

China's influence in the CEE countries - the relation and its impact on the region

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Abstract. In the last few years, China has managed to experience an economic boost and maintain its relation with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The paper presents the evolution and the results of the 16+1 initiative from the beginning to the present. It compares it in terms of trade, economy, foreign policy, and geopolitics by identifying China's influence and analysing its importance in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Nonetheless, the development of the 16+1 initiative has demonstrated that China is becoming a power through growing investments and enlargement compared to the European Union (EU). The trade relations between China and the CEE region are constantly growing in fund projects, energy, infrastructure, and transport. Furthermore, the paper tackles factual information to understand Chinese involvement in the CEE and on which spectrum of cooperation from the lenses of the EU.

Keywords: China, 16+1 initiative, European Union, trade, foreign policy

Introduction

China initiated and pushed a cross-regional cooperation initiative to respond to a changing international scenario and consider the needs of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The initiative has made good strides and gathered a wealth of experience since its debut. Reviewing the accomplishments and practical experiences and conducting a thorough assessment of the prospects and challenges are essential for the steady and sustained development of China-CEE cooperation. Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) now consider China a strategic ally. Growing Sino-Central and Eastern European collaboration is a result of the region's economic trajectory. It is widely acknowledged that China is essential to the CEE economy. The 16+1 initiative which is part of China's Newest Economic Belt is currently a top priority for China and its allies in Central and Eastern Europe.

Through this strategy, China and other fastest-growing economies will continue to cooperate economically and across cultural boundaries. In essence, this has given China the chance to expand its influence with financial

support from the new Silk Road fund that was launched concurrently with this collaboration and has already seen billions of dollars of investment awarded. The 16+1 initiative has already had an impact on negotiations between the European Union (EU) and China by fostering détente between two opposing forces. It occurred because it illustrates how cooperation could grow when economies are complementary as contrary to competition. Second, it has given support to smaller economies that previously feared being left outside the initiative due to their small size.

However, a closer analysis reveals a vast network of connections, including regional and national government players as well as an initiative started by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote trade between China and 16 nations in Central and Eastern Europe such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia. To better understand this initiative as well as to ascertain China's long-term objectives and potential effects on the region, the paper aims to present a descriptive approach to ties between China and CEE countries under the scope of the 16+1 initiative. By highlighting the significance of CEE for China and the global market, it tries to grasp the potential of the region. The second part of the paper will modestly examine the range and character of foreign policy and economic relations between China and CEE countries while taking into account the geopolitical significance of the region (Horvath 2020).

Moreover, the paper argues that the initiative has ambiguity because Central and Eastern Europe is the strategic location between Asia and Europe. East Europe is identified as the Heartland, and having control over this part means ruling and having dominance.

China and CEE cooperation is an ongoing process that is interesting to preserve the situation and its future. Based on the economic, foreign policy, and trade outcomes, the paper demonstrates that **China's influence in the CEE countries brings positive outcomes and enhances their economies by giving them chances to expand and develop.** The paper addresses in particular two main research questions regarding cooperation between China and CEE countries. The main research questions are:

- What are the benefits of cooperation between China and CEE countries, and Chinese intentions?
- How is the European Union dealing with the China-CEE relationship?

Hence, the paper concludes that trade numbers, political ties, and economic indicators are sufficient to understand China's short- and long-term influence in the region.

Literature review

Chinese interests in CEE countries range from political to commercial, with the former pushing businesses and investors to look for new opportunities and the latter providing full assistance. The goal of changing China's perception among CEE countries is another one. The CEE countries may be able to assist

China in convincing the EU to grant it a new economic status. It is well-known evidence that the cooperation between China and CEE countries is growing and evolving faster in recent years and cooperation worries the EU of trade relations. However, some of the CEE countries were not willing to perceive China as a friend due to their previous communist system (Turcsányi 2020).

In addition, Goralczyk (2017) argues that China is willing to provide investments and FDI in CEE countries. However, China and EU relations are still regarded as a division between the EU institution based on the Chinese presence and its willingness to enhance economic cooperation (Oehler-Şincai 2018). Additionally, Chinese investments are new in the CEE countries but China never stopped to look for new opportunities.

Szunomár, McCaleb, and Che (2017) defined China's presence in terms of investment flows and trade through its diplomatic efforts. Regarding the EU's response to China-CEE cooperation, Vangeli and Pavličević (2019) suggested that China's involvement in the region has forced the EU to rethink its Western Balkans strategy, adopt measures intended to reaffirm the EU as a central force in the Western Balkans and restrict the scope of Sino-Western Balkans relations through a variety of regulatory and policy frameworks. China has been establishing much stronger relations with the EU as a result of the EU giving the go-ahead for China to become the first non-EU state to contribute to the European Fund for Strategic Investment, despite the EU's attempts to slow down the speed with which China is establishing relationships in the CEE. However, the EU and China have cooperated in a variety of ways when it comes to Western Balkans (Vangeli, Pavličević 2019).

Habova (2021) examined the Chinese challenge to the EU model in a different study and hypothesized that China's presence in the CEE has started to pose a threat to the process of democratization in Eastern Europe since China, in contrast to the EU, grants loans without any conditions. It is further argued that China's engagement in the region could exacerbate the current shortcomings in the European Union due to the lack of solidarity, the core and periphery strategy used by the EU, and its inability to present a realistic vision of the global power shift. Gries and Turcsanyi (2022) investigated how the CEE region perceived China-CEE cooperation and made the case that views of China in CEE are shaped by attitudes toward the country's communist past.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is based on quantitative, qualitative, and historical analysis. The qualitative analysis consists of empirical studies, case studies, publications, writings, books, online journals, reports, research, historical events, papers, and analyses that describe the relationship of China with CEE countries. The quantitative method describes the statistical outcomes for the economic or trade relations with a special focus on imports and exports in 2021 and other relevant outcomes to support economic cooperation. These methods help to understand the future of the China-CEE countries that will develop further besides the economic relation.

The added value of this paper is providing a detailed description of the relationship and Chinese influence from the lens of the European Union. The period of analysis includes the beginning of the Chinese relation with CEE following a depth-analysis and case studies of trade relations with the respective countries of the initiative.

Consequently, the paper also consists of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are to understand by gathering essential data. In addition, secondary sources are important for using available information as a source of data in the paper. This paper interprets data based on tables and explanations regarding export and import as indicators of economic relations for infrastructure, highways, railways, technology, and projects. Additionally, the table used in the paper is about trade relations between China and 16 countries.

Historical ties between China and CEE countries

The 16+1 initiative is a multi-channel diplomacy that brought together diplomatic relations in 2012 in Warsaw between the CEE countries and China. The initiative was perceived as an important landmark project for China since its opening area under Xi Jinping. During the administration of Xi Jinping, several senior officials discussed all the possible approaches to establishing a relationship with the CEE countries, and finally, China came up with 16+1 (Sharma 2021). The official cooperation started in April 2011, when the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Central and Eastern Europe (Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China 2011). Finally, in 2012, China established cooperation between China and CEE countries, and the first meeting of national coordinators was held in Beijing (Eszterhai 2017). China reached to become the second most important trade partner of the CEE countries after the European Union.

The initiative aims to develop economic cooperation that will put the relationship with the 16 countries on the fast track compared to countries' relationship with the European Union. From the Chinese perspective, the initiative brought deeper connectivity to trade, cooperation, and foreign policy. Additionally, the initiative is to complete China's Belt and Road initiative which is a major plan for China. In addition, the cooperation between the CEE countries and China refers to an entry point to the European Common Market that is also a part of the China-EU relationship. During the Cold War, the situation was different for the CEE countries because the dynamics of major powers' relations changed based on the Soviet Union (Zuokui (ed.) 2022). In this case, China had no relationship with any of the countries of the Soviet Union because of the confrontation in ideology and economic abstains. The situation changed after the Cold War because most of the former republics of the Soviet Union joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union (NATO 2022). However, there is a visible divergence between the EU and CEE regarding economic relations.

After the end of the Cold War, the CEE countries have gone through a transformation of their social and political system. The main priority during

this time was to return to Europe regarding foreign and domestic politics. Each country worked harder to adopt the Western economy and get accepted by the EU and NATO. During this period, relations with China were less significant, and the only connectivity was through bilateral relations as there was the non-existence of a common political or ideological system. Following this period, China managed to establish its cooperation despite differences with the CEE countries and developed the cooperation by understanding adjustments in their foreign policy.

The relationship started in the 1990s when China and the sixteen countries of the initiative strengthened their connection even though most of their communist governments failed. Thus, for the first time in 38 years, President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland visited China in 1997 (Drab 2021). His visit presents the improvement between the two countries. The bilateral relationships of the CEE countries with China have improved as China updated its reforms and opened more referring to its foreign policy. Nonetheless, the initiative is a mechanism used by China and CEE countries to make important political decisions at the annual summits. For example, the last summit was held in Croatia in 2019, the other one in Bulgaria in 2018, the other one in Latvia in 2016, and others in China, Serbia, Hungary, Romania, and Poland (Üncel, Güner 2021). Additionally, Greece joined in 2019 as the first member from outside of the former communist system (Kampouris 2019). The former Greek Prime Minister Alexi Tsipras concluded that cooperation with China is an important framework for economic growth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019).

However, the agenda-setting and technical work between China and CEE countries are done by the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, the secretariat of state, and national coordinators of the member states that are elected to represent the countries' governments. The structure of institutions of the 16+1 initiative is scattered across the CEE countries. For example, the 16+1 Agency for the Promotion of Tourism and Association of Enterprises is in Hungary, while the other institutions are in Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Poland: the 16+1 Contact Mechanism for Promotion of Investment is in Poland, the 16+1 Union of Governors - in the Czech Republic, and the 16+1 Logistics Coordination Centre - in Latvia (Pendrakowska 2018).

Having institutions structured in this way brings the influence balance between the CEE countries and China because it gives institutions the ability to communicate information to the public. Based on the historical ties between China and CEE countries, there are different challenges because of their past. The differences are not stopping China and CEE countries from moving ahead as this cooperation helps to overcome the complications created by ideology, culture, identity, and history. The 16+1 initiative is one of the greatest successes of China's influence on the economic approach because it overran the ideological and historical differences and conflicts.

Economic relation between China and CEE countries

China has actively participated in the economic growth of CEE countries and has built a strong and good reputation in the region. The member countries of the initiative can apply their projects to China National Development Bank, Citic Banks, ICBC, BOC, CCB, and China Import and Export Bank (Wang, Tan 2022). Usually, the rate for the preferential loan is 1 to 3% (Lui 2020). The countries agree that the Chinese corporations will complete 80 to 85% of the projects in case Chinese funding is higher regarding the infrastructure. However, insurance does not exist, and only a small amount of administrative fees applies. The loan covers 85% of the project with a duration of 15 years up to 20 depending on the circumstances, and the sovereign is guaranteed (Lui 2020). The economic relationship between China and CEE countries improved in recent years as bilateral trade continues to rise.

Table 1 reflects the exports and imports between China and CEE countries. It can be inferred that China's investments in the CEE region increased in 2021. China continues to remain an important trading partner regarding areas of cooperation. Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Greece are top trading partners, and only Serbia from Western Balkans has greater cooperation

Table 1. China's exports and imports to CEE countries in 2021

Countries	Exports	Imports
Albania	US\$591.56 million	US\$485.88 million
North Macedonia	US\$224.28 million	US\$760.18 million
Serbia	US\$2.24 billion	US\$4.16 billion
Montenegro	US\$96.13 million	US\$289.71 million
Poland	US\$36.58 billion	US\$49.66 billion
Hungary	US\$10.14 billion	US\$9.83 billion
Czech Republic	US\$15.11 billion	US\$35.41 billion
Slovenia	US\$5.36 billion	US\$6.31 billion
Slovakia	US\$4.55 billion	US\$7.66 billion
Greece	US\$11.18 billion	US\$5.92 billion
Bulgaria	US\$2.31 billion	US\$2.51 billion
Romania	US\$6.71 billion	US\$13.73 million
Croatia	US\$1.98 billion	US\$1.21 billion
Bosnia and Herzegovina	US\$136.95 million	US\$1.03 billion
Latvia	US\$1.15 billion	US\$1.02 billion
Estonia	US\$1.01 billion	US\$2.1 billion

Source: Author's compilation based on Trading Economics (<https://tradingeconomics.com>).

compared with Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. To the initiative, China remains the biggest trading partner of Asia for the CEE countries.

Nowadays, bilateral trade focuses on the main area of technological products such as electronics, machinery, infrastructure, and telecommunication. In addition, the agricultural products of the CEE countries have entered the market of China and gained popularity among vendors and local consumers. Several investment projects have been successful in the member countries and had a positive impact referring to the content of China and CEE countries by deepening the connection. The major projects include the Peljesac Bridge and Hungary-Serbia Railway (Chastand 2022).

Investments with special aid loans are for the highway of Montenegro in the south-north part of the country, the Stanari Power Station in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Hungarian-Serbian railway. In addition, China issued special loans with a total amount of 10 billion dollars for investing in the highways, railroads, infrastructure, and other parts of construction. In a comparison of 2012 and 2021, China invested in Serbia with an amount of 2 billion euros in 16 projects worth 5.7 billion euros (Fabrègue 2022). A noted fact is that China started to cooperate with Western Balkans in 2009 when the financial crisis hit the world and in particular Greece. Then, Greece opened its door to China in the same year through the port of Piraeus, and Serbia made China its fourth pillar of foreign policy (Fabrègue 2022).

It was a well-known fact that the Balkan countries needed investments, money, and infrastructure. The Balkan region holds 135 projects which have a value of 32 billion euros and mostly are energy, transport, mining, metallurgy, and transport (Stojkovski et al. 2021). In addition, the Chinese Export-Import Bank has granted loans for projects of an amount of 5.7 billion euros (Stojkovski et al. 2021). In the end, China and CEE countries are deepening their relationship and opening up a broad space for connectivity and cooperation. In terms of energy and infrastructure, China brought opportunities and changes for local development. The cooperation between China and CEE countries has raised a new stage of improvement for a brighter and better prospect.

Brief Chinese foreign policy in CEE countries

For China, the CEE countries refer to a geographic area with a multi-dimensional ideology, geopolitics, and political concepts. The member countries present diversity in social, economic, and political relations. In addition, they do have their similarities but still have different cultures, religions, and foreign policies. However, these features give China an opportunity to set up an initiative for cooperation. Thus, China's relations with CEE countries are crucial for its new diplomatic strategy. Chinese foreign policy changed after the reform started in the country. The main purpose of foreign policy is for China to keep a low profile and make friends more than enemies, have less presence on the international stage, and have no military intervention overseas. Chinese foreign policy is seen as soft power for promoting economic development, peace, language, and security.

By promoting its foreign policy, China is creating a positive image in the international community by helping smaller economies to rise above. China addressed the CEE countries' needs by creating policies and opportunities where each country is winning and benefiting from the agreements. China follows bilateral and multilateral agreements with CEE countries regarding its foreign policy approach (Zuokui 2022). The CEE countries make a region for China a critical point for the geopolitics of the connectivity between East and West. Geopolitics was always a significant phase for understanding European external relations, and many academics, researchers, policymakers, and reports viewed the connectivity between regions or external affairs through the geopolitics. Based on geopolitics, the scale and scope of China-CEE countries developed throughout the years.

China's intensifying economic engagement with CEE creates new opportunities for cooperation and mutually beneficial exchanges, but it also opens new areas of potential connectivity. Central and Eastern European countries are becoming more economically dependent on China, and at the same time, they are becoming more geopolitically aligned with Beijing. There are several areas where these conflicting interests could cause tension in the future. The Central and Eastern European countries are aware of the challenges that come with increased Chinese economic and political activity in their countries. However, the CEE countries are aware of geopolitics because of their history and location throughout the years, they were perceived as pawns in the arena of geopolitical powers.

Based on the Heartland theory, East Europe is identified as the Heartland, and having control over this part means ruling the world. The term was coined by the British geographer Halford John Mackinder, and the CEE countries are part of the Heartland for China and other major powers (Góralczyk 2018). It was not only China interested in the region, other players such as Russia, the United States, Turkey, Germany, and Italy had competition for influence during the Cold War. Based on the historical context, the region faced complex ethnic issues and historical events.

However, the CEE countries are now experiencing a new geopolitical perspective regarding the Chinese footprints in the region. Compared to other major powers, China's influence is not religious, military, or political but rather economic. It is a well-known fact referring to geography that China is far away from the CEE countries due to its culture, ideology, and history and by being different and having a single similarity or previous connection. Furthermore, having the possibility to exert its influence by using an economic perspective has led China to move ahead compared with other powers.

In general, China's footprints in the economic and political affairs of the countries are welcomed and are bringing positive opportunities for development in terms of the economy. China and CEE countries cooperate based on bilateral relations and in some situations, multilateral relations promote, strengthen and bring balanced development to their connection. In the future, the 16+1 initiative will not turn to multilateral cooperation because China's approach laid the basis for bilateralism. The promotion of China in the CEE countries contributes to the regionalization of cooperation and brings positive outcomes for both parties.

The I6+1 initiative has already had a great impact on the negotiation between the EU and China by catalysing rapprochement between two opposing forces: firstly, because it is a good example of how cooperation can develop when economies are complementary and not competitive; secondly, because it has given voice to smaller economies that feared being left out of the equation due to their small size. EU-China relations can have an ambiguous approach towards CEE because some countries accept the Chinese influence and others are more skeptical. However, the countries not supporting China do not mean they are against the EU or are close to working against it. CEE countries need to have cooperation with China and the EU in order to boost their economy as the primary goal remains economic growth.

The countries that are more prone to cooperation with China are Hungary, Serbia, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Poland. The countries that cooperate but are not that euphoric are Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, Romania, and North Macedonia. The least euphoric to cooperate with China are Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most papers point to China as dividing and conquering while removing the European Union from the region. Based on the historical context, countries of the region had a skeptical approach towards China but developed relations with which raised a challenge for the EU regarding cooperation (Lamond, Lucas 2022).

Therefore, it is understandable that the EU might look at China with suspicious eyes regarding its investments, foreign affairs, and economic cooperation. The European Union fears the I6+1 initiative due to the cooperation level with the member countries is lower compared with China. The member states of the initiative seek China's attention and are provoking competition between China and the EU. Additionally, the European Union is concerned about the deals and investments of China that are not always in conformity with EU policies and regulations. Nonetheless, it is earlier to know if China is attempting to sway European policies and practices, including those about labour laws and human rights. Brussels implores China to give a more transparent strategy and more coordinated plan in light of the I6+1 initiative that might result in a readily recognizable interlocutor, understood by all parties involved (Pendrakowska 2018). Even so, maintaining jobs, promoting economic growth, and protecting social stability are goals that the EU and China have in common (Zhigao (ed.) 2018). However, there are many various ways to go about achieving these objectives.

Conclusion

The I6+1 is still a useful tool for learning about the area, finding business opportunities, and acquiring political clout on global concerns. China has recently marketed the I6+1 as "open", creating the possibility for new countries to join the initiative. China will have the chance to attract partners to advance its objectives and enjoy higher international prestige. The 16 member states will continue to use the format to further their interests and deepen their bilateral ties with China. Plans for the BRI should not be disregarded when

evaluating the 16+1 initiative in the context of the EU and China's potential for future collaboration. China's cooperation already offers an alternative to the conventional development model headed by Western institutions. And while being the ideal embodiment of Western institutions, the EU has had some trouble interacting with the distinctly Chinese "Belt and Road".

The CEE countries have the chance to present themselves as a vehicle for negotiations with China in EU decision-making forums as a result of China's presence in the region. Additionally, the 16 states' increased political and economic interactions are facilitated by China's expanding and active presence in region. This strengthens the region's regional integration, which will surely be advantageous to the European project. Another alternative would be to use the 16+1 initiative as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to compensate for the economic underdevelopment of the region. A large-scale international infrastructure project, like the Belgrade-Budapest railway, requires diplomatic and financial resources. Chinese policy must be adjusted to the size of the tiny countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Before advancing to enormous transnational cooperation projects like the 16+1 initiative working to the new promised Silk Road, both sides can see concrete results from smaller-scale projects with fewer resources, which helps to establish lasting trust and mutual knowledge.

What is important are the outcomes of the economic cooperation and to what extent the Chinese geopolitical position will change towards the CEE region and the EU. However, the Chinese presence and the 16+1 initiative influence the negotiation between the EU and China because it enhances the CEE country's economic, political, and trade relations by increasing integration which can be beneficial to the EU. In the end, the paper concludes that the 16+1 initiative allowed China to increase its political and economic influence by working on the advantages and providing good practices in the CEE region. In conclusion, by some politically motivated actors, there is a chance to strengthen Sino-EU ties and their effects on CEE states. The EU and China can take advantage of the chance to strengthen their relationships and their implications for transatlantic relations. International actors can protect ideals and defend a trading system based on rules by shifting their attention to their shared interests and attempting to mend their disputes. However, doing so necessitates addressing respect for each other's sovereignty is a need for any constructive action (Jing 2014).

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