



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia External Relations briefing:

A Macedonian Perspective on The Fifth High-Level Think Tank Symposium of China and the Central-East European Countries Held in Skopje, 30-31 October 2018

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

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Introduction

The epistemic-like community that has formed around 16+1 cooperation is one of the main drivers of the cooperation. After six years of advancing the cooperation between China and the sixteen Central-East European Countries (CEEC), the major achievement of 16+1 is that now CEEC gained visibility and importance in China; China gained visibility and importance in the region; and the China-CEEC relationship gained visibility and importance in the world – although the meaning of the increased visibility and importance is interpreted in various ways by various individuals and groups. One important reason for this is the advancement of the cooperation of think tanks, which has served to shape the discourse on the cooperation. The various symposiums, forums and conferences have served to take stock of current developments and discuss the potential future developments, and to juxtapose the various interpretations against each other. The think tank events are thus the main knowledge production venue for China-CEEC cooperation. They create and interpret meanings, add content to, and discuss the context of the cooperation. They come up with new concepts, and new policy ideas – or rationalize the existing ones. They provide reflection from the perspective of participants from different countries, who come from different areas of expertise, and are venues where these different perspectives come in dialogue and adapt to each other. For the participants, the think tank events are also a good opportunity to meet old friends, and make some new ones, and listen to what they have to say about topics that are of mutual interest. Often, for them, interactions and networking on the sidelines are as important as the official program.

On October 30-31, Skopje hosted more than 50 think tank experts and other intellectual workers from China and CEEC, for the Fifth High-Level Think Tank Symposium of China and CEEC. Previously, three Symposiums took place in Beijing (2013, 2015, 2016), and one in Slovenia (2014). The Skopje Symposium was co-hosted by a number of organizations. On the Macedonian side, the hosts were the Institute for Geostrategic Research and Foreign Policy (IGRFP), the in-house think tank of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Macedonian Academy of the Sciences and Arts (MANU). From the Chinese side, the organizing institutions were the 16+1 Think Tanks Network and the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the Secretariat for China-CEEC Cooperation with the Foreign Ministry of the PRC, the China Foundation for International Studies and the China Institutes for International Studies. The Symposium was one of the highlights of Macedonia's participation in 16+1. This report provides brief overview of how the Symposium proceeded (from the perspective of a participant observation of the author), and then focuses on the how the Symposium was covered in the context of Macedonian public debate.

Think Tank Symposium in Macedonia

After several delays and postponements back in 2016, and earlier on in 2018, Macedonia finally managed to successfully host the Fifth High-Level Think Tanks Symposium. Earlier delays were a result of the prolonged political crisis (which was the reason why Macedonia was unable to host the Symposium in 2016), and because of the referendum on the Prespa Agreement which has paralyzed the country and put all other activities on hold (which led to delays of the Symposium in Fall 2018). The Symposium had more than 50 participants, which was a number significant lower than Think Tank Symposiums held in China. However, for Macedonian standards it belonged to the category of the largest and most international events of that type held in the country. At the

same time, the Symposium carried a particular political weight for an event of that sort.

For instance, the Symposium was opened by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, who gave a long speech on China-CEEC and Macedonia-China relations. He referred to the Symposium as a “significant step” in terms of establishing linkages and deepening the cooperation between CEEC and China, which occurs on the 6th anniversary of 16+1 and the 25th anniversary of Macedonia-China relations. He argued that the Think Tank Symposium is an important venue for exchange of experience and information, that will facilitate mutual learning, which in turn is an important way of achieving development. Zaev argued that after a period of intense cooperation, Sino-Macedonian relations are now at a “very high level.” He also restated Macedonia's commitment to advancing 16+1 cooperation, which he framed as a “platform for discussion” with China on its “complementary role to our joint efforts for securing improved livelihood of our citizens.” Zaev emphasized the importance of the Coordination Center for Cultural Cooperation that was established in Skopje, since, as he argued, cultural dialogue plays an important role. He announced that Macedonia will host the Fourth Meeting between Ministers of Culture of China and CEEC. He also argued that the China-CEEC cooperation advances China-EU cooperation and is a vehicle for implementation of the EU-China 2020 Agenda. At the same time, he used the opportunity to accentuate Macedonia's Euroatlantic commitment and repeated that EU and NATO membership is not only an utmost priority for Macedonia's government, but also a precondition for progress.

As part of the Symposium, there was also a ceremony of signing a Memorandum for Cooperation between MANU and CASS. MANU, the highest scientific institution in Macedonia, was represented by its president, Taki Fiti, a former Minister of Finance, while CASS was represented by Mr. Wang Jingqing, a Minister-level Vice President of CASS. In attendance, and one of the speakers at the Symposium was Madam Hou Yuzhen, the Special Representative for

Cooperation between China and CEECs. There were other high-level speakers from Macedonia and China who addressed the audience. After the first day of scholarly activities, the participants visited the China – CEEC Coordination Centre for Cultural Cooperation, located in the National University Library in Skopje, where they were greeted by Macedonia's Minister of Culture, Ambassador Asaf Ademi.

The research panels of the Symposium brought together a number of old and new faces in 16+1 studies. The central themes of the Symposium were discussed in four panels, dealing with the strengthening of the communication of policies and development strategies between China and CEEC; expanding the scale of trade, investment and financial cooperation between China and CEEC; enhancing China-EU cooperation on the platform “16+1;” and deepening sub-regional cooperation between China and CEEC. Participants reflected on the developments and evolution of 16+1 and its various aspects, on the current regional, European and global context and environment, and contemplated the road ahead. The panels highlighted several important topics, such as the national-level motivations of and context in which CEEC countries advance their cooperation with China; the practices of economic cooperation in light of the broader ideas and paradigms on economic development that underpin them; the geopolitical complications that come with the (re)emergence of the China Threat approach in the West and the possible consequences on China-CEEC relations; and the questions of how to proceed with subregional modes of cooperation between China and the various subregional groups in CEE. The Symposium was an opportunity to continue some of the older discussions raised in previous formats, such as the processes of institutionalization (and the traps of over-institutionalization) of China-CEEC relations, the role of agency of the CEEC countries, and so on.

Impact and Coverage

The think tank cooperation carries a particular importance within the 16+1 framework; thus, hosting the Think Tanks High-Level Symposium was one of the most significant examples of Macedonia's contribution to the 16+1 cooperation. The event had an additional political weight given the opening speech of Prime Minister Zaev, and the presence and participation of other high-level political figures. It was also among the most significant events organized by the IGRFP of the Macedonian MFA in its short history of existence (the Institute was founded in 2012).

A number of Macedonian media covered the event. They nevertheless mostly focused on the presence of Prime Minister Zaev, and some even broadcast portions of his speech – but not on the rest of the Symposium. Some media also reported on the signing of the Memorandum as well as the activity in the Center for Coordination of Cultural Cooperation. Nevertheless, there was little to no reporting from the remainder of the event, and no reports whatsoever on the research component of the program. The event itself was not seen as an occasion to discuss or write more on 16+1 – there were no commentaries, reports or op-eds on the issue before or after the Symposium.

Most of the news from the Symposium were formal and a readout of the press release issued by the organizers. No further analysis was carried out. The journalists used the opportunity of the event to ask questions to Prime Minister Zaev after his speech. These questions, nevertheless, concerned ongoing developments in Macedonia, but not Macedonia-China relations, 16+1 cooperation or the Belt&Road Initiative. No other participants in the Symposium, from the Macedonian side, the Chinese side, or from the rest of the CEEC were interviewed for Macedonian media. At the same, the event attracted very little attention in the Macedonian research and scholarly circles. There was low presence from Macedonian think tanks and the academic community.

The relatively low coverage of the Symposium can be ascribed to several factors. First, cooperation with China remains a far and distant topic outside the

“China circles,” including for the media and the attentive public. Second, Macedonia's public debate has been dominated by a number of burning political issues revolving around the issue of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement and the constitutional amendments, and therefore very few topics outside of this could be considered important these days – both for the media and the researchers. Third, when it comes to foreign affairs, most of the discussions in Macedonia are heavily focused on EU and NATO – in fact, all Macedonian high representatives discussed about EU and NATO during the Symposium too. Fourth, the discourse on Macedonia-China cooperation currently dominated by the controversial Kichevo-Ohrid highway funded via a loan from China ExIm Bank and implemented by Sinohydro; while Macedonian high-level officials referred to this highway as a success case during the Symposium, in the public debate it is considered a controversial case (see previous reports). Finally, the scholarly and policy research community on China in Macedonia is extremely small and has no voice, agency or platform to have any role in shaping the public discussion – which is a reality that continues despite having the China-CEEC Symposium hosted in the country.