



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Albania external relations briefing:  
4th China-CEEC Capital Mayors Forum held in Tirana  
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## **4th China-CEEC Capital Mayors Forum held in Tirana**

### **Introduction**

*Albania is an integral part of the cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) embodied in the “17+1” platform. The yearly high-level meetings at a governmental level of China-CEEC are issuing guidelines of cooperation at the end of every summit. In 2015, ‘The Suzhou Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries’ stipulated in section 9.3: “The Participants encourage and support exchanges and cooperation between mayors of China and CEEC capital cities.”<sup>i</sup> The following year, the first China-CEEC Forum of Capital City Mayors was held in Sofia, in 2016; the second, was held in Podgorica in 2017; the third, was held in Belgrade in 2018 and the fourth was held in Tirana on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and next year it is set to be held in Sarajevo, during autumn 2020, according to the latest Dubrovnik Guidelines.<sup>ii</sup>*

*Only from the above mentioned, it can be found a rationale - this event has the has bases of a Balkan-centric trajectory, at least in the very first meetings. Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina – all capitals of which has been the host of the forum are now trying to intensify ties in local governance with China.*

### **Beijing the organizer - Tirana the location host (Oct. 24<sup>th</sup>)**

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, Deputy Mayor of Beijing Lu Yan arrived in Albania and met with the Mayor of Tirana, Erjon Veliaj. Mr. Lu, while thanking the Mayor of Tirana for the organization of the event and preparations for the reception of delegations for the Mayors' Forum of “17+1” capitals stated: *“I developed a warm friendly conversation with Mr. Veliaj, for the successful organization of the forum, as well as for strengthening exchanges and cooperation within the framework of “17 + 1” cooperation, especially between Beijing and Tirana. We want to further strengthen the political, trade, economic exchanges between peoples.”<sup>iii</sup>* He added that the Beijing Municipality is ready to strengthen concrete cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana, as well as support the advancement of signed agreements. *“In this hall we have just witnessed the signing of a friendly cooperation agreement between the Beijing International Trade Promotion Council and the Tirana Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I am convinced that this agreement will only be the beginning of cooperation. In the future the collaborations and exchanges between us will be more extensive. Beijing is ready to strengthen cooperation with Tirana.”<sup>iv</sup>* He concluded that Beijing municipality is ready to intensify cooperation with Tirana municipality, as well as support the further advancement of signed agreements.

The Mayor of Tirana on the other hand, in welcoming the delegation from Beijing, stated that this visit was marking the beginning of a new era in relations between the two countries and new page of history was written in the cooperation between China and Albania. Mr. Veliaj also affirmed his enthusiasm, stressing that signing of the cooperation agreement between Beijing International Trade Promotion Council and Tirana Chamber of Commerce and Industry, will further strengthen trade exchanges of the two capitals. He also underlined that besides the holding of such an important meeting in Tirana, it is important to implement the decisions and cooperation agreements that will be reached. *“The most important day will be the day after the Forum of Capital Mayors of the ‘17+1’, when we will start implementing projects and collaborating. Sometimes, we need friends from far away in order for us to converge with cities or nations so close to us, because a reason to meet is always needed. Because of this forum, even us within the same region will have deeper cooperation.”*<sup>v</sup>

This high meeting was followed by an evening show with Dance Performance of the Beijing Dance Academy, where old and new friends of China were present as well as the delegation from Beijing, Chinese Diplomatic Corps in Albania, Mayors from China-CEEC capitals, distinct public figures and many press and media outlets.

### **The Forum (Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>)**

The Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj and Deputy Mayor of Beijing Lu Yan co-hosted the activity which was attended by mayors Sarajevo, Podgorica, Skopje and Belgrade, officials of capital cities of CEEC – as well as H.E. Ambassador HUO Yuzhen, Special Representative China-CEEC Cooperation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama stretched his speech from citing Socrates to the newly proposed “Balkans Schengen” and with regards to Chinese presence in the region, Rama stated: *“People see cooperation with China as an opportunity for financial backing, but bridges of cooperation with China provide knowledge through which experiences and know-how are exchanged that benefit countries and cities. I am glad that this forum provides an opportunity to meet with leaders of countries that have similar paths to ours.”*<sup>vi</sup>

Deputy Mayor of Beijing, Mr. Lu Yan while stating that China enjoys profound traditional friendship with CEEC noted that in recent year this traditional friendship has seen robust and dynamic cooperation which has brought fruitful results in the fields of economy and trade, infrastructure construction, investment and people to people and cultural exchanges.

Mr. Veliaj highlighted that Tirana has already started a series of processes and cooperation with Chinese companies, such as in the field of transport, where very soon electric buses will be a reality Albania. At the same day different panels, with specific topics of cooperation were taking place, such as tourism, education, trade, energy and more.

Under the theme "Sustainable urban development" the participating parties at the forum exchanged the points of view about challenges facing their cities, shared experiences on city management and environment protection, as well as discussed topics of green cities, urban planning and urban resilience.

At the end of the forum, the participating parties signed a joint declaration, under which they agreed to promote the refined city management in their respective city and take the China-CEEC Capital Mayors Forum as a platform to share experiences in terms of urban governance, improvement of governance capacity and effectiveness.<sup>vii</sup> The event was broadcasted on all national media as well as most important on-line/social platforms.

### **Some assessments on the event and beyond**

The "17+1" cooperation mechanism has created a multitude of sub-channels of dialogue between the participant countries. These sub-channels encompass sectorial associations in: finance; trade and investment; science and technology, research, environmental protection; culture, education, youth sport and tourism; industrial capacity and equipment manufacturing; agriculture, forestry and quality inspection; health and local government level.<sup>viii</sup> All these associations usually have a country of residence for their headquarters; for example, the Mayors Associations center resides in Czech Republic while the meetings are held with different locations year by year. These associations and events have created an intense net of country-to-country interaction compartmentalized according to the specific area of expertise.

With regards to Albania, according to the 'Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries' section 3.6 it is stated that: "*The Participants support Albania establishing the China-CEEC Youth Development Center and are encouraged to participate in related activities organized by the Center to enhance mutual understanding between youths of China and CEECs.*"<sup>ix</sup>

So, 2019 placed Albania on the spotlight of the "17+1" platform initially with the intention of establishment of the Youth Development Center and six months later with the meeting of Capital's Mayors. Eight years into this cooperation and for the first time Albania appears to be taking some kind of role in the "17+1" mechanism.

### *What it means to Albania?*

It is our argument that this event could raise Albania's profile within the platform. Until present days, in the High-Level Summits, in which occasions Prime Minister Edi Rama attended, Albania was not appointed any specific attribute; for this reason, the actual involvement of the country into some sort of project initiated by PRC is felt to be auspicious. Any opportunity given for deepening mutual understanding and benefits is important, not only to bilateral relations but to the entire society.

### *What it means to the platform?*

Since the very implementation of the China-CEEC cooperation platform in 2012, in many within and outside the group, argued that one or another country from the initial 16, would sooner or later gain predominance and some status of "leader" within the very platform - even though China has always made clear that is approaching these nations on equal footing. With Greece joining the group, dynamics and estimations have shifted, if we are to put in theoretical economic terms: instead of analyzing competitive advantage, it would be better to think as the "17+1" in terms of comparative advantage, where each member country inputs into the cooperation what its best features are and altogether achieve the much acclaimed synergy.

The very geographical distribution (or diversification) of forums, symposiums, associations, joint events, etc., in the "17+1" territories point to the fact that the it is possible to find common grounds of cooperation while existing differently.

### **Timing and perceptions**

This Forum took place in very delicate timing for Albania with regards to foreign affairs: just one week earlier the European Council rejected the opening of negotiation talks for Albania (and North Macedonia), for this reason the entire public attention, media commentaries, press etc., were focused on yet another disappointment. The general frustration is still visible considering that more than 90% of Albanians desire to be part of the EU. Thus, the focus was shifted and by considering this a failure of the Albanian political establishment the embittered attitude towards the government was reflected nationwide. However, this does not mean that Albanians did not pay attention to the Forum; in a close analysis to on-line portals and comments on the event, the read counts and comments are numerically very substantial, so it is fair to state that the forum received public consideration and scrutiny.

## Conclusions

In a country where relatively little is known about China, the 4<sup>th</sup> Capital Mayors Forum placed PRC in the map of public attention. This event represented also in important milestone in the prospect of rekindling the overall Sino-Albanian relations.

Every robust cooperation starts from involved parties trying to understand each-others realities and identify potential fields for partnerships, it is only hoped that this will be the case between Tirana and Beijing; it is also important, for the benefit of all, to pursue a serious follow up of agreements until tangible results are achieved.

Finally, it is greatly wished that this is only the first step for Albania in demonstrating a more intensive (and extensive) participation into the “17+1” cooperation platform, because only through policy coordination and active participation into to the platform, the good intentions proposed and the agreements signed can be materialized into actual deeds.

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<sup>i</sup> Full text of Suzhou Guidelines available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1318039.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1318039.shtml)

<sup>ii</sup> Full text of Dubrovnik Guidelines available at: <https://www.ceec-china-croatia.org/files/dubrovnik-guidelines.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Translated from Tirana Municipality official website, available at: <https://www.tirana.gov.al/artikull/forumi-171-kryeba-shkiaku-i-tiranes-pret-nenkryetarin-e-bashkise-se-pekinit-dhe-delegacionin-kinez>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Rama at the “17+1” Forum: Opportunities for exchange of experiences. Bridges of cooperation with China bring knowledge. *BalkanWeb*. Available at: <https://balkanweb.com/rama-ne-forumin-171-mundesit-per-shkembim-eksperiencash-urat-e-bashke-punimit-me-kinen-te-sjellin-dije/>

<sup>vii</sup> Albania's capital hosts 4th China-CEEC Forum of Capital City Mayors. XINHUA. Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/26/c\\_138503639.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/26/c_138503639.htm)

<sup>viii</sup> Kavalski, E., 2019. China in Central and Eastern Europe: the unintended effects of identity narratives. *Asia Europe Journal*, pp.1-17.

<sup>ix</sup> Full text available at: <https://www.ceec-china-croatia.org/files/dubrovnik-guidelines.pdf>