ASIA PROGRAM

# THE "16+1" PLATFORM

## CHINA'S OPPORTUNITIES FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE


**BY**

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## SUMMARY

For the first time in the history of the EU, an external power practices a geographical division of Europe that does not correspond to that defined by Brussels, within the EU. Inaugurated in Warsaw in 2012, China's cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), known as "16 + 1" Platform or the "16+1" Format, brings together sixteen countries (EU members and candidates), all of which share a communist past.

Although this co-operation is created around the different bilateral investment agreements, the first years of cooperation show that the political results overpass the economic progress. Therefore, the "16+1" is the subject of multiple studies aimed at identifying its threats and risks for Europe.

This study looks at opportunities, not dangers. Aside from the risks that it may represent, the "16+1" generates multiple opportunities for both the EU and the CEEs. With a focus on Romania, this study offers a reading of the opportunities to be explored as to the growing and unstoppable presence of China in Central and Eastern Europe.


*Keywords: "16+1"; The new Silk Road, The One Belt One Road, EU-China relations, China-Central and Eastern Europe (China-CEE)*

### ➢ METHODOLOGY

*This study draws on various publications and data from European, American and Chinese think tanks and governmental organizations such as the EU, the OECD, the National Bureau of Statistics of China, and research institutes and statistics of the countries of the region studied. The sources used come from documents originally in French, English, Romanian and Mandarin Chinese.*

*In addition to the literature research, this analysis involves field studies in China, Taiwan and Central and Eastern European countries. In China and Taiwan, interviews were conducted with centres of European and international studies, EU Delegations and embassies from Central and Eastern European countries. In the CEEs, namely in Romania, Hungary and Serbia, interviews were conducted with researchers affiliated to universities or to think tanks and specialized in relations with China. Field research was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews in Chinese, English, French or Romanian.*

### ➢ SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND RELEVANCE OF THE SUBJECT

*Firstly, there is little research in Western Europe about China's relations with CEEs. The limited existing literature is devoted to identifying the threats and risks that this*

*cooperation represents for the stability of Europe and provides very little study as to the opportunities of the Chinese presence. This study addresses the lack of dedicated academic research on this topic.*

*Secondly, the "16+1" represent a unique form of cooperation. Initiated by China, the "16+1" cooperation model's uniqueness lays in the unprecedented initiative of an external power to regroup only a part of the EU members, without the participation of the founding members. As a result, this research is relevant both for the field of European studies and for the discipline of international relations.*

*Thirdly, CEE represents a key region for Chinese diplomacy's main project, namely the One Belt One Road Initiative. The sixteen CEE countries appear to be of great geostrategic importance for China, representing a quarter of the countries along the new Silk Road.*

*Finally, "16+1" is designed to be a long-term effects strategy. When assessing the composition of the "16+1" format, we observe the non-attendance of at least five Eastern European countries which are, however, of major importance for Chinese interests in the region and for the Belt and Road Initiative. These states are Greece, Turkey, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. What distinguishes the sixteen from the five is the combination of two characteristics. (i) The sixteen countries all share a communist past and (ii) a declared pro-European orientation, while none of the five excluded countries combine the two criteria. Therefore, while enlisting historical links to reach its diplomacy ambition, China seems to be settling in this region for the long term. In this perspective, this study proposes an analysis of the complexity of the "16+1" Chinese strategy. Also contributing to the current literature's highlights of possible economic and political implications for the stability and consolidation of the EU.*

# DEFINING THE CHINA-CEE COOPERATION "16+1": SATELLITE OR DESTINATION OF THE NEW SILK ROAD?

Cooperation between China and 16 CEE countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia), also called the "16+1" platform or format, was formalized in Warsaw in 2012. Thus, since 2012, China is more and more present in the CEE, in a framework of economic cooperation organized around three axes: trade, investment and human exchanges. Apart from these three axes, China declares itself reluctant for any cooperation in the political or military field.

While China's first post-Maoist economic ties with the CEE lay on China's "Going out policy" launched in 1999, its relations with the EU's Eastern border progressively developed in the following years, especially starting with China's accession to the World Trade Organisation. However, the "16+1" cooperation appears in the context of the "multilateral diplomacy" strategy launched by President Xi Jinping. Closely related to the project of the new Silk Road and inseparable from China-EU relations, the "16+1" platform is designed to express a strategy of a great power *dàguó wàijiāo* 大国外交, promoting win-win relationships *shuāngyíng* 双赢 and inter-nation friendship ties *huǒbàn guānxì*伙伴关系.

## Old solidarities: the origins of the "16+1" format

When assessing the historical levers, it is worth paying attention to the beginnings, historical and economic context preceding the emergence and the institutionalization of the "16+1" cooperation, as for both CEE and China's sides. In the context of the former tight relationship with Mao's China and the relatively little ties during the last three decades of the 20s, some of the CEE countries turned back towards China starting in the late 1990s, way before the creation of the "16+1" platform. This is, for instance, the case of Serbia, whose relations with Beijing have greatly deepened especially since the late 1990s, after the episode of the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Another example is that of Hungary which in 2011 launched the "Eastern opening policy"[1], aiming to concentrate its external links on the Eastern major powers. The Hungarian strategy provides for economic diversification (including trade, investment and education) with the aim of reducing the heavy dependency of Western Europe in these sectors. On the basis of their tight economic ties with Budapest, China, Russia and India

[1] MOLDICZ Csaba (Istvan), NOVAK Tamas, "China's Effort to Boost Globalization in a Hungarian Perspective: How Hungary Perceives the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 Cooperation", China-CEE Institute Working Paper, 2017, No.15, [PDF online] < https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/chinas-effort-to-boost-globalization-in-a-hungarian-perspective-how-hungary-perceives-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-161-cooperation/>

naturally became the three main countries targeted by this strategy. In early 2000s other CEE countries have also begun to develop or revive their trade relations with China, encouraged by the Chinese rapid economic growth and favoured by their membership of the EU single market, especially after the EU's 2004 and 2007 enlargement waves.

In this context, the institutionalization of the "16+1" format was welcomed with the greatest hopes in the CEE region, the format being seen by most of the CEE as the only opportunity to do business with China, "this economic giant with whom we do not often have the opportunity to discuss"[2].
According to sources from CEE states Embassies in Beijing, for most of the CEE countries, the Chinese strategy seeks to take advantage of the region's economic development potential and its geostrategic position that could play a key satellite role in the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative. For few of the CEE states, the region's need of infrastructure investment could even place it as "the real destination of China's One Belt One Road" [3]. As for some Chinese scholars' point of view [4] with regard to the limits and objectives of the "16+1" platform, China affirms itself reluctant to include new members in the platform, in order to first allow the platform's consolidation in its current shape. Therefore, alike the new Silk Road, the "16+1" remains compatible, complementary and inclusive for any local project and any actor wishing to participate as an observer (EU, European Development Bank, Greece, Austria, Switzerland, Belarus) . But unlike the new Silk Road, the "16+1" is reluctant to the inclusion of other members beyond the 16 CEE states. However, satellite or destination of the One Belt One Road, the "16+1" platform appears to embody Beijing's great power ambitions combined with the CEE states' old Soviet solidarities and new development perspectives.

## An original design: Structure of the "16+1"

Presented and promoted as compatible and complementary to any regional project, the new Silk Road becomes a very effective mechanism in the creation of "satellite" projects, which the "16+1" platform is sometimes considered. However, China's cooperation with the CEE was institutionalized in 2012, a year before the OBOR Initiative's launch in Astana and this could fuel debates on the platform's belonging to the OBOR Initiative. Nevertheless, the "16+1" is very much in line with the objectives of the OBOR aiming at broader economic cooperation, beyond the field of infrastructure. Therefore, beyond the China-CEE's economic cooperation, seen as the main collaboration stream, the "16+1"

[2] Interviews, CEE Embassies in Beijing, April 2018
[3] Interviews, CEE Embassies in Beijing, April 2018
[4] Interviews with scholars from Tsinghua University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, April 2018

platform, by its structure and design, embodies strong political and diplomatic potential links.

To some extent, the EU is worried by exactly these political implications and deepening diplomatic relations between China and the CEE states. When selecting the countries invited to join the "16+1" platform, China proposed a viewpoint of the European continent that contrasts the EU's one. In the strategic choice of its CEE partners, China does not comply to the EU borders, nor with those of the Euro zone.

Therefore, when assessing the "16+1" platform's structure, it is worthy to observe the dialogue between the region's past and future orientations. Firstly, the format betrays the borders of the former Eastern bloc, since it "includes" the countries of the former Yugoslavia (not aligned after 1948) and "excludes" former Soviet countries such as Moldova, Ukraine or Belarus. Secondly, the format does not follow the borders of the EU. However, it should be noted that the CEE states that are not EU full members are, according to the EU statutes[5], either official candidate countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia) or potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Furthermore, the format does not follow the borders of the Euro zone either, only the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Slovakia and Slovenia being part of the monetary union. As a result, two coexisting characteristics appear to bring together the sixteen CEE countries: (i) a shared communist past and (ii) a current pro-EU orientation.

## A new model of cooperation on the European Continent

Institutionalized with a Secretariat within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the "16+1" cooperation is particularly noticeable by the abundance of high-level meetings and bilateral agreements, at the expense of genuine regional cooperation. Summits at Prime Minister level (one per year, in November, rotating in different member countries); meetings of the Ambassadors of the sixteen CEE states in Beijing (four per year in Beijing); National Coordinator meetings (two per year, one in Beijing, the second in the country to host the annual summit) trace the framework of meetings that drive the "16+1" decision-making forums. In addition to these initiatives, thematic or academics meetings are organized at different frequencies in different CEE countries or in China, within think tanks or thematic cooperation forums.

Under the label of regional cooperation, the "16+1" operates mainly on the basis of the bilateral cooperation China has with each of the sixteen countries. Therefore the "16+1"

[5] European Union Countries, European Commission Official Website, [online] < https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries_en >

shows up to be what some diplomats name as "16 x (1 + 1)"[6]. In order to bridge the bilateral cooperation level to the regional one proposed by the "16+1" format, each of the sixteen CEE states assigned to the management of a regional cooperation folder. In this sense and following a type of "one country, one policy"[7] strategy, Hungary manages the tourism promotion file; Romania - cooperation around energy; Poland - maritime cooperation; Macedonia - cultural cooperation; Serbia - cooperation on transport infrastructure, Bulgaria - cooperation in the field of agriculture[8]. In addition to the bilateral relations, the "16+1" cooperation is organized around sub-regional cooperation between China and the different subgroups of the sixteen CEE states (eg. cooperation with the Višegrad countries, with the Baltic countries, etc.).

Despite Beijing's efforts to cover all three bilateral, sub regional and regional levels of cooperation, the China-CEE cooperation economic results remain very modest compared to China's achievements in the Western Europe. However, the "16+1" format generates numerous non-economic results, since it emerges as a prosperous platform for cultural and diplomatic ties with China.

## A CONTROVERSIAL COOPERATION

The first six years of cooperation show that the political profit surpasses the economic progress. As a result, the "16+1" is the subject of multiple studies aimed at identifying threats and risks for Europe. Debates over the idea of China's intention to divide the old continent arise up to the EU's decision-making forums, creating tensions among EU members and fueling a climate of mistrust over Sino-European relations.

The pro-EU orientation of the sixteen CEE states is a vital factor that Beijing is cultivating for its projects in the region. However, Brussels stays worried about the Chinese presence in this region. While pointing out the existence of certain opacity in trade with the CEE, Brussels is wary of the interests that the PRC declares in the region but also the evolution of the political position of these states within the EU-China Dialogue. The emergence of the "16+1" format worries Brussels especially as the format continues to consolidate in the context of a tense Sino-European relations (eg. issues on the status of a market economy, human rights in China, Tibet, Taiwan, failure to lift the arms embargo, widening European trade deficit, intellectual property rights, the South China Sea, etc.).

[6] Interviews, CEE Embassies in Beijing, April 2018
[7] Interviews at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, European Studies Institute, April 2018
[8] LIU Zuokui, "China-CEEC Cooperation: China's Building of a New Type of International Relations", Croatian International Relations Review, 23(78), 2017, pp. 19-34, [PDF online] < https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/cirr.2017.23.issue-78/cirr-2017-0005/cirr-2017-0005.pdf>

Besides the EU, other regional powers could have a role to play in the "16+1" geopolitical landscape. Germany itself has a firm stance on China's presence in Eastern Europe. While pointing out the threats that the Chinese presence in Eastern Europe would represent for the unity and cohesion of the EU, Berlin stays sensitive to any factor likely to change the status quo of the region or likely to impact Germany's strong economic ties with the CEE states. Except Germany, the other EU founding members remain silent on the "16+1" issue, prompting Chinese researchers to question the relevance of the fears expressed by Brussels or Berlin ("If the 16 + 1 really threatens the stability and unity of the EU, why do we see and hear only Germany's position? Why would other founding member states such as France or Italy remain silent in the face of so-called potential danger?"[9]).

Beyond European borders, major powers such as the United States or Russia also remain silent about the Chinese presence in the CEE. Moscow appears to have no worries, since Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova is not included in this initiative. The United States maintain their historic military presence in the region via the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) security network and haven't expressed any official position on the "16+1". However, some of these silent powers' strategies meet China's interests in the CEE region. For instance, the Three Seas strategy (Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas) [10] aims to develop a regional energy security solidarity network, independent of the EU, in order to better cope with the Russia. Although the Three Seas project was launched by Poland in 2016, it came back to light only after the coming to power of Donald Trump and his participation in the 2nd forum of this strategy, in July 2017. A few months after, at the 5th China-CEE Summit in November 2017, Beijing proposed the deepening of maritime cooperation and sets the Three Seas strategy as a priority for the "16+1" format. In this context, China's argument on the 16+1 platform's contribution to the EU's integration wears out, fueling EU's fears of a Chinese Trojan horse[11].

[9] Interview at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, department of Central and Eastern European Studies, Beijing, April 2018

[10] RICHARD Dorota, "L'Initiative de « Trois mers » – la coopération Nord-Sud au centre de l'Europe, le nouvel axe de la politique étrangère polonaise", Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques –Analyses, 2 décembre 2016, [online] < http://www.iris-france.org/84654-linitiative-de-trois-mers-la-cooperation-nord-sud-au-centre-de-leurope-le-nouvel-axe-de-la-politique-etrangere-polonaise/ >

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## FOCUS ON ROMANIA'S POSITION WITHIN THE "16+1" PLATFORM

Romania is both a historical partner[12] of the PRC and one of the most ardent supporter of the EU in the region. It is also among the largest countries of the region, in terms of surface area and population. It becomes all the more relevant to study the case of Romania when looking at its neighbourhood and its geopolitical position: a bordering EU country, Romania is in the vicinity of Russia's friends like Bulgaria; critical EU members like Hungary; candidate countries from the Western Balkans such as Serbia and conflict areas such as Ukraine, Moldova. In addition to its opening towards the Black Sea linking it indirectly to Russia and Turkey. These are most of the reasons the EU give to Romania a key role to play in the "16+1" platform.

Seen from Brussels, Romania is the only one of the major countries of Central Europe not to have switched to an anti-EU position and reactionary sovereignty[13], while in Poland, Hungary and in the Czech Republic the leaders in place are, moreover, likely to criticizing the EU's policy and to attacking the stability of the rule of law and the freedom of the press of their countries. Moreover, public opinion in Romania [14]associates the EU with a *watchdog of democracy*, *problem solver* and a *legitimate actor*. As a result, Romania is very sensitive to any criticism or negative signal towards China coming from the western European capitals.

However, the very positive public opinion towards the EU does not exclude a good opinion in relation to China. According to a study conducted by the European Commission in 2016[15] , the general attitude in the CEE towards China is much more critical than that towards the EU. Paradoxically, among the countries showing the most negative attitudes are those who are most active in relations with China, including Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Romania is among the countries with the highest rate of appreciation of China. However, this public opinion's positive attitude does not translate into an intensity of the bilateral cooperation. For most of the CEE states, two main factors appear to define the strength of the bilateral links with China.

[12] Romania is the 3rd country in the world to recognize the PRC on October 5, 1949.
[13] GUETTA Bernard, "Esentielle Roumanie", Franceinter, 26 mars 2018, [online] < https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/geopolitique/geopolitique-26-mars-2018>
[14] OEHLER-ŞINCAI Iulia Monica, LIANU Costin, ILIE Cristina, RĂDULESCU Irina, "Romanian Attitudes and Perceptions towards the 16+1 Cooperation Platform", China-CEE Institute Working Paper, 2017, No.15, p. 3 [PDF online] < https://china-cee.eu/working_papers/romanian-attitudes-and-perceptions-towards-the-161-cooperation-platform/>
[15] Idem

Following the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' report on the "16+1" platform (2012-2016)[16], the economic and business environment of the country constitute the main vehicle in the county's cooperation with China. This hypothesis is confirmed in the case of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. However, the more advanced economy of the Baltic countries does not translate into closer cooperation with China, whereas Serbia's developing economy had definitely not restrained the deepening ties with China. The current situation of Sino-Romanian cooperation is in line with the general trend of the "16+1" platform characterized by very few achievements, a lot of delay for on-going projects and renewed promises each year. Therefore, seen from China, the relatively few bilateral cooperation achievements with Romania, next to the current Government's instability, Romania occupies a secondary position within the "16+1", unlike its neighbours Hungary and Serbia, along with Poland that are considered as the main three pilots of the "16+1" format.

In Romania, there is no large-scale project implemented so far, as part of the bilateral relationship with China. Energy cooperation projects are underway, notably on the Cernavodă and Rovinari nuclear projects. As a result, Romania's expectations mainly concern these two energy projects. Regretting to have "missed" the folder on agricultural cooperation already attributed to Bulgaria, Romania nevertheless attaches particular importance to agricultural cooperation with China. Despite China's focus on the energy sector, Romania works to attract more Chinese investment in infrastructure and increase the number of Chinese tourists, since the country stays largely behind Hungary, Poland and Serbia in truism cooperation with China.

In China-CEE bilateral cooperation, the case of Romania reflects the main challenges for the "16+1" format: the diversity of expectations and of economic priorities; the climate of mistrust and reluctance to cooperate at the national level and the limited knowledge of the Chinese partner. Fully aware of these challenges, China intends to overpass this period of stagnation and mistrust by multiplying meetings, think tanks and studies in Europe on this subject. For instance, one of the first studies conducted by the Chinese think-tank China-CEE Institute, recently implemented in Budapest, aims to identify public opinion with regard to China, in the different countries of the CEE. Other studies are aimed at mapping energy opportunities in the region. These initiatives highlight China's efforts to fight the attitude and the critical literature with regard to the "16+1" platform. As for the EU and the CEE side, the focus on threats overpasses the one on the opportunities. The abundant literature and research underlying threats are certainly of

[16] CHEN Xin, TANG Chenyu, "An Quantitative Analysis on China-CEEC Economic and Trade Cooperation", Working paper series on European studies, Institute of European studies, Chinese academy of social sciences, vol. 10, no. 5, 2016, p. 13-14, [online] < http://www.geopolitika.hu/en/2017/04/12/a-quantitative-analysis-on-china-ceec-economic-and-trade-cooperation/ >

undeniable importance and utility. However, as they are very unlikely to prevent China's rising presence in the CEE, a focal shift towards opportunities will be of a great value in EU and CEE states' efforts to design their common strategy towards China.

## OPPORTUNITIES OF CHINESE PRESENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Firstly, in the context of China's growing presence in the East, CEE states have the opportunity to assert themselves as a vehicle for negotiation with China in the EU. There are no doubts about Beijing's expectations of CEE support China in the negotiations with the EU. Whether on sensitive topics (eg. South China Sea, human rights, arms embargo, Tibet, Taiwan) or on more pragmatic issues (eg. award of market status, negotiations on the agreement on investments), China is certainly gaining support in Central and Eastern Europe and this could benefit not only China but also the CEE states. The case of Romania is an example. Currently in a still comfortable geopolitical position, Romania may be under pressure from both sides: Beijing and Brussels, during his Presidency of the Council of the EU scheduled for January-June 2019. In this context, this presidency could represent a unique opportunity for Romania to become a vehicle for negotiations with China in the EU, especially to unblock the negotiations on the EU-China investment agreement.

Secondly, the Chinese presence is enhancing the regional integration of Central and Eastern Europe that could benefit both the CEE region and the EU. Despite criticism, the Chinese presence in Central and Eastern Europe is successful in favouring a certain centrifugal dynamic in the CEE. Within the format, the CEE states meet regularly around annual summits and many other diverse meetings organized at different frequencies during the year. As a result, CEE leaders meet far more often than if they were not part of this cooperation with China. Apart from differences, or even competition within the "16+1" format, the Chinese presence brings the sixteen countries to deepen their reflection on their membership of the EU and to reconsider their geopolitical position in international affairs. A concrete example of this is the study recently started and sponsored by China to identify different energy opportunities in the region. The study, coordinated by Bucharest, is very well received and enjoys the full participation of the 16 CEEs.

Finally, the Chinese initiative could be exploited as a unique opportunity to catch up with the economic backwardness of the CEE region. China offers an alternative model of economic development to countries in Asia, Africa, South America and Central and Eastern Europe. The economic and infrastructural development might be the most

important opportunity to be seized, both by the CEE and the EU, next to the increasing human exchanges that will definitely bring long-term benefits to the EU's economy.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

After a reading of the origins, the structure and the functioning of the China-CEE cooperation (I), this study reviews the main debates that makes the "16+1" a controversial subject of Sino-European relations (II). With a focus on the Romania's case (III) this paper identifies a series of opportunities generated by the Chinese presence in Eastern Europe, to be explored by both the CEE states and the EU (IV). Thanks to the Chinese presence in Eastern Europe, the CEE states face the opportunity to position themselves as a vehicle for negotiation with China in EU decision-making forums. In addition, the growing and very active Chinese presence in the CEE brings the sixteen countries to increase their economic and political exchanges and thus enhances the CEE regional integration that will undoubtedly be beneficial to the European project.

Another opportunity would be to exploit the "16+1" CEE as a once in a lifetime chance to make up for the economic backwardness of the Central Eastern Europe. To do so, the challenge for the CEE states lies in making the infrastructure investments a reality. Some of the reasons of the current delays lie in the unmeasured scale and the unrealistic ambitions of the current infrastructure projects. The financial and diplomatic resources needed for a large scale transnational infrastructure project, such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway, entail risks that neither side wants to assume. The Chinese strategy needs to adapt to the scale of the small countries of central and eastern Europe. Then, with less resources for smaller scale projects both sides are enabled to see concrete results and thus establish a lasting of trust and mutual knowledge, before moving on to gigantic transnational cooperation projects such as the "16+1" cooperation is working on to advance or as the new promised Silk Road. ■

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