new nonaligned option for many countries, teamed up with the growth of euro skepticism in the region.

On the lever of the overall Chinese policy towards the European Union, the Sofia Summit was also interpreted in the light of Prime Minister Li's visit to Berlin in the following days. The importance of these talks were dubbed »Going through B to B«, namely trough Berlin to Brussels. Convincing German Prime Minister Angela Merkel that China is an important ally in the opposition to Trump's revival of the cold war paradigm was seen as an effective strategy to influence European Union decision makers through one of the most influential political forces in the EU. As the main reason for this strategy media reports identified the importance of the Chinese-German trade exchange, but also the open skepticism of Germany towards the Chinese investments in the Balkans. On the other hand it is primarily the doubts about the German domination in the European Union after Brexit which causes a lot of euroscepticism in the countries of the Balkan region.

Conclusion – New perspectives for the Slovenia-China relations within the 16+1 framework

As far as the official reports are concerned, there seems to be a newly revived interest in the China-Slovenia relations within the 16+1 framework, an initiative which was rather absent in the last government term. On the other hand the business side of the forum did not seem to attract too much media attention and also the professional organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry kept a low profile on the event. A new strategy was evident in the public appearances of the Prime Minister Miro Cerar, which was to include the Port of Koper into the key points of Slovenian 16+1 and Belt and Road visions.

This is even more surprising for two reasons. First, it was this government which stopped the negotiations with Chinese investors for the railway connection project essential for the Port of Koper. Second, the government that Miro Cerar represents – and himself –, resigned precisely because of the controversies related to the railway project. Other main strategic points Miro Cerar was stressing, do not seem this controversial, especially the academic agreements, civil aviation and tourism were widely recognized as the logical cooperation junctures of the two economies. It is however still an open question, what will remain of these Slovenian strategies when a new government is formed, which is expected shortly. The government change might affect the policies towards China due to the foreign policy changes but also due to the different strategic development preferences in economy and especially due to the different visions of European Union and the Balkans between different potential government parties.