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Editor's Welcome and Some Introductory Remarks

Eight years have passed since Hungary had the pleasure to welcome then Premier Wen Jiabao, and to organise the first China–Central and Eastern European Countries Economic and Trade Forum, the foundation of the cooperation between Beijing and its sixteen regional partner countries, or the 16 + 1 initiative as we know it today. Relations to China were high on the political agenda of all Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in the past years, as everybody was hoping for higher levels of financial liquidity, new jobs and enhanced economic activity amid the crisis-ridden economic environment of the European Union.

This book was written in the framework of a larger research project of the National University of Public Service, Budapest. The project was supported by the research funds of the European Union, and its main aim was to analyse the foreign policy and international affairs of ten CEE countries. The following chapters will guide the reader into the details of the China policy of Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine, that is, it includes the most important countries of the 16 + 1 cooperation, but also goes beyond that framework and offers an insight into the approach of Austria, a wealthy western nation, and Ukraine, a developing Eastern European country. The authors are all one of the most renowned China and foreign policy experts of their respective nations with remarkable experiences and expertise in their field of research.

Each chapter offers a country level approach and covers topics like bilateral political relations, economic and investment ties and cooperation with China in the context of the 16 + 1 and the European Union. Every country has its own, unique understanding of China, and attaches a different

level of importance to its relations to Beijing, focuses on different sectors of bilateral relations and has different aims and goals. It also seems that EU and non-EU members of the CEE region have different achievements with and different approaches towards China. It is a major question, how the political and scientific discourses in the CEE countries see their relationship to China? Is it a success or a failure, based on the developments of the last eight years? How could the cooperation be further developed? What are the main obstacles, and what are the most promising opportunities? Does China play a geopolitical role in the region, or is it simply a business-minded actor?

We hope that the following essays of this book can answer these questions, and thus contribute to the international and domestic debate on the role of China in Europe and in the CEE region. The European Union and its member states have to formulate new and more up to date strategies to address the opportunities and challenges created by the rapid development of China. As President Xi Jinping mentioned in his speech at the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Middle Kingdom is about to return to the middle of the world stage, and every country around the globe must adapt to this new environment. Are we up to the task?

A brief introduction to the findings of the book

The cooperation between China and its sixteen Central and Eastern European partners has attracted a lot of attention and created suspicions ever since it was born in 2011. The so-called 16 + 1 initiative has raised many questions around the European Union, about the true nature of the project, the intentions of the Chinese side and its potential impact on the integrity of the Union. Two years later, in 2013 President Xi Jinping introduced a new, comprehensive initiative, the ‘One Belt, One Road’ project, or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as we know it nowadays. This latter idea is even more complex than 16 + 1 itself. Dozens of conferences and hundreds of articles attempt to find out and to articulate the meaning and substance of the new Silk Road project on a global scale.

When Beijing introduced the outlines of the cooperation between the Middle Kingdom and its sixteen Central and Eastern European partners in 2011–2012, most observers believed that China had a well-prepared and detailed plan in the background. The exclusion of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova from the 16 + 1 project signals that Beijing regards these countries

too important to Moscow to interfere.¹ Since this supposed plan has never been published or even talked about, Western EU member states (and some Eastern ones as well) developed concerns regarding the true intentions of China. Was it to divide and rule Europe?

We had to learn that the Chinese way of thinking and communication is different from the Western style; Beijing follows the East Asian tradition of inductive thinking, while the West tries to understand it through its deductive traditions. It means that countries with different traditions are suspicious of China's intention, because many believe there might be a secret plan behind the curtain. Through the 16 + 1 cooperation we have learned that the only viable way is to create and shape our cooperation together with China, and to think together with Chinese colleagues about the future and details of our common project.

Both 16 + 1 and the BRI are rather an opportunistic idea at a strategic level. Chinese IR scholars and decision-makers realised that the crisis induced financial vacuum and development opportunities in the CEE region and grabbed the chance. The leadership embraced the idea, announced the initiative, dedicated the proper amount of money, and watched what the whole thing started to evolve into. Their approach and strategy have been modified underway according to the newly gained experiences.

When it comes to BRI, the methodology was very alike. Chinese experts realised the strategic opportunity or necessity to integrate Eurasia and to tackle the challenges imposed by the restructuring domestic economy, geostrategy and the TPP and TTIP. The central leadership embraced the idea, announced the proposal of the Silk Road Economic Belt in September and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in October 2013, pledged billions of dollars, and analysed the reactions. Chinese scholars and officials travel around Europe and Asia to ask for ideas and recommendations from their local peers. Dozens of forums and think tanks have been created, equipped with a proper budget and the Chinese side expects everyone to create ideas and content together.

The understanding of time is also different in China and in the West. One of the main problems of the Chinese involvement in the CEE region is that having spent eight years with summits and major announcements many observers complain about the lack of tangible results. Others, especially on the Chinese side argue that we all have to be more patient, as such

¹ Kosovo was excluded since China does not recognise the independence of the country.

achievements take time. Indeed, governments on both sides have done a lot to make business circles aware of mutual opportunities, the legal and political framework has been well established, the gates are open. Now it is up to entrepreneurs, tourists, students and scholars to walk through the gate, and people-to-people and business-to-business relations tend to develop slowly and will bear fruits over several years. According to the Chinese way of thinking, friendship is to be established first, to facilitate good business relations later.

As it was mentioned before, the China–CEE cooperation has attracted a substantial amount of criticism and high levels of suspicions among Western members of the European Union. It is indeed true that the crisis of the EU and the subsequent financial vacuum in the CEE region offered potential business opportunities to China. Even though these opportunities are modest compared to the usual Chinese appetite, given its own domestic economic challenges, Beijing has to grab every possible chance to find business projects for the overcapacity of its companies and for its abundant financial assets.

The cooperation has to face some problems and major structural contradictions when it comes to the future and progress of the China–CEE cooperation. These structural issues may explain the relatively low number of successful businesses and projects. First of all, the difference in the size of the parties involved is obvious and cannot be changed. When China created the 16 + 1 cooperation, it invited all countries between the traditional ‘West’ and ‘East’ from the Baltic to the Balkans (Except Belarus, Ukraine, Kosovo and Moldova). China has established a framework to reduce transaction costs of cooperation with the countries of the so-called “New Europe” and with those to join the club in the upcoming decades. Since the CEE region represents altogether more than a hundred million people and a trillion-dollar economy it did make sense from the Chinese point of view to invite these countries to a table, and to forge major business plans across the region. Individual countries of the region cannot offer projects big enough to Chinese multinational companies, so Beijing expected the countries involved to cooperate and to put joint projects on the table. This expectation has never been met, however, as CEE countries rather compete than cooperate with each other.

Second, another fundamental issue is the divergent investment interests of the parties: while China is mostly looking for infrastructure investment opportunities (preferably through governmental public procurements),

most CEE countries are more eager to attract greenfield investments to create jobs and industrial production. However, China has barely set up any new production facilities in the region; companies of the East Asian giant typically enter the CEE markets through acquisitions, or pursued infrastructure construction opportunities. Furthermore, Central and Eastern European member states of the EU are entitled to apply for non-refundable financial support for infrastructure development. Consequently, Chinese loans are not attractive, while any attempts to pay off Chinese construction companies from European funds might likely provoke political turbulences across the Union, as Croatia experienced it when a Chinese company won a tender to build Pelješac Bridge financed by the EU up to 85% of its cost. That is, both Beijing and the CEE countries seek for a different achievement, which is a fundamental problem, and cannot be sorted out in the short or medium run.

Third, when it comes to merchandise trade issues, the role played by CEE countries and their respective governments is very modest. In the case of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, approximately 90% of exports to China is produced by foreign owned multinational companies, that is, politicians in Budapest, Bratislava or Prague cannot really influence such trade relations, no matter how good their political connections are to Beijing. The more developed CEE countries are integral parts of global value chains; thus, the majority of their foreign trade is conducted by multinational and not domestically owned companies. Consequently, national governments have a very limited impact on the development of trade relations. One sector where they seem to be successful is the export of food and agricultural products to China. Hungary increased its agricultural export sevenfold between 2012 and 2017, which is a great achievement, though the sector represents only 3% in the total export of the country to China. In other fields of the economy, however, Central and Eastern European SMEs are usually too weak to start and facilitate their own business relations in China, or the product they have is not interesting to the Chinese side.

Political relations

The Visegrád Four countries (V4: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) represent the core of the CEE region, and the V4 appeared to be high on the agenda of Beijing from the beginning of its recent rapprochement

with the CEE countries. The initial 16 + 1 business forum took place in Budapest in 2011 and Warsaw hosted the first summit of the heads of government a year later where Wen Jiabao presented the '12-measure initiative', which meant the formal beginning of the 16 + 1 cooperation. In the following years, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary became strategic partners of China, while Budapest has long been considered one of the most stable partners of China in the region, hosting the vast majority of the Chinese investments, the largest Chinese community and the regional headquarters of major Chinese companies. The importance of the V4 countries in the CEE region is obvious when it comes to trade and investment relations between the region and China. Still, it seems that the major target of Chinese activities in the new era of China–CEE relations is not the V4 countries, but the Western Balkans. China has been more successful in finding business opportunities and construction projects in the non-EU member states of the 16 countries of the region. Lower legal standards and the higher level of need for financial support in those countries might have played a role in its achievements.

According to the understanding of Dragana Mitrović of the University of Belgrade, China pursues a strategy in the CEE region to multiply and strengthen its presence in Europe, to build stronger influence in the EU and to get multiplied economic and geopolitical gains through construction, financial and investment activities, trade and by spreading Chinese culture. Indeed, many say around the EU that China tries to 'divide and rule' Europe through its relations to CEE countries. It is hard to prove such a statement, but whatever the reality may be, it is for sure that all countries in Europe try to forge good relations with Beijing. CEE countries merely follow global trends, but there are major differences in their political approaches. As Alice Rezkova of the Czech Republic argues, it can be tempting to barter political points for Chinese investments. However, this approach can be hazardous for the Czech Republic. From other sources it seems that the current Czech president personally attaches great importance to Sino–Czech relations, while other segments of the elite and the wider society do not share his enthusiasm about China. Czechs have a long record of accomplishment of a value-based foreign policy, where human rights and political freedom matters a lot, thus the country's friendship with China is a rather recent development. Meanwhile the Hungarian–Chinese relationship seems to be more deeply rooted, without any political tensions. Politically sensitive issues have disappeared from the agenda in the last eight years, the

government is more than eager to cooperate with Beijing, while opposition parties either support a pro-China policy or they simply do not care about it. Poland considers itself a major European country, thus it created a well-established system of cooperation with China. As Justyna Szczudlik writes, Poland–China relations are carried on three different levels: bilateral (both on central and local levels), the 16 + 1 cooperation, and finally on the EU level. The close relationship of Polish and Chinese local governments, on regional and city levels is probably one of the unique features of Sino–Polish relations. Dr. Szczudlik is convinced that has Poland achieved its political goals in its relations with China, Polish representatives take part in all 16 + 1 mechanisms, have contacts with Chinese officials and shape relations in various areas, while there are three 16 + 1 mechanisms headquartered in Poland. Romanian–Chinese ties are less vibrant, at least according to Andreea Brînză. As she writes, the last period of strong relations was during the government of Victor Ponta, but ever since he stepped down, relations became stagnant, though still seen as a traditional friendship. Romanian prime ministers skipped two 16 + 1 summits and the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, and none of the projects proposed at the 2013 Bucharest Summit have been materialised. Compared to initially enthusiastic countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland, Slovakia has been more cautious in its approach towards China. According to Richard Turcsányi, Bratislava has always tried to avoid taking anti-Chinese critical stances, but at the same time it is also considered one of the least active countries of the 16 + 1. As Dr. Turcsányi argues, Slovakia might have been the first to realise, that such a small country cannot really do business with China. Furthermore, this approach of Slovakia seems to pay-off, as other CEE countries have been targeted by criticism of EU institutions and major member states. Ukraine, a country with very turbulent recent history, has to follow a very careful China strategy. Our Ukrainian contributor, Sergiy Gerasymchuk sheds light on the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyiv was looking for new friends to increase its diplomatic space of manoeuvre vis-à-vis Russia. Leonid Kuchma perceived Beijing as an alternative pole of the international arena to hedge against the West and Russia at the same time. China also appreciated Kyiv's openness and declared Ukraine as its key partner in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the PRC was cautious enough not to include Ukraine into the 16 + 1 back in 2012, and the subsequent events in the Eastern part of the country proved that Beijing avoided a potential friction with Moscow.

Trade relations

Trade with China is a heated topic nowadays all around the world, and some CEE countries also face difficulties in this regard. The biggest player of the region, Poland could not achieve its main economic goal, to narrow the trade deficit. What is worse, the trade deficit has been expanding significantly in the last few years. This development has had an impact on political relations as well, as Polish officials started to talk about the trade deficit as a serious political problem in bilateral relations. That is understandable, given that Polish trade deficit with China is close to USD 25 billion (Figure 1).

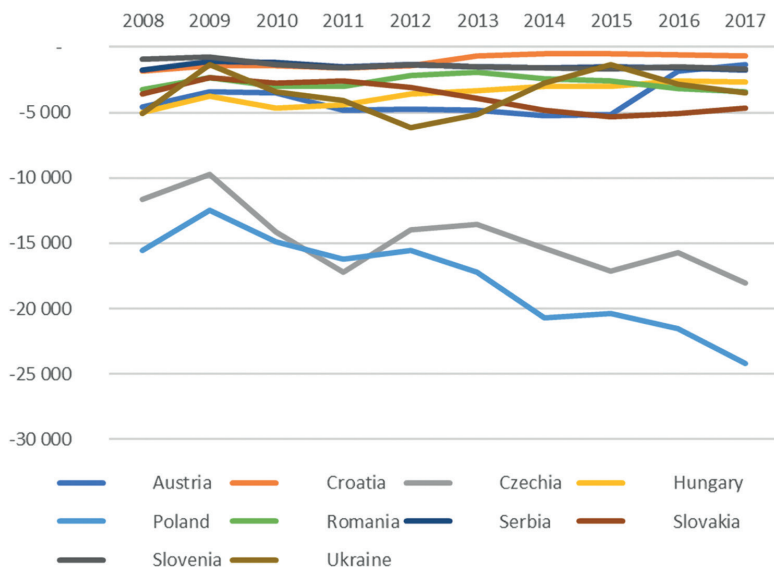


Figure 1
Trade deficit of CEE countries to China (USD million)

Source: UNCTAD Stat 2018.

All other CEE countries are in a similar situation, as far as their trade with China is running on a deficit, though there are huge differences in its size and structure. Relatively speaking Serbia is in a desperate situation as its

imports were thirty times higher than exports to China in 2017.² In case of Romania the pattern is similar, though less concerning, as the country imported goods for USD 4.3 billion and exported for USD 833 million last year according to Andreea Brînză. Hungary enjoys a relatively stable trade relation with China; exports reached USD 2.6 billion last year, while imports were standing at USD 5.3 billion. Despite the trade deficit, the Hungarian Government is not concerned of the situation, as most of the products imported to the country from China are parts and other components of final products, thus Chinese import means input to the Hungarian manufacturing sector. As it can be seen on Figure 1, the other country suffering of a huge trade imbalance with China is the Czech Republic next to Poland. The trade deficit with China represents 91% of the total trade deficit of the Czech Republic, and in case of Poland, the deficit with China is three times bigger than the total trade deficit of the country.³ Austrian trade with China has been slowing down, but still, its growth rate is higher than average, thus the relative importance of China as a trading partner for Austria is on the rise, and this is true for almost every single country of the region.

Investment relations

The Chinese investment pattern is changing constantly. While energy and raw materials have been the most attractive to invest in, mostly by Chinese state-owned enterprises, the tide has been turning in the recent years as more and more medium sized private companies discover opportunities abroad, thus the outflow of Chinese FDI grows rapidly. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Romania host the major part of Chinese investment in Central and Eastern Europe;⁴ however, countries in the Western Balkans recently have been more successful in attracting Chinese investment. According to most experts, Chinese FDI has been flowing into countries like Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia since they are not members of the

² UNCTAD Stat 2018.

³ UNCTAD Stat 2018.

⁴ Please note that the available FDI data are unreliable, and tend to vary widely in different sources. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, the CEE16 countries host USD 18 billion, out of which 8 billion is located in the V4 countries. However, other sources mention significantly lower levels of Chinese investment into the CEE region.

European Union, thus strict EU level regulations of public procurement and other investment procedures do not apply. Meanwhile, Chinese enterprises have not found many opportunities in EU members of the CEE region, as the above-mentioned rules and regulations seem to be too strict and complicated compared to the business environment on the Balkans or back in China. However, the Belt and Road Initiative may reinvigorate Chinese investment and business activities in other countries of the CEE region as well, as these countries have a crucial geographical location and their will to attract Chinese infrastructure construction companies may increase in the upcoming years. Austria is one of the few countries, which actively invests into China, instead of merely focusing on Chinese investment into Austria. According to Waltraut Urban, investing in China will remain attractive for Austrian companies despite many challenges and the slowing down of economic growth in China. The restructuring Chinese economy and its new aim to pursue qualitative growth and high technology and higher value-added production, rapid urbanisation and the BRI also provide investment opportunities for Austrian companies with a focus on high-end machinery and environmentally friendly technologies. Meanwhile there are serious challenges for Austrian enterprises doing business in China, such as violation of property rights, forced technology transfer, unfair treatment, legal and factual restrictions in certain business segments. These issues have to be addressed on the EU level. Though Austria is highly interested in investing in China, Chinese companies have not invested much into Austria so far. Only 0.5% of the total FDI stock is of Chinese origin, Chinese investors focus on the machinery and transport equipment sector; nevertheless, as a result of domestic economic development in China, their investment spectrum may broaden in the near future.

Other CEE countries tend to focus on attracting Chinese investment, rather than investing in the East Asian country. The amount of Chinese capital in Croatia is very low, it was close to zero until 2017, but even today is less than EUR 200 million. Others, like Richard Turcsányi argue that the lack of Chinese investment is not of concern. Slovakia did not attract any significant Chinese investments, but it does not make it much different from other CEE countries, which host more Chinese FDI, but this is still negligible, thus, 'late-comer' Slovakia has not missed anything important. Poland has been somewhat more successful in attracting investment from China, but, as Justyna Szczudlik sustains, most of them are mergers or acquisitions (several of them perceived as high-quality takeovers), not greenfield investments

what Poland is looking for. Hungary faces a similar problem. Though the country hosts by far the highest amount of FDI from China in the CEE region, Budapest has been unable to attract any new, major investors in the past few years, and 75% of the stock of Chinese investment is due to one single, huge acquisition. Meanwhile, outside of the EU, Chinese capital has been looking for different kinds of targets. In Ukraine, Chinese state-owned companies have the chance to rent up to 3 million hectares of farmland in the eastern part of the country and largest volume of investment flowed into enterprises active in agriculture, forestry and fishing, industry, wholesale and retail trade. It has to be noted, however, that many projects labelled as ‘Chinese investment’ in CEE countries, are loans in reality and not FDI. In many cases, even CEE governments depict such transactions as Chinese investment to prove the importance of bilateral relations to their constituencies.

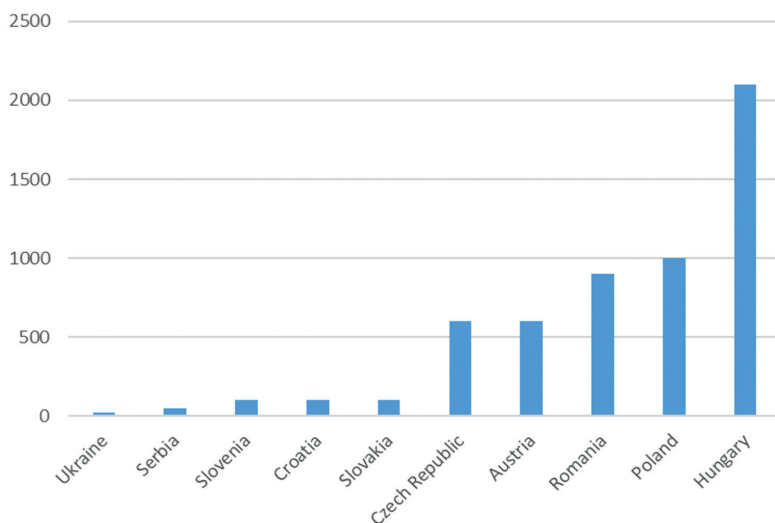


Figure 2
Stock of Chinese Investment as of 2017

Note: Serbian data is from 2015.

Source: HANEMANN–HUOTARI 2018; The Economist 2018; HKTDC 2018.

Despite expectations, however, the overall level of Chinese investment has remained relatively low in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative

Though the development of 16 + 1 relations has been slowing down recently, the BRI may offer new impetus to the regional cooperation. As most CEE countries have a favourable geographical position when it comes to connectivity between the EU and Asia, they seem to play an inevitable role in the implementation of BRI programs between Europe and China. Since the EU set up its own plans on connectivity, furthermore created an EU–China connectivity platform, CEE countries may find even more opportunities to develop their infrastructure.

The looming project of connecting the port of Piraeus in Greece with Budapest through Macedonia and Serbia is one of the first examples of how BRI and 16 + 1 may eventually merge together. Meanwhile China is considering relocating some of its industrial or manufacturing capacities into foreign countries to rebalance its domestic economic structure and its foreign trade. Central and Eastern Europe is a region which might be able to attract such kind of Chinese investment, and transportation corridors of the BRI may offer a particularly good chance. Of course, it is of utmost importance to convince Brussels and Western member states of the European Union that the 16 + 1 cooperation could help them with reaping the benefits of BRI. Instead of seeing Chinese construction companies as competitors in the CEE region, European companies may find the way to join them in building new transportation systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Beijing is willing to provide financial support to major construction projects, while EU funds are about to be reallocated from the CEE to Southern Europe in the upcoming years. Budapest should not be the terminal station of the Belgrade–Budapest railway line, and the railroad could continue its path to the north, until it reaches the Baltic sea in Poland. The region desperately needs a north–south corridor, and China would be happy to finance it, while German, French, Austrian etc. companies could find their way to cooperate with their Chinese counterparts for the benefit of all, at least according to optimistic voices. Countries like Croatia see more potential in the BRI, as it opens opportunities for transport infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic shows more restraint to the BRI. That is understandable given the unfortunate fact that the Czech Republic will be benefiting the least from the higher levels of connectivity between China and the EU. The mutual trade exchange may increase only by 2.82% in comparison to 8.22% in case of Poland or 9.18% in case of Slovakia according to the study of Alice Rezkova.

The image of China in the CEE countries

China's image has been going through significant changes all around Europe in the recent years. In Western Europe, governments and elites have developed deep concerns about the intentions of Beijing, and many argue that the EU should return to its strong, traditional, value-based stance towards China, as 'appeasement' and soft power did not work. European elites realised that there has not been and probably will never be any convergence between the European and the Chinese political and value system. Consequently, the perception of China has deteriorated in many European countries. Central and Eastern Europe is as diverse as always in this regard as well. According to a recent survey of the European Commission (Figure 3) Romanians, Croatians have a very positive attitude towards China (56% and 54% respectively), Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks and Austrians are slightly above the EU average, while Czechs nurture the most negative feelings about China in the CEE region (25% positive) and they are the most negative (69%) in the whole EU. That is, it cannot be said that CEE member states all have the same perception of China.

QCS.7 As regards each of the following countries or group of countries, do you have a positive or a negative view about it?

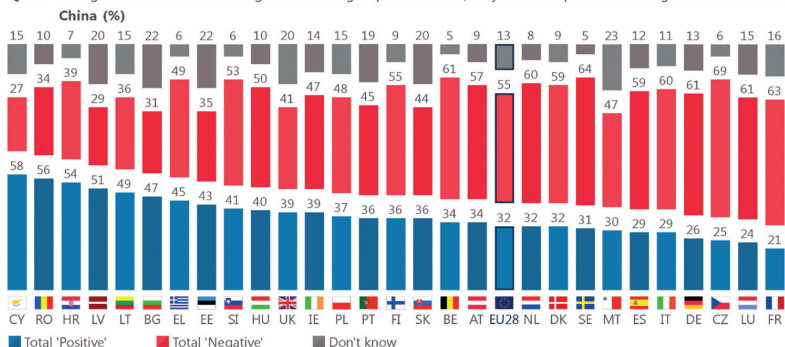


Figure 3
How Europeans see China

Source: European Commission 2017.

Another survey conducted by the China–CEE Institute in Budapest brought similar results. Countries like Slovenia, Serbia and Romania see a dramatic increase in the global importance of China. Meanwhile results in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are less encouraging.⁵

The findings of these surveys are in line with the overall opinion of our contributors in this book. As Anastasya Raditya-Ležaić from Croatia states in her essay, the Croatian public rhetoric towards China is very positive, and the country seems to be open to Chinese investment and cooperation both on a bilateral level and within the frameworks of BRI and the 16 + 1. Meanwhile, as Alice Rezkova mentions, the Czech Republic sends very mixed messages to the Chinese side. The government pursues a pro-China policy, while the public sentiment has been traditionally critical towards the policies of Beijing. Czech tends to be sharply critical of the status of human rights in China and they support Taiwanese and Tibet exiles. The Polish Government has been reconsidering its pro-China policy recently, as the deteriorating image of China in the EU may have an impact on the political influence of Poland itself in the integration. Justyna Szczudlik argues that Warsaw became rhetorically more vocal about the trade deficit and more restrained towards Chinese investments in the country, and Poland's policy towards China will get closer to the approach of the EU and the U.S.

In conclusion, the diversity of the Central and Eastern European region has a significant impact on its relations with China. Some countries like Austria focus on economic relations leaving political cooperation aside. Others, like Hungary see a great potential in political relations with Beijing, while Poland reconsidered its position and became less enthusiastic of the cooperation with China. Business, trade and investment results also show a mixed picture, with some significant achievements on the Balkans, and lack of major tangible results in bigger countries of the region. Based on all of these, it seems that the biggest challenge in front of bilateral relations with China is the spread of disappointment in the region, what may lead to a general 'China fatigue' in the countries concerned. China is aware of this threat, which might have made Beijing reconsider its plans to organise 16 + 1 summits only in every second year. Indeed, such a move could have easily triggered a vicious circle in the region, as CEE political leaders would take such a move as a devaluation of the cooperation.

⁵ CHEN 2018.

Still it is not easy to answer the initial question of this endeavour. Is the cooperation with China a success or a failure? I believe the answer is certainly not failure. Both sides have learned a lot about each other in the recent years, many intangible connections have been created between politicians, business people, students, professors and intellectuals and even between ordinary people. These ties will bear fruits in the long run, we just need to be patient to see more successes in China–CEE relations.

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