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China–Croatia Relations: Preview and Outlook

Abstract

The bilateral relations between Croatia and China have been friendly ever since the diplomatic relations were established in 1992. However, not much is going on in terms of economic relations and trade despite many efforts to intensify economic cooperation. In 2017, the first notable Chinese investment was realised in Croatia in the tourism sector, and a Chinese consortium won a tender to implement a politically important transport infrastructure project in Croatia. This chapter gives a review of the milestones of both political and economic relations since the Croatian independence to the present days. It also looks at relations within policy-specific frameworks such as Belt and Road Initiative, CEEC and China cooperation and China–EU relations. The conclusion includes the sectors with the most potentials and interests as well as the outlook of political and economic relations.

Keywords: China, Croatia, bilateral relations, Chinese investment

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Political relations

The People's Republic of China (PRC) recognised the Republic of Croatia on 27 April 1992, and diplomatic relations were established on 13 May 1992 when the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia signed the Joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Croatia. Later in the same month, China voted in favour of Resolution No. 753 of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, supporting the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the UN.

In China, Croatia is represented by two representative offices: an embassy in Beijing with five diplomatic staff and a consulate in Hong Kong with an honorary consul, while China is represented by an embassy in Zagreb with twelve diplomatic staff. A total of 65 bilateral agreements and bilateral acts have been signed between the Republic of Croatia and the PRC.

This part of the chapter searches for shared interests between Croatia and China based on the agreements and acts signed and the motives of state and official visits exchanged. It reviews political disagreements including the current issue of appeals raised by an Austrian company and an Italian–Turkish consortium against a Chinese consortium over a bid for Croatian Pelješac Bridge construction.

Common and converging interests

Since Croatia gained independence in 1992, many state and official visits have been organised between China and Croatia, showing good bilateral relations between the two countries. Official visits are usually done by high-level officials, ministers or prime ministers, while state visits are defined as the visit of presidents of the states. State visits usually represent the highest expression of friendly relations between two sovereign states.² The list of official and state visits can be seen in Appendix 1.

² KOTARSKI–KOS-STANIŠIĆ 2016.

During the state visit of the Croatian President in 1993 for example, three bilateral agreements were signed: Agreement on Promotion and Mutual Protection of Investments, Agreement on Cooperation in Culture and Education, and Agreement on Maritime Transport. The complete list of bilateral agreements and acts between Croatian and China can be seen in Appendix 2.

Based on the signed bilateral agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation, and the type of state and official visits that have been done, the area of cooperation between Croatia and China that represent common interests of the two states can be categorised as follows:

1. Economic cooperation, including trade, investments and SMEs development
2. Diplomacy and foreign affairs, including education and training for diplomatic staff
3. Transport and transport infrastructure, including air transport and maritime transport
4. Cooperation on science, education, culture and technology
5. Cooperation on tourism
6. Security and defence, including internal affairs and police cooperation
7. Health and medicine, including traditional medicines
8. Agriculture and aquaculture

Since the MoU on cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was signed in 2017, cooperation has converged within this framework, which covers many sectors, although heavily focused on transport and transport infrastructure. During 2018 and 2019, eight MoUs, cooperation plans and programmes were signed between Croatian and Chinese ministries, covering the area of culture, tourism, sport, science, economic cooperation and medicine. It is also worth mentioning that for the first time in history, a Chinese Prime Minister paid a state visit to Croatia in 2019 in the framework of the 16 + 1 summit held in Croatia. Following the state visit of the Chinese Prime Minister in Croatia, the Chinese Ambassador in Croatia Xu Erwen stated in September 2019 that the bilateral relations between China and Croatia had entered its best period in history. The bilateral cooperation within BRI is discussed in section *Belt and Road cooperation* of this study.

Disputes and problematic issues

Croatia and China have never experienced any political disputes in the history of their bilateral relations. However, it is worth mentioning that currently there was a China-related problem regarding the construction of the Pelješac Bridge in the southern part of Croatia.

Back in September 2017, Croatian Roads published a call for tenders to build the 2.4 km long Pelješac Bridge that would connect the Dalmatian peninsula of Pelješac to the mainland. This bridge is significant for Croatia from a political point of view since it would finally connect Dubrovnik-Neretva County with the rest of the country. This county is at the moment separated from the rest of Croatia by a short strip of the Bosnian coast that interrupts the continuity of Croatian and EU territory. The European Commission approved that the EU will contribute 85% of the cost of the construction through the Cohesion Funds.

Three consortiums submitted their offers for the bid: a Chinese consortium led by the China Road and Bridge Corporation – CRBC (bid €279 million to do the job), an Austrian company Strabag (bid €352 million) and a consortium comprising an Italian company Astaldi and a Turkish company IC Ictas (bid €342 million). In January 2018, Croatian Roads announced the result of the competition and decided that the Chinese consortium (addressed as CRBC throughout this study) won the bid and would build the bridge.³ The reason was that their bid was the most economically advantageous and the cheapest choice. Within the period of 15 days to file a legal complaint, Austrian Strabag filed a complaint, claiming that CRBC might have used dumping prices to win the bid.⁴ The appeal also alleged that as CRBC is a Chinese state owned company, it is likely that it “received state aid for entering the EU market through this project which is not in line with the community acquis”.⁵ Further in the complaint documentations, Strabag pointed out thirteen controversial pricing items. One example was the price of disposal of the excavated soil in the construction which CRBC offered at only €75,700, while Strabag offered at €1.9 million. Strabag claimed that the price CRBC offered was not realistic since it would not even cover the fuel for transporting the excavated soil to

³ PAJIĆ 2018.

⁴ ŽABEC–KORBler 2018.

⁵ ŽABEC–KORBler 2018.

the destined landfill.⁶ Later, the Italian–Turkish consortium filed a similar appeal.

Following the appeals, in a press conference Hu Zhaoming, Chinese Ambassador to Croatia stated that the appeals were groundless, and that the complaint was not aimed at CRBC but rather to question the jurisdiction of the Croatian Government and of the European institutions.⁷ The State Commission for Supervision of Public Procurement handled the appeals and decided on 26 March 2018 to reject both appeals. Following this decision, CRBC signed a contract to build the bridge in 23 April. The construction of the bridge is estimated to be completed in three years.

Two years later, in May 2020, the works at the construction site of the bridge are in full swing. In spite of the crisis and lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the bridge is being constructed according to the planned dynamics. In March 2020, 614 workers were registered to be working at the construction site: 70 engineers, interpreters and drivers are Croatian nationals, and the rest are Chinese nationals.⁸ The main impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is a prolonged delivery time of imported materials to the construction site.

Public opinion and domestic rhetoric towards China, before and during Covid-19

The issue of appeals against CRBC in the Pelješac Bridge tender was widely covered by the Croatian media in the first third of 2018. However, public opinion and domestic rhetoric towards China are quite positive. A research conducted by GfK Croatia involving 1,000 respondents as a sample of the population, released in March 2018, shows that 86% of Croats are in favour of Chinese investments in Croatia. This research showed that Croats no longer perceive China as a big communist country, but rather as a modern global power with growing economic and political influence in the world.⁹ Only 3% of the population sees the political relations of China and Croatia as unfriendly.

⁶ ŽABEC–KORBLER 2018.

⁷ CSEBA 2018.

⁸ PRKUT 2020.

⁹ PAVIĆ 2018.

Related to economic cooperation and investments, respondents think that cooperation should be done in the sectors of infrastructure, tourism and e-trade. Respondents were also asked why, in their opinion, the level of investment is so low, when in fact the public support is big. Most of the respondents blame the slow and complicated Croatian bureaucracy and the Croatian Government. The complete answers of the respondents are shown in Figure 1. On the issue of education and culture, the research found that every second Croat would like his/her child/children to learn the Mandarin Chinese language, and every third Croat would go to study in China.¹⁰ It should be noted that although this research was conducted by a global and independent research company GfK, the research itself was funded and ordered by the Chinese Embassy in Croatia. Despite the fact that the research was conducted by a *bonafide* company, the timing of the research collided with the dispute and appeals against the Chinese consortium with regard to the Pelješac Bridge construction. The timing of the research could be meant to raise public support for CRBC.

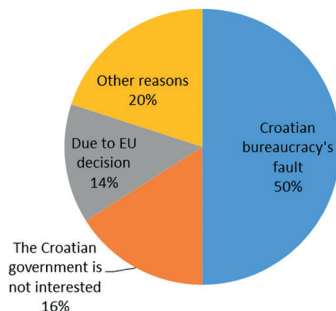


Figure 1

Public opinion on why Chinese investment in Croatia is low

Source: GfK in PAVIĆ 2018.

Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, public rhetoric in Croatia towards China stayed positive. CRBC, the same company that is constructing Pelješac Bridge donated 20,000 face masks and HRK 800,000.00 (around EUR 106,000.00) to Croatia, handed to the Directorate of Civil Protection of the Ministry of the Interior of Croatia. Later the Government of Croatia

¹⁰ PAVIĆ 2018.

also procured around 400 tons of medicinal and protection equipment from China, including face masks, gloves, protection kit and sterilisers. However, the Government did not openly reveal to the public how much of the package are Chinese donation to Croatia and how much of it was actually purchased.¹¹ No public procurement was involved.

Changes after the accession of Croatia to the EU

Croatian accession to the EU in 2013 brought significant changes related to the common policies of the EU that Croatia has to respect. It is said that many negotiations for the sake of investment, especially in the transport infrastructure sector, had failed because Croatia hesitated to accept Chinese offers due to the fact that the deal might not be in line with EU guidelines or could undermine EU policies and *acquis*.¹² Referring to the research conducted by GfK presented in Figure 1, 14% of Croats believed that the EU is the reason why the Chinese investment in Croatia is so low despite the high interests of the two countries to cooperate.

There has not been any official statement made by the EU following the Pelješac Bridge issue, but it has been portrayed as a sensitive issue in the media. Chinese investment had entered Europe before, however, it was the first time for a Chinese contractor to contribute to a project co-financed by the EU. Political analysts have argued in the media that the EU might apply drastic measures of supervision during the construction, but it is only to be seen once the construction process starts.

Fox and Godement¹³ categorised EU member states into two categories related to the EU–China relations: the supportive ones and the critical ones. Using their criteria and subcategories, Kotarski and Kos-Stanišić categorised the member states into four: assertive industrialists, for the countries who are critical towards China; ideological free-traders, for the countries who are ready to pressure China on political issues but reluctant to endorse imposition on trade; accommodating mercantilists, for the countries that refrain from criticising China on political issues because they want to secure China's benevolence in improving their market access; and European followers,

¹¹ FRLAN GAŠPAROVIĆ 2020.

¹² STANZEL et al. 2016.

¹³ FOX–GODEMENT 2009.

for the countries that do not consider their relationship with China a very important pillar. In their research, Kotarski and Kos-Stanišić concluded that Croatia belongs to the latest group.¹⁴ Now with the intensifying cooperation between China and Croatia in the last two years, Croatian interest might change, and it might no longer be just a European follower.

Economic relations

Since diplomatic relations between China and Croatia was established, bilateral economic cooperation has been cultivated. To enhance economic and trade relations between Croatia and China, there is a mechanism called the Sino–Croatian Joint Committee for Economy and Trade that holds regular working meetings. The Chinese Embassy in Zagreb plays an active role in this mechanism, but also in maintaining economic relations between the two countries in general.

In 2016, the Embassy held a summit between Chinese and Croatian businessmen aimed at boosting economic relations. 100 businessmen, representatives of over 50 companies from the coastal region of Zhejiang in China came to Zagreb, Croatia, to meet over 50 companies from Croatia, and to discuss possibilities of investment and trade in the spectrum of sectors like construction, communications, chemicals, energy, car-making, electronics and food. In this summit, the companies from China showed interest in investing in the ports of Rijeka in the north and in Ploče in the south for unloading containers with Chinese goods for Europe.¹⁵ Interests for investments in the Croatian seaports and railway never faded out. During the state visit of Prime Minister Li to Croatia in 2019, these were once again the main topics discussed.¹⁶

In April 2019, the 9th Business Forum of CEEC and China was held in Dubrovnik, Croatia, attended by a record high number of participants: thousands of business owners coming from 17 countries, 130 big companies and over 260 small and medium enterprises. Seven agreements and/or Memorandums of Understanding between Croatian and Chinese companies were signed during this forum (see Table 1).

¹⁴ KOTARSKI–KOS-STANIŠIĆ 2016.

¹⁵ MILEKIĆ 2016.

¹⁶ ZEBIĆ 2019.

Table 1
Agreements signed during the 9th Business Forum of CEEC and China 2019

Croatian signatory	Chinese signatory	Field of cooperation
Ministry of Health	Pharmaceutical company Sinopharm	Cooperation in science, health tourism, medicines, financial supports and arrival of Chinese patients to Croatia
Faculty of Civil Engineering, University of Zagreb	China Road and Bridge Corporation	Mobility of students and exchange of knowledge
HŽ Infrastructure	China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group Corporation & China Road and Bridge Corporation	Transport project, railway Rijeka–Zagreb and the Mediterranean corridor
Metamorfoza d. o.o.	Shanghai Everglow Management Partners	Opening of the Museum of Illusion in Shanghai (tourism and cultural cooperation)
Stadion Kantrida	Top International Engineering Corporation (TIEC)	Construction of a new football stadium in Rijeka including its hotel and business centre
Eco Consult	Top International Engineering Corporation (TIEC)	Projects related to renewable energy sources and emission reduction (in industrial processes)

Source: Croatian Ministry of Economy 2019.

Export–import relations

Croatia's main trading partners are Italy, Slovenia, Germany, Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. China is not yet among the most important trading partners for Croatia. However, there is an increasing trend of export volume in recent years. In 2016, Croatian export to China for all products was worth USD 83 million, while import from China reached USD 645 million. In 2018, the value of Croatian export to China has almost doubled, to USD 158 million, while import from China only raised around 50% to a total of USD 952 million. The value has been rising, but the amount of trade exchange with Croatia is very small, the whole share of total trade exchange of China. Croatia imports eight times more goods from China than exports in 2016. This figure enhanced a little bit in 2018 when Croatian import was

only six times higher than its export to China (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Almost half of the Croatian export to China is capital goods, including timber, leather, aluminium and stone, while most of the Croatian import from China is consumer goods including textile products, household appliances, computers and electronic goods.¹⁷

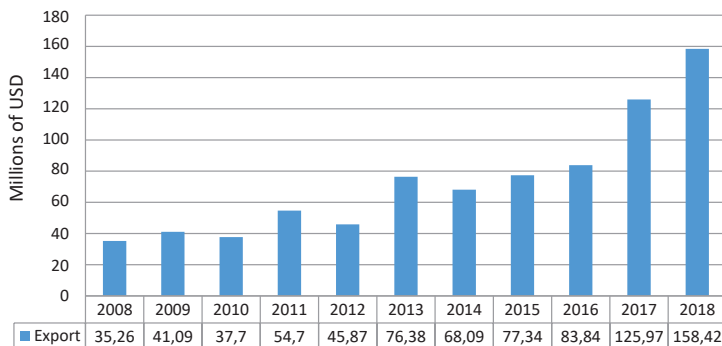


Figure 2

Croatian export to China in USD million

Source: World Bank 2020.

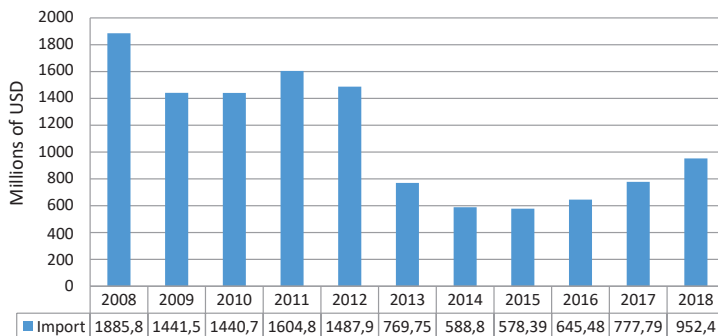


Figure 3

Croatian import from China in USD million

Source: World Bank 2020.

¹⁷ World Bank 2018.

In 2017, the Croatian Chamber of Economy (HGK) had opened an office in Shanghai to assist Croatian companies in China and Croatian exporters. The main reason of the decision to open an office was the rise of Croatian export to China, which was 93% higher in 2014 compared to 2008.¹⁸ The raise of the export was mainly a result of a very high increase in export of woods, raw materials and minerals.¹⁹ The Chamber (HGK) also offered common offices in their premises in Shanghai for their members (Croatian firms) to use, especially because the interest for Chinese market is raising within Croatian entrepreneurs.

Trends of Foreign Direct Investments

FDI inflow from China to Croatia was insignificant up until 2016. In 2014 for example, the share of FDI from China was less than 0.05% of the overall FDI inflow to Croatia that year. UNCTAD recorded Chinese FDI of USD 1 Million in 2008 and 2010,²⁰ but newer data is not available. Using the assets/liability principle, the Croatian Central Bank presented the fluctuation of FDI inflow to Croatia from China²¹ (see Figure 4).

The big leap of the FDI inflow in 2017 is directly related to the first investment from China that was realised in that year. Chinese real estate company Zhongya invested in the tourism business in Krapinske Toplice, constructing both residential and touristic resorts worth EUR 30 million.²² The business deal was a fruitful cooperation between the Mayor of Krapinske Toplica Ernest Svažić and a private association called Chinese Southeast European Business Association (CSEBA). CSEBA connects investors from China with business opportunities in Southeast Europe. Planning to develop health tourism and four-star wellness resort, a meeting was held between teams of medical experts from both China and Krapinske Toplice to develop further cooperation.²³

In 2018, the same company Zhongya bought “Hotel Zagorje”, a complex of buildings in Kumrovec, the same region in Krapina-Zagorje County in the

¹⁸ KORETIĆ 2017.

¹⁹ World Bank 2018.

²⁰ UNCTAD 2014.

²¹ Croatian Central Bank 2018.

²² DRAŠKIĆ 2017.

²³ BRODAR 2017.

north of Croatia. The transaction was agreed at the value of 2 million Euros, but the company did not manage to pay the amount despite extension of terms given twice by the Croatian side.

CSEBA claimed to have prepared a big production of a Chinese action movie that will be made in several locations across Croatia. By exposing Croatian cities and locations through an action movie,²⁴ a substantial promotion of Croatian tourism in the Chinese market will be done, which might be followed by a high rise of Chinese tourists' visit to Croatia.

Tourism is an important sector in the Croatian economy, and a good start for further cooperation. In 2017, direct contribution of tourism to GDP was USD 6 billion or 10.9% of the total GDP, and it created 138,000 jobs, which is 10.1% of the total employment in the country.²⁵

Apart from tourism, at the end of 2018 a big investment project was launched when a Chinese construction company Norinco International Cooperation bought 76% of the Croatia-based Energija Projekt that developed the 156 MW wind farm project Enar Senj. The transaction was worth 32 million Euros. Until the end of 2020, Norinco plans to install 39 wind turbines.

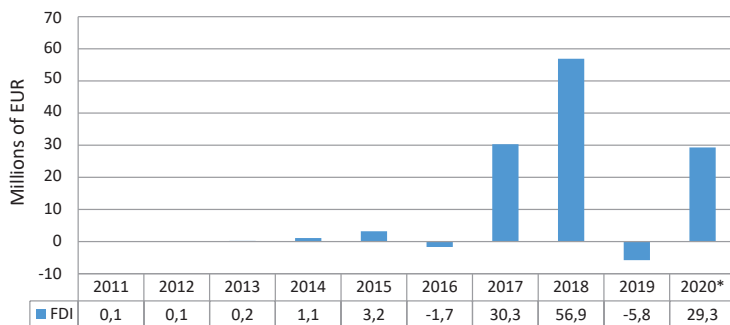


Figure 4
FDI inflow from China to Croatia

Note: * 2020 data only for the first quarter of the year. The methodology used by the Central Bank to count FDI includes equity investments, retained earnings and debt relations between owners and non-residents. Direct equity investments are investments by which a foreign owner acquires at least 10% of the shares in the company's share capital, whether the investor is a resident abroad or a non-resident in Croatia.

Source: Croatian Central Bank 2020.

²⁴ GUDIĆ 2018.

²⁵ World Travel and Tourism Council 2018.

In an interview in 2016, the Chinese Ambassador in Croatia highlighted the need for the Croatian Government to promote its rich tourism resources to the Chinese market, since those are not well known to Chinese tourists and are hidden gems for them.²⁶ The number of Chinese tourists visiting Croatia has been rapidly increasing, with 88,000 Chinese tourists visiting Croatia in 2015. Although this number is relatively small compared to the total overseas visits of Chinese citizens that amounted to 120 million in 2015, there is large potential in the sector.

The Croatian geographical position, knowledge and local conditions in South East Europe make the country a partner worth serious consideration by China. As a member state of the EU, goods and services traded with Croatia are not only aimed at the Croatian market but could reach the entire EU with a population of 500 million people. Croatia, as an EU member, also has access to EUR 1 billion of EU structural funds annually aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. Foreign investors, including Chinese investors, who set up businesses in Croatia, have equal access as domestic companies to compete for these funds.

Chinese company ownership in Croatia

Up to 2016, there was no significant number of Chinese companies present in the Croatian market or the other way around. In a previous research conducted,²⁷ only six Croatian companies are registered in China, and five Chinese companies registered in Croatia in 2016 (see Table 3). Most of the Chinese companies registered in Croatia are specialised in the sector of information and technology, although lately companies from other sectors have been registered as well. While on the other side, the Croatian companies registered in China are wider in variation including sectors of food and beverage, tourism, electronics, automobile and IT.

²⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Croatia 2016.

²⁷ KOTARSKI–KOS–STANIŠIĆ 2016.

Table 2

Registered Croatian companies in China and Chinese companies in Croatia in 2017

Registered Croatian companies in China	Registered Chinese companies in Croatia
Telegra (Intelligent transport system)	Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd.
Badel	ZTE
Podravka d.d.	LENOVO Technology b.v.
TBEA Končar (Shenyang) Instrument Transformers Co., Ltd. (joint venture)	Asia d. o.o.
Jiali Tema Electric Manufacturing Group Co., Ltd. (joint venture)	Zhongya nekretnine d. o.o.
Uniline	
Zhongke Luo Rui Technology Co. (joint venture)	

Source: Compiled by the author based on KOTARSKI–KOS–STANIŠIĆ 2016; DRAŠKIĆ 2017; Autoklub 2018.

As mentioned in the previous section of this study, in 2017 real estate Company Zhongya had bought Toplice Hotel and is developing luxurious health tourism in the northern part of Croatia. The project is worth €30 million. The company is registered in Croatia under the name Zhongya nekretnine d. o.o. and belongs to the tourism sector. In 2018, by the time this study is written, Croatian car manufacturer that specialised in developing electric sports cars, Rimac Automobili, started a joint venture with Chinese company Camel Groups. The joint venture is registered in China under the name Zhongke Luo Rui Technology Co., and the estimated value of the investment is €128 million. The share of Croatian Rimac Automobili in this company is 40%, and the main focus of the company is to design and manufacture high-performance drive and battery systems and technology for smaller series of cars for European premium makers.²⁸

²⁸ Autoklub 2018.

Policy field-specific relations

Belt and Road cooperation

MoU between the Government of the Republic of Croatia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative was signed and later approved by the Croatian Government in June 2017. The MoU paves the ground for five areas of cooperation between Croatia and China:²⁹

1. Transport, logistics and infrastructure focusing on cargo transportation, sea ports, railways and logistic centres, and additionally establishing direct flights between the two countries
2. Trade and investments including cooperation between companies, with a focus on wood products, machines, pharmaceutical products, cosmetics, foods and clothing
3. Financial cooperation for supporting trade and investments
4. Science and technology to stimulate companies from both countries to cooperate in the sector of high and new technology and innovations; and
5. Cultural and people exchange in the sectors of education, arts and culture

For the BRI, Croatia offers one of the shortest connections from Asia to Western Europe given the fact that three Pan-European Corridors (V, VII and X) pass through Croatia, as well as three Trans-European Transport Network corridors (Mediterranean, Baltic–Adriatic, and Rhine–Danube). However, although port infrastructure is available, the cargo and turnover are limited. The needs are therefore mutual, because China could provide cargo and turnover. Shipment from the Far East to Europe could be 8 days shorter in transit times if the Port of Rijeka is used instead of the Port of Hamburg or Rotterdam.³⁰

Even before the BRI MoU was signed, China had shown great interest in transportation infrastructure projects in Croatia. In February 2016, in a meeting between the Chinese Ambassador to Croatia and the Croatian Minister of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure, the Chinese

²⁹ Government of the Republic of Croatia 2017.

³⁰ Croatian Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure 2017.

side expressed its intention to participate at the construction project of railway connection between Rijeka to the border of Hungary via Zagreb as well as the upgrade of the Port of Rijeka.³¹

Later in November 2016, an MoU was signed between the two countries on the Port and Harbour Industrial Park, Cooperation between the Chinese National Commission for Development and Reforms and the Croatian Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts. There were three areas in which cooperation was encouraged:³² 1. investment, construction, modernisation and management of sea ports; 2. development, construction and management of industrial parks including investments in projects; and 3. construction of railways, highways, logistic centres, and storage in sea ports and industrial parks.

The role and importance of CEEC and China cooperation

Trade partnerships and cooperation between companies should not only involve big enterprises and Multinational Corporations. It should also involve the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The CEEC and China cooperation has recognised the potential of this kind of partnership. The Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), which was the output of the 6th Summit of China and CEEC, also encourages SMEs in China and CEECs to enhance cooperation and exchanges. It was decided in the summit that Croatia will be the country to host the centre of the SMEs..

Within the framework of the CEEC and China cooperation, the potential of tourism is recognised, and growth of the sector is stimulated by regular exchanges of experience, sharing best practices, joint research, promotional activities, networking between agencies, and development of regional tourism products. Among the 17 CEE countries, Croatia's potential in the tourism sector is highly recognised, which was proven by the fact that the 4th China–CEEC High-Level Conference on Tourism Cooperation was held in 2018 in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Later in 2019, the 8th Summit of the CEEC and China was also held in Dubrovnik, Croatia, which facilitated the visit of a Chinese Prime Minister to Croatia for the first time in history.

³¹ Croatian Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure 2016.

³² Government of the Republic of Croatia 2016.

Cooperation in the context of EU–China relations

Transport infrastructure is also in the focus of interest in the cooperation between China and Croatia, especially in the context of the EU. In the framework of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the main port of Croatia, the Port of Rijeka, is inside three corridors: Mediterranean, Baltic–Adriatic and Rhine–Danube. The Mediterranean corridor (marked green in Figure 5) will link ports in the southwestern Mediterranean region to the Ukrainian border with Hungary, following the coastlines of Spain, France, crossing the Alps towards east. The Baltic–Adriatic corridor (marked dark blue in Figure 5) will cross or tangent five other corridors: the North Sea Baltic corridor, the Mediterranean corridor, the Scandinavian–Mediterranean corridor, the Rhine–Danube corridor and the Orient/East-Med corridor. The Rhine–Danube corridor (light blue in Figure 5), with the Main and Danube waterway as its backbone, connects the central regions around Strasbourg and Frankfurt via southern Germany to Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and finally the Black Sea (see Figure 5).

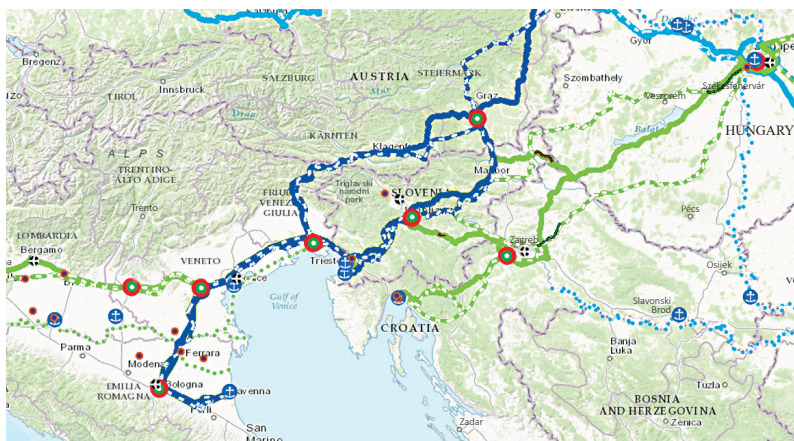


Figure 5

TEN-T corridors crossing through Croatia and connected to the Port of Rijeka

Source: European Commission, DG Mobility and Transport 2018.

Shipment from the Far East to Europe could be 8 days shorter in transit times if using the Port of Rijeka, compared to the Port of Hamburg and Rotterdam.³³

Infrastructure upgrades and development of the Port of Rijeka are being made continuously. A grant agreement for the reconstruction of railway station Rijeka–Brajdicca and the Adriatic Gate container terminal intermodal yard “Brajdicca” was signed in November 2015; construction works have started in 2018. The total value of the project is EUR 35.5 million, with 85% of the total value co-financed by the EU Connecting Europe Facility. The reconstruction of the cargo section of Rijeka railway station was also planned for the third quarter of 2017, worth EUR 31.58 million.

During the first Chairs’ meeting of the EU–China Connectivity Platform in Beijing in June 2016, a list of pilot projects was established for the cooperation focus. Among 7 pilot projects in Europe,³⁴ one is in the Mediterranean corridor: the Rijeka–Zagreb–Budapest railway. This shows the high interest of establishing the Port of Rijeka as one of the main entrance of goods from the Far East into Europe.

In this very meeting, to attract Chinese investments, except for the favourable geographical location, the Croatian delegation highlighted another strength of Croatia: the pro-business environment. In 2017, the World Bank within its Doing Business³⁵ reports ranked Croatia 43rd in the world out of 190 countries, scoring a total of 72.99 out of 100. The evaluation is based on 10 different aspects: starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, registering property, getting credit, protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts and resolving insolvency.³⁶ Although Croatia scored better than the countries in the category of “Europe and Central Asia” (71.05), it performed much worse than most of CEE countries. Only Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia scored lower than Croatia.

³³ Croatian Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure 2017.

³⁴ Others are: projects in the Orient/East-Med corridor in the Western Balkans, projects in the North Sea–Baltic corridor, the V0 rail cargo line bypassing Budapest in Hungary, corridor 5C highway project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, railroad upgrade project from Koper to Divača in Slovenia and the Budapest–Belgrade railway.

³⁵ World Bank 2017.

³⁶ World Bank 2018.

Market economy status: national pros and cons

There is no ongoing debate in the national area about granting China the market economy status. The issue has not been widely covered by the Croatian media nor discussed by academic scientists and experts in the public sphere. When it comes to the political attitude on granting China's market economy status, all Croatian members of the European Parliament (MEP) voted in line with their party groups' dominant position.³⁷ In 2016, the majority of MEPs voted against the motion of the European Parliament that explicitly requires that the EU should withhold from granting China the market economy status. The right-wing EPP and ALDE groups were against the motion, and so were the Croatian HDZ/EPP members. Socialists in the MEPs abstained from taking a firm position, and so did the Croatian SDP members.

Conclusion and outlook: more or less China?

Political relations between China and Croatia have been conducted actively. State visits and signed agreements show many areas of interests of cooperation. However, big focus has been put on the issue of transport and transport infrastructure. This interest is renewed with the BRI, which opens up opportunities for more transport infrastructure projects and negotiations. Although there has not been any real conflict in the bilateral relations, a recent bump happened when the Chinese company CRBC won a tender to build Pelješac Bridge in Croatia which is be 85% financed by the EU. Other contenders in the bidding process accused CRBC of using dumping prices and filed an appeal. With the rejection of the appeals by the Croatian State Commission for Supervision of Public Procurement, a contract is to be signed soon and CRBC will be expecting to start the project. It is a historical moment since it would be the first time when a Chinese company is contracted for an EU funded investment project. This has put Croatia under pressure from the EU, but the popularity of China and Chinese investment in Croatia has not been decreasing.

³⁷ KOTARSKI–KOS-STANIŠIĆ 2016.

Economic relations between China and Croatia are far under its potential. China is not among the main trading partners of Croatia. However, there has been a constant increasing trend in Croatian export to China in the last decade, which consists mainly of capital goods, including timber, leather, aluminium and stone. Chinese export to Croatia has also been increasing since 2014 although not significantly; it consists of mostly consumer goods including textile products, household appliances, computers and electronic goods. Chinese FDI in Croatia was almost non-existent until 2017 when Zhongya invested €30 million in Croatia for touristic resorts. Later in 2018, Rimac Automobili started a joint venture with the Chinese company Camel Groups with an estimated value of €128 million. The two cases might be examples for other potential investors. The 8th CEEC and China Summit and the 9th Business Forum held in 2019 in Croatia were a breakthrough and facilitated many agreements between Croatian and Chinese partners. With the office of the HGK in Shanghai to assist businessmen, and the Chinese Embassy holding business meetings in Zagreb, more investments are to be expected.

With the CRBC building a politically important bridge, and in recent years, two big investments flowing in to Croatia, it seems that more Chinese projects will follow. This expectation is supported by the fact that the Croatian public rhetoric towards China is very positive even during (and potentially after) the Covid-19 crisis. Despite the EU being hesitant, Croatia seems to be open to Chinese investment and cooperation both bilaterally as well as within the framework of the BRI and CEEC and China cooperation. Besides transport infrastructure, tourism is the next sector to be pursued by the two countries to strengthen their cooperation.

Appendix 1

Official and state visits

Date	Visit
June 1993	Croatian President Franjo Tuđman paid a state visit to PRC
February 2001	Chinese State Councillor Wu Yi paid an official visit to Croatia
March 2001	Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs paid an official visit to China

Date	Visit
April 2002	Chinese Minister of Defence Chi Haotian paid an official visit to Croatia
May 2002	Croatian President Stjepan Mesić paid a state visit to China
November 2002	Chinese Vice-President of State Council Li Lanqing paid an official visit to Croatia
September 2003	Croatian Minister of Defence Željko Antunović paid an official visit to China
June 2004	Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Zeng Peiyan paid an official visit to Croatia
May 2005	Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader paid an official visit to China
September 2006	Chinese State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan paid an official visit to Croatia
May 2007	Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kolinda Grabar paid an official visit to China
June 2009	Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a state visit to Croatia
August 2009	Public speaker of the Croatian Parliament Luka Bebić paid an official visit to China
March 2010	Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordan Jandroković paid an official visit to China
November 2013	Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vesna Pusić paid an official visit to China
May 2014	Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Liu Yandong paid an official visit to Croatia
October 2015	Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović paid a state visit to China
September 2017	Croatian Minister of Administration Lovro Kuščević paid an official visit to China
November 2018	Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković paid a state visit to China
January 2019	Croatian Minister of Sea, Maritime Affairs and Infrastructure Oleg Butković paid an official visit to China
April 2019	Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang paid a state visit to Croatia
May 2019	Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhija paid an official visit to Croatia
June 2019	Croatian Minister of Agriculture Tomislav Tolušić paid an official visit to China
June 2019	Chinese Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Han Changfu paid an official visit to Croatia
November 2019	Croatian Minister of Economy paid an official visit to China

Source: Compiled by the author.

Appendix 2

Bilateral agreements and acts³⁸

Date	Agreement and Acts
13 May 1992	Joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations
27 October 1992	Bilateral Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation*
7 June 1993	Bilateral Agreement on Maritime Transport
	Bilateral Agreement on Cultural and Educational Cooperation
	Bilateral Agreement on Promotion and Mutual Protection of Investments
11 April 1994	Bilateral Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation
16 September 1994	Program for Educational and Cultural Cooperation for 1995, 1996 and 1997
9 January 1995	Bilateral Agreement on Avoiding Double Taxation and Prevention of Tax Evasion
	Bilateral Agreement on Mutual Abolition of Visas for Holders of Diplomatic and Official Passports
10 September 1995	Agreement on Cooperation on Aquaculture between the Croatian Ministry of Science and Technology and the Chinese State Commission for Science of the PRC
26 February 1997	Agreement on Cooperation between the Croatian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security**
6 October 1997	Bilateral Agreement on the Establishment of the Intergovernmental Sino–Croatian Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation
27 February 1998	Program for Cultural and Educational Cooperation for 1998, 1999 and 2000
29 May 2000	Bilateral Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism
7 November 2000	Program for Cultural and Educational Cooperation for 2001, 2002 and 2003
7 June 2002	Agreement on Air Transport between the Government of Croatia and the Government of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong
21 June 2004	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Traditional Medicines between the Croatian Ministry of Health and Social Care and the Chinese State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicines
14 October 2004	Program for Cultural and Educational Cooperation for 2004, 2005 and 2006

³⁸ Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018.

Date	Agreement and Acts
18 October 2004	Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation between the Government of Croatia and the Government of the Special Region of Hong Kong
26 May 2005	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation of SMEs between the Croatian Ministry of Economy, Works and Entrepreneurship and the Chinese National Commission for Development and Reforms
1 September 2006	Agreement on Cooperation on Agriculture between the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management and the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture
25 October 2006	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation between the Croatian State Attorney's Office and the Chinese Supreme Prosecution Office
14 May 2008	Memorandum of Understanding on Economic Cooperation between the Croatian Ministry of Economy and Entrepreneurship and the Chinese Ministry of Trade
	Program for Cultural Cooperation for 2008–2010
20 June 2009	Bilateral Agreement on Economic Cooperation
	Bilateral Agreement on Air Transport
	Plan for Cooperation in Health and Medicines 2009–2012 between the Croatian Ministry of Health and Social Care and the Chinese Ministry of Health
10 May 2010	Memorandum of Understanding between the Diplomatic Academy of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and the Chinese University for Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2 November 2010	Program for Cultural Cooperation for 2011–2013
18 May 2012	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on Mutual Investment between the Croatian Ministry of Economy and the Chinese Ministry of Trade
2 November 2012	Memorandum of Understanding for the Establishment of Sino–Croatian Economic Technological Zone between the Croatian Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts and the Chinese Ministry of Trade
3 December 2013	Agreement on Police Cooperation between the Croatian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security
15 March 2013	Program for Educational Cooperation 2013–2016
21 January 2015	Action Plan for Cooperation in the field of Agriculture 2015–2016 between the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture and the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture
11 April 2016	Program for Cultural Cooperation 2016–2020

Date	Agreement and Acts
5 November 2016	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Ports and Port Industrial Parks between the Croatian Ministry of Economy and Entrepreneurship and the Chinese National Commission for Development and Reform
31 March 2017	Action Plan for Cooperation in the field of Agriculture 2017–2018 between the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture and the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture
14 May 2017	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Framework of the Belt and Road Cooperation between the Government of Croatia and the Government of the PRC
12 September 2017	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation during Touristic Season between the Croatian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security
7 July 2018	Program of Cooperation in the Field of Education between the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and the Chinese Ministry of Education for the Period of 2018–2022
7 July 2018	Cooperation Plan between the Croatian Ministry of Health and the Chinese National Commission for Health in the Field of Health and Medicine for the Period of 2018–2020
19 September 2018	Memorandum of Understanding between the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism
10 April 2019	Protocol between the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture and the Chinese Central Tax Administration on Veterinarian and Public Health Demands for Dairy Products for Export to China
10 April 2019	Memorandum of Understanding between the Croatian Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts and the Chinese Ministry of Trade on the Establishment of Joint Working Groups for Cooperation on the Field of Investments in the Framework of Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation
10 April 2019	Memorandum of Understanding between the Croatian Central State Office for Sport and the Chinese General Administration for Sport on the Cooperation in the Field of Sport
10 April 2019	Memorandum of Understanding between the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology on Joint Financing of Research and Developmental Projects
10 April 2019	Memorandum of Understanding between the Croatian Ministry of Tourism and the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism on Cooperation in the Field of Special Forms of Tourism

Notes:* terminated on 1 July 2013 when Croatia became full member of the European Union.; ** terminated on 31 December 2013 and replaced by another Agreement on Police Cooperation.

Source: Compiled by the author based on the website of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018).

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