

國立政治大學東亞研究所

碩士論文

The Cooperation between China and Central Eastern Europe - the
Case of Poland (2012-2021): Effective Partnership or Unequal
Framework?

中國與中東歐國家合作——波蘭個案研究 (2012-2021)：有效
的夥伴關係還是不平等合作方式？

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中華民國一一一年六月

Acknowledgements

In the arduous process of writing this thesis, I benefitted greatly from the support and help of many individuals. First and foremost, I wish to thank my advisor, Shao-cheng Tang, for his invaluable academic guidance and unfailing patience. I am also very thankful to my committee members, Chung-hung Cho and Anne Hsiu-An Hsiao, for all their comments, suggestions and insights. Moreover, the research presented in this work could not have been carried out without the deeply appreciated courtesy of president of the Polish Press Agency (PAP) Wojciech Surmacz, who kindly provided me with an access to the Polish Press Agency archives.

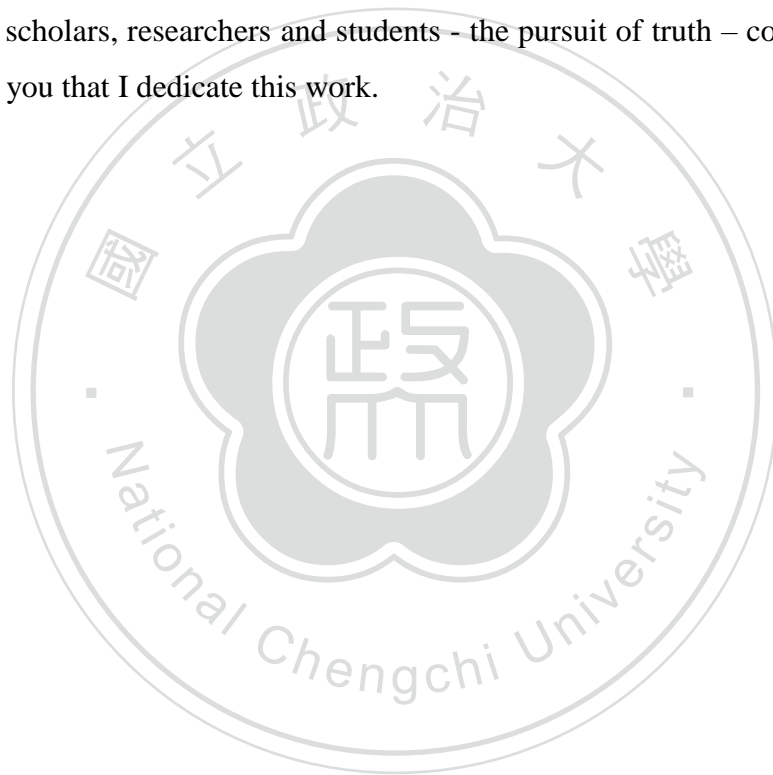
My academic adventure began with the undergraduate training I received at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies and at the Oriental Studies, Chinese Studies Department, both at the University of Warsaw – I wish to thank the professors and teachers at both faculties for encouraging me to follow the road across the fields of international relations and sinology, the one which lead me to Taiwan. I am immensely thankful for the subsequent tutelage at the Graduate Institute of East Asia Studies at the National Chengchi University, where I was given the most unique access to the knowledge and resources about People’s Republic of China, that could hardly be obtained anywhere outside Taiwan in such extent and in a form untouched by censorship and propaganda.

My deep gratitude is owed to the Taiwanese taxpayer, who, through the Ministry of Education Taiwan Scholarship program, generously provided me with the much-needed financial stability during my initial years in Taiwan. I also thank the staff of the Education Division of the Taipei Representative Office in Warsaw, Poland, for assisting me throughout the scholarship application process.

On a personal note, I would like to express the utmost gratitude to my life partner and best friend, Marian Olech, who has been an inspiration for me to always stand up to every challenge and to never give up, crucially during the most difficult and exhausting periods, while accompanying me in Taiwan, the country which has become a home for both of us. Without his constant support and unwavering encouragement, this work could never have been completed. I am also profoundly grateful for the friendship of Marcin Jerzewski, my staunchest comrade-in-(taking)-arms against a sea of troubles and a dear companion on an academic path carved amidst professional

pursuits. I wish to thank also my mother Katarzyna, father Cezary and sister Julia, as well as dearest friends Katana, Alicja, Nehring, Kuba, Pałka and Eugénie, who, through their unceasing emotional support given and received mostly across thousands of miles, are always by my side.

Last, but by no means least, I thank the journalists around the world - those from the Polish Press Agency that I had the pleasure to work with, reporting on the most crucial events on the Taiwanese social and political scene, and the press freedom defenders from East Asia, to whom, together with my outstanding colleagues at Reporters Without Borders (RSF), we devote our work. Without your admirable endeavors and sacrifices in the name of press freedom and the right to information, the noble task of scholars, researchers and students - the pursuit of truth – could not even begin. It is to you that I dedicate this work.



ABSTRACT

Set within the larger structure of Sino-European relations, the cooperation framework between China and the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) region, commonly known as 16+1, is an important example of an institutionalized, PRC-led transregional cooperation platform. Poland, the largest country of the CEE region, can and has been perceived as the most important European participant to this cooperation. This thesis seeks to examine the evolving attitude of the Polish government towards the 16+1 framework, and in doing so to address the question of whether Poland perceives 16+1 as an effective cooperation format.

The investigation motivated by these questions is carried out in two essential steps. The initial step, made by the author over the first three chapters, is the introduction of the historic and geopolitical background of the 16+1 framework and the development of the framework itself. The author delineates Sino-European, Sino-CEE and Sino-Polish relations after 1989, the latter two since 2012 being inseparably interwoven with the functioning of the 16+1 framework.

The second step, made in the fourth chapter and immediately instrumental in answering the research questions, is the qualitative analysis of the source material, composed mainly of press releases of the Polish Press Agency, obtained by the author from the Agency's archives. The corpus of press releases is supplemented by documents of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and periodic publications by Polish Institute of International Affairs. The content analysis of the political discourse represented in these sources is hoped to shed light on the Polish government's perception of the effectiveness of 16+1 and its overall attitude to the framework.

Keywords: *China, Poland, Sino-Polish Relations, 16+1, China-CEE, Central Europe*

摘要

中國與中東歐之間的合作模式（俗稱「16+1」）是中歐關係的組成部分，同時也是由中國率領的跨區域、機構化合作平台的重要實例。作為中東歐地區最大國家的波蘭，被認為是 16+1 最重要的參與者。本文旨在考察波蘭政府對此合作模式的態度演變，且希冀解答波蘭是否將 16+1 視為有效合作模式的問題。

作者將以上述問題為動機的考察過程分為兩個步驟。在前三章中所邁出的第一步，是介紹 16+1 合作模式的歷史與地緣政治背景以及該合作模式的發展歷程。作者對於 1989 年後的中歐關係、中國與中東歐關係以及中波關係略作簡介；後二者自 2012 年以來與 16+1 存在著密不可分的關聯性。

本文為了解答研究問題所做的第二步，則是第四章中所進行的資料定性分析。本文所分析的資料，主要為作者從波蘭新聞局的檔案中所收集到的大量相關新聞稿。作為輔助資料，作者另將波蘭外交部的相關文件以及波蘭國營國際事務學院的週期刊物，一同納入討論範圍。本文針對這些資料所呈現的政治言談進行一番分析考察，以期表明波蘭政府對 16+1 效率的認識及其對此合作模式的一般態度。

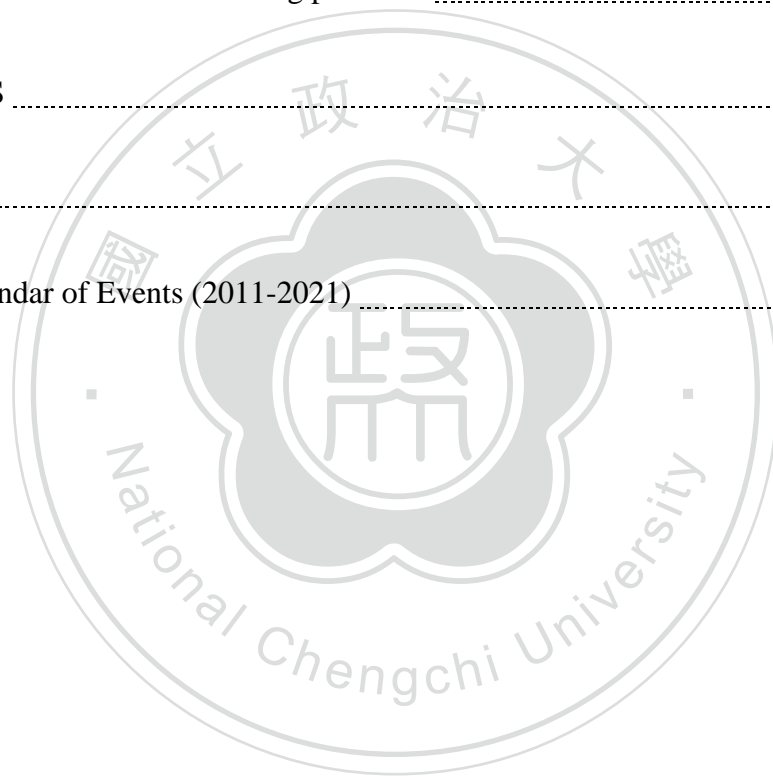
關鍵詞： 波蘭、中國、中東歐國家、16+1、中波關係、中歐

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Introduction

Ten years have passed since the establishment of the cooperation framework known as 16+1 between China and Central and Eastern European countries (中東歐國家, CEE) during the visit of Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) in Warsaw in 2012. During that time, we have been able to observe the framework unfold and change, with all its achievements and challenges. This study is devoted to the role of Poland within the framework, and seeks to answer the questions related to the Polish perspective on the effectiveness of 16+1.

Research background and purpose

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether the 16+1 is seen by the Polish government as an effective cooperation platform, and whether the framework, in accordance with its initial assumptions, has proved beneficial for the involved CEE countries, which in the scope examined herein is exemplified by the case of Poland. Intrinsicly connected to these questions is the Polish stance towards the framework, its role, and the level of involvement in the 16+1. By outlining the processes of the 16+1 development, presentation of the relevant scholarship and the analysis of data directly related to the Polish political discourse, the author will endeavor to demonstrate how the Sino-Polish cooperation under the banner of 16+1 and the Polish government's attitude to the framework has evolved over nearly the decade from 2012 to 2021.

Research Questions

The focus of this study is the role of Poland in the China-CEE cooperation as formalized within the 16+1 framework. The author will strive to demonstrate how Poland's position towards the framework has evolved from 2012 to 2021, and assess to what degree the shifts in

Polish perspective have been due to the actual issues with the effectiveness and functioning of the framework. The research questions motivating the investigation carried out in this thesis may be formulated as follows:

(I) How has the Sino-Polish cooperation within the 16+1 framework developed over the years 2012-2021?

(II) What were the changes in Poland's stance towards the 16+1 framework?

(III) Does Poland consider 16+1 as an effective partnership?

Literature review and theoretical framework

Even though the 16+1 framework can be seen as a relatively new initiative, there is a vast volume of scholarship dedicated to different aspects of the framework in question. Moreover, the fact that 16+1 soon after its creation has been effectively incorporated into the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) renders the latter also highly relevant to the scope of this discussion. Although the denomination of 16+1 is used throughout this study, the author also incorporates the perspectives focused on the BRI, insofar as they relate to the cooperation of the Central Eastern Europe region with the PRC.

The topic of 16+1 has been increasingly current in the IR academia, and the extent of relevant scholarship warrants the selection of only the most representative works to be reviewed below. It is interesting to observe such discourse unfold along the actual developments of the framework itself, as a number of scholars have remained committed to the research on 16+1 since its very creation. For example, the papers published by Liu Zuokui (劉作奎) such as *The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems, and Policy Suggestions* (2013), *Europe and the 'Belt and Road' Initiative: Responses and Risks* (2016), *Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times*

of *Major Changes* (2020) etc. essentially follow the timeline of 16+1 and analyze changing circumstances and challenges of the framework. Liu, a scholar associated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中國社會科學院), is representative of the PRC-based scholarship on China-CEE relations, and his views, such as those presented in *Europe's Protectionist Position on the Belt and Road Initiative* (2018), to certain extent may be seen as reflective of Chinese government's stance on 16+1 and BRI.

As for comparatively recent scholarship dealing with structural and operational aspects of the 16+1 framework, Jakóbowski in *Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF* (2018) identifies characteristic features shared by 16+1 with other PRC-led regional cooperation platforms. Szczudlik in *Seven Years of the 16+1. An Assessment of China's 'Multilateral Bilateralism' in Europe* (2019) paints a dynamic picture of main development tendencies and structural changes in the framework. Particularly valuable is the analysis Song and Pavličević: "*China's multilayered multilateralism: a case study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework* (2019) - the authors stratify the Chinese involvement in 16+1 into different regionally-defined "layers", with the Visegrád Group (including Poland) placed as the core target of Chinese interest. Noteworthy is the comprehensive analysis presented by Kusak in the doctoral dissertation *Impact of Cooperation of China and Central Eastern European Countries - Gateway to Europe or Backdoor to Revisionism?* (2019), focused on the interrelation of China-CEE and China-EU levels of cooperation.

When it comes to ideologies and narratives surrounding the China-CEE cooperation, an early, yet still relevant, issue is the supposedly divisive character of 16+1 in relation to the European Union; a representative scholarly critique of these questions was conducted by Turcsányi in "*Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?*" (2014). An exceptionally notable is the article by Vangeli: *Global China and Symbolic*

Power: The Case of 16+1 Cooperation (2018), where the author analyzes the intangible influence that China exerts on “established notions on boundaries, historical legacies, and development paradigms” in the CEE region.¹ Informed by Vangeli's discussion, Turcsányi and Qiaoan in *Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China - CEE 16+1 platform*. (2019) set off to reassess as misguided the PRC's insistence on the “common Communist past” with the CEE region, a question very relevant to Sino-Polish relations. In *China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers* (2020), Turcsányi traces the evolving perception of 16+1 on the part of CEE countries along what can be simplistically imagined as a curve running from the initial enthusiasm to the subsequent disappointment.

The Sino-Polish cooperation within the 16+1 framework has been summarized by Mierzejewski in *Between central and local interdependence. Dimensions of Poland's relations with China* (2018), among others. The most relevant from the viewpoint of this study, however, are discussions focused directly on the Polish perception and attitude towards 16+1 - and such scholarship is relatively scarce. Of the few relevant works one may cite Szczudlik's *Coming out of the shadows: the Polish perspective on China—Central and Eastern Europe relations* (2015), but somewhat contrary to its title, the paper discusses rather the perspectives and interests of the CEE region, China and the EU and possible future developments of the framework. Apart from that, the author of this thesis has been able to locate two papers concerned with the Polish discourse on the BRI: “*Geopolitical Chance or Security Threat: Polish Public Political Discourse on the One Belt One Road Initiative*” (2017) by Michał Lubina and *Poland's perspective on belt and road initiative* (2019) by Patrycja Pendrakowska. Pendrakowska's paper rightly integrates the BRI and 16+1 in discussing the Polish

¹ A. Vangeli (2018) Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16 + 1 Cooperation, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113, 674-687, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458056, p. 674.

government's attitude towards the Sino-Polish cooperation, and identifies the stages of rising interest, culminating enthusiasm and the ensuing skepticism. It is, however, the theoretical angle of Lubina's work that attracts most attention from the viewpoint of this study. Based on a variety of sources such as media coverage, press articles, experts' opinions etc., Lubina has examined the public discourse on the BRI in Poland, identifying two opposing narratives: the "geopolitical chance" and the "security threat". The scope of source data examined in this study (mainly the Polish Press Agency materials - see the next section) and by extension the scope of the analyzed discourse differs from that of Lubina's, although his findings remain highly relevant. The methodological tools for discourse analysis employed by this author are also essentially convergent with those utilized by Lubina, and will be detailed in the following sections.

Thesis structure

The basic structure of the thesis will be briefly summarized below. In the first chapter, the author analyzes the development of the cooperation between China and the CEE region. As not all of the regional countries are EU members, the historical background of the framework should be discussed from the dual perspective of PRC-EU relations and PRC-CEE relations, which is the approach adopted by the author in the first and second sections of the first chapter. The author has chosen the year 1989 - the beginning of the post-Cold War era marked by the collapse of Communist rule - as the best starting point for such an account. The history of relations between China and CEE countries provides the crucial background in understanding the concept of 16+1, along with the development of relations between China and CEE countries. The main emphasis will be put on the year 2008 and the economic crisis, which, as many scholars suggest, ignited the Chinese interest in the CEE region and facilitated the institutionalization of the PRC-CEE cooperation. Subsequently, the perspective is narrowed to

the cases of Hungary, Romania, Czechia and Slovakia, which, due to their specificity, provide a valuable background information on China's cooperation with particular actors in the CEE region before the establishment of 16+1 in 2012.

In the second chapter, the author takes a closer look at the Chinese objectives in initiating the 16+1 framework. In the first part, the author will describe China's main rationale in undertaking the cooperation with all sixteen countries, as well as China's recognition of this group as one region uniform enough to allow for such a framework. Based on relevant scholarship, the author examines the main trends, developments and problems of 16+1, and consequently devotes her attention to China's cooperation with countries that, alongside Poland, comprise the Visegrád Group (V4), i.e. Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia.

The subsequent chapters are devoted specifically to the case of Poland. In the third chapter, the author presents a historical overview of the Sino-Polish relations, divided into sections before and after the creation of 16+1. An emphasis is placed on the defining events such as the failed highway construction project in Poland by the Chinese company COVEC in 2009, as well as the visit of the Polish President Bronisław Komorowski to Beijing and the signing of the strategic partnership with the PRC in 2011. The main developments connected to Poland's involvement in 16+1 are also discussed.

The last and the most important step of this study, made by the author in the fourth chapter, is the analysis of Polish political discourse regarding 16+1 as evidenced by the corpus of primary sources gathered by the author. The analysis of the source material is chronologically divided into four periods characterized by different tones in the official discourse and opinions on 16+1 framework during the years 2012-2021. The year 2011 is also included in the scope of analysis as a reference point to the time immediately preceding the establishment of the framework.

The structure of the thesis is graphically represented in the figure A below:

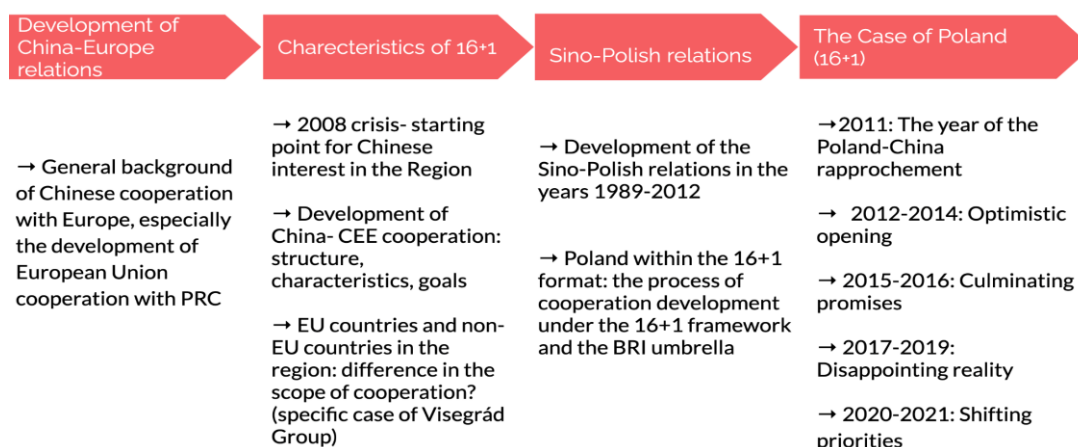


Figure A: Thesis structure

The timeline of the 16+1 framework including the most important events from the Polish perspective can be represented as follows:

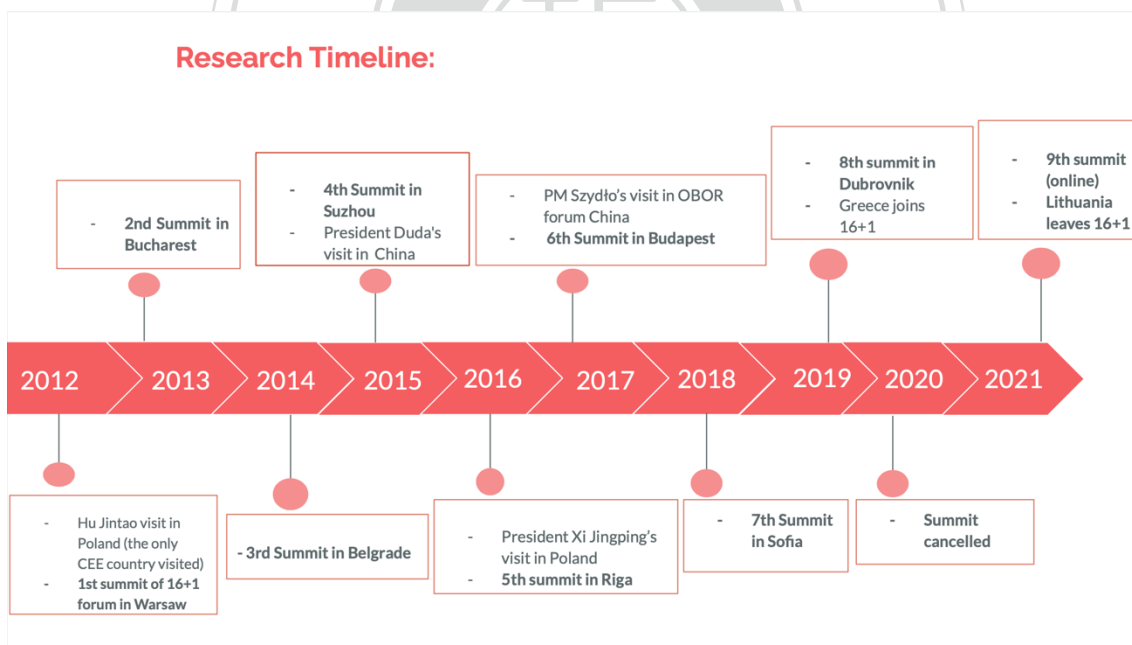


Figure B: Poland in 16+1 Research timeline (Chapter 4)

Source material and methodology

To answer the research questions of the thesis, the author has analyzed the following source materials: a) archival data from Polish Press Agency archives, b) the official statements regarding Polish foreign policy by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and c) the periodic publications by Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM).

By far the most important of the aforementioned sources in terms of volume is the bulk of relevant press releases of the Polish Press Agency (Polska Agencja Prasowa, PAP), a Polish public news provider and one of the most reliable sources of media materials available in Poland. The PAP is responsible for the publication of daily news, fragments of official's statements, interviews with experts, and all information related to the government's actions - it was therefore chosen by the author as a suitable source of the analysis of political discourse regarding the 16+1 framework. The total number of the identified relevant data gathered by the author from the years 2011-2021 is 219 press releases related to 16+1 out of 550 related generally to China. The author was granted the exclusive access to the PAP archives thanks to the courtesy of the PAP director, Wojciech Surmacz.

Apart from PAP dispatches, two categories of supplementary sources will be examined insofar as they touch upon the subject of 16+1. The first category comprises two types of official statements regarding Polish foreign policy issued by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) - the annually-published "Information about the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy" and the "Priorities of the Polish Foreign Policy" issued once every four years. The second category are the materials published by Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), a state-funded research institution (think-tank) formerly localized directly under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Information contained in those publications can therefore be seen as an academic basis informing foreign policies pursued by the Polish government, and as such afford a valuable and relevant addition to the present analysis.

The methodological approach undertaken by the author is essentially qualitative, and concentrates on the content analysis of the source material - mainly the press releases of the PAP, supplemented by the documents of the Polish MoFA and the publications by PISM. What the author understands as represented in these sources is the Polish political discourse surrounding the 16+1 framework. While it is neither possible nor justified here to delve into the sociolinguistic nuances of discourse studies, in defining the notion of “political discourse” employed in this study the author subscribes to the view of Lubina, who, informed by Wilson’s “*articulation of information on policies and actions for the public good*” (among other theories), defines it as “*a narrative, or group of narratives, that function in the public debate and presents (sic.) different strands of the public opinion*”.² To vindicate the multifarious character of examined data, Lubina remarks (after van Dijk) that actors of political discourse are not only politicians.³ This undeniable fact is also reflected in the corpus of PAP dispatches analyzed by this author, which contain occasional interviews with experts and quotations from press articles. However, the majority of information shared by the PAP is concentrated around the actions and utterances performed by the functionaries of the Polish government, therefore the political discourse identifiable from the source material is indeed highly representative of current ruling establishments.

It is hoped that through the qualitative analysis of the views contained in press releases, MoFA documents and PISM publications the author will be able to reconstruct the trajectory

² M. Lubina, “From geopolitical chance to security threat: Polish public political discourse on the One Belt One Road initiative”, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 2017, 1(46), p. 222. From the theories of political discourse potentially applicable to the scope of this study not referenced by Lubina, one may also cite Chilton’s description of discourse as consisting of “*coherent chains of propositions*” that create a “*discourse reality*”, with the essential “*meaning ingredient*” being the “*projection of ‘who does what to whom, when and where’*”; see P. Chilton, *Analyzing Political Discourse. Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 54. China’s intentions and actions in its cooperation with the CEE region as presented in the Polish political discourse could be interpreted as a “*projection*” postulated by Chilton, although due to the present spatial and thematic constraints it is impossible to pursue this proposition in greater detail. A useful (and notably more recent than the sources quoted by Lubina) summary of different definitions of political discourse is provided in J. Wilson, “Political Discourse”, in D. Tannen et al. (ed.) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., New York, 2015, pp. 775-795.

³ M. Lubina, *ibid.*

of the Polish government’s evolving attitude towards the effectiveness of the 16+1 cooperation. In the course of the analysis, also some basic quantitative information on the examined data - such as annual statistics of China- and 16+1-related press releases - will also be supplemented. The methodological framework of the analysis conducted by the author in the fourth chapter is represented in figure C below.

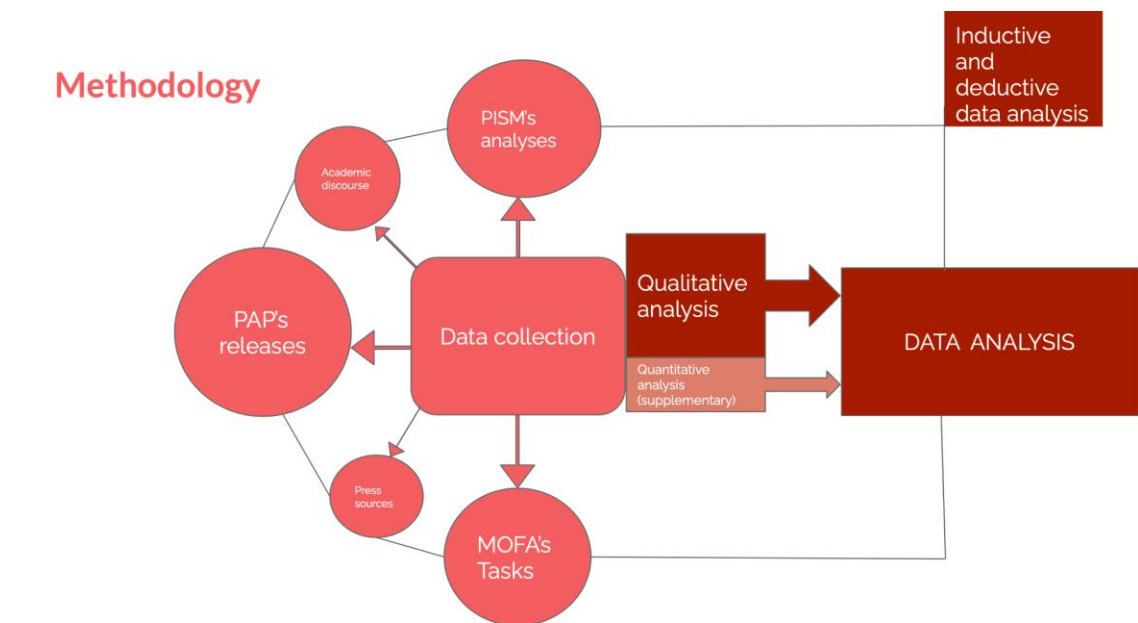


Figure C: Research methodology and sources

Chapter One: Development of China's relations with Europe

It is impossible to carry out a meaningful discussion on the 16+1 framework without at least a glance at the socio-political background of Sino-European relations and particular processes that led to its creation. Such an account is inevitably complicated by the fact that some of the members of 16+1 are at the same time EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and some are not (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina). This is why the historical background of the framework should be discussed from the dual perspective of PRC-EU relations and PRC-CEE relations, which is the approach adopted by the author in the two following sections. The year 1989 - the beginning of the post-Cold War era marked by the collapse of Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and the suppression of Tiananmen Square protests in China - provides a convenient starting point for the present summary as easily the most defining chronological juncture in the recent history of both Sino-European and PRC-CEE relations.

1.1 Development of the PRC relations with the EU since 1989

Although the PRC established diplomatic ties with the forerunner of the European Union - the European Community - as early as 1975 and the budding of cooperation between the two entities has gained some initial momentum in the wake of Chinese economic reforms during the 1980s, the sociopolitical upheavals of 1989 and the crackdown of Tiananmen Square

protests by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) resulted in a significant cooldown in Sino-European relations.⁴

The rift of the early 1990s, a result of Western dissatisfaction at China's autocratic turn, entailed the still ongoing arms embargo by the EU and co-coordinated international resolutions specifically condemning China's human rights record. The issue of human rights, the most salient and concrete emanation of axiological disagreement between the PRC and the EU, has remained an important factor in Sino-European relations ever since; the subsequent thaw of the mid-1990s was enabled by initiating, on China's proposal, the Human Rights Dialogue - a diplomatic compromise allowing the EU to display assertiveness on values and at the same time expand potentially lucrative cooperation with the PRC.⁵

The year 1994 figures as a watershed between the periods of "mutual disregard" and "mutual attraction" in Sino-European relations' chronology proposed by Hooijmaaijers.⁶ The European Union's more favorable stance towards China was adopted within the framework of new global strategic planning for economy and trade, which emphasized the role of East Asia as Europe's foreign partner.⁷ In 1994 the EU published its first *Towards a New Asia Strategy*, and one year later *A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations*, followed by the creation of the "loosely-structured" Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM); a series of steps aimed at expanding the EU relations with the ASEAN member states, and undertaken in an effort to counter-balance the United States' influence in the East Asia region.⁸ Immediately after second ASEM

⁴ For the comprehensive discussion of this period in Sino-European relations, see N. Casarini *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and its Implications for East Asia and the United States* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009) pp. 25-31.

⁵ K. Kinzelbach, H. Thelle. 2011. "Taking Human Rights to China: An Assessment of the EU's Approach." *The China Quarterly* 205: 61; M.R. Taylor "Inside the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue: assessing the practical delivery of the EU's normative power in a hostile environment", *Journal of European Integration*, 2020, doi: 10.1080/07036337.2020.1854245, p. 4.

⁶ B. Hooijmaaijers, *Unpacking EU Policy-Making towards China: How Member States, Bureaucracies, and Institutions Shape its China Economic Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2021, p. 4.

⁷ N. Casarini, *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and its Implications for East Asia and the United States*, p. 46.

⁸ See S. Tang: "The European Union and the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait (1996-2009) - A Content Analysis", *Issues & Studies*, 46(1), 2010, p. 61.

summit in 1998, the PRC and the EU established a bilateral summit meeting mechanism - a platform for direct strategic communication which has been perceived as a new start in the Sino-European relations since 1989, which was nevertheless followed by a “serious setback” caused by the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces in May 1999. Tang points out that this, along with the growing tensions in the Taiwan Straits over President Lee Deng-hui’s “two state theory” (兩國論), contributed to the fragility of Sino-European relations at the turn of centuries, evidenced in the fact that the second and third EU-China summits, unlike the first one, concluded without a Joint Statement.⁹

However, already in 2000 China and the EU were able to reach an agreement on the former’s accession into the WHO, crucially enabling both entities to engage in mutual cooperation within the same legal framework and using common trade mechanisms; such new momentum was articulated in the *cooperative partnership* of 1998 being upgraded to *comprehensive partnership* in 2001 and then again to *comprehensive strategic partnership* in 2003.¹⁰ Along with China’s economically propelled ascension to the status of global power, the geopolitically strategic dimension of the Sino-European relations became increasingly pronounced. Casarini indicates that as of 2003, European and Chinese priorities in international affairs largely converged on the inclination towards *multipolar world based multilateralism*, which at the time was generally tantamount to counterbalancing American supremacy in the post-Cold War world.¹¹

Despite this important common ground in geopolitical interests, the misalignment of values between the PRC and the EU was readily visible at any closer scrutiny of the declaratory

⁹S. Tang, *ibid.*, pp. 65.

¹⁰H. Zhou “An Overview of the China-EU Strategic Partnership (2003–2013)”, in: Hong Zhou (ed.) *Reassessing the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, Springer Science+Business Media, Singapore, 2017, pp. 4-5.

¹¹N. Casarini, *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and its Implications for East Asia and the United States*, pp. 82-84. According to Casarini, *(i)t appears that most EU policy makers would agree with the classic definition provided by Robert Keohane of multilateralism as an institutional approach that ‘prescribes behavioral roles, constraints activity, and shapes expectations’ among a group of states* (p. 84)

facet of the accelerating cooperation. Casarini points out that the very term “democracy” is put to quite contrary uses in statements of both sides: “(w)hereas EU policy makers emphasize the importance of advancing human rights and democracy within China, Beijing leaders are rather busy underlining the external dimension of democracy. For Chinese leaders, nations of the world should externally ‘respect diversity in the world and promote democracy in international relations’ but without interfering with the domestic arrangements and internal affairs of sovereign states.”¹² In other words, while the EU saw “democracy” as an intangible export asset destined for the Chinese people (obviously an echo of the American rationale behind US-PRC rapprochement in the 1970s), the PRC hoped for a “democratic” respect for international political diversity.

Scholars have proposed various chronological divisions of the Sino-European relations’ timeline, however commonly featured in different chronologies is the “honeymoon” period (2003-2004/2005), followed by the “adjustment” period starting in 2005.¹³ The “honeymoon” period began with the establishment of the aforementioned *comprehensive strategic partnership* in 2003, and was marked by exploring new cooperation opportunities and frequent, mutual high-level official visits between the EU and the PRC. All of that was bilaterally underscored by fast economic growth of China and the unprecedented enlargement of the European Union in 2004.

A visible shift in the attitude towards PRC in the following years is the reason behind the identification of the “adjustment” period of 2005-2008, dubbed by Michalski and Pan more descriptively as “awakening to a more realistic engagement”.¹⁴ In the 2006 Communication

¹²N. Casarini, *ibid.*, p. 83. The quote by Casarini is from *China’s EU Policy Paper*, October 2003.

¹³H. Zhou, “An Overview of the China-EU Strategic Partnership (2003–2013)”, in: Hong Zhou (ed.) *Reassessing the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, pp. 8-9; J. Li et al. “China-EU Political Relations”, *ibid.*, pp. 36-40; A. Michalski, Z. Pan, *Unlikely Partners? China, the European Union and the Forging of a Strategic Partnership*, Pallgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2017, pp. 46-49; B. Hooijmaaijers, *Unpacking EU Policy-Making towards China: How Member States, Bureaucracies, and Institutions Shape its China Economic Policy*, pp. 4-6.

¹⁴H. Zhou, *ibid.*; A. Michalski, Z. Pan, *ibid.*

from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament entitled *EU – China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities* and a working paper *EU-China Trade and Investment: Competition and Partnership*, the European perspective drifted towards perceiving China as a power capable of exerting political influence on the global scale, and as such requiring a more coherent, sophisticated and responsible approach. The aforementioned EU policy papers, apart from reiterating the geopolitical necessity of Sino-European cooperation, also directly referred to problematic issues both within China, such as the question of political stability in the face of growing social wealth gap along with regional and gender imbalances, and international matters, such as sustainable development in Africa and the Iranian nuclear issue.¹⁵

At the same time, human rights remained the bone of contention between the EU and the PRC. Cameron points towards the traditionally more critical stance of the European Parliament towards China. In the resolution adopted in 2005, the Parliament emphasized the necessity of sharing and promoting common values in international engagement, expressed regret “*that relations with China have made progress only in the trade and economic fields, without any substantial achievement as regards human rights and democracy issues* and voiced its explicit support for Taiwan as *a model of democracy for the whole of China.*”¹⁶ Especially consequential were the tours in Europe by Dalai Lama, in 2007 and 2008, occurring around the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Scholars note that the reception of the Tibetan spiritual leader by the French president Nicholas Sarkozy, who at the same time served as the rotating president of the EU, caused PRC leaders to postpone the 11th China-EU Summit scheduled to take place in Lyon, France. As an example of political determinants of trade, Fuchs and Klann identify the so-called “Dalai Lama effect”, manifested mainly in the PRC’s temporary reduction of imports

¹⁵F. Cameron “The Development of EU-China Relations”, in G. Wiessala et al (ed.) *The European Union and China: Interests and Dilemmas* (Rodopi, Amsterdam - New York, 2009), pp. 54-57.

¹⁶*Official Journal of the European Union*, 14 April 2003, C 33 E/578. F. Cameron, *ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

from the countries that had received the Tibetan leader.¹⁷ Another step of European Parliament that aggravated the PRC was awarding the Sakharov prize to the human rights activist and dissident Hu Jia (胡佳) in October 2008.¹⁸

The impact of the economic and financial crisis of 2008 has shifted the economic balance between the PRC and the EU, placing China in a position where it was able to relieve Europe's dire need of international financial investment. These economic factors underlie the improvement of Sino-European relations occurring from 2009, a turn designated by Chinese scholars as simply "returning to normal track".¹⁹ The postponed 11th China-EU summit was held in May 2009 in Prague, Czech Republic, followed by the 12th summit in Nanjing in November 2010. In regained Sino-European momentum, the High-Level Strategic Dialogue was established in 2010. The Dialogue continued and accelerated the diversification of the EU-PRC cooperation from its original economic focus to the wide range of global issues such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and interregional security. A complex and multi-level structure of Sino-European relations remained in operation ever since; "(t)he EU-China dialogue architecture comprises three pillars, including the High-Level Strategic Dialogue, the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, and the People-to-People Dialogue."²⁰ Authors point also to the significant cooperation in the field of science and technology, such as the GALILEO Satellite Navigation Cooperation Agreement, signed already in 2003 as a joint effort to counterbalance US space supremacy. It should be noted, however, that the PRC was

¹⁷A. Fuchs, N.-H. Klann, "Paying a Visit: The Dalai Lama Effect on International Trade", *Journal of International Economics* (2013), doi: 10.1016/j.jinteco.2013.04.007.

¹⁸S. Tang, "The European Union and the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait (1996-2009) - A Content Analysis", *Issues & Studies*, 46(1), 2010, p. 73. N. Casarini *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and its Implications for East Asia and the United States*, p. 72.

¹⁹J. Li et al. "China-EU Political Relations", in: Hong Zhou (ed.) *Reassessing the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, pp. 38-40. For a more in-depth analysis of the impact of the financial and economic crisis on EU-China relations, see A. Michalski, Z. Pan, *Unlikely Partners? China, the European Union and the Forging of a Strategic Partnership*, pp. 49-52.

²⁰B. Hooijmaijers, *Unpacking EU Policy-Making towards China: How Member States, Bureaucracies, and Institutions Shape its China Economic Policy*, p. 6.

excluded from the second phase of the project in 2008 amid “*growing EU suspicions and anxieties toward China in the mid-2000s.*”²¹

2008 crisis that engulfed Western countries rendered the US unable to support Europe, specifically CEE region, which in turn created a vacuum for the PRC, and resulted in China initiating the CEE-specific 16+1 cooperation framework in 2012, and in 2013 it launched the “Belt and Road Initiative” (一帶一路, BRI, originally known as “One Belt One Road”), an infrastructure development project aimed enhancing economic ties and connectivity between China, Central Asia and Europe. Both initiatives will be discussed in greater detail in the following section, but their very creation testifies to the importance attached by the PRC to international trade and projecting China’s economic presence abroad. Hooijmaaijers analyzes the current significance of the Sino-European relations from the bilateral perspective of the EU being China’s largest trading partner, and China being the EU’s largest source of import. At the same time, cooperation between the two entities is not bereft of considerable problems - at the economic level, the most important issues include EU’s enormous trade deficit with the PRC and the opaque state-sponsored Chinese firms entering the European markets in the stream of Chinese outward foreign direct investment (COFDI).²²

Moreover, Western scholars often indicate that in contrast to relatively optimistic portrayals on the part of the PRC, Sino-European political cooperation falls considerably short of the declared goals and is meaningful only in environmental and a few other “standout areas”.²³ “The Joint Communication of the European Commission” from March 2019 entitled

²¹J. Clegg, “China Views Europe: A Multipolar Perspective”, *European Studies* 27 (2009), pp. 133; See also M. Li, “China-EU Relations: Rivalry Impedes Strategic Partnership”, in J. Wang, W. Song (ed.), *China, the European Union, and the International Politics of Global Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2016, p. 18.

²²B. Hooijmaaijers, *Unpacking EU Policy-Making towards China: How Member States, Bureaucracies, and Institutions Shape its China Economic Policy*, pp. 6-8. Hooijmaaijers notes that the recent EU engagement with China has been essentially shaped by the policy papers *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* (2013), *Elements for a new EU Strategy on China* (2016) and *Council Conclusions EU Strategy on China* (2016).

²³M.R. Taylor “Inside the EU–China Human Rights Dialogue: assessing the practical delivery of the EU’s normative power in a hostile environment”, *Journal of European Integration*, 2020, p. 3. See also R. Maher, “The Elusive EU-China Strategic Partnership” *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 962-965.

“EU-China: a strategic outlook” states explicitly that *the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted*, and proceeds to describe PRC as “*a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.*”²⁴ The rhetoric of *systemic rivalry* is linked to the Western criticism of the PRC's authoritarian turn under the governance of Xi Jinping (习近平), aggravated by the worsening human rights record - most notably the policy of persecution and internment targeting Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang and the violent crackdown of Hong Kong protests in 2019-2020.²⁵ A notable new theme in the scope of reference of the “*(competition) in the pursuit of technological leadership*” is an increasingly contentious issue of cybersecurity, exemplified mainly by growing concerns over Huawei’s involvement in building 5G networks in European countries.²⁶

A point quite crucial from the perspective of this thesis is that the very formulation “EU-China relations” inherently entails political asymmetry: EU is nowhere close as politically homogeneous as the PRC, and the latter’s relations with individual EU member states do not necessarily follow lines of engagement and hierarchy of interests stipulated by EU institutions. In fact, scholars note that “*(t)he EU member states’ tendency to pursue bilateral agreements*

²⁴European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, *Communication: EU-China - A strategic outlook*, 12 March 2019, at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf> (last accessed on 22 February 2022).

²⁵See e.g. Shirk, Susan L. "China in Xi's "New Era": The Return to Personalistic Rule." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29 no. 2, 2018, pp. 22-36. The issue of Huawei will be discussed in greater detail in reference to particular CEE countries, including Poland, in the following chapters.

²⁶International cybersecurity issues connected with telecommunication technologies, especially in the context of 5G networks, had already been subjected to a heated debate and considerable political counter-measures in the United States, which is why the EU's recent hardening of attitude towards Huawei should be seen and analyzed on the more complex, triangular background of EU-US-PRC relations. See H. Paul, L. Tcheyan, *How the World Is Responding to a Changing China*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 10 2020, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/10/how-world-is-responding-to-changing-china-pub-82039?utm>. (last accessed on 11 February 2022); P. Le Corre, “European and American approaches towards Chinese foreign direct investment in post-COVID times Opportunities, challenges and policy responses”, in S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, Routledge, London, 2021, p. 147.

with China and China's ability to use the EU's internal disagreement is frequently brought forward as the primary explanation for the EU's lack of strategic edge"²⁷ and "a source of major impediment to forwarding European interests in the EU-China partnership."²⁸ For example, the 16+1, whose framework geopolitically cuts across EU boundaries, has been cited as a potential challenge to the unity of the EU. Despite the PRC's pragmatic portrayal of the framework as an integral part of its engagement with the European Union, European assessments have emphasized selective targeting of subregional cooperation partners and resultant influence over their strategic choices.²⁹

The most important recent global factor deeply affecting China's international relations is undoubtedly the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on Sino-European relations has been mostly adverse - China's hyperactive Covid-19 diplomacy, manifest in the array of issues such as battle of narratives pertaining to the origin of the virus, effectiveness of anti-epidemic measures, coupled with pre-existing trends of anti-Western discourse and the so-called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (戰狼外交)³⁰, has eroded China's international image and led to deterioration of its relations with the West, both in political and economic terms.³¹

²⁷B. Hooijmaaijers, *Unpacking EU Policy-Making towards China: How Member States, Bureaucracies, and Institutions Shape its China Economic Policy*, p. 8.

²⁸A. Michalski, Z. Pan, *Unlikely Partners? China, the European Union and the Forging of a Strategic Partnership*, pp. 49-52.

²⁹B. Hooijmaaijers, *ibid.*, pp. 9; C. Liu, "Framing China-EU Sub-regional Cooperation: The Elusive Pursuit of Normative Resonance?", in A. Miskimmon, et.al. *One Belt, One Road, One Story : Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, Pallgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, pp. 45-63.

³⁰The term "wolf-warrior diplomacy" has been used to describe Chinese diplomats' aggressive and confrontational rhetoric purportedly aimed at defending the Chinese national interest. As Dai and Liu point out, this phenomenon has been connected to the rhetoric of "fighting spirit" and the cooperation-centered "shared future for mankind", advocated by President Xi Jinping; see: Y. Dai, L. Luqiu, "China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Xi Jinping's Grand Diplomatic Strategy", 29 March 2021, at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350677590_China's_Wolf_Warrior_Diplomacy_and_Xi_Jinping's_Grand_Diplomatic_Strategy (last accessed on 22 February 2022). The discourses of "fighting spirit" combined with "shared future for mankind" have been heard on many occasions, including the Statement by Xi Jinping's speech during the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly in 2015; see: J. Xi, "Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind", General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, 28 September 2015, at: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cesg/eng/jrzg/t1305051.htm>

³¹Pandemic-related economic factors obviously include disturbances and severed links in the international trade, however the macroeconomic impact of Covid-19 is at present still difficult to assess; see P. Le Corre "European and American approaches towards Chinese foreign direct investment in post-COVID times Opportunities, challenges and policy responses", in S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American*

1.2 Development of China and CEE countries relations from 1989 to the establishment of 16+1 framework in 2012

A background even more crucial in understanding the concept of 16+1 is the history of relations between China and CEE countries. When it comes to the level of general comparisons with Western Europe, it has been indicated that “*the fact that the CEE countries were not part of the colonial incursion into China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries means that political relations are free of historical tensions,*” which especially in Chinese is coupled with CEE countries being among the first ones to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1949 - which was a simple consequence of the common affiliation to the Eastern bloc.³² The actual extent to which such a broad historical background has factored into China-CEE relations in the post-Cold War reality is difficult to assess, and in any case beyond the scope of this thesis. It is however worth mentioning that the early recognition of the PRC by CEE countries features frequently in the China’s official rhetoric as a historical foundation and rationale for the current development of friendly international relations.³³ Such sentiment is not necessarily shared by the CEE countries themselves, which are eager to emphasize rather the systemic discontinuity with the Soviet era, perceived as a time of involuntary and harmful subjugation to a foreign communist regime.³⁴

Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle, pp. 138-154; for the diplomatic and political impact of the pandemic on Sino-European relations, see P. Le Corre, E. Brattberg, *How the Coronavirus Pandemic Shattered Europe’s Illusion of China*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/09/how-coronavirus-pandemic-shattered-europe-s-illusions-of-china-pub-82265>, 9 July 2020 (last accessed on 25 February 2022); J. Cabestan, “The COVID-19 Health Crisis and Its Impact on China’s International Relations”, *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 15:123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm15030123>.

³² T. Matura, “China-CEE Trade, Investment and Politics”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1571166>, pp. 3. See also B. Kowalski, “China’s foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The ‘16+1’ format in the South-South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017,1: #7R65ZH, <https://doi.org/10.22261/7R65ZH>, pp. 6-7.

³³See W. Kusak, *Impact of Cooperation of China and Central Eastern European Countries - Gateway to Europe or Backdoor to Revisionism?*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, National Chengchi University, July 2019, p. 37.

³⁴See an excellent, in-depth analysis in R. Turcsányi, R. Qiaoan, “Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China-CEE ‘16+1 platform’”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 18, 2000, pp. 397-412,

A useful analysis of the relations between China and CEE after 1989 was conducted by Kong Tianping in 2015. Kong divided the timespan of these relations into three periods: 1989 - 1998, 1998 - 2009, and 2009 up to the date of the composition of Kong's work in 2015.³⁵ It should be noted that the division markers identified by Kong on the timeline of PRC-CEE relations largely coincide with important events on the larger Sino-European background referenced above, which is however hardly surprising in the view of westward gravitation of CEE in the post-Cold War era and the subsequent accession of majority of these countries to the EU. In the account presented below we will follow Kong's periodization for the years before the establishment of the 16+1 in 2011. The discussion of the development of the framework since 2011 up to the current date will be presented in the next chapter.

The first period distinguished by Kong covers the years between 1989 and 1998. During that time Central Eastern Europe countries, experiencing rapid economic and political transition in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, would naturally cast their eyes towards possibilities revealed by the collapse of the Iron Curtain. The most crucial goal for CEE countries at the time was the accession to the EU and NATO - rapprochement with the West (Western Europe and the United States) was supposed to provide post-communist countries with a new security basis. At the same time the PRC needed to face a new international environment: end of the bipolar world and post-Tiananmen sanctions and a serious deterioration of its public image in the West. Contradictory political tendencies of the PRC and CEE came to a stark contrast on 4 June 1989, which was the date both of the violent suppression of Tiananmen Square protests by the Chinese regime and the first democratic general election in post-war Poland.³⁶ Tang further remarks that Lech Wałęsa and Vaclav

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00550-6>. The question will be discussed further in the following chapter, section 2.3.3.

³⁵T. Kong, "16+1 Cooperation Framework: Genesis, Characteristics and Prospect", *Medjunarodni problemi* (International Problems), 2015, 67 (2-3), pp. 167-183.

³⁶S. Tang: "The European Union and the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait (1996-2009) - A Content Analysis", p. 72.

Havel, the first post-communist presidents of Poland and Czech Republic respectively, were also the icons of the region's anti-communist struggle, as well as outspoken critics of the PRC.³⁷ In sum, China and CEE relations were not a priority for both sides at the time.

The second period singled out by Kong comprises the years 1998-2008, characterized by China's rise as one of the global powers. Accession of the PRC to the World Trade Organization in 2001 marked its full integration into the global economy, and opened a new door for a broad international cooperation beyond East-Asian neighbors. Following the establishment of the *comprehensive strategic partnership* between the EU and the PRC in 2003 (which marked the beginning of the Sino-European "honeymoon" period described in the previous section), CEE countries also started to look past the West, towards the cooperation opportunities with fast-developing China. China's interest in the CEE region was reinforced by the accession of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the EU in May 2004, as well as entry of Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania into the NATO in March the same year (Poland and Czech Republic having already been NATO members since 1999) - events which resulted in a "dramatic increase" of the strategic significance of the CEE region on the world stage. New momentum in the CEE's relations with China was perhaps best illustrated by Hu Jintao's visit to Europe in 2004, when the PRC committed to establishing "friendly and cooperative partnership" with Poland, Romania and Hungary.³⁸

The third and last period identified by Kong began in 2009, with the onset of new conditions in international trade and economy in the wake of the earth-shaking financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing recession. During the crisis, Western European FDI outflow to CEE countries declined significantly. Western capital, which was still needed by less developed

³⁷ S. Tang, *ibid.* See also: B. Kowalski, "China's foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The '16+1' format in the South-South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017.1, p. 4.

³⁸ T. Kong, *ibid.* p. 169.

CEE countries for catching-up strategies and investments, under these unfavorable circumstances has also dramatically decreased.³⁹ This, along with the abrupt depreciation of the Euro and non-eurozone CEE currencies, created a window for the influx of Chinese FDI - the countries of Central Eastern Europe needed investments and liquidity, and PRC was looking for new markets and investment opportunities. In the face of the general perception of not getting enough assistance for development needs and the feeling of political marginalization within the EU structures, the welcoming attitude of CEE countries towards China was a very natural outcome.⁴⁰ Moreover, many particular sectors targeted by China, such as energy generation or infrastructure building, still had a huge unexplored potential in the CEE region. China found itself in an extremely convenient position: PRC investors had almost no competition in CEE markets, and these countries themselves would be trying to attract and build mutual cooperation with China. New economic opportunities provided by the cooperation with China were a perfectly logical choice for the majority of the Central Eastern European states, and the strengthening of cooperation was simply a matter of time.⁴¹

Authors often point to Poland, Hungary and Romania as the earliest participants of the regional cooperation with the PRC that would eventually be molded into the 16+1 framework. With the exclusion of Poland, which will be discussed in detail in the third chapter of this thesis, it is instrumental to devote some attention to the development of China's relations with Hungary and Romania in the period preceding the establishment of 16+1. Moreover, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia have already in early 1990s entered into a partnership known as the Visegrád group, which has ever since represented the common interest of these

³⁹S. Pencea, "Windows of Opportunity in China", *Global Economic Observer*, "Nicolae Titulescu" University of Bucharest, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Institute for World Economy of the Romanian Academy, 1(2), p. 9.

⁴⁰R. Turcsányi, "Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?", European Institute for Asian Studies, *EU-Asia at a Glance*, January 2014.

⁴¹S. Pencea, *ibid.* For a succinct overview of this and other periods in PRC-CEE relations, see also T. Matura, "China-CEE Trade, Investment and Politics", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1571166>, pp. 2-4.

states in the CEE region and later within the EU. As such, the Visegrád Group is the most immediate international environment of Poland's engagement with the PRC. According to some of the scholars, V4+China could be a potential alternative for these countries' cooperation with China, and might be modeled on V4+Japan or V4+South Korea cooperation forms. It is therefore also important to delineate pre-16+1 Sino-Czech and Sino-Slovak relations, which will be done in the following sections.⁴²

1.2.1 Sino-Hungarian relations prior to 16+1

Much of the driving force behind the Sino-Hungarian rapprochement in recent years is derived from the eurosceptic, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese course of the Hungarian ruling party Fidesz headed by Viktor Orbán, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. It is however interesting that during Orbán's first term as a prime minister in 1998-2002, Sino-Hungarian relations were hitting rock bottom. At the time, in an overall display of a right-wing, anti-communist stance, Orbán openly criticized China's human rights record and received Dalai Lama in October 2000, which resulted in the shutdown of Hungarian consulate in Shanghai. Sino-Hungarian rapprochement was in fact initiated during the rule of the succeeding left-wing MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) under Prime Ministers Péter Medgyessy (in office 2002-2004) and Ferenc Gyurcsány (in office 2004-2009). The visit of Medgyessy to Beijing in 2003 was followed by the creation of a new envoy position within the Prime Minister's Office for the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations and for the coordination of the China-related work of governmental institutions and the public administration.⁴³ This, along with a number of bilateral agreements signed by Gyurcsány in the subsequent years, led to a significant increase in trade as well as intensification in cultural and

⁴²K. Dubravčíková et al., "Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform", Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2019, p. 21.

⁴³T. Matura, "Hungary and China Relations", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2018, E-book (Kindle) edition, p. 138.

academic ties between Hungary and China, effectively establishing Hungary as the main regional cooperation partner of the PRC.⁴⁴ According to the frequently quoted Chinese statistics, in the wake of the financial crisis, Chinese FDI in Hungary skyrocketed to levels far above the rest of the CEE countries (see Figure 1).⁴⁵

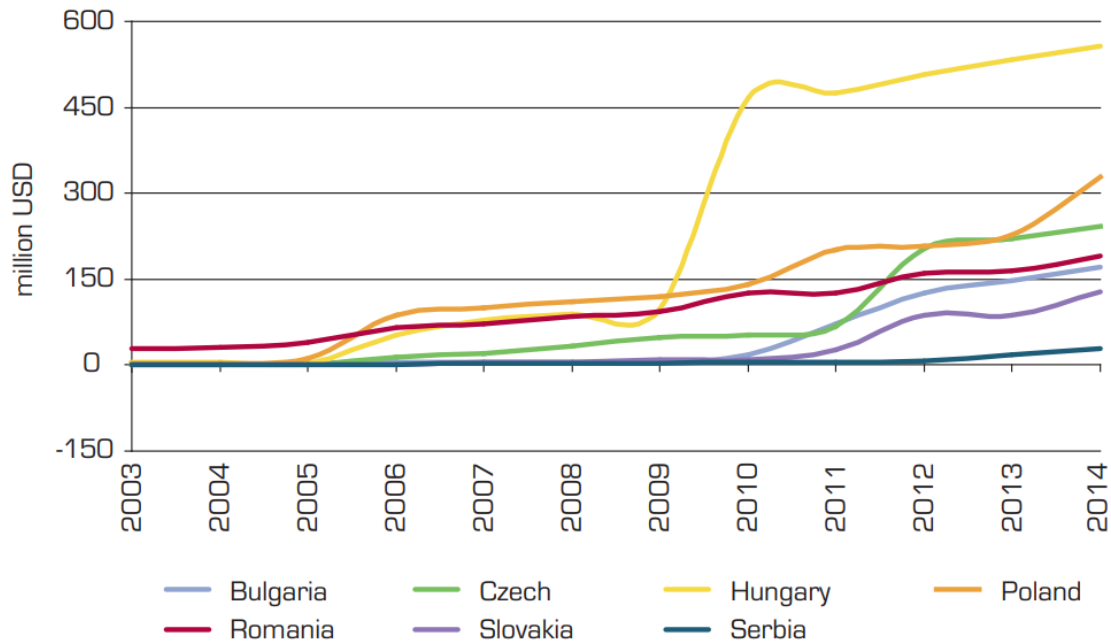


Figure 1: China’s OFDI stock in CEE, 2003-2014, selected countries. Adopted from Ágnes Szunomár “Blowing from the East”, *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2015, 24.3, pp. 68 (source: CEIC China Premium Database, based on Chinese statistics).

By the time Fidesz returned to power in 2010, Orbán had already embraced a pro-Chinese inclination of Hungarian foreign policy; he visited Beijing already in 2010, and in 2011 Hungary’s new line of engagement with the PRC was officially baptized as “Opening to the East strategy”. The first China-CEE Economic and Trade Forum held in Budapest in June

⁴⁴ R. Koleszár, “Hungary-China Relations: Is it Time for a Change?”, *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*, 28 October 2021, at: <https://chinaobservers.eu/hungary-china-relations-is-it-time-for-a-change> (last accessed on 1 March 2022).

⁴⁵A. McCaleb, Á. Szunomár, “Chinese foreign direct investment in central and eastern Europe: an institutional perspective”, in J. Drahokoupil (ed.), *Chinese investment in Europe: corporate strategies and labour relations*, Etui aisbl, Brussels, 2017, pp. 124-125.

2011, perceived as a direct prelude to the establishment of 16+1, was also a vivid continuation of Sino-Hungarian rapprochement. During the summit, China and Hungary, represented by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) and Victor Orbán, concluded twelve bilateral agreements worth around €2.62 billion; Wen Jiabao also declared PRC's confidence in Hungary's economy and willingness to buy a portion of its debt.⁴⁶

1.2.2 Sino-Romanian relations prior to 16+1

Unlike other countries in the region, Romania did not assume uncompromising anti-communist position in international relations after 1989 and maintained close ties with China throughout the 1990s, becoming perhaps the closest political ally of the PRC in Central Eastern Europe during that time. Sino-Romanian proximity was expressed by a series of mutual visits on the highest level - Romanian President Ion Iliescu flew to China already in 1991, and Chinese Premier Li Peng (李鵬) included Romania as the only stop in the CEE region on his European itinerary in 1994. During his visit, Li Peng declared readjustment of PRC relations with the region undergoing transformation processes, and announced the alignment of the PRC policy concerning CEE with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共處五項原則) - a declaratory set of rules of international engagement first stipulated in Sino-Indian agreement 1954, including: i) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, ii) mutual non-aggression, iii) non-interference in each other's internal affairs, iv) equality and mutual benefit and v) peaceful coexistence.⁴⁷ Jiang Zemin (江澤民) also arrived in Romania in 1996, and the Romanian President Emil Constantinescu returned the visit in 1997. Another manifestation of

⁴⁶For the detailed analysis of the strategy in question, see Á. Szunomár “Blowing from the East”, *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2015, 24.3, pp. 60-77. See also the relevant discussion in T. Matura, “Hungary and China Relations”, in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From “Old Comrades” to New Partners*, pp. 137-153.

⁴⁷ W. Kusak, *Impact of Cooperation of China and Central Eastern European Countries - Gateway to Europe or Backdoor to Revisionism?*, p. 37.

the pro-China attitude of the Romanian government that stood out against the regional anti-communist sentiment was its open and consistent support of the PRC's stance on the issues of Taiwan and Tibet.⁴⁸

According to Oehler-Şincai and Liu, after Romania's accession to the EU in 2004, impediments for once-promising Sino-Romanian economic cooperation included red tape, frequent changes of governments and legislation and a non-transparent business environment, a combination of discouraging factors that repelled the Chinese focus towards more attractive regional players, such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.⁴⁹ Relations between China and Romania were to regain some momentum only in 2013, under the framework of 16+1.

1.2.3 Sino-Czech relations prior to 16+1

Sino-Czech relations present an interesting case, in certain respects antithetical to that of Romania. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Czechoslovakia (until 1993) and then Czech Republic assumed a strongly pronounced anti-communist position in international relations and remained the staunchest advocate of human rights among all of CEE. Vaclav Havel, icon of anti-Soviet opposition and democratic transformation, remained highly supportive towards Chinese dissidents and the Dalai Lama throughout his presidency from 1989 to 2003. Moreover, despite maintaining diplomatic relations with the PRC, until 1996 Czech Republic cultivated close ties with Taiwan and endorsed the Two-State theory. A low point on Sino-Czech relations timeline was the visit of Lien Chan (連戰,) Premier of the Republic of China, to Prague in 1995.

⁴⁸I.M. Oehler-Şincai, M. Liu, "Sino-Romanian relations under the New World Order", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, p. 174.

⁴⁹I.M. Oehler-Şincai M. Liu, *ibid.*, pp. 175. See also the relatively comprehensive discussion in L. Popescu, A. Brînză "Romania-China Relations. Political and Economic Challenges in the BRI Era", *Romanian Journal of International Affairs*, 18.2, December 2018, pp. 20-38.

During the following years, Czech Republic engaged in what has been dubbed a “diplomatic U-turn” towards China.⁵⁰ In 1996 Czech government reaffirmed One-China policy, and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), which came to power in 1998, sought to pursue closer relations with the PRC, especially in the economic sphere. The results were, however, mixed - for example, the largest Sino-Czech business project up to date, the enlargement of the thermal power plant in Shentou strongly endorsed by the prime minister Miloš Zeman from 1999 to 2001, fell short of expectations in terms of profitability.⁵¹

It is telling that the arrival of Wen Jiabao in Prague in 2005 (a year after Czech Republic’s accession to the EU) marked the first ever visit of a Chinese premier to Czech Republic and the first official visit from PRC since Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽) stayed in Prague during his East-bloc tour back in 1987. In 2006 a new, comparatively conservative government headed by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) that replaced the socialist ČSSD again distanced itself from the PRC. Over heavy concern with the issue of human rights, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek declared boycott of 2008 Olympics in Beijing; a year later, the succeeding Prime Minister Jan Fischer received Dalai Lama, who arrived in Prague along with the Uygur activist Rebiya Kadeer to attend the Forum 2000 conference, at the invitation of Havel. This led to another crisis in Sino-Czech relations, which continued until the founding of the 16+1 framework in 2012.

However, in contradiction to Sino-Romanian relations, where political cordiality failed to bear substantial economic fruits, trade exchange between Czech Republic and China developed despite diplomatic animosities. PRC featured prominently in Czech guidelines for international cooperation as a “strategic economic destination”; exports to China experienced

⁵⁰See B. Kowalski, “Central and Eastern Europe, China’s Core Interests, and the Limits of Relational Politics: Lessons from the Czech Republic in the 2010s”, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, September 2020, 088832542095214. doi:10.1177/0888325420952142, pp. 6-8.

⁵¹For a thorough case study, see A. Skřivan, Jr., “»Škodaexport« and the Shentou Project —A Controversial Case of Czech (Czechoslovak) Export”, *Studia Orientalia Slovaca*, 2012, 11.2, pp. 289-302.

high annual increases towards the end of 2010s, and Czech Republic was in turn perceived as an important regional partner by Beijing.⁵² This provided a solid economic rationale, in the absence of a political one, for the participation of Czechia in the 16+1 framework.

1.2.4 Sino-Slovak relations prior to 16+1

The state of Slovakia, formally having come to existence on 1 January 1993 after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, was a natural heir to the experience of Czechoslovakian international politics, especially the one formed during the two and a half years of the independent Czechoslovakian state after 1989. Even though, as Kelemen et al. note, the “moralistic” personal imprint of Vaclav Havel which would define Sino-Czech relations had considerably weaker (though not negligible) influence on Slovak relations with the PRC, the Western-oriented development strategies concentrated on the accession to NATO and the EU pushed China towards the margins of Slovak international cooperation programs, and the PRC was not an important partner for Slovakia, neither economically nor politically, throughout the 1990s.⁵³

Only in 2003, as an outcome of the Slovak President Rudolf Schuster’s visit to Beijing, the new institutional framework for Sino-Slovak relations was established. Although few of the planned cooperation projects were realized, bilateral exchange between Slovakia and the PRC increased in the latter half of 2000s, owing to the pro-Chinese diplomatic attitude displayed by the government led by the prime minister Robert Fico of the left-wing Direction - Social Democracy (SMER-SD) party during the years 2006-2010. Fico’s government also did not actively criticize PRC’s human rights’ record and chose not to boycott the 2008 Beijing

⁵²R. Fürst, “Czechia’s relations with China. On a long road toward a real strategic partnership?”, in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From “Old Comrades” to New Partners*, pp. 125-126. See also the general overview of Sino-Czech relations provided by Fürst, *ibid.*, pp. 117-126.

⁵³B. Kelemen et al. *Slovakia and China: Challenges to the future of the relationship*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Slovakia-and-China-Challenges-to-the-Future-of-the-Relationship.pdf> (last accessed on 15 March 2022), pp. 7-9.

Olympics.⁵⁴ In 2009, the president of the PRC Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) visited Slovakia; the main item of the agenda was the discussion of Chinese companies' potential participation in Slovak infrastructure projects, particularly the construction of highways - at the time, the government of Slovakia was favoring the private-public partnership as a way of utilizing EU funds.⁵⁵ However, the planned cooperation eventually did not come to fruition, and Hu Jintao's trip to Bratislava was partly overshadowed by the violent clash between Slovakian human right activists and President Hu's Chinese supporters, with many personal accounts pointing to the latter as initial aggressors.⁵⁶ Due to all these factors, during the time when the 16+1 framework was taking shape in the years 2011-2012, Slovakia's relations with the PRC were at the lowest level among all of the Visegrád Group members.

1.3 16+1: Background of the framework invention

It should be clear from the above account that the most direct macroeconomic factor behind the formation of the 16+1 framework was the impact of the 2008 economic crisis in the West. As the crisis affected Western European countries most severely, it has disturbed the even influx of Western capital that the CEE region had firmly relied on for their "catching-up" developmental needs. This has created a foreign investment and international trade vacuum in the region, allowing for the increased Chinese presence. As Kong Tianping emphasized during his speech in the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Beijing on February 27th 2013, 2011

⁵⁴G. Pleschova, "The Slovak and Hungarian Partnerships with China: High Hopes that Did Not Come True", in R. Fürst, F. Tesař, *China's Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*, Institute of International Relations, Prague 2013, p. 27.

⁵⁵B. Kelemen et al., *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁶The incident attracted widespread coverage and attention; its most debated aspects included the apparent provocation on the part of Hu's supporters (mostly PRC citizens) and questionable reaction of the police (including delayed intervention and detainment of mostly Slovak activists). For an excellent, multifaceted scholarly analysis of the incident, see G. Pleschová, R. Fürst, "Mobilizing Overseas Chinese to Back Up Chinese Diplomacy: The Case of President Hu Jintao's Visit to Slovakia in 2009", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2015, 62:1, doi: 10.1080/10758216.2015.1002347, pp. 55-65.

had been a year when China for the first time started to think about relations with CEE countries in terms of regional approach.⁵⁷

Two particular events that have decisively influenced the creation of this new form of multilateral cooperation framework were already touched upon in the discussion above. The first event was the “China-Central and Eastern European Countries Economic and Trade Forum” held in Budapest in June 2011, organized at the initiative of China. It was during this forum that a unified regional approach of China towards CEE indicated by Kong was exhibited in practice. Wen Jiabao, the premier of the PRC, met with the representatives of 16 CEE countries, and indicated the potential for future development between China and the region. In his speech, Wen emphasized geopolitical value of the CEE region as the “gateway to Europe” and acknowledged long tradition of China-CEE relations dating “from the early days of the PRC”; Turcsányi also notes that Wen has referred to cooperation perspectives in the fields of trade, investments, infrastructure constructions, financial cooperation and people-to-people contacts.⁵⁸

The second event crucial in the establishment of 16+1 and widely regarded as the proper beginning of the framework was Wen Jiabao’s visit to Warsaw in April 2012. On the Sino-Polish bilateral level, Wen’s visit was a direct response to the Polish President Bronisław Komorowski’s trip to Beijing in December 2011 (see sections 3.1.1 - 3.2, pp. 87-90). On the multilateral level, Wen met in Warsaw with the leaders of 16 Central and Southern European countries⁵⁹. The Chinese premier announced a list of short- and medium-term goals, collectively known as “Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and

⁵⁷T. Kong, *Changing World and the China-CEE Relations, Speech given at the Embassy of Republic of Poland, February 27, 2013*, <https://www.msz.gov.pl/resource/2a451c0d-8d19-431d-895e-3f3de8746ec4:JCR> (last accessed on 21 January 2022).

⁵⁸R. Turcsányi, “China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe’s Repeating Troubles with Great Powers”, *China Report*, 2020, 56:1, pp. 64-65.

⁵⁹Namely: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Eastern European Countries” (hereafter referred to as “Twelve Measures”). Although the event was at the time perceived as an *ad hoc* gathering, the subsequent establishment of a China–CEE Secretariat within the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September 2012 to coordinate Chinese involvement with the 16 countries, along with the second 16+1 summit held in Bucharest in late 2013, “*was enough evidence that China is seeking a regular, annual format for its cooperation with CEE countries.*”⁶⁰



⁶⁰J. Szczudlik, “Coming out of the shadows: the Polish perspective on China–Central and Eastern Europe relations”, *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2015, 24. 3 (*China’s Discovery of Central Europe*), pp. 50-51.

Chapter Two: Characteristics and development of the 16+1 framework

It has been repeatedly emphasized that the establishment of the 16+1 framework and the Chinese interest towards the CEE region in general should be understood on the broader background of Going Global Strategy (走出去戰略), an active effort of the PRC government initiated already in 1999 to encourage the expansion of Chinese companies in foreign markets.⁶¹ The CEE region is attractive for Chinese investors for several reasons. First of all, CEE countries display a favorable ratio between labor cost and quality; moreover, these countries have relatively fast-growing economies and from a geopolitical perspective may function as a useful “back door” and “testing ground” for PRC entities that wish to expand further to Western Europe. As such, the region provides a unique opportunity to build new production facilities and finally sell products to the rest of Europe, whose market is undoubtedly more attractive than the one of the CEE region itself.⁶² What is more, CEE countries need investments in energy generation and infrastructure building, in which Chinese investors are typically most interested; that gives both sides matching interest and creates cooperation opportunities.⁶³

Some scholars argue that 16+1 is just a pragmatic formula, the main rationale of which is simply the mutual benefit (the win-win policy). For example, in his early (2013) analysis of the 16+1 initiative, Liu considers pragmatism as one of the defining features of the framework. “Pragmatism” in Liu’s understanding refers to the fact that the cooperation between PRC and

⁶¹See M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbcowski, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing”, *OSW Commentary*, N. 166 (April 2015), pp. 3; B. Góralczyk, “China’s interests in Central and Eastern Europe: enter the dragon”, *European View* 16(1), May 2017, doi:10.1007/s12290-017-0427-9.

⁶²M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbcowski, *ibid*, pp. 3-4.

⁶³S. Pencea, “Windows of Opportunity in China”, *Global Economic Observer*, 2013, vol. 1(2), p. 9.

CEE arises from capital and infrastructural needs, in face of which political and strategic considerations are only secondary.⁶⁴ Five years later (2018), Liu from virtually the same position refers to the scholarly debate around 16+1 by saying that “*some think tanks of the West have become more convinced that China has a significant strategic intent to intervene in the CEECs. In fact, what the “16+1 Cooperation” demands is precisely the de-ideologicalization and non-geopolitics.*”⁶⁵ It is nonetheless significant that Liu does not directly deny the existence of “strategic intent” on part of the PRC, he rather indicates that such considerations, whether real or imagined, are undesirable in terms of what the 16+1 “demands”.

The notions of “pragmatic” and “strategic” approach of China to the CEE region underlie the competing Chinese and European narratives surrounding the 16+1 framework, which will be scrutinized in detail in the section 2.3.2. However, at this point it seems safe to say that apart from the evident economic incentive, Beijing sees the cooperation with the CEE region also as a tool of shaping Chinese relations with the EU, though not necessarily in a hostile “divide and conquer” manner envisaged by some European skeptics (see section 2.3.2, pp. 63-67). Building a positive image of China, whose main slogan for international expansion is “peaceful growth”, is obviously in the political interest of Beijing, but the PRC is eager to exercise more concrete influence - Kaczmarek and Jakóbczyk note that CEE can become the “lobbyists” for specific Chinese interests on the general Sino-European level.⁶⁶ The perceived political agenda of PRC in developing the relationship with the CEE region has been

⁶⁴ Z. Liu, “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions”, *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 7.6, 2013, pp. 2. Szczudlik agrees that China’s motivations in setting up the 16+1 format are primarily economical, see J. Szczudlik. “Seven Years of the 16+1: An Assessment of China’s ‘Multilateral Bilateralism’ in Central Europe”, *Asie.Visions*, No. 107, Ifri, April 2019, p. 10.

⁶⁵Z. Liu, “The ‘16+1 Cooperation’ under the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative”, in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From “Old Comrades” to New Partners*, p. 33.

⁶⁶M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbczyk, *ibid*, pp. 4. However, such assumption seems to be empirically contradicted by at least the case of Sino-Hungarian cooperation on the 16+1 platform; see section 2.4.1, pp. 74-76 for the relevant discussion.

characterized as an attempt to influence or even - as stated above - divide the EU, an issue that has attracted considerable political and scholarly attention.

In the course of the following discussion, we will try to characterize multiple aspects of the evolution of 16+1. After a brief description of the initial structure of the framework and the development of its structure (often referred to as “progressing institutionalization”), the author will identify the main tendencies, phenomena and changes that occurred within and around the framework during the decade since its establishment in 2012 up to the present date, such as the trend towards bilateralism, the interdependence of 16+1 and the BRI, as well as fluctuations in membership, i.e. the admission of Greece (2019) and the withdrawal of Lithuania (2021). Consequently, we will try to concisely address the main problems of the initiative, such as the long-standing issue of trade inequalities and the aforementioned question of strategic intentions. Lastly, to make final touches in preparing the background for the discussion of Poland’s case, we will outline China’s cooperation and relations with the other members of the Visegrád Group - Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

2.1 Initial structure and basic characteristics of the 16+1 framework

The core structure of the 16+1 was stipulated in the “Twelve Measures” for promoting friendly cooperation with CEE countries announced by Wen Jiabao during what has retrospectively come to be known as the first 16+1 summit held in Warsaw in April 2012. It is meaningful here to take a closer look at the content of the “Twelve Measures”, which, besides the organizational function, were meant to define Chinese strategy of engagement with the CEE region under the banner of 16+1 framework. The measures in question included:

- 1) Setting up a secretariat - the main coordination body of the 16+1 platform. The Secretariat has been based under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC; its main

task is liaising and coordinating the matters related to the cooperation, such as preparation of leaders' meetings, organization of forums, implementation of meeting outcomes etc. Each country is obliged to designate a counterpart department and a coordinator, who would take part in the work of the Secretariat;

- 2) Establishment of the US\$10 billion special credit line for CEE countries in target areas such as new technologies, infrastructure or green ecology, and opening the application for Chinese banks, such as National Development Bank of China, Export and Import Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Construction Bank of China, Bank of China or China Citic Bank;
- 3) Setting up the investment fund (with the goal of raising US\$500 million in the first stage);
- 4) Dispatching investment promotion missions to create new bilateral opportunities;
- 5) Commitment to encourage and support Chinese enterprises to cooperate with relevant countries in establishing economic and technological zones in CEE;
- 6) Commitment to explore opportunities of international financial cooperation between China and CEE countries;
- 7) Establishment of an expert committee on the construction of transportation network between China and the CEE region;
- 8) Regular organization of high-level expert meetings on cultural exchange and cooperation;
- 9) Establishment of student exchange programs, provision of 5,000 scholarships for CEECs and supporting the development of Confucius Institutes in these countries;

- 10) Establishment of a tourism promotion alliance between China and the CEE region, which would be coordinated by China Tourism Administration and will be open to participation by entities such as airline companies, travel agencies and civil aviation authorities of both China and CEE;
- 11) Establishment of a research fund on relations between China and CEE and active support of academic exchanges;
- 12) Establishment of the young leader's forum and enhancing mutual understanding and friendship.

The first two of the “Twelve Measures” are especially noteworthy. The second one, that is the establishment of the US\$10 billion special credit line for CEE projects in areas such as infrastructure, high-tech technology or green ecology and the investment fund with the goal of raising US\$500 million during the first stage, strongly points to economic and investment considerations as the prime motivation of the PRC in creating the 16+1 cooperation framework and during its initial stages. Such an inaugural profile of the framework is significant from the recent perspective of the China-CEE partnership having drifted towards “*political and other areas*.”⁶⁷

The first measure, crucial to the very functioning of the 16+1 platform, is the establishment of the China-CEE Secretariat. The Secretariat is a Chinese institution, created under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) of the PRC and located within the Department of European Affairs of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to the provisions of the Twelve Measures, the Secretariat deals with communication and coordination of all matters related to the China-CEE cooperation; it is also responsible for preparation and implementation of the

⁶⁷A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova, “Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (“16+1”): New Trends, Future Developments and Implications for Latvia”, *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook*, 2018, p. 164.

decisions made during the leaders' meetings and business forums. As specified above, the work of the Secretariat includes mainly liaison and coordination tasks; it consists of 24 units - PRC Ministries, PRC government institutions, Banks, PRC infrastructure and development institutions and corporations, as well as National Coordinators appointed by 16 CEE countries. According to the Suzhou Guidelines, a mechanism of quarterly meetings between the Secretariat and its member organizations and CEE embassies in China was implemented⁶⁸.

Turcsányi notes that by locating the Secretariat within the structures of Chinese MoFA, PRC has effectively placed itself in the driving seat of the initiative. However, the positioning of the Secretariat as just the body within the Department of European Affairs means that it is not the sole instrument in formulation or even coordination of China's policies towards CEE; Chinese MoFA has also built coordination mechanisms with all of CEE states separately.⁶⁹ Since its establishment, the 16+1 framework has undergone significant structural enlargement or "institutionalization", manifested mainly in the successive creation of a number of supporting and coordinating bodies on different governmental levels of CEE countries. We will briefly examine this and other development tendencies over the following sections.

2.2 Major trends and phenomena in the development of the 16+1 framework

In September 2012, as the fulfillment of the first of "Twelve Measures", the ceremony was held in Beijing which marked the establishment of the Secretariat and the meeting of national coordinators.⁷⁰ Since then, the 16+1 has been evolving to the steady pace of annual meetings held on the highest level between China and CEE: in 2013 in Bucharest (Romania),

⁶⁸The Suzhou Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 01 November, 2015. http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474159.htm

⁶⁹R. Turcsányi, "Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?", European Institute for Asian Studies, *EU-Asia at a Glance*, January 2014; "China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers", *China Report*, 2020, 56:1, p. 65.

⁷⁰J. Simurina, "China's approach to CEE-16", Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN), Short Term Policy Brief 85, January 2014, p. 6.

in 2014 in Belgrade (Serbia), in 2015 in Suzhou (China), in 2016 in Riga (Latvia), in 2017 in Budapest (Hungary), in 2018 in Sofia (Bulgaria), 2019 in Dubrovnik (Croatia). Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic early in 2020, the next summit scheduled for spring 2020 in Beijing had been postponed and later held online in February 2021⁷¹.

Every summit is an opportunity for 16+1 leaders to talk about the future cooperation within the region, and ends with an issuance of the *Guidelines for Cooperation* (hereafter referred to as “guidelines”), which consist of the most important agendas, plans and a schedule of National Coordinators’ Meetings, with particular emphasis on investment and trade prospects for CEE and China. Various supplementary multilateral meetings, mostly concentrated on economic investment and regional cooperation issues (such as forums or ministry-level conferences) have been organized since the framework’s creation and are scheduled for the future. Apart from the issues of economy and trade, the scope of topics discussed on the 16+1 platform has also encompassed tourism, education, agriculture, environment protection, e-commerce and other affairs.⁷² Establishment and any modifications of relevant bodies are also agreed on and arranged bilaterally during annual summits, and it is the development of such institutional framework that will be briefly discussed in the following subsection.

2.2.1 Multilayered institutionalization

Since the official inauguration of the 16+1 platform, a number of associations and industry organizations were set up by particular states independently of the Secretariat, a

⁷¹ “2020 China-CEEC Summit postponed due to COVID-19”, CGTN, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-07/2020-China-CEEC-Summit-postponed-due-to-COVID-19-PuP2kkYHLi/index.html> (last accessed on 31 March 2022); “China-CEEC Summit gains new consensus, cooperation momentum: Wang Yi”, CGTN, 12 February 2021, available at: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/ldrhw_1/Beijing2021/hdtj4/202112/t20211222_10474292.htm (last accessed on 31 March 2022).

⁷²L. Song, D. Pavličević, “China’s Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework”. *China Political Science Review*, 4, 2019, pp. 281; Z. Liu, “Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes”, *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, pp. 28-29.

tendency by some authors described as a progressing institutionalization of the initiative.⁷³

Firstly, two permanent bodies of the initiative were created in Warsaw in 2014, namely: The Permanent Secretariat for Investment Promotion in Warsaw, and the China-CEEC Business Council - a fact that testifies to the importance of Poland within the initiative.⁷⁴

In the following years, as many as fourteen supporting institutions (variously called “centers”, “associations” or “mechanisms”) have been announced: in 2015, the New Silk Road Institute (NSRIP) (located in Czech Republic); in 2016, the Center for Dialogue and Cooperation on Energy Projects (in Romania), the Regional Center of the China National Tourism Administration (Hungary), the Coordination Mechanism on Forestry Cooperation (Slovenia); in 2017, the Association for the Promotion of Agricultural Cooperation (Bulgaria), China-CEE Institute (Hungary), CEE Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (Hungary), Virtual “16 + 1 Cooperation” Technology Transfer Center (Slovakia), Secretariat on Logistics Cooperation and Virtual Information Platform (Latvia), Secretariat for Maritime Issues (Poland) and in 2018, the Cultural Cooperation Coordination Center (Macedonia). The establishment of the Association on Transport and Infrastructure Cooperation in Serbia has been in the 16+1 agenda since at least 2014, however the current status of this project is unclear.⁷⁵

⁷³M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbcowski, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing”, *OSW Commentary*, 166 (April 2015), pp. 2; S. Istenič, *China-CEE Relations in the 16+1 Format and Implications for Taiwan*, 14th Annual Conference on “China-EU Relations and the Taiwan Question”, October 19–21, 2017, Shanghai, p. 2 (discussion paper, quoted with author’s permission).

⁷⁴The Business Council had been initially coordinated by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP), but according to arrangements made during the 16+1 summit in Sofia 2018 it has been taken over by the Polish Investment and Trade Agency (PAIH). Both PARP and PAIH are Polish government agencies. See the communication from the PAIH website from July 9th 2018: “PAIH is home for China-CEEC Business Council office” https://www.paih.gov.pl/20180709/paih_home_for_china_ceed_business_council (last accessed on 4 March 2022).

⁷⁵See S. Istenič, *China-CEE Relations in the 16+1 Format and Implications for Taiwan*, 14th Annual Conference on “China-EU Relations and the Taiwan Question”, October 19 – 21, 2017, Shanghai, pp. 2-3 (discussion paper, quoted with author’s permission); see also E. Kavalski, “The Unexpected Consequences of China’s Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe”, *International Studies* 57(1), 2020, pp. 8; “4th China-CEEC Ministerial Forum on Cultural Cooperation held in Skopje”, Xinhua, available at: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/201911/27/content_WS55ddd229c6d0bcf8c4c17df6.html (last accessed on 1 April 2022). Kizeková lists the Association on Transport and Infrastructure Cooperation in Serbia among the established institutions, however she references only the Suzhou Guidelines where the creation of that institution is only encouraged; see “China’s engagements with Central and Eastern Europe in the BRI era”, in J.C. Liow et al. (ed.) *Research Handbook on the Belt and*

While due to the present spatial and thematic constraints it is impossible to discuss any of these institutions in detail, it is important to note how the emerging institutional structure has been interpreted by scholars. Jakóbowski, in discussing international cooperation model that he dubs “Chinese-led regional multilateralism”, points to the 16+1 framework as a unique example of an institutionalization where each mechanism is dedicated to a selected sector of cooperation; such a sector is “usually an extension of a given country’s bilateral focus in relations with China.”⁷⁶ Song and Pavličević further comment that “these mechanisms illustrate China’s unorthodox approach to multilateralism: their operational concept entails individual member countries taking role within the broader multilateral setting in developing cooperation within the specific cooperation areas based on their identified strengths and interests.”⁷⁷ As such, 16+1 institutional framework displays characteristics of the Chinese approach that Song and Pavličević call “multilayered multilateralism” - a combination of multilateral and bilateral cooperation realized on three distinct levels: (1) PRC’s and CEE region as a whole, (2) PRC and sub-regional groups: the Visegrád Group, the Baltic countries, and Southeastern Europe and (3) bilateral relations, especially four pivot countries: Poland, Hungary, Romania and Serbia.⁷⁸

Road Initiative, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2021, pp. 325. As far as we have been able to determine, towards the end of 2018 the association in question was still a “future project”; see J. Petrović, “Attitudes and knowledge of young people in Serbia toward People Republic of China’s development”, China-CEE Institute Working Paper, 2018 no. 20 (22 November 2018), pp. 5, 9.

⁷⁶J. Jakóbowski, “Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOACAC, and CCF”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113, 2018, pp. 667-668, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458055.

⁷⁷L. Song, D. Pavličević, “China’s Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework”, *China Political Science Review*, 4, 2019, p. 283. The authors provide the examples of Hungary hosting the China-CEE Association for Tourism Promotion, because of its economy’s heavy reliance on tourism, as well as Serbia hosting Association for Transportation Infrastructure in accordance with the emphasis it places on infrastructural development. Similarly, *Poland hosts the China-CEE Investment Promotion Agency and China-CEE Business Council, playing to its advantage of being the biggest economy in the CEE region.* (ibid., p. 284).

⁷⁸L. Song, D. Pavličević, ibid., pp. 277-302.

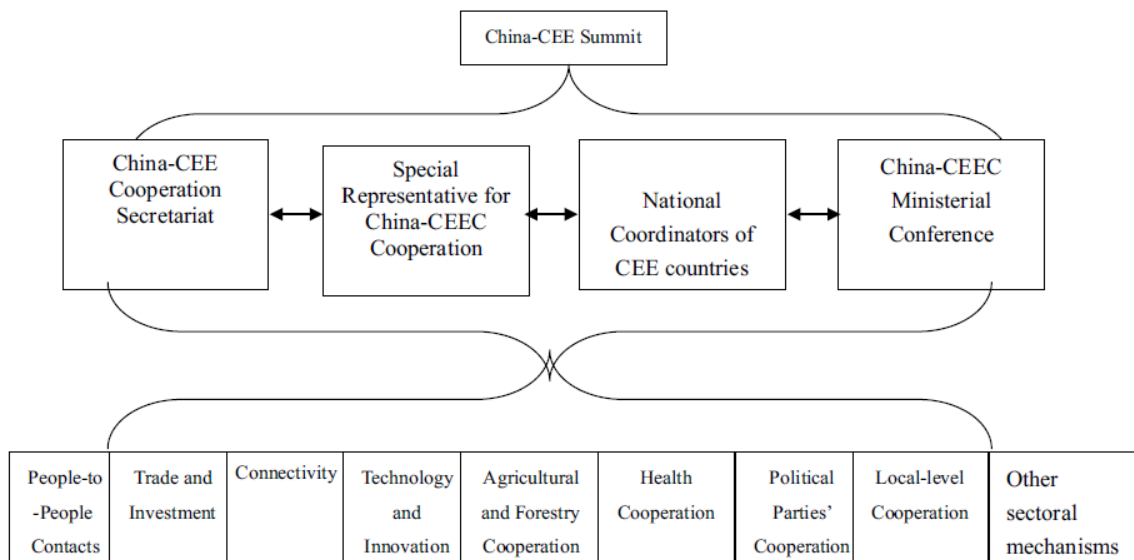


Figure 2. Visualization of 16+1 framework structure, adapted from L. Song, D. Pavličević, “China’s Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework”, p. 285.

2.2.2 Towards EU-ization, bilateralism and diversification

Another tendency that has been discerned from organizational changes occurring within the 16+1 framework over the years 2012-2019 is the “EU-ization” of the initiative, that is the gradual shift of decision-making and agenda-setting capacity from the PRC towards a more balanced multilateral model with considerable attention devoted to the requirements and factors of the EU. Szczudlik indicates that while the “Twelve Measures” were prepared, announced and implemented solely by China, the guidelines adopted at annual summits are in fact joint documents, drafted by China and then amended, commented and finally agreed upon collectively by all of the leaders of 16+1 member states. Since the second summit in Bucharest in 2013, an EU observer has participated in the summits, and upon completion the guidelines are submitted to Brussels for scrutiny whether the content remains in line with the EU law and competencies. Szczudlik also notes that the importance attached by the actors of 16+1 initiative to the larger framework of China-EU relations is evident in particular passages of annually

released guidelines, such as “*China-CEEC cooperation is in concord with China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership*” (Bucharest guidelines, 2013) or *China-CEEC cooperation is in line with China-EU relations(...) thus contributing as appropriate to the implementation of the ‘EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda of Cooperation’*” (Belgrade guidelines, 2014).⁷⁹

Another tendency that can be observed in the 16+1 framework over the years is the diversification of the discussed issues and topics, as well as the diversification of relevant narratives and areas of cooperation. Szczudlik has noticed that the content politically or strategically important to either China or CEE countries has been gaining currency within the framework. For example, since Suzhou (2015) and Riga (2016) summits, connectivity and maritime issues have been prevailing over strictly trade-related matters in the PRC’s narrative and slogans (which is undoubtedly related to China’s dynamic development and promotion of the larger BRI - see the discussion in the next subsection). On the other hand, proposals such as Three Seas Initiative (2016) and Eastern Partnership (2017) are part of the geopolitical agenda that the respective CEE countries seek to advance on the 16+1 platform.⁸⁰ In fact, due to conflicting political interests, the process of drafting of 16+1 documents is not a smooth one, and has been described as a “tug-of-war” between China and CEE.⁸¹

In discussing areas of China-CEE relations that underwent significant expansion in the course of 16+1 development, scholars point also to the multiplication of lower-level, non-governmental formulas which fall into the broader designation of “people-to-people contacts”,

⁷⁹Quoted after J. Szczudlik, “Seven Years of the 16+1: An Assessment of China’s ‘Multilateral Bilateralism’ in Central Europe”, *Asie.Visions*, N. 107, Ifri, April 2019, pp. 16-17. It is instrumental to view such declarations in the perspective of the voices criticizing 16+1 format as harmful to the EU unity – a judgment that China has been eagerly attempting to disprove. See the 2.3.1 section of this chapter for the relevant discussion.

⁸⁰J. Szczudlik, *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

⁸¹J. Szczudlik, *ibid.*, p. 18. Szczudlik points to the Sino-Russian relations as a source of contention between Poland and PRC, particularly since Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014. This thesis is being written during the first months of the full-scale Russian military invasion on Ukraine, which has been unfolding since late February 2022; its influence on Sino-Polish and Sino-European relations remains to be seen, but in the view of the above, it is likely to be significant.

an umbrella term that covers exchanges in tourism, culture, sport and academia (concrete examples include literature and music festivals, mutual visits of artists, think-tank cooperation etc.).⁸² People-to-people contacts have been increasingly emphasized in the Chinese narrative about 16+1, and even presented as the main goal of the initiative which as such should not be perceived as “institutionalized organization” with “ambitions to build a union”, rather as a framework or platform complementary to the Belt and Road Initiative.⁸³ It is difficult to ignore the defining influence that the BRI, launched one year later the 16+1 framework, had on the functioning of and narrative about the latter.

2.2.3 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (一帶一路, BRI, originally known in the Anglophone context as “One Belt One Road” and abbreviated as BRI in earlier works) is an international infrastructure development project launched by the Chinese government in 2013, and aimed at developing connections between China, Europe and Central and Southeast Asia. Despite the fact that the BRI was announced after the creation of 16+1, the latter has been promptly incorporated into the former. The Belt and Road Initiative is in fact better understood as an umbrella concept that spans a vast number of projects and initiatives, and some of the pre-existing ones, such as the 16+1 formula, were retroactively assigned the BRI label.

The goal of incorporating the 16+1 platform into the BRI framework was already expressed in the guidelines from the second 16+1 summit held in Bucharest in 2013 as the aforementioned emphasis on “connectivity”. The guidelines included a section entitled

⁸²J. Szczudlik, *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸³See the remarks of Chen Xin, an expert from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, recounted in P. Pendrakowska, “Poland’s perspective on belt and road initiative”, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 2019, p. 5. Liu, however, provides exact examples of institutions established to coordinate people-to-people contacts, such as China-CEEC Cultural Cooperation Forum, the China-CEEC Education Policy Dialogue and the China-CEEC and Young Political Leaders Forum; see Z. Liu, “Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes”, *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, pp. 27-28.

“Enhance cooperation in connectivity”, the first point of which was an active discussion on “*the possibility of building an international railway transportation corridor connecting China with CEECs and encourage businesses to establish bonded areas and distribution centers along the railway routes to build a new logistics passage between China and Europe*”⁸⁴ - a wording tantamount to the synopsis of BRI agenda. Guidelines on the “cooperation on connectivity” were considerably expanded and specified in the documents from both Belgrade (2014) and Suzhou (2015) annual 16+1 summits.⁸⁵ During the speech at the Suzhou summit, Xi Jinping openly declared that “*the realization of ‘16+1’ cooperation must be fully complementary to the construction of the “One Belt, One Road.”*”⁸⁶

What is labeled by “connectivity” in 16+1 documents is mainly the establishment of logistics and transport infrastructure in these countries that would be instrumental in linking China with Europe. This area of cooperation has become crucial for China in terms of its engagement with the CEE region, and has also constituted one of the pillars of PRC-EU relations; 16+1 has accordingly become a major tool in achieving Sino-European connectivity objectives of the BRI.⁸⁷ It has been indicated that from the European perspective, Chinese investments in infrastructure and logistics can be highly beneficial and helpful in resolving the long-standing problems in connectivity resulting from asymmetries in infrastructural development within the EU area, manifested most clearly along the division between old and

⁸⁴ *The Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, at: <http://www.ceec-china-logistics.org/databank/images/docs/9/61/The-Bucharest-Guidelines.pdf>.

⁸⁵ *The Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201412/t20141231_679391.html; *The Suzhou Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201511/t20151124_679426.html.

⁸⁶ See the original content of Xi’s speech as reported by People’s Daily at: http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-11/27/content_22522751.htm; translation after B. Kowalski, “China’s foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The ‘16+1’ format in the South–South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017,1: #7R65ZH, <https://doi.org/10.22261/7R65ZH>, p. 7.

⁸⁷ Importance of the CEE region in the context of BRI is an inevitable consequence of geographic factors - virtually all existing and planned land connections between China and the EU are leading through the CEE region. See: J. Jakóbowski, “How to Finance the Enhanced EU-China Connectivity in the CEE region?.” In M. Andžāns (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Riga, 2016, pp. 36-39.

new members of the European Union. Another problem that has been identified in respect to the intra-European transportation network is the lack of routes connecting the north and south. China-propelled BRI and potential investments in the CEE region might provide a solution for these disproportions, which is why the new emphasis on infrastructure brought by the integration of 16+1 into the BRI framework was met with a fairly enthusiastic reaction on the part of most of the CEE.⁸⁸

In the following years China-CEE cooperation gained visible momentum and intensity; during the year 2016, Chinese leaders visited the region with unprecedented frequency - in March the president of the PRC, Xi Jinping visited Czech Republic, and in June Poland and Serbia. During each visit a number of bilateral agreements were signed, most of which related directly to BRI infrastructure projects.⁸⁹ By mid-2017, almost 40 China-Europe rail roads had been opened, including the south-north corridor between Greece and Baltic states. In Poland, regular cargo railway connections from the Polish city Łódź to Chengdu and Xi'an, as well as from Warsaw to Suzhou have been established, along with the China-Europe Land-Sea express line, running through Western Balkans and Hungary. Belgrade-Budapest High Speed Railway, despite some technical and legal issues, is under construction. What is more, trade volume between China and CEE is rising, and outward foreign direct investments (OFDI) between 2010 and 2015 have surged by over 100%. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the expansion of cooperation has also amplified the negative trend which remains the main reason for dissatisfaction of CEE states: the trade imbalance (see section 3.2.2.1, pp. 96-98, and section 4.2.4, pp. 131-139).

At least in terms of statistics, the years 2014-2018 appear as a golden period of 16+1 - China's investment in the CEE region has achieved an impressive increase from US\$3 billion

⁸⁸C. Xin, "Connectivity in China and Europe: What Lessons can be Learned." In M. Andžāns (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, pp. 40-42.

⁸⁹J. Ma. "New features of 16+1 cooperation in 2016", 2017, pp. 4-5.

to US\$10 billion, with the areas of investments becoming considerably diversified. These numbers are underscored by large projects in transportation infrastructure realized or significantly advanced under the auspices of 16+1 and the BRI. Apart from the aforementioned international connections of Łódź-Chengdu (freight train) and Belgrade-Budapest (high-speed railway), also smaller transportation enterprises at national level have been initiated, such as the Pelješac Bridge and the Montenegro North-South Expressway.⁹⁰

However, the infrastructural projects undertaken within the framework of China-CEE cooperation have not always yielded satisfying results - the construction of the aforementioned Montenegro expressway project has become bogged in corruption allegations, environmental concerns and doubts surrounding the economic impact of construction costs, which have taken the form of Chinese loan for the Montenegro government;⁹¹ Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway is also far from completion, with significant legal and functional issues still to be resolved (see section 3.2.2.1, pp. 96-98). Moreover, European countries have become concerned with the inherent inequality of the BRI model - in April 2018, all 28 EU ambassadors to China, excluding Hungary's, signed a joint report "*critical of the BRI for hampering free trade and effectively being a 'one-way street' that favored Chinese companies and left European countries without a say.*"⁹²

⁹⁰Z. Liu, "Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes", *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, pp. 26. For the relevant summary see also Z. Liu, "The '16+1 Cooperation' under the 'Belt and Road' initiative", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, pp. 34-43.

⁹¹See H. von der Brielle, The billion-dollar motorway leading Montenegro to nowhere, 28 May 2021, *My Europe*, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/05/07/the-billion-dollar-motorway-leading-montenegro-to-nowhere> (last accessed on 4 April 2022). Although apparently advancing towards completion, as of April 2022 different sections of the motorway still await opening. See R. Ralev, Montenegro to open Smokovac-Matsevo motorway section in May, *See News*, 25 March 2022, <https://seenews.com/news/montenegro-to-open-smokovac-matsevo-motorway-section-in-may-778459> (last accessed on 4 April 2022).

⁹²S. Biba, R. Wolf, Introduction to S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, p. 10. The authors nonetheless indicate that this unity has afterward crumbled, as some countries, including Greece, Italy and Portugal, have adopted a more favorable stance towards the BRI.

2.2.4 From 16 to 17: Admission of Greece (2019)

The eighth summit of 16+1 held in Dubrovnik in April 2019 was a revolutionary one - for the first time in the 16+1 framework's history, a new country has been accepted as a member, and the platform was officially renamed from 16+1 to 17+1. Greece was an exceptional candidate: a financially troubled EU member state which barely survived the Eurozone crisis, and by any stretch of geographic terminology not a Central Eastern European country, although, according to Liu, Greece's localization at the intersection of Balkans and Southeastern Europe "does not transgress the initial mandate of China-CEE cooperation."⁹³ Sino-Greek relations have been on the upward curve since the two countries launched the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and China's economic presence in Greece increased greatly in the wake of the financial crisis which devastated the Greek economy. In the geopolitical perspective of the BRI, the state-owned China Ocean Shipping company (COSCO) in 2016 has crucially acquired a controlling stake in the Greek port of Piraeus, making it one of the primary logistical nodes on the new silk road functioning as an entrance to Europe and the Near East. Therefore, the inclusion of Greece into 16+1 is well justified by China's overall strategic layout centered on facilitating Sino-European connectivity.⁹⁴

Liu further notes the admission of Greece into the framework "helped to disperse some criticism about the cooperation mechanism: China is not establishing a club of former socialist

⁹³Z. Liu, "Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes", *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, p. 30. Some scholars prefer to terminologically acknowledge Greece's inclusion into the framework of regional cooperation by CEE to CESEE (Central-East and Southeast Europe); see e.g. A. Vangeli, "Belt and Road and China's Attempt at Region Building in Central-East and Southeast Europe", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, December 1, 2020, doi: 10.1177/1868102620953439 available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868102620953439> (last accessed on 12 April 2022). However, since Greece as such is not essential to the present analysis, for the sake of clarity we have chosen to operate with the CEE designation throughout the thesis.

⁹⁴C. Liu, "Framing China-EU Sub-regional Cooperation: The Elusive Pursuit of Normative Resonance?", in A. Miskimmon, et. al. *One Belt, One Road, One Story : Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, p. 49. For the recent, comprehensive analysis of China's acquisition of Piraeus port on the background of the BRI, see T. Gontika, *The One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative and the Port of Piraeus: Understanding Greece's Role in China's Strategy to Construct a Unified Large Market*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2022.

countries, but is carrying out cooperative measures with an inclusive and open mind.”⁹⁵ What is also interesting, Greece’s admission to the formula was an effect of one-to-one negotiation between Athens and Beijing, which had been initiated by the Greek side.⁹⁶

2.2.5 Back to 16: withdrawal of Lithuania (2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic

In May 2021, Lithuania announced its withdrawal from the framework, causing the short-lived “17+1” designation to relapse back to the original “16+1”. It should be noted, however, that even before Lithuania’s decision, the actual results of China-CEE cooperation were already being perceived as disappointing by many CEE countries towards the end of the 2010s. Concrete reasons for dissatisfaction included unabated trade deficits with China, Chinese FDI still directed mostly to Western Europe rather than to the CEE, low completion rate of BRI projects in the region and pan-European cybersecurity concerns over Huawei (see section 3.2.2.2, pp. 98-102).⁹⁷ According to Lithuanian official statements, the unprecedented withdrawal from the framework was motivated by persistent economic obstacles in the access to the Chinese market. However, more prominent in the Lithuanian narrative surrounding the move was the criticism of 17+1 as detrimental to the unity of the EU. Commenting on Lithuania’s decision to pull out of the initiative, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis emphasized that *“Europe’s strength and impact is in its unity,”* and appealed to the European leaders to engage in *“a much more effective 27+1 approach and communication with China.”*⁹⁸ Roughly simultaneously with the relinquishment of membership in the

⁹⁵Z. Liu, “Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes”, *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, p. 30.

⁹⁶H. Ciurtin, “The “16+1” Becomes the “17+1: Greece Joins China’s Dwindling Cooperation Framework in Central and Eastern Europe.” *China Brief*, 19(10), The Jamestown Foundation, 29 May 2019, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-161-becomes-the-171-greece-joins-chinas-dwindling-cooperation-framework-in-central-and-eastern-europe> (last accessed on April 5 2022).

⁹⁷P. Gupta, “The “17+1” initiative: Is China losing its charm in Central and Eastern Europe?”, Observer Research Foundation, 18 September 2020, at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/17-plus-1-initiative-china-losing-charm-central-eastern-europe> (last accessed on 5 April 2022).

⁹⁸“Lithuania quits ‘divisive’ China 17+1 group”, *LRT English*, May 24 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1416061/lithuania-quits-divisive-china-17plus1-group>; T. Shattuck “Lithuania shows blueprint to

framework, Lithuania strengthened its ties with Taiwan by changing the name of the *de facto* Taiwanese embassy in Vilnius to “Taiwanese Representative Office” in an unprecedented departure from the conventional designation “Taipei Office” used across Europe, a PRC-enforced concession to the lack of official diplomatic relations between Taiwan and the EU countries.⁹⁹ Although it was the second, Taiwan-related issue that provoked diplomatic and trade retaliation on the part of PRC, both steps undertaken by the Lithuanian government exemplify its row with China that has been continuing to the present date.

The issue of actual or perceived divisiveness of 16+1 - a recurring theme in the debate on Sino-European relations - has been already touched upon in the above discussion and will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section; it is however important to note that Lithuania’s withdrawal from the framework has been analyzed on the broader background of deteriorating relations between China and the EU, especially during the ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19. Apart from obvious circumstances of the canceled summits and the abrupt decrease in bilateral trade, the actual extent of macroeconomic impact and sociopolitical consequences of the pandemic on China-CEE cooperation is difficult to assess at the present moment; it nonetheless follows from the fact that 16+1 is a part in the larger framework of Sino-European relations, that the COVID-19-pandemic will factor into the levels of both China-EU and China-CEE relations along similar lines.

oppose China”, *Taipei Times*, 1 September 2021 <https://taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/09/01/2003763571> (both last accessed on 5 April 2022).

⁹⁹ Bielakowska, A. “Tajwan/ 27 samolotów ChRL naruszyło strefę ADIZ podczas wizyty deputowanych z krajów bałtyckich” [Taiwan/ 27 PRC planes violated the ADIZ during the visit of the representatives of the Baltic countries], Polish Press Agency, 28 November, 2021.



Figure 3: CEE16 countries and their EU status as of 2022, after admission of Greece and withdrawal of Lithuania. Adapted with modifications by this author from Stanzel et. al, China’s Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation, European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 December 2016, available at: https://ecfr.eu/publication/chinas_investment_in_influence_the_future_of_161_cooperation7204/.

2.3 Problems of the 16+1 framework

Many problems frequently emerging in the debate surrounding the 16+1 are in some way attributable to the characteristic of the platform that in the early stages of its existence has been designated by Liu as “the asymmetric nature of China and CEE pragmatic cooperation”.¹⁰⁰ Much like in the case of China-EU relations, the PRC and CEE are not by any measure symmetrical cooperation partners, the former being a politically unified and increasingly

¹⁰⁰ Z. Liu, “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions”, *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 7.6, 2013, p. 4.

authoritarian global power, while the latter is a cluster of sovereign states connected to each other by little more than geographical proximity. Long before the accession of Greece, it has been noted by Chinese researchers that due to its heterogeneity and diversified demands, it is impossible to regard the CEE region as a single strategic entity.¹⁰¹ On the organizational level, Liu has indicated that while the PRC has committed to establishing a nationally-controlled coordination mechanism in the form of the Secretariat, the “*CEE states exhibit a lack of organized united framework toward China and every country separately is unwilling to create such mechanisms themselves. This creates a huge asymmetry and makes the cooperation look more like ‘one country versus multiple sides’.*”¹⁰² Western scholars, such as Jakóbowski and Szczudlik, have argued that 16+1 is better described and understood as a combination of bilateral relations rather than a truly multilateral platform, in the sense that China in fact utilizes the framework to facilitate and advance its bilateral relations with individual countries, and on the other hand CEE themselves are not particularly willing to engage in a meaningful cooperation between themselves within the constraints of 16+1 - a model for which Szczudlik employs the term “multilateral bilateralism”.¹⁰³

Such problems of the 16+1, apart from the aforementioned labels of “heterogeneity” and “asymmetry”, have also been described in perhaps more negatively charged terms of “inequality” - the level of the relationship between China and particular CEE countries as such is highly unequal. It manifests not only in economic interactions, but also in the sphere of political commitment. Some of the CEE countries enjoy dynamic and vibrant interactions with

¹⁰¹Z. Liu, *ibid.* pp. 5-6. In 2016 Liu has reiterated the same concerns regarding China-CEE cooperation 2016 in the context of BRI; see “Europe and the “Belt and Road” Initiative: Responses and Risks”, China Social Sciences Press, Beijing 2016, retrieved from <http://www.geopolitika.hu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Liu-ZuokuiEurope-and-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>, (last accessed on 6 April 2022), p. 12.

¹⁰²Z. Liu, “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions.” *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, 7(6), 2013, p. 4.

¹⁰³J. Jakóbowski, “Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113, 2018, pp. 659-673, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458055; J. Szczudlik, “Seven Years of the 16+1: An Assessment of China’s ‘Multilateral Bilateralism’ in Central Europe”, *Asie.Visions*, N. 107, Ifri, April 2019, pp. 3-13.

Chinese partners, and for some of them the level of cooperation is much lower; some of the countries exhibit an enthusiastic pro-China approach, while others are very skeptical towards any political engagement with the PRC.¹⁰⁴ In the early years of the initiative, Liu has already classified CEE countries according to their demands and attitudes in their cooperation with the PRC into three categories. The first category is represented by Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia and most of the EU members who want to be the “free riders” of China’s economic development - open to economic cooperation and unwilling to make any concessions on ideological and political grounds. The second category includes countries like Serbia and Hungary, which are keen on deepening pragmatic cooperation with China along with some pro-PRC political steps, such as Hungarian support for lifting the European arms embargo on China and its unwillingness to meet receive delegations from Taiwan and Tibet¹⁰⁵. Last group is represented by the Western Balkan countries (excluding Serbia) - these countries have poor independent abilities, weak and limited markets, they lack competitiveness and are short of resources, which makes them especially susceptible to Chinese influence.¹⁰⁶

In the following subsections, the author will carry out the discussion on the problems of the 16+1 platform on two levels - economic and ideological. Firstly, we will take a look at an easily measurable and statistically conspicuous question of trade and investment inequalities, which in case of China-CEE relations is tantamount to significant trade deficits that have incessantly beleaguered CEE as a region and most of the CEE countries individually in their exchange with China - a problem that is aggravated, if not caused, by the lack of reciprocity in

¹⁰⁴ M. Andžāns, “Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Eastern European countries: conclusions, considerations, recommendations, and introduction to the afterthoughts”, in M. Andžāns (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Eastern European Countries*, p. 15. Differences in economic cooperation with China among CEECs may result from a variety of political, social and legal factors. For example, high involvement of the PRC in the infrastructure investment in the Western Balkan region (non-EU member states) has been facilitated by the lack of complicated EU procurement procedures (see the discussion in section 2.3.1 below).

¹⁰⁵ Á. Szunomár “Blowing from the East”, *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2015, 24.3, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶ Liu Zuokui. 2013. “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions.” *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, 7(6), p. 6. See also M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbczyk, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing” *OSW Commentary*, 166, (April 15), p. 2.

market accessibility. Our take on the ideological level of problems will revolve around differing narratives concerning 16+1, neatly captured by Chunrong Liu as “dissonance” between European “normative” frame (including the frequently heard criticism of 16+1 as a Chinese strategy to conquer the EU) and Chinese “pragmatic” frame (a “win-win” economic cooperation model - see the discussion in the section 2.3.2 below). The author will also try to supplement a broader context of ideological differences and misalignment of mutual perceptions between PRC and CEE, the latter at least to certain extent being the result of the former.

2.3.1 Trade inequalities, investment obstacles and the question of reciprocity

The long-standing, frequently raised and probably the most visible problem of the 16+1 framework is the high trade deficit between all CEE countries and China. Although reflective of general trends in Sino-European economic exchange, the CEE-China trade deficit is particularly significant.¹⁰⁷ Establishment of express freight train connections - a hallmark project of the connectivity-centered BRI - in increasing the trade volume also aggravated trade imbalance between China and Europe, with deficits run by the great majority of both Western European countries and CEE. Pencea notes that in fact “*some of the countries (e.g. Romania) that had managed to scale down their deficits during and after the global economic crisis, have seen them rebounding after the 16+1 and BRI launch.*”¹⁰⁸ What is especially noteworthy is the fact that in the years 2010-2016 (a period immediately following the financial crisis), China-CEE trade volume has oscillated at only around 10% of a total volume of Sino-European trade,

¹⁰⁷J. Ma, “The Paradoxes Between Narrator and Audience in the China’s Narrative of Belt and Road Initiative”, in A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin, J. Zeng, *One Belt, One Road, One Story: Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁸S. Pencea, “China’s Initiatives in Emerging Europe”, The University of Nottingham's Asia Research Institute, 31 August 2018, at: <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/31/chinas-initiatives-in-emerging-europe/> (last accessed on 8 April 2022.)

a clear indication that despite the increase in absolute volumes, 16+1 would not significantly alter the negative ratio between CEE's and Western Europe's exchange with China.¹⁰⁹

It should be instructive here to also take a glance at the last years of the pre-Covid era, when the volume of China's export to CEE was roughly three times the volume of its imports from that region. Right before the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2019, PRC's exports to CEE amounted to US\$70.6 billion compared to US\$24.82 billion in imports, with overall trade surplus for China reaching US\$45.78 billion. Poland was the country with the highest trade deficit of US\$19.93 billion, followed by Czech Republic (US\$8.34 billion) and Greece (US\$7.01 billion), with the rest of CEE states experiencing deficits below US\$3 billion. Only Slovakia and North Macedonia sustained trade surplus with China (US\$3.05 billion and US\$10 million respectively; see Figure 4).¹¹⁰

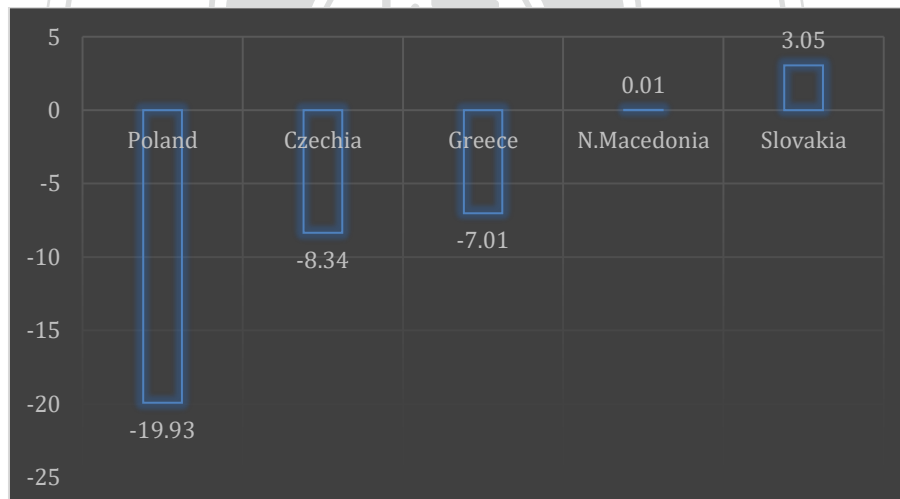


Figure 4: Trade balance between the chosen CEE states and the PRC in 2019, in US\$ billion.

The 16+1 framework failed to live up to CEE expectations also in terms of investments and industrial development. Pencea indicates that while the Central European countries

¹⁰⁹ S. Pencea, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Z. Liu, "Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries in Times of Major Changes", *China International Studies*, 85, November/December 2020, p. 35.

hopefully anticipated an increase in Chinese FDI particularly in greenfield investment and technology transfers, PRC concentrated on industrial takeovers, which also proved comparatively scarce. Again, investment flow between China and CEE is dwarfed by the one between China and Western Europe. Pencea notes that in the latter case “*an impressive upswing of investment flows*” can be observed after the financial crisis, while the Chinese investments directed towards CEE have actually decreased.¹¹¹ At least in terms of trade exchange and FDI flow, Chinese perception of the region as a “gateway to (Western) Europe” is reflected much more clearly than a “win-win” narrative.

It has also been indicated that the completion rate of infrastructure projects is hardly satisfactory. Some projects have been seriously delayed (such as Belgrade-Budapest speed train, whose financing by the Chinese credit line came under investigation as to its compliance with the EU law), some have simply failed (such as the aforementioned highway construction in Poland by the Chinese company Covec, to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter). Scholars and analysts have frequently pointed out that Chinese entities have, in many cases, disregarded or attempted to circumvent EU regulatory regime, which itself resulted from their choice to rigidly apply practices from the cooperation with African and South American countries, rather than adapt to the more demanding legal reality of the EU.¹¹² This is also the reason why most of the infrastructural projects undertaken under the 16+1 banner have been successfully completed in the Western Balkan countries which are not yet members of the EU, and as such not subject to the complexities of EU procurement regulations.

Even so, though undoubtedly beneficial in the short run, China-driven infrastructure development in Western Balkans is not free from potential risks, originating mostly from the much-disputed mode of financing the projects through Chinese loans. Szczudlik notes that

¹¹¹ S. Pencea, *ibid.*

¹¹² M. Kaczmarzski, J. Jakóbowski, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing”, *OSW Commentary*, N. 166 (April 2015), p. 4; S. Pencea, *ibid.*

repaying the credits may result in increasing the public debt of a given state; she cites the example of Montenegro, whose public debt, exacerbated by the Chinese loans for infrastructure projects, totals around 80% of the country's GDP. Szczudlik also argues that the economic difficulties created by Chinese loans may cause undesired international consequences for WB states, for example negatively affecting a country's economic and political ratings and, by extension, its prospect of joining the EU.¹¹³

Despite the initial enthusiastic optimism, the CEE countries have realized that Chinese offers come with some strings attached, such as favoring Chinese subcontractors, crowding out local competition, shifting of risk onto the recipient state etc.¹¹⁴ The EU law has a defining influence for the whole CEE region, as even the EU non-member Balkan states aspire to join the Union. This is why any foreign investments conflicting with European regulations are naturally undesirable for any country of the region. It does seem that on the practical level of carrying out the economic cooperation, China has unduly emphasized its own strategic goals and ignored, or at least made light of, specific conditions and priorities of the CEE.¹¹⁵

¹¹³J. Szczudlik, "Seven Years of the 16+1: An Assessment of China's 'Multilateral Bilateralism' in Central Europe", *Asie.Visions*, N. 107, Ifri, April 2019, p. 24.

¹¹⁴Major risk-shifting strategies include requiring sovereign guarantees from the recipient states and avoiding the involvement of PRC entities in the operational stage of investments; see S. Pencea, *ibid.* M. Makocki, "One-way Train from China to Central Europe." in Andžāns, Māris, eds., *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, pp. 44-45.

¹¹⁵ S. Pencea, *ibid.*

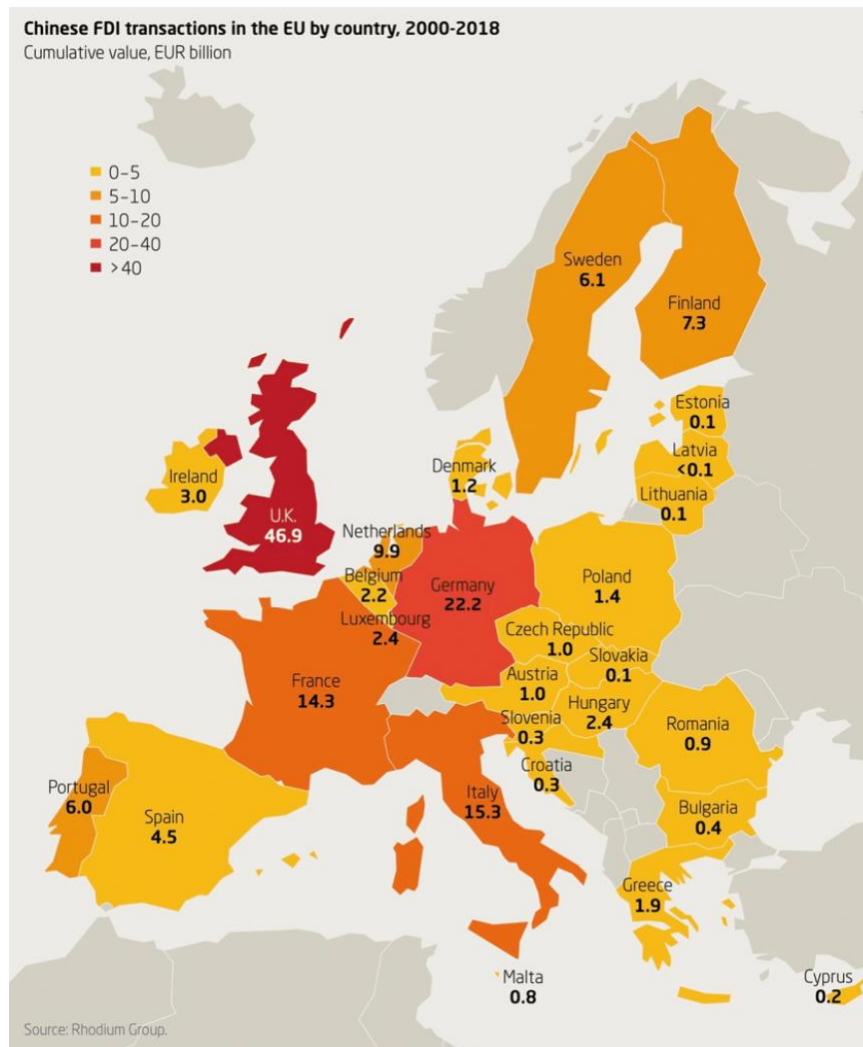


Figure 5: Chinese FDI transactions in the EU by country (2000–2018). Source: Rhodium Group and the Mercator Institute for China Studies, adapted by this author from L. Irimescu, Hungary’s Eastern Opening: Political and Economic Impacts”, Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest, 2019, at: https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/57_KKI-Policy-Brief_HU-CHN_Irimescu_20191220.pdf

2.3.2 Competing narratives and frame dissonance

The narrative framing 16+1 as a divide and conquer strategy directed against the unity of the EU has been presented in Western media since the very establishment of the framework,¹¹⁶ and is descriptive mainly of the official positions expressed by the old EU member states, such as Germany. Reservations of Western European countries towards

¹¹⁶S. Bolzen, J. Erling, “Divide, Conquer, Aim East: China Has A Sharp New European Trade Strategy”, *Worldcrunch*, 11 November 2012 <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/divide-conquer-aim-east-china-has-a-sharp-new-european-trade-strategy> (last accessed on 6 April 2022).

developing China-CEE cooperation have been formulated as fears of China fostering bilateral ties at the expense of China-EU relations¹¹⁷ or installing a Trojan horse of political sympathizers and pro-Chinese lobbies inside the EU.¹¹⁸ It has been observed that for some of the CEE countries Beijing offers a more accessible source of funding compared to relatively strict application procedures and conditions within the EU. Economic dependence on China could result in an increased susceptibility to political influence, which in turn might undermine the consistency of the EU's foreign policy. In his insightful analysis of the EU narrative Chunrong Liu has indicated that *“China’s sub-regional activism has provided a stimulus for the EU to reclaim its collective identity. Increasing public attention is directed toward a normative challenge: China’s regional engagement is eroding the EU’s political unity and internal cohesion by accumulating influence over the Union’s members and potential members’ strategic choices. Furthermore, regional engagement in Europe may provide China with strategic means to encourage or pressure its regional partners to act according to China’s interests, thus deconstructing the EU’s voice on politically sensitive issues.”*¹¹⁹

It should be noted that since the very establishment of the 16+1 framework, China has emphasized the pragmatic “win-win” aspect of PRC-CEE cooperation and its commitment to the relationship with the EU; Chinese politicians and scholars have consistently asserted their understanding of 16+1 as a part of China-EU relations.¹²⁰ The aforementioned suspicions about China's ulterior motives, expressed chiefly in political statements and circulated in non-academic media, have been granted varying credibility by the Western scholarly discourse. In

¹¹⁷M. Kaczmarek, J. Jakóbowski, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing”, *OSW Commentary*, 166 (April 2015), p. 5.

¹¹⁸R. Turcsányi, “Central and Eastern Europe’s courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?”, European Institute for Asian Studies, *EU-Asia at a Glance*, January 2014.

¹¹⁹C. Liu, “Framing China–EU Sub-regional Cooperation: The Elusive Pursuit of Normative Resonance?”, in A. Miskimmon, et.al. *One Road, One Story : Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, Pallgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, p. 53.

¹²⁰See for example the answers that Song Tao, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Secretary-General of the Secretariat, gave to journalists’ questions right after the ceremony marking the establishment of the 16+1 Secretariat on 6 September 2012, in J. Simurina, “China’s Approach to the CEE-16”, Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN), Short Term Policy Brief 85, January 2014, p. 6.

an article from 2014 tellingly entitled *Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?*, Turcsányi expressed serious doubts about the validity of such claims, arguing that China itself does not appear particularly eager to act as an alternative to the EU in its relations with CEE countries, which has been evidenced by PRC's reluctance to support Hungary's Prime Minister Orbán's anti-EU rhetoric in 2011/2012; at that time China would rather engage with a more EU-friendly Poland to avoid potential risks in its relation with the EU. For Liu Zuokui, whose voice may be considered largely representative for the Chinese scholarship on 16+1, PRC's decision to shun Hungary in favor of Poland was a vivid display of pragmatism, in line with its declared approach to the cooperation with CEE countries.¹²¹

Basing on his incessant research and scrutiny of 16+1 development over the years, Turcsányi has also noted that during the period from 2017 to 2019 the criticism of 16+1 has grown considerably, owing to general shift in the European perception of China and EU-PRC relations dynamic during that time (such as China becoming the “systemic rival” of the EU). In his recent article *China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers* (2020) Turcsányi makes a valuable observation that both the criticism and the support for 16+1 is rooted in the widespread misconception about the allegedly sky-rocketing economic cooperation between the PRC and CEE. Despite exaggerated portrayals in both Western and Chinese press, the actual economic presence of China in the CEE region remains limited. This calls to question any claims that derive PRC's political stratagems from its economic influence in the CEE.¹²² Garlick, re-examining Holslag's claims

¹²¹ R. Turcsányi, *ibid.* Liu Zuokui. 2013. “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions.” *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, 7(6), p. 2.

¹²² R. Turcsányi, “China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers”, *China Report*, 2020, 56:1, pp. 64-69. Other scholars are also skeptical of China's alleged hostile ulterior motives, see e.g. T. Matura, “China-CEE Trade, Investment and Politics”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1571166>, pp. 3, 7; Sali sees the competing narratives of both the anti-European Trojan horse and a pillar of the China-EU relations as “simplistic overstatements”, but in general concurs that China does not seek to undermine its own cooperation with the EU; see E. Sali: “16+1 Initiative in China-EU Relations: ‘Golden Opportunity’ or ‘Divide and Rule’”, in Chen Xin (ed.) *16+1 Cooperation and China-EU Relationship*, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2018, pp. 25-38. As a means of facilitating the “transparency of mutual intentions”, the EU has put forward the idea of creating a permanent Chinese think-tank based in Brussels,

about the threats of the BRI and re-applying his theoretical framework of “offensive mercantilism” to China-CEE relations, similarly to Turcsányi finds no evidence that China intentionally pursues “divide and conquer” or a zero-sum aggressive agenda in its relations with the CEE, although he does concur with Holslag that the BRI can be seen as a PRC’s offensive in its geo-economic competition with Western Europe on the Eurasian landmass.¹²³

There is also a more general level to the concerns raised by the EU about China’s presence in the CEE region, and it pertains to the possibility of lowering European standards of labor protection, environmental protection, welfare, product quality etc. An entry of new Chinese investments could influence the legal environment within the EU, or the competitiveness of other EU member states. Fukuyama has argued in 2016 that the BRI can in fact be seen as an instrument for “exporting Chinese model” in the global contest between China and the West, an endeavor to promote Chinese patterns of economic growth.¹²⁴ Vangeli, applying the notion of “symbolic power” to the 16+1 has indicated that “*as an effect of symbolic domination, a growing number of actors may at least start thinking and behaving more like China, or the way China inspires them to think and behave, or in a way that legitimizes China and its claims, its values, its economic model and practices.*”¹²⁵ Song and Pavlićević, drawing on the views of Vangeli and others, have perceived 16+1 and other PRC-led multilateral platforms as spaces that, through the implementation of “*institutional arrangements, guiding*

which could hold a credible discussion on Chinese vision of cooperation within the whole European Union. (A. Georgescu, “Building a Great Bridge, not a Great Wall.” In M. Andžāns, (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, pp. 32-35.

¹²³J. Garlick, “China’s Economic Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case of Offensive Mercantilism?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2019, doi: 10.1080/09668136.2019.1648764, pp. 1-25. Interestingly, the Eurasian geopolitical ambitions of China have been also subjected to a (quasi) post-colonial interpretation as “reversal of the results of the Age of Discovery”, where either the Sino-Russian or Sino-European integration is seen as an attempt to consolidate the “Eurasian heartland” as a global counterbalance to the US. See J. Górski, “Central and Eastern Europe, Group 16+1 and One Belt One Road: The Case of 2016 Sino-Polish Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, *Transnational Dispute Management (TDM)*, 14.3, October 2017, pp. 12, 26-27, and the referenced works.

¹²⁴F. Fukuyama, “Exporting the Chinese Model”, *Project Syndicate*, 12 January 2016, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/china-one-belt-one-road-strategy-by-francis-fukuyama-2016-01?language=english&barrier=accesspaylog> (last accessed on 7 April 2022).

¹²⁵A. Vangeli, “Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16 + 1 Cooperation”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113, 2018, pp. 674-687, doi: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1458056.

documents, policies and 'shared practices',” become subject to Chinese “rules of engagement”, “*reflective of its [Chinese] values and conducive to its interests.*” In the long run this might, according to Alden and Alvez, be seen as “*opening a way for revision of global governance in order to lay foundations for a parallel international order.*”¹²⁶

The EU is also apprehensive towards the possibility of PRC becoming an alternative for the EU membership for the five Western Balkans countries - Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. Cooperation with Beijing and being treated in the same way as other CEE has indeed brought new promises and perspectives for the Western Balkan (WB) region. What is also interesting, China benefits from the fact that these countries are functioning outside of the EU, as it makes them more receptive and flexible for Chinese investments and at the same time creates a possibility for indirect cooperation with the EU. This situation vividly manifests in a vast number of Chinese investments in the WB region, especially in comparison to more populous CEE countries, where the actual amount of COFDI after a decade of 16+1 has often fallen short of expectations.¹²⁷

¹²⁶L. Song, D. Pavličević, “China’s Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework”, *China Political Science Review*, 4, 2019, p. 279. The article by Alden and Alves quoted by Song and Pavličević examines China normative influence exercised by the PRC in the so-called “Regional Forum Diplomacy” using the case studies of Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Macau Forum. Authors note that they have intentionally selected the examples *where the Chinese preponderance of economic power is self-evident* (p. 151), which is not exactly the case with the 16+1 format. Nevertheless, as Song and Pavličević imply in quoting the paper, Alden and Alves’s findings are a valuable reference point also in the discussion of China-CEE cooperation. See C. Alden, A. Alves “China’s Regional Forum Diplomacy in the Developing World: Socialisation and the ‘Sinosphere’”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26:103, 2017, pp. 151-165, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2016.1206276.

¹²⁷For the comprehensive overview of economic, political and cultural aspects of Sino-Balkan relations within the 16+1 format, see S. Š. Šabić: “China in Southeast Europe: Detecting a Trend”, in Chen Xin (ed.) *16+1 Cooperation and China-EU Relationship*, China-CEE Institute, Budapest 2018, pp. 199-214; for in-depth analysis of China’s economic presence in the WB region, see the following articles by Anastas Vangeli: “On Sino-Balkan Infrastructure Development Cooperation”, in: U. Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Ł. Janulewicz (ed.) *Experience with Chinese investment in the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet space: Lessons for Central Europe?*, EU Frontiers Policy Paper, No. 16, December 2018; “China: A New Geo-economic Approach to the Balkans”, in F. Bieber, N. Tzifakis, *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with External Actors*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2019, pp. 205-224. For the most recent insights about the prospects of Sino-Balkan relations in the post-Covid times, see A. Vangeli, “China’s Belt and Road in the Balkans in the Post-COVID-19 Era”, available at <https://www.iemed.org/publication/chinas-belt-and-road-in-the-balkans-in-the-post-covid-19-era> (last accessed on 7 April 2022); J. Long, “The Transition of EU’s Attitude Towards “16+1”.” In M. Andžāns (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, pp. 25-28.

Liu Chunrong has presented competing Chinese and European narratives surrounding the BRI in terms of a “frame dissonance”, where the European “normative frame” is juxtaposed with the Chinese “pragmatic frame”. The same theoretical treatment is applicable to the 16+1 framework, which is an integral part and in fact has since become a regional manifestation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Liu notes that “(w)hile the EU has maintained its sensitivity over geopolitical influence in its peripheries and tends to see China’s interconnectivity and trade ties to have the potential to undermine the EU’s unity and solidarity, China’s framing is largely grounded in a pragmatic logic. By crafting a master frame of ‘community of common destiny,’ China is able to narrate its regional activism as a flexible and balanced engagement with the EU, a functional need to serve its domestic development, and a constitutive element of a new global order.”¹²⁸ These narratives continue to unfold parallel to each other, and it remains to be seen if and how the unfolding global events such as Covid pandemic might reshape their coexistence and interaction.

2.3.3 Ideological differences and publicity problems

The complicated relationship between China and CEE can be also examined in a broader, socio-cultural context, which reveals a conspicuously problematic issue - the political misperception of the CEE region on the part of China. Kaczmarek and Jakóbowski asserted that the acknowledgement of “historical ties” formed between China and CEE after 1949 in spite of present political and ideological differences should be explained “*by the fact that Chinese experts find it difficult to understand the meaning of the changes which happened in the CEE region after 1989. According to them, the source of these changes may be associated*

¹²⁸C. Liu, “Framing China–EU Sub-regional Cooperation: The Elusive Pursuit of Normative Resonance?”, in A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin, J. Zeng, *One Belt, One Road, One Story : Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, Pallgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, p. 61.

with pressure exerted by Western Europe; they do not comprehend the internal drive for change in CEE countries.”¹²⁹

Employing the geopolitical dichotomy of “Global South” (mostly the developing, postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America) as opposed to the developed states constituting “Global North”, Kowalski has convincingly demonstrated that although the general framework Sino-European relations falls within the North-South category, China approaches the CEE region as part of the Global South, making the 16+1 in essence similar to South-South cooperation models that China entertains, for example, with Africa.¹³⁰ Although the CEE political environment is very unlike the African one, Chinese rhetoric is implicitly indicative of the PRC’s endeavor to assume the role of a “spokesman of the weak” in its relations with the CEE region. Although China’s perception of democratic transition of these countries as “imposed” by the West is for the most part fundamentally misguided, China’s historically conditioned stance against Western imperialism might resonate with recent trends of questioning the values of liberal democracy seen in some of the leading CEE.¹³¹

The most comprehensive and enlightening discussion of the socio-cultural discontents of China-CEE relations was carried out by Turcsányi and Qiaoan in the article *Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China-CEE “16+1 platform”* (2019). In their analysis, the authors assume sociological perspective on culture as a meaning system and apply methodological tools such as Geertz’s “thick description”, and examine the role of collective memory and cultural trauma (both instrumental in national identity building) in the mutual perception and relations between China and the CEE region. Turcsányi and Qiaoan

¹²⁹M. Kaczmarek, J.Jakóbowksi, “China on Central-Eastern Europe: ‘16+1’ as seen from Beijing”, *OSW Commentary*, 166, (April 15), p. 2.

¹³⁰Apart from the common points in Chinese rhetoric, there are also considerable organizational analogies between 16+1 and FOCAC. See B. Kowalski, “China’s foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The ‘16+1’ format in the South–South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017, 1: #7R65ZH, <https://doi.org/10.22261/7R65ZH>, p. 5.

¹³¹Kowalski, *ibid.* p. 7. See also the arguments presented throughout the article pp. 1-16.

illuminate vastly dissimilar socio-cultural contexts in the view on Communism, conditioned mainly by divergent historic trajectories, which render the notion of “traditional friendship”, unilaterally emphasized by China, essentially problematic for the CEE countries whose massive and decisive rejection of the communist rule in 1989 naturally engendered a post-1989 reality where the political legitimacy has been ideologically grounded in opposition to Communism. This “creates a significant gap between China and the CEE countries. China’s utilization of the terms such as ‘traditional friendship’ and ‘shared past’ are framed within China’s political context which sees them as the positive reinvigoration of the fact that at one-point China and the CEE countries were both ruled by the parties of the (nominally) same ideology. The markedly different post-1989 development, however, puts them on the opposite sides of the history.”¹³² Turcsányi and Qiaoan grant that such rhetoric on the part of the PRC might very well be regarded as a sincere expression of warm feelings, it is nevertheless rather ill-conceived, as “most of the CEE countries today are apparently not grateful for being reminded of their Communist past. In a way, the old friendship which China recognizes is seen in much of the CEE region as deriving of their past Communist governments which are considered as illegitimate ones by today’s elite and much of the public.” Communist past for the CEE states “is the one of suppression of their European identity, freedoms, and worse—the one of foreign occupation.”¹³³

Turcsányi and Qiaoan are undoubtedly right in presenting China’s narrative of “traditional friendship” as a liability that might undermine the PRC-CEE cooperation. But authors themselves note that the anti-communist sentiment of CEE is not uniform - on the contrary, it is in fact one of the parameters of the region’s sociopolitical heterogeneity. The V-4 group and Baltic states are traditionally the most anti-communist ones, which manifests also

¹³²R. Turcsányi, R. Qiaoan, “Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China-CEE ‘16+1 platform’”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 2000, 18, pp. 397–412.

¹³³R. Turcsányi, R. Qiaoan, *ibid.*

in the comparatively unfavorable perception of China in these societies and the relative eagerness of their governments to criticize PRC on human rights issues. Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria view their Communist past in slightly brighter, though still mostly negative hues. Western Balkan states, however, due to turbulent post-1989 history and the fact that their Communist regimes had grown out of largely domestic movements, identify with the West to a much lesser degree and are significantly more nostalgic towards their Communism than the rest of the region.¹³⁴ This is complemented by a significantly more favorable outlook on China in WB countries, both in terms of the economic cooperation and on the political level.

Referring to the aforementioned views of Turcsányi and Qiaoan, Vangeli notes that “regardless of the discomfort that ideological divergences bring, they were not an obstacle for the voluntary participation of the CESEE countries in the Belt and Road and China-led regional endeavours, and tacitly engaging with the Chinese narration of the shared history of socialism.”¹³⁵ Although Vangeli’s observation, made in 2020, is no longer true for Lithuania, which has left the initiative in 2021 (see section 2.2.5, pp. 54-57), it does seem that the problems of diverging ideologies, misapplied narratives and negative publicity are not critical for the 16+1, with the main axis of cooperation remaining economically oriented.

2.4 China’s cooperation with the Visegrád Group within the 16+1 framework

Scholars have indicated that inherent in the initial frameworks of both 16+1 and BRI China was China’s geo-economic misreading of Central Eastern Europe as a homogeneous region and disregard to the preexisting subregional groups such as the Baltic countries, the

¹³⁴R. Turcsányi, R. Qiaoan, *ibid.*

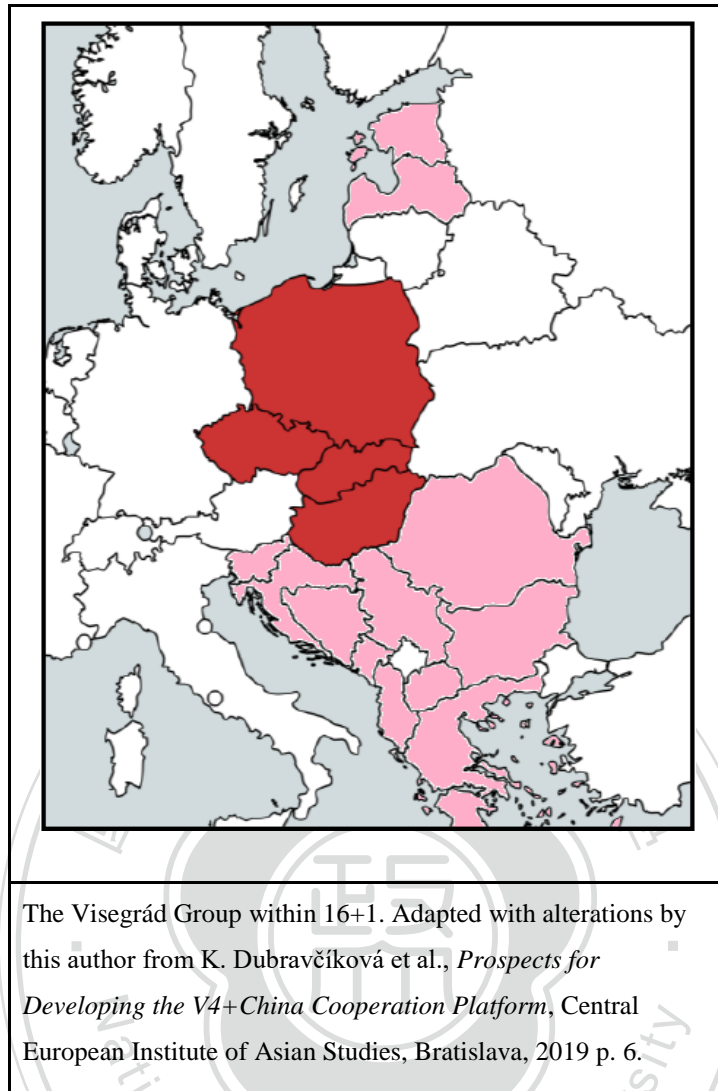
¹³⁵A. Vangeli, “Belt and Road and China’s Attempt at Region Building in Central-East and Southeast Europe”, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, December 1, 2020, doi: 10. 1177/ 1868 1026 20953439 available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868102620953439> (last accessed on 12 April 2022), p. 26.

Visegrád Group and Balkan states.¹³⁶ However, the significance of differences between CEE countries - signaled from the beginning by the European side - soon received due attention also from Chinese scholars and policy-makers, with the aforementioned tripartite division becoming the basis for the regional diversification proposal issued by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2017 (and based on an earlier report completed already in 2015). The diversification in question has been pictured as follows: cooperation with V4 group would focus on trade and should be the leading destination of Chinese direct foreign investments, Baltic countries would be a partner in transportation and logistics, and Balkan countries would be given a role as energy and infrastructure partners of China.¹³⁷



¹³⁶V. Veebel, “The China’s New Silk Road Initiative: Why is Estonia Rather Cautious About it?.” In M. Andžāns (ed.), *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 International Forum of China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, pp. 53-57. A. Vangeli, *ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³⁷See A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova, “Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (“16+1”): New Trends, Future Developments and Implications for Latvia”, *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook*, 2018, p. 165. The question of subregional diversification of the CEECs and resulting challenges was also directly addressed by Liu Zuokui already in 2013; see “The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions”, *Working Paper Series on European Studies*, Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 7.6, 2013, pp. 5-6. The division into Baltic, V-4 and Balkan (Southeastern) states also features in the aforementioned Song and Pavlicevic’s account of China-CEE cooperation as “multilayered multilateralism”, where the tailoring of involvement according to the specificity of each group is considered as the second out of three levels of cooperation; see section 2.2.1, pp. 44-46 for the relevant overview.



Let us now take a glance at the Visegrád Group itself, a loose cultural and political alliance between Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. What brought these countries together was essentially geographical proximity, common history and a similar trajectory of economic development. All these countries underwent democratic transitions in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. On 15 February 1991, they decided to join forces and establish the Visegrád Group (also known as Visegrád Four or simply V4), one of the most vital alliances and the visibly profiled initiative in Central Europe.¹³⁸ From Poland's

¹³⁸ For the detailed account on the historical roots of the V4, see the official website of the group: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/historia-v4> (last accessed on 16 April 2022).

perspective, it was one of the main factors for the regional cooperation in economical, political, cultural and military matters, as well as the tool for the deepening of cooperation to further their integration within the European Union and coordinating common approach to the NATO policies and reinforcing of its “Eastern Flank”. It is worth emphasizing that the V4, which was established 13 years before accession of these countries to the EU, was not created as an alternative to the pan-European integration efforts. On the contrary, V4 aims at encouraging optimal cooperation with all European countries, while at the same time promoting cultural cohesion of its four member states. Quite similarly to the 16+1, V4 is not institutionalized in any manner, and is based on periodical meetings of its representatives on various levels, while every year one country takes over the presidency and prepares a year-long action plan of the group.

In the preceding chapter we have already discussed China’s relations between Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia in the period between the beginning of the democratic transition of the region in 1989 and the establishment of 16+1 in 2012. In the following subsections, we will carry on with the account of PRC’s relationship with these countries into the era of 16+1, to finally set the canvas for the subsequent description of Sino-Polish relations, which will be presented in the next chapter.

2.4.1 Hungary

On the timeline of Sino-Hungarian relations, the creation of 16+1 is roughly contemporaneous with the introduction of “Opening to the East” strategy, anticipated already in 2010 in a much-quoted statement by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán that *“we are sailing under a Western flag, though an Eastern wind is blowing in the world economy.”* Although the strategy in question has never been specified beyond slogans and opinions

expressed by politicians in various interviews and public speeches,¹³⁹ the pro-China shift of Hungary during the second decade of the 21st century has become evident on both economical and political levels.

From the investment perspective, as of 2019 Hungary has been the leading recipient of Chinese FDI at US\$2.4 billion in 2015, far ahead of the remaining CEE countries (the second one was Greece at US\$1.9 billion, with Poland ranking the third at US\$1.4 billion). However, it has been indicated that this amount was for the most part linked to a single transaction - the acquisition of chemical company Borsodchem by the Chinese Yantai Wanhua Group back in 2011, an example of acquisition (brownfield) FDI commonly carried out by China in the CEE region, and less desirable from the latter's point of view.¹⁴⁰ The most important infrastructural project initiated under the auspices of 16+1 and BRI in Hungary is the aforementioned Budapest-Belgrade high speed train, which remains mired in legal investigations and overall doubts surrounding its functionality and profitability.¹⁴¹ Sino-Hungarian trade exchange has accelerated under the 16+1 framework, although as most CEE countries, Hungary is sustaining a considerable deficit; moreover, as of 2019, Hungary's trade with China accounted for only 2.9% of Hungarian exports and 5.9% of Hungarian imports, which is a relatively low ratio, especially considering the ambitious "Opening to the East" declarations of diversifying the country's international trade exchange beyond the EU.¹⁴²

¹³⁹T. Matura, "Hungary and China Relations", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, p. 139.

¹⁴⁰ L. Irimescu, *Hungary's Eastern Opening: Political and Economic Impacts*, Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest, 2019, at: https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/57_KKI-Policy-Brief_HU-CHN_Irimescu_20191220.pdf, pp.7. It should be noted that COFDI received by Hungary are still insignificant compared to Western Europe, especially the UK (see figure 5). T. Matura, *ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁴¹ The importance of Budapest-Belgrade railway lies in the fact that it connects China-operated Greek port of Piraeus with the rail network running through much of Central and Northern Europe. However, it has been pointed out that since the existing Piraeus-Belgrade railway is not suitable for high speed trains, the Budapest-Belgrade section, even if eventually completed, will not be functional, except in an unlikely scenario of simultaneous modernization of remaining sections and infrastructure. See L. Irimescu, *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴²L. Irimescu, *ibid.*, p. 6.

Political reorientation of Hungarian ruling party Fidesz towards the PRC is one of the facets of its euroscepticism - it is being justified by the government as an effort to build resistance to the EU, which is criticized on account of its problematic integration mechanisms and uneven development.¹⁴³ Denunciations of China's human rights abuses, often voiced by the European actors from the position of upholding Western values, have been relatively hushed in Hungary; what is more, "*Orbán openly declared China a success model while at the same time denouncing liberal democracy as a model for global competitiveness.*"¹⁴⁴ At the same time, however, it seems that Sino-Hungarian rapprochement is free of transactional dimension, envisaged as a potential threat in the EU's "normative" narrative about 16+1 - it has been theorized that China might seek to acquire political gains in exchange for economic profits it provides (see section 2.3.2, pp. 63-67). An example of such a scheme would be Hungary, primary CEE recipient of Chinese FDI, voting against the imposition of anti-dumping measures (ADMs) against Chinese products by the EU. Matura was able to decisively disprove such a hypothesis - following the massive upsurge of COFDI, "*Hungary has not become more supportive towards Chinese interests, hence, the government has opposed fewer (actually none of the) ADMs to be imposed on Chinese goods than before the birth of the 16 + 1 Cooperation.*"¹⁴⁵ These conclusions are in line with the aforementioned observations that in the pursuit of pragmatism and stability in its relationship with the EU, China is unwilling to actively inflame anti-European sentiment of the Hungarian government (again, see the relevant discussion in the section 2.3.2).

¹⁴³W. Schaffar, "The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and its impact on democratization and de-democratization processes", in A. Gerstl, U. Wallenböck (ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic and Economic Impacts on Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Eastern Europe*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2021, p. 72.

¹⁴⁴T. Matura, "Hungary and China Relations", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, p. 148.

¹⁴⁵T. Matura, *ibid.*, p. 145.

2.4.2 Czech Republic

In the previous chapter we have shown that the trajectory of the Sino-Czech relations during the 1990s and 2000s has been particularly turbulent, with Czech Republic remaining the most adamant critic of China's human rights record and PRC's stance on Taiwan and Tibet. However, similarly to Hungary, the establishment of the 16+1 roughly coincided with changes in Czech political landscape that facilitated the country's rapprochement with China. After the legislative elections in 2013, Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) became the senior coalition party (a position it would hold until 2017). Also, in 2013, the former leader of ČSSD Miloš Zeman was elected president in the first direct election for presidency in the country's history. Both the left-wing ČSSD and Zeman's relatively pro-Chinese attitudes (evident already during their previous years in power – see section 1.2.3, pp. 32-34) and the reassessment of Czech Republic's geopolitical importance under the 16+1 framework on the part of China, resulted in the unprecedented invigoration of Sino-Czech relations from 2013 to 2016, with frequent visits of Czech dignitaries to the PRC and the first ever visit of Chinese president to Prague in 2016.¹⁴⁶

Resumption of the political dialogue led to the increase in economic cooperation between the countries, including a FDI package for 2016-2020 worth €8 billion. However, Fürst notes that as of 2015, Chinese FDI constituted only 0.35% of total FDI value in Czech Republic; moreover, again similarly to Hungary, a large part of Chinese investment volume was connected to a single entity - Shanghai-based CEFC, which had chosen Prague as a base for its expansion on European markets. Fürst also indicates that Czechia plays a comparatively

¹⁴⁶See R. Fürst, "Czechia's relations with China. On a long road toward a real strategic partnership?", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, pp. 126-127; B. Kowalski, "Central and Eastern Europe, China's Core Interests, and the Limits of Relational Politics: Lessons from the Czech Republic in the 2010s", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, September 2020, 088832542095214. doi:10.1177/0888325420952142, pp. 8-12.

inconsequential role in the BRI connectivity network, with most overland transport infrastructure bypassing its territory.¹⁴⁷

Warming of Sino-Czech political relations, however, did not sway the anti-communist and liberal sentiment of the Czech society. On the contrary, Zeman's pro-Chinese actions and statements provoked much criticism and were presented in some of the Czech media as "kowtowing to Chinese communists". Xi Jinping's visit to Prague in March 2016 sparked extensive demonstrations. Clashes occurred between the protesters and the Chinese supporters of Xi, which were to some extent reminiscent of the aforementioned 2009 incident in Bratislava (see section 1.2.4, pp. 34-35), but the incomparably greater scale of Czech protests is often acknowledged in the analogies drawn between the two events.¹⁴⁸

Already in 2016, signs of deterioration in Sino-Czech relations could be detected. In October 2016, the Dalai Lama was received in Prague by Czech minister of culture, an event followed by expressions of strong dissatisfaction on the part of China. In 2017, Czech Republic was the only V4 country and one of the two CEE countries (alongside Estonia) to sign the letter criticizing the treatment of human rights lawyers in the PRC.¹⁴⁹ In 2018, a major "*spat between Prague and Beijing occurred in the wider context of the US backlash against Chinese telecom giant Huawei in the midst of the US-China trade war. In the December 2018 report published by the Czech intel agency BIS (Information Security Service), the PRC was identified as a threat to the Czech Republic—primarily in terms of economic, industrial, and technological*

¹⁴⁷R. Fürst, *ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁸Fürst has interestingly referred to the critical reactions to Sino-Czech rapprochement on the part of Czech media and society as "self-imposed shame"; *ibid.*, 129-131. See also S. Tiezzi "President Xi's Visit to Czech Republic Sparks Praise, Protests", *The Diplomat*, 30 March 2016, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/president-xi-visit-to-czech-republic-sparks-praise-protests/> (last accessed on 14 April 2022). Turcsányi et al. present an interesting, comparative take on media responses to the intensification of relations with China in Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia in the years 2010-2017. In the latter case, the portrayal of the PRC in the media became visibly polarized, reflecting the fact that the question of Sino-Czech relations became one of the most hotly contested issues of public debate. See "Followers, Challengers, or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China" *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 5.3, 2019, pp. 53-54.

¹⁴⁹R. Turcsányi, R. Qiaoan, "Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China-CEE '16+1 platform'", *Asia Europe Journal*, 18, 397-412 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00550-6>.

espionage,” which was followed by a warning against Huawei issued by a Czech cybersecurity agency.¹⁵⁰ Towards the end of 2019, Prague terminated its partnership with Beijing and in January 2020 upgraded its partnership with Taipei, a result of the pronounced pro-Taiwanese policy of Prague’s mayor Zdeněk Hřib. Although at the time Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš reaffirmed Czechia’s respect for the “One China Policy,” Hřib’s actions were not met with any criticism from the central authorities on account of the autonomy of local governments in democratic systems. Moreover, in the first half of 2020, disappointment about insufficient results of economic cooperation with China were being voiced also by representatives of the central government, including President Zeman himself.¹⁵¹ At the turn of August and September 2020, a Czech delegation led by the President of the Senate of the Czech Republic Miloš Vystrčil and attended by Hřib arrived in Taipei, meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen and high-ranking Taiwanese officials. The unprecedented visit was condemned by Beijing and resulted in a significant cooldown in Sino-Czech relations.¹⁵²

2.4.3 Slovakia

In 2012 elections left-wing Direction - Slovak Social Democracy party led by Robert Fico returned to power after a short and rather inconsequential interregnum of central-right wing coalition government. It would then appear that the establishment of 16+1 happened at a favorable moment also on the Slovak political timeline, especially considering Fico’s proactive

¹⁵⁰B. Kowalski, “Central and Eastern Europe, China’s Core Interests, and the Limits of Relational Politics: Lessons from the Czech Republic in the 2010s”, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, September 2020, 088832542095214. doi:10.1177/0888325420952142, pp.13-14.

¹⁵¹B. Kowalski, *ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

¹⁵²M. McCartney, “Czech Senate leader's delegation arrives in Taiwan”, *Taiwan News*, 30 August 2020, available at: <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3998011> (last accessed on 14 April 2022). See also the press release by the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Visit of Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil yields numerous tangible results; Taiwan and the Czech Republic working towards a comprehensive, democratic and cooperative partnership”, 3 September 2020, available at: https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1329&s=93657 (last accessed on 14 April 2022).

attitude towards the PRC during his first term in 2006-2010. However, since 2012 Fico appears to have grown more reserved towards China. For example, he did not attend the third China-CEE summit in Suzhou, and the official reason of health issues has been seen as doubtful in the view of Fico's unaltered domestic activities; the year-long vacancy of the post of Slovak ambassador to Beijing has been also interpreted as a signal of low priority attached to China in Slovak international politics, although Fico himself continued to speak favorably about developing relations with the PRC.¹⁵³

Economically, it is worth noting that during the era of 16+1 Slovakia has sustained the most favorable trade balance with China among all CEE participants to the initiative. The overall trade exchange between Slovakia and PRC along with COFDI levels are, however, comparatively low (see figure 5, p. 63); the country also did not attract (nor did it seek to attract) any important infrastructure projects under the “connectivity” umbrella of BRI. Looking at Sino-Slovak relations from the comparative perspective of the Visegrád group, Kelemen et al. notice that “*Slovakia has been the only V4 country which has not responded overly enthusiastically to the China-CEEC and Belt and Road initiatives. While stressing an interest in developing relations with China, it refrained from ‘out of the way’ welcoming gestures and attempts to attract China*” - something that has been occasionally observed in other V4 states.¹⁵⁴ The authors state that in taking a “down to earth” position in its relations with the PRC, Slovakia suggests that “*there are economically interesting projects they would materialize, irrespective of the political processes*”¹⁵⁵ - a stance that has been referred to as unique and even paradoxical when viewed against the regional background of CEE.¹⁵⁶ It has

¹⁵³B. Kelemen et al. *Slovakia and China: Challenges to the future of the relationship*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Slovakia-and-China-Challenges-to-the-Future-of-the-Relationship.pdf> (last accessed 15/03/2022), pp. 11-12.

¹⁵⁴B. Kelemen et al., *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁵B. Kelemen et al., *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵⁶Turcsanyi et al., “Followers, Challengers, or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China” *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 5.3 (2019), doi: 10.17356/ieejsp.v5i3.564, pp. 53-54. The general findings of the article are also interesting: Slovak media’s

also been observed that Slovakia, due to its limited geo-economic potential, is of marginal strategic importance to the PRC, what is evident in the fact that Slovakia is the only country in the Visegrád Group whose relationship with China has not been upgraded to the level of strategic partnership; Slovakia's importance in the eyes of the PRC stems mainly from its identity as a member of the EU, CEE and the V4 group.¹⁵⁷



comparatively indifferent portrayal of China, described in the terms of “standing by with little interest”, is thought to be reflective of the country's general distanced attitude to the cooperation with the PRC.

¹⁵⁷B. Kelemen et al., *ibid.*, p. 19.

Chapter Three: Sino-Polish relations, 16+1 and the BRI

In this chapter, we will examine Sino-Polish relations after 1989 with special emphasis on the cooperation within the 16+1 framework. It is nevertheless important not to overlook the historical roots of China's contemporary perception of Poland, and these can be traced back to the eve of the Qing dynasty.¹⁵⁸ Cieciora notes that in the face of increasingly invasive colonialism of the Western powers towards the end of the Qing era, the analogy became so current in the discourse and consciousness of the Chinese elites that the very term "Poland" (波蘭) began to function as a synonym for "partitions".¹⁵⁹ The image of Poland as a victim of Western imperialism, later framed within the broader narrative of "solidarity with the oppressed nations" (see section 2.3.3, pp. 68-71), has undoubtedly contributed to China's notions and impressions of this CEE country nowadays.

Important to the present perspective is also the fact that during the Cold War era, when China and Poland both belonged to the Eastern bloc of the bipolar world - even though, as previously stated, for Poles the Communism was a forcibly imposed foreign regime, rather than a domestic political power formed over the complicated course of internal struggle, as was the

¹⁵⁸B. Kowalski, "China's foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The '16+1' format in the South-South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017.1, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ In 1896 Liang Qichao 梁啟超 published an essay *Record of the Destruction of Poland* (波蘭滅亡紀), which "brought the history of Poland's downfall in late 18th century to the attention of the late Qing elites, serving as an analogy between the situation of Poland on the eve of its partition and the contemporary state of the Qing empire in demise a century later." (B. Kowalski, *ibid.*). See W. Cieciora, "Opis zniszczenia Polski Liang Qichao z 1896 roku i narodziny polskiego toposu w chińskim dyskursie reformistycznym" [Liang Qichao's 1896 Description of the Destruction of Poland and the Birth of the Polish Topos in the Chinese Reformist Discourse], *Azja-Pacyfik* 2014.17, pp. 25-46. An undeniably important thread in the history of Sino-Polish relations was also the major role played by Polish engineers and workers in the development of East-China railway under the Russian empire at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, and the resultant proliferation of the Polish community in Harbin - still present there as late as WW2; see M. Borysiewicz, "Polish Settlement in Manchuria (1898-1950). A Brief Historical Survey", *Studia Polonijne*, 39, Lublin 2018, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/sp.2018.6>, pp. 125-166 for an in-depth historical account.

case in China.¹⁶⁰ Anyhow, the People's Republic of China was recognized by the Communist government of Poland already on 5 October 1949, and the 1950s marked the period of the closest relations between the two countries. A noteworthy bilateral enterprise initiated during that time was the Polish-Chinese Shipping Joint Stock Company. Established in 1951 as the first joint venture in the history of the PRC, it still operates under the name Chipolbrok, with the head office located in Shanghai, and the branch office in the Polish port city of Gdynia; initially set up to operate cargo ships between the PRC and Poland, Chipolbrok has since developed into a worldwide ocean shipping corporation.¹⁶¹

The culmination in Sino-Polish came in 1956, when China supported the moderate reforms of "October renewal" in Poland, effectively preventing a military intervention on the part of Moscow - at the same time the Hungarian Revolution was violently suppressed by the Soviet army with the PRC's tacit approval. Following the Sino-Soviet rift and the Cultural Revolution, Sino-Polish relations subsided during the 1960s and early 1970s, to subsequently regain some intensity in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the successful implementation of opening-up reforms (改革開放) in China under Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平.

3.1. Development of Sino-Polish relations in the years 1989-2012

It has been remarked earlier that the violent suppression of Tiananmen protests in Beijing coincided with the first democratic elections in Poland - both events occurred on 4 June 1989, marking a dramatic point of divergence in political trajectories of China and Poland. These simultaneous events became subsequent focal points of mutual perceptions between the

¹⁶⁰See D. Mierzejewski, "Between central and local interdependence. Dimensions of Poland's relations with China", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, p. 157, and the referenced works.

¹⁶¹J. Górski, "Central and Eastern Europe, Group 16+1 and One Belt One Road: The Case of 2016 Sino-Polish Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", *Transnational Dispute Management (TDM)*, 14.3, October 2017, p. 12; see also the official website of Chipolbrok at: <http://chipolbrok.com.pl/article/1/general-info> (last accessed on 25 April 2022).

two countries: China saw democratic transition of Poland as a “dangerous precedent” detrimental to the unity of the Communist bloc, an observation verified by the ensuing collapse of the USSR and democratization of the CEE region. Polish perception of China, on the other hand, became defined by the Tiananmen crackdown as the grim, autocratic “alternative reality” as compared to Poland’s bloodless defeat of the Communist regime. Exemplifying general tendencies of the CEE region, during the 1990s Poland actively sought integration with the West, becoming a member of NATO in 1999, and devoting very little attention to the PRC; as a result, Sino-Polish relations were treated as marginal by both sides throughout the 1990s.¹⁶² In 1995, the visit of the PRC Premier Li Peng to Poland was canceled at the last minute over the fears of anti-Chinese protests and negative press publicity. Until 1995, Polish presidency of anti-communist icon, Lech Wałęsa, also contributed to the minimization of official Sino-Polish contacts. That personal factor vanished with the election of the succeeding president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who, in stark contrast to Wałęsa, came from a communist political background. Kwaśniewski was however a strong proponent of Poland’s integration with the West, and his visit to Beijing in 1997 and meeting with Jiang Zemin brought very few substantial political results.

On the background of general economic transformations of post-Communist Poland, its first trade agreement with the PRC was concluded already in December 1989, facilitating trade exchange between the countries - among other provisions, it enabled private entities, apart from state enterprises, to participate in international trade. This was followed by another agreement in 1993, which stayed in force until Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004. The Agreement of 1993 introduced safeguard, anti-dumping measures into the bilateral trade; anti-dumping proceedings were launched several times by the Polish side, concerning goods such

¹⁶²M. Burdelski, “60 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between Poland and the People’s Republic of China - Historical Review”, *Polish Political Science*, vol. XL, 2012, pp. 219-222.

as lighters and footwears imported from the PRC. In this new legal environment, Sino-Polish trade accelerated quickly, but chiefly due to the fast-growing volume of imports from China, while Polish exports to the PRC remained insignificant. In October 1998, a session on economics was held in Warsaw between Polish and Chinese governments; the main issue under discussion was the already soaring trade deficit on the Polish side (nearly US\$1 billion).

It has been already remarked earlier that the accession to the European Union greatly elevated the strategic importance of CEE countries in the eyes of the PRC; this is very clearly exemplified in the case of Sino-Polish relations. Poland became an official member state of the European Union in May 2004, as a result of the Accession Treaty signed in Athens in April 2003. The frequency and level of mutual visits increased by a wide margin; already in June 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a state visit to Poland and met with President Kwaśniewski and Prime Minister Marek Belka. Sino-Polish relations were upgraded to a “friendly cooperation partnership”, and a number of different agreements and memoranda on economic and cultural cooperation were signed, including the Agreement on Copper Export by KGHM Company, important from the present perspective of KGHM’s copper having become one of the pillars of Polish exports to China.¹⁶³ Still, the trade deficit continued to increase throughout the 2010s (see figure 6); Chinese vice-Premier Zeng Peiyan’s visit to Warsaw in 2008 and his meeting with Polish Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak was once again devoted to the question of the incessantly growing trade imbalance between the two countries.

¹⁶³M. Burdelski, *ibid.*, pp. 222-223; J. Szczudlik, “Poland and China: a Strategic Partnership in the Making?” in R. Fürst, F. Tesař, *China's Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*, p. 27.

	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Exports from Poland to China	220	252	224	449	473	607	721	866.5	1,050
Imports	830	1,117	2,563	3,287	4,412	6,169	8,516	11,465.5	9,774
Turnover	1,050	1,369	2,787	3,736	4,885	6,776	9,237	12,332	10,824
Balance	-610	-865	-2,339	-2,838	-3,939	-5,562	-7,795	-10,599	-8,724

Figure 6: Sino-Polish trade in the years 2000-2009, in million €. Adopted with modifications by this author from K. Palonka, “Economic and trade relations between Poland and China since 2004”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 2010, 8, pp. 372.

When it comes to the social and ideological layer of Sino-Polish relations, the criticism of China’s human rights record, though not as pronounced as in the Czech Republic, has never subsided in Poland. The issue was openly addressed by Radosław Sikorski, minister of foreign affairs in the government led by the Civic Platform (pol. *Platforma Obywatelska*) party, which had come to power in 2007. Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced in March 2008 that he would not attend the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. Although Tusk had visited China and met with both the President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao in October 2008, he received the Dalai Lama in Warsaw in December 2008. In response, Beijing canceled its annual political consultations with Poland.¹⁶⁴

Although Poland was widely hailed as one of the few European green havens on the map of raging recession during the early stages of the 2008 financial crisis, the country was eventually implicated in the overall economic decline of the region (though still to a much lesser degree than other CEE states, let alone Western European countries). It has already been

¹⁶⁴Suspension of the annual consultations was among the series of the political steps undertaken by China in reaction to the Dalai Lama’s European tour of 2008, most serious of which was canceling the 11th Sino-European summit in Lyon; J. Szczudlik, “Poland and China: a Strategic Partnership in the Making?” in R. Fürst, F. Tesař, *China’s Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*, Institute of International Relations, Prague 2013, p. 28. Ł. Sarek, “Poland and the EU: Seeking a Two-way Street with China”, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 30 March 2018, at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/poland-eu-seeking-two-way-street-china> (last accessed on 26 April 2022); M. Habowski, “Elementy zmiany i kontynuacji w polityce Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej wobec Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej po 2015 r.”, *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, 1.4, Wrocław 2016, pp. 178-179.

indicated that the impact of the crisis was among the primary factors underlying the advance of China-CEE cooperation later formalized as 16+1 (see section 1.3, pp. 35-37). In the case of Poland, there is one particular Chinese infrastructure investment that deserves treatment in some detail here - the unsuccessful project of highway construction in Poland by the Chinese state-owned enterprise COVEC.

3.1.1 The case of COVEC

The project in question concerned the construction of an over 100 km-long section of the highway between the Polish cities of Warsaw and Łódź, which was to be carried out separately on five sections. In 2009, the tenders for the construction of two of those sections were won by a subsidiary of China Railway Group Limited (CREC), COVEC, which became the first PRC company to win a public contract in an EU member state. Allegedly owing to the subsidies of the Chinese government, COVEC was able to underbid European companies by over 20 percent.¹⁶⁵ However, after less than one year of construction work, the Chinese company announced that it was unable to complete the project under the agreed financial terms and attempted to renegotiate the contract. In adherence to Polish and EU law, the Polish government refused to make any amendments to the initial contract, forcing COVEC to abandon the project with less than one fifth of the construction completed. The Chinese company had to face the €200 million compensation claim from the Polish Directorate for National Roads and Motorways.¹⁶⁶

In her comprehensive analysis of the case, Kanarek argues that the causes for the spectacular failure of the COVEC project can be understood as miscommunication on many

¹⁶⁵P. Kanarek, "Perspectives for development of China-EU relations in the infrastructure investment sector: a case study of COVEC's investment in Poland", *Journal of Political Risk*, 5.8, August 2017, available at: <https://www.jpolarisk.com/perspectives-for-development-of-china-eu-relations-in-the-infrastructure-investment-sector-a-case-study-of-covecs-investment-in-poland/> (last accessed on 28 April 2022).

¹⁶⁶P. Kanarek, *ibid.*

levels, arising from cultural differences, China's negligence towards specific EU laws and requirements, a hostile attitude of local subcontractors, etc. For example, COVEC hoped to rely on Chinese workforce and machinery in carrying out the construction - a practice customary for Chinese foreign investments and successfully applied in PRC projects realized in Africa.¹⁶⁷ However, such a mode of operation proved unfeasible in the legal environment of the EU, where a high portion of the employed workforce has to come from the local market, and comparatively strict certification standards effectively prevented the usage of Chinese machines. This, coupled with difficulties in cooperation with Polish subcontractors who perceived COVEC as potentially dangerous foreign competition on the construction market, eventually proved fatal for the achievability of the project under the initial financial terms.¹⁶⁸

The failure of COVEC was a high-profile scandal and generated a significant amount of negative publicity for Chinese investments in the EU and CEE region in general. The case is especially noteworthy due to its strategic importance - the project in question was widely expected to be groundbreaking in opening the European public procurement market to Chinese entities, one of the key points of PRC's "Going Global" strategy with regard to the EU. The case had a profoundly negative impact on Sino-Polish relations, discouraging Polish enterprises from pursuing cooperation with Chinese entities, while at the same time driving potential Chinese investment away from Poland toward other Eastern European EU member states.¹⁶⁹

3.1.2 Sino-Polish strategic partnership

The case of COVEC was undoubtedly detrimental to the Sino-Polish economic cooperation and most probably impeded the overall pace of Chinese investment in the region, but it did not negate the general attraction towards China generated by the post-crisis economic

¹⁶⁷Kanarek notes that also the very practice of renegotiating the initial deal has been successfully applied by Chinese companies within the relatively flexible legal environment of African countries; see P. Kanarek, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸P. Kanarek, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹P. Kanarek, *ibid.*

vacuum in Poland, much less other CEE countries. During its second term in power (after the parliamentary elections of 2011), Civic Platform, facing a new economic environment, took a visibly more favorable stance regarding cooperation with China. In December 2011, Polish President Bronisław Komorowski (originally associated with Civic Platform) visited Beijing and Shanghai. Komorowski and Hu Jintao signed the “Joint Declaration of the Republic of Poland and of the People’s Republic of China on the Establishment of the Strategic-Partnership Relations” (中波关于建立战略伙伴关系的联合声明), in which “(t)he Polish side declared its support for the EU granting China its market economy status as soon as possible, and ensured that Poland would make attempts to persuade the EU to remove the military sales ban on China. On the other hand, China supported European integration and promised to invest more and increase its imports from Poland.”¹⁷⁰ In April 2012, Wen Jiabao stayed in Warsaw during the last stage of his tour in Europe. Poland was also the only CEE country included in Wen’s European itinerary. It has already been mentioned in the preceding chapter that Wen’s visit, though at the time perceived mainly from a bilateral perspective as a token of reciprocity after Komorowski’s travel to China, is in retrospect seen also as the official establishment of 16+1, expressed in Wen’s announcing the “Twelve Measures” of China-CEE cooperation.

¹⁷⁰D. Mierzejewski, “Between central and local interdependence. Dimensions of Poland’s relations with China”, in Q. Wei, *China’s Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From “Old Comrades” to New Partners*, p. 159. The issue of human rights in China, although significantly downplayed in the Polish government’s rhetoric as compared to earlier years, was still assigned certain priority by Komorowski, who, during the 2011 visit to China, met also with Chinese dissidents; see M. Habowski, “Elementy zmiany i kontynuacji w polityce Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej wobec Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej po 2015 r.”, *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, 1.4, Wrocław 2016, p. 179. For the original text of the Declaration in Mandarin, see the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China at: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/1179/t889004.htm> (last accessed on 29 April 2022); for the Polish version, see the official website of the President of the Republic of Poland at: https://www.prezydent.pl/storage/file/core_files/2021/8/5/dd7eb4341c771ad4823274303896926e/20_06_16_wspolne_oswiadczenie_pl_polski.pdf (last accessed on 29 April 2022).

3.2. Poland within 16+1: the process of cooperation development under the China-CEE framework

It has been repeatedly noted by scholars that due to its being the biggest economy and the most populous country in the CEE region, Poland was chosen by the PRC as the regional leader in the cooperation framework, which was the reason behind the “Twelve Measures” being announced during Wen Jiabao’s official visit to Warsaw.¹⁷¹ Although the Sino-Polish cooperation on the 16+1 framework and later within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative was met with enthusiastic expectations from the Polish side, after the initial momentum of the first years of both initiatives, the actual results started to be perceived as disappointing. This, coupled with security concerns originating at least partly from the international context of Sino-American rivalry, caused the general deterioration of the PRC-Poland cooperation in the second half of 2010s.

3.2.1 Initial momentum

Sino-Polish relations during the first years of the 16+1 indeed had all the appearances of dynamic development. In May 2013, during Polish Minister of Defense Tomasz Siemoniak’s visit to Beijing, the strategic defense dialogue at the level of deputy ministers of defense was initiated between China and Poland; however, in the view of the ongoing EU arms embargo on the PRC, the dialogue would be limited to non-combat areas such as educational cooperation and joint exercises.¹⁷² Immediately after Siemoniak’s trip, Marshal of the Sejm Ewa Kopacz visited Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou and Zhuhai, met with the vice-President of the PRC Li Yuanchao (李源潮) and other high-ranking officials, with whom she discussed

¹⁷¹D. Mierzejewski, *ibid.*

¹⁷² J. Szczudlik, “Poland and China: a Strategic Partnership in the Making?” in R. Fürst, F. Tesař, *China's Comeback in Former Eastern Europe: No Longer Comrades, Not Yet Strategic Partners*, Institute of International Relations, Prague, 2013, p. 31.

various economic topics, such as the promotion of Polish products and enhancing regional cooperation.¹⁷³

Apart from the intensification of mutual diplomatic visits, the warming climate of Sino-Polish relations facilitated also the establishment of a bilateral formula known as China-Poland Regional Forum, held for the first time in April 2013 in Gdańsk (Poland), then in June 2014 in Guangzhou, in June 2015 in Łódź (Poland) and in June 2016 in Warsaw (Poland). The forum was aimed at promoting Sino-Polish cooperation on the regional level - between cities and/or provinces/voivodeships - in the areas of economy, education, tourism and culture.¹⁷⁴

Sino-Polish cooperation during that period looked even more promising from the viewpoint of the BRI. One of the flagship infrastructure projects of the Belt and Road Initiative and undoubtedly the most important one involving Poland was the freight train connection between Chengdu and the Polish city of Łódź, initiated in April 2013 and hailed as a paragon of the aforementioned inter-regional dimension of China-Poland relations.¹⁷⁵ The connection has been considered an optimal alternative for both sea and air freight, being significantly faster than the former and much cheaper than the latter. Under the connectivity framework of the BRI, the Chengdu-Łódź rail was posited as one of the main land transportation arteries of the New Silk Road; Łódź was accordingly expected to become a major Central European logistics hub, a distribution center for Chinese exports to the EU and - what was strategically crucial for Poland in the view of its trade deficit with the PRC - a catalyst for Polish exports to China.

¹⁷³J. Szczudlik, *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁷⁴ Polish Trade and Investment Agency: “I Forum Regionalne Polska - Chiny”, 22 April 2013, at: https://www.paih.gov.pl/20130422/i_forum_regionalne_polska_chiny (last accessed on 30 April 2022); Polish Press Agency: “MSZ: IV Forum Regionalne Polska-Chiny”, 20 June 2016, at: <https://pap-mediroom.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/msz-iv-forum-regionalne-polska-chiny-komunikat> (last accessed on 30 April 2022).

¹⁷⁵The connection came into being within the framework of a joint venture between the Polish logistic company Hatrans and its Chinese partner, and its creation was partly due to Łódź promotion efforts in the Sichuan province. The freight train connection was later institutionalized as an important part of the BRI network. See B. Kowalski, “From railway dreams to a reality check. Achievements and challenges of Sino-Polish relations at the local level – the case of Łódzkie- Sichuan partnership”, in A. Gerstl, U. Wallenböck (ed.), *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic and Economic Impacts on Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Eastern Europe*, p. 199.

Although during the third 16+1 summit in Belgrade (2014) was unexpectedly skipped by the Poland's Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, during the fourth summit in Suzhou in November 2015 Poland was the only CEE country represented by a president, a testimony to high priority that Poland still attached to the cooperation with China.¹⁷⁶ Apart from attending the summit, President Andrzej Duda also signed memoranda on agreements between Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and Poland's National Economy Bank, as well as between ICBC and Polish Investment and Trade Agency, concrete steps aimed at promoting the reliability of Polish enterprises in China. In March 2016, Poland became a founding member of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a decision unanimously supported by the Polish parliament.¹⁷⁷

The culmination of Sino-Polish rapprochement was officially expressed during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Warsaw in June 2016, when both countries upgraded the designation of mutual relations from "strategic partnership" (declared in 2011) to "comprehensive strategic partnership". Mierzejewski notes that the new quality of "comprehensiveness" was manifested in a shift from bipartite to a more "unison" phrasing (both sides speaking in "common voice"), as well as the further institutionalization of the cooperation, exemplified by the new biennial consultative dialogue involving prime ministers and intergovernmental commissions.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ D. Mierzejewski, "Between central and local interdependence. Dimensions of Poland's relations with China", in Q. Wei, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, p. 159.

¹⁷⁷ D. Mierzejewski, *ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁷⁸ D. Mierzejewski, *ibid.*, p. 161. For the original text of the Declaration in Mandarin, see the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China at: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgmb/chn/zgyw/t1373762.htm> (last accessed on 30 April 2022). For the Polish version, see the official website of the President of the Republic of Poland at: https://www.prezydent.pl/storage/file/core_files/2021/8/5/dd7eb4341c771ad4823274303896926e/20_06_16_wspolne_oswiadczenie_pl_polski.pdf (last accessed on 30 April 2022).

3.2.2 Economic underperformance and security concerns

Perhaps one of the early harbingers of decline in Sino-Polish relations was Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz's aforementioned, sudden choice not to attend the third 16+1 Summit in Belgrade in December 2014. The decision appears to have been made overnight and came as a general surprise, provoking various interpretations. Radosław Pyffel, a prolific analyst of Sino-Polish relations, has related five different, but intertwined narratives that have circulated in Polish political circles immediately after the event, first of which attributes Kopacz's decision to her dissatisfaction at the alleged anti-EU profile of 16+1, heterogeneous character of the CEE16 group and disappointing economic results of the Sino-Polish strategic partnership.¹⁷⁹ Drawing on Pyffel's analysis, Tuszyński further argues that Kopacz's move was in fact motivated by what he dubs the "unexpected Ukraine factor" in Poland's foreign relations - in February and March 2014, Russian Federation had invaded and effectively annexed Crimean peninsula from Ukraine. Poland has been the foremost proponent of a united EU front against the Russian aggression, and Prime Minister's absence at 16+1 summit in Belgrade was meant to signal Polish disapproval of the tacit accommodation of Russia's actions on the part of the PRC.¹⁸⁰ Even though in retrospect Kopacz's nonattendance in Belgrade did not seem to negatively affect Sino-Polish relations, which exhibited an upward curve until the middle of 2016, Tuszyński's "Ukraine factor" deserves new spotlight in the view of Russian full-scale military aggression on Ukraine which began in February 2022, and has been unfolding for several months while the present thesis is being written (see: Conclusions).

¹⁷⁹R. Pyffel, "Pięć opowieści o tym, dlaczego premier Kopacz nie pojechała na spotkanie 15 premierów Europy Środkowej z chińskim premierem w Belgradzie?" [Five stories about why Prime Minister Kopacz did not go to the meeting of 15 Central European prime ministers with the Chinese prime minister in Belgrade], *Centrum Studiów Polska-Azja*, 13 January 2015, at: <http://www.polska-azja.pl/r-pyffel-piec-opowieści-o-tym-dlaczego-premier-kopacz-nie-pojechała-na-spotkanie-15-premierów-europy-środkowej-z-chińskim-premierem-w-belgradzie> (last accessed od 2 May 2022).

¹⁸⁰R. Tuszyński, "Polish Perspectives On Cee-China 16+1 Cooperation: The Unexpected Ukrainian Factor," *Europolity – Continuity and Change in European Governance - New Series*, Department of International Relations and European Integration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, 9.1, 2015, pp. 1-32.

In the parliamentary elections of 2015, Polish conservative Law and Justice party (pol. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) gained majority in the Parliament, and its presidential candidate Andrzej Duda was elected president in the same year. PiS has since remained the ruling party in Poland (maintaining the majority in 2019 elections), with Duda retaining presidency in 2020 elections. However, the right-wing allegiance of PiS did not directly translate into an anti-Chinese revision of Poland's foreign policy. On the contrary, both Duda and PiS generally carried over the pro-Chinese foreign policy of Civic Platform during their first years in power, apparently having perceived Sino-Polish rapprochement as reconcilable with their own skepticism towards the EU and liberal democratic values. Kowalski posits a “*convergence of antiliberal positions*” between Poland and China, suggested by the “*declaration aired by Jan Parys, the head of Foreign Affairs Minister Witold Waszczykowski's cabinet, in October 2016 during a parliament session dedicated to Poland's relations with Asia. The politician representing the right-wing government of the Law and Justice party found that 'China is a post-communist country,' which 'has effectively detached itself from the legacy of communism.'* Parys declared also that Poland is entirely open to the BRI and cooperation in the '16+1' framework, opting for a completely pragmatic approach to relations with China.”¹⁸¹

An event often cited as a turning point in Sino-Polish relations was the decision of the Polish Ministry of National Defense headed by Antoni Macierewicz in December 2016 to nullify the public bid of a parcel belonging to the Polish Military Property Agency in Łódź, effectively preventing the sale of the allotment to Hatrans, a Chinese-Polish joint venture company with dominant Chinese capital. Hatrans intended the land for the construction of a logistic hub of the Łódź-Chengdu train connection.¹⁸² The choice to block the tender was

¹⁸¹B. Kowalski, “China's foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The '16+1' format in the South–South cooperation perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2017,1: #7R65ZH, <https://doi.org/10.22261/7R65ZH>, p. 7 (footnote 32).

¹⁸²M. Lubina, “From geopolitical chance to security threat: Polish public political discourse on the One Belt One Road initiative”, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 2017, 1(46), pp. 231-232; See also P. Pendrakowska, “Poland's perspective on belt and road initiative”, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 2019, p. 2.

widely criticized by the political opposition and affiliated media as a blow to the booming Sino-Polish cooperation, while at the same time being defended by Macierewicz and his supporters as motivated by security concerns. Subsequent cooldown in Sino-Polish cooperation was felt already in May 2017 - Poland's Prime Minister Beata Szydło, when attending a BRI forum in Beijing, did not sign any significant economic agreements with the PRC; the change in Polish rhetoric became all the more palpable when Szydło, during the sixth 16+1 summit in Budapest in November the same year, referred to Chinese partners as "difficult".¹⁸³ Moreover, the aforementioned China-Poland Regional Forum was canceled after the fourth summit in 2016.

Lubina has interestingly characterized the shift in Poland's attitude in terms of the competition between two domestic discourses: "geopolitical and geo-economic chance" and "security threat". Based on an extensive analysis of press articles, programs and internet lectures within the years 2014-2017, the author has shown that while initially Sino-Polish relations and the BRI were seen chiefly as an opportunity for Poland in the world that is being "reshaped" by Chinese growth, since around autumn 2016 a narrative presenting the cooperation between the countries as ineffective and the expansion of the PRC as a geopolitical danger gained the upper hand in public discourse.¹⁸⁴ It should be noted that economic and security factors, though often mentioned in one breath, are in fact mutually independent, therefore it is instrumental to further differentiate between the two in the account of the downward tendency of Sino-Polish relations towards the end of 2010s.

¹⁸³See Ł. Sarek, "Poland and the EU: Seeking a Two-way Street with China", *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 30 March 2018, at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/poland-eu-seeking-two-way-street-china> (last accessed on 26 April 2022); D. Mierzejewski, "Poland and Budapest 16+1 summit", China-CEE Institute, Weekly Briefing, 2017, 4.3 (November 2017), at: <https://china-cee.eu/2018/02/19/poland-and-budapest-161-summit> (last accessed on 2 May 2022).

¹⁸⁴M. Lubina, "From geopolitical chance to security threat: Polish public political discourse on the One Belt One Road initiative", *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 2017, 1(46), pp. 221-238.

3.2.2.1 Economic underperformance of 16+1 and the BRI

In the previous chapters I have already indicated that the economic exchange between China and CEE countries (including Poland), although increasing under the frameworks of 16+1 and BRI, is still incomparably lower than the one between China and the majority of Western European states; in other words, Western Europe is a much more important economic partner for China than the CEE region. Similarly, Western Europe is a much more important partner for the CEE region than China. In the case of Poland, this is forcefully illustrated by the foreign investment example provided by Bachulska: in the years 2000-2016 Poland was the second largest recipient of Chinese FDI in the CEE region at €936 million in total, second only to Hungary (€2 billion). However, only in 2015, German FDI in Poland amounted to more than €27 billion.¹⁸⁵ It has also been noted that the value of greenfield investment - the type of COFDI most desired by Poland as it creates new workplaces and causes technology transfer - is many times smaller than acquisitions.¹⁸⁶

There has also been a visible and progressing acceleration in Sino-Polish trade during the 16+1 era, but only due to rapidly growing imports from China to Poland, with Polish exports to the PRC remaining at rather meager levels (see figure 7). The most conspicuous problem in Sino-Polish economic cooperation even before 2012 - the trade deficit - thus became aggravated, rather than alleviated, through the intensified cooperation within the framework.

¹⁸⁵ A. Bachulska, "China, Poland, and the Belt and Road Initiative - the Future of Chinese Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe", *Геополитика (Geopolitika)*, 12 December 2017, at: <https://geopolitica.eu/more/in-english/2724-china-poland-and-the-belt-and-roadinitiative-the-future-of-chinese-engagement-in-central-and-eastern-europe> (last accessed on 2 May 2022).

¹⁸⁶ Ł. Sarek, "Chinese FDI in Poland: Still Just Wishful Thinking", *Sinopsis*, 25 August 2018, at: <https://sinopsis.cz/en/chinese-fdi-in-poland-still-just-wishful-thinking/#:~:text=Unrealistic%20expectations%2C%20over%2Dreliance%20on,services%20could%20offer%20some%20relieve> (last accessed on 5 May 2022).

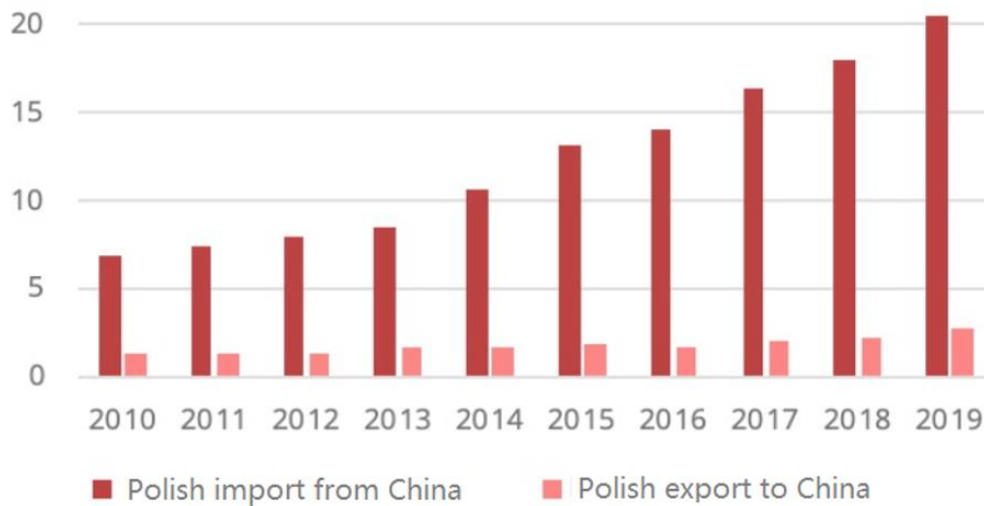


Figure 7: Annual trade balance between China and Poland in billion €. Adapted with modifications by this author from G. Zhang, “Asia - Europe. Mapping out the connection between Poland and China”, 5 March 2020, at: <https://market-insights.upply.com/en/asia-europe-corridor-mapping-out-the-connection-between-poland-and-china> (last accessed on 4 May 2022).

The causes of underperformance of Sino-Polish cooperation in terms of both investment and trade are complex. Sarek identifies several potential factors, including the relative scarcity of globally recognized Polish companies and cutting-edge technologies that would constitute attractive buyout targets for China, the underdevelopment of the network of Polish governmental agencies for investment attraction in China and the calibration of their activities towards infrastructural contractors rather than the desired greenfield sector.¹⁸⁷ As for the question of trade, Pendrakowska points to the misalignment of notions regarding product attractiveness between Poland and China. The author cites as an example of the Polish government’s insistence on the export of apples, which appears ill-suited to resolve the problem of trade deficit due to the Polish farmers’ lack of united proposal to their Chinese counterparts and China’s high barriers on agricultural products - the bulk of Polish exports to China still consists of copper, machines and chemical products.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷Ł. Sarek, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸P. Pendrakowska, “Poland’s perspective on belt and road initiative”, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 2019, p. 12.

A particularly telling reflection of Sino-Polish trade imbalance is seen in the stark disparity of occupancy rates of trains coursing between Łódź and Chengdu, flagship project of cooperation between Poland and the PRC under the Belt and Road “connectivity” banner. In a development that Kowalski describes as a “reality check” to the initial “railway dreams”, the overall pattern has emerged where the trains bound from Chengdu to Łódź are either fully loaded or have “limited storage space”, while most trains running from Łódź to Chengdu are characterized by “ample storage space”.¹⁸⁹ In other words, the flow of goods from Sichuan to Łódź is incomparably greater than in the opposite direction - a situation unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Kowalski illustrates this asymmetry with the data from 1 July to 30 August 2019 (figure 8):

	<i>Number of trains dispatched</i>	<i>Fully loaded</i>	<i>Limited storage space</i>	<i>Ample storage space</i>	<i>% of ample (largely empty) in total number of trains</i>
Chengdu-Łódź	58	21	34	3	5.2
Łódź-Chengdu	54	0	2	52	96

Figure 8: Chengdu-Łódź freight trains occupancy rates, 1 July - 30 August 2019, adapted by this author from B. Kowalski, “From railway dreams to a reality check: achievements and challenges of Sino-Polish relations at the local level – the case of Łódzkie- Sichuan partnership”, in A. Gerstl, U. Wallenböck *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic and Economic Impacts on Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Eastern Europe*, pp. 203.

3.2.2.2 Security concerns and the American factor

Security concerns surrounding the PRC influence in Poland, CEE region and Europe in general have to be viewed in the three-dimensional perspective of the PRC-EU-US triangle, in which one of the most important dynamics is *the intensifying systemic, economic and military*

¹⁸⁹B. Kowalski: “From railway dreams to a reality check: achievements and challenges of Sino-Polish relations at the local level – the case of Łódzkie- Sichuan partnership” in A. Gerstl, U. Wallenböck *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic and Economic Impacts on Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Eastern Europe*, pp. 197-211.

*rivalry between the world's foremost powers, China and the United States.*¹⁹⁰ Sino-American competition translates into regional levels along the lines of specific political conditions; in the case of Poland, such conditions are exemplified by the distinct pro-American stance of the conservative Law and Justice, which has remained in power since 2015. Lubina notes that already in 2015, before the victory of PiS in Polish parliamentary elections, Antoni Macierewicz referred to the BRI as *a part of Chinese expansion, a cooperation between Western Europe, Russia and China to push the United States' influence out of the region.*¹⁹¹ Even though Sino-Russo-European cooperation envisaged by Macierewicz does not seem to be grounded in reality, it reflects the priority of the USA in the foreign relations narrative of PiS. The pronounced anti-BRI position of some of the party's politicians, vividly manifested by Macierewicz in the aforementioned act of blocking the sale of a parcel in Łódź to a Chinese-controlled company in the end of 2016, in fact can be seen as a reiteration of American disapproval of the Chinese initiative.¹⁹²

Probably the most salient security concerns in recent history of Sino-Polish relations were connected to the development of 5G information networks by Chinese companies in Europe. The debate surrounding cybersecurity is firmly rooted in the general context of the Sino-American technological race, an increasingly inclusive and consequential strand of the PRC-US rivalry. Researchers have noted that in the face of China's unprecedented advances in the field of robotics, artificial intelligence (AI) and other pivotal high-tech industries, *the US has been considering a partial economic and technological "decoupling" which is meant to*

¹⁹⁰S. Biba, R. Wolf, Introduction to S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, p. 1.

¹⁹¹Quited after M. Lubina, "From geopolitical chance to security threat: Polish public political discourse on the One Belt One Road initiative", *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 2017, 1(46), p. 231.

¹⁹²The BRI has been referred to as a *Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion* in the American discourse, a wording highly reminiscent of the criticisms aimed specifically at 16+1 format (see the discussion in section 2.3.2, pp. 63-67); A. Chatzky, J. McBride "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative", Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 28 January 2020, at: www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative (last accessed on 5 May 2020).

guarantee US national security by establishing strategic supply chains independent of Chinese producers. The most prominent example of this US policy so far has been the blacklisting of China's telecommunications giant Huawei Technologies, which bans US firms from selling high-tech components (such as chips) and software (e.g., Google's Android operating system) to this Chinese company that is perceived as a significant long-term competitive threat to US dominance of future wireless technologies such as 5G.¹⁹³ Inseparably intertwined with the narrative of technological competition is the more literal aspect of "security" as protection against the Chinese cyber-espionage, a phenomenon confirmed to occur on a large scale at least in the sphere of economy, in the forms of stealing intellectual property such as technology blueprints, manufacturing processes, test results etc.¹⁹⁴ The pressure of the United States on European countries, including Poland, to follow the US suit and ban Chinese companies from the public procurement in 5G technology, has therefore been considered as motivated both by strategic effort to safeguard American economic and technological influences, as well as the legitimate concerns for the safety of sensitive data.¹⁹⁵

By far the most conspicuous Chinese actor on the Polish communication technology market has been Huawei. It should be noted at this point that Huawei's presence in Poland actually predates the 16+1 framework, as the company participated in the construction of Polish 2G and 3G networks since 2006.¹⁹⁶ In 2018, when Huawei, after over a decade of steady growth had just become the largest smartphone seller in Poland, the Polish government started to

¹⁹³ S. Biba, R. Wolf, Introduction to S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, pp. 6. The most severe American measures against Chinese IT companies were undertaken in the context of the Sino-American trade war and the so-called "tech cold war" waged by the US government under the Trump administration; see M. Schüller, "Europe's economic and technological relationship with the United States and China: a difficult balancing act", *ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁹⁴ See J. Hemmings, "Reconstructing Order: The Geopolitical Risks in China's Digital Silk Road", *Asia Policy*, 15.1, January 2020, p 5-21; R. Buchan, *Cyber Espionage and International Law*, Hart Publishing, Oxford, 2019, p. 45, and the sources referenced therein.

¹⁹⁵ P. Le Corre, "European and American approaches towards Chinese foreign direct investment in post-COVID times Opportunities, challenges and policy responses", in S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, p. 147.

¹⁹⁶ See A. Bachulska, "Poland: hardening stance", in I. Karásková, (ed.) *Huawei in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Forecast* (briefing paper), Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague, 2020, p. 11.

ostensibly manifest its dissatisfaction with China: in July 2018 Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki decided to skip the 7th 16+1 summit held in Sofia, and later in the same year, Polish regulatory authorities nullified three public tenders for infrastructure projects initially won by Chinese companies.¹⁹⁷ Around the same time, Polish authorities voiced their criticism at the perceived geopolitical threat to the “free world” posed by China and Russia and condemned the Chinese practice of commercial cyber-espionage (see the relevant analysis in the next chapter). Finally, Huawei made the headlines of the Polish press in January 2019, with the arrest of a Chinese regional director of Huawei and a former Polish security officer, both accused of spying for China. In September 2020, Poland passed a cybersecurity law which introduces to the public procurement of 5G requirements of the compliance with EU safety standards and the diversification of suppliers.¹⁹⁸ There has been little doubt that the anti-Huawei comments and measures of the Polish government were related to the aforementioned stance of Washington, yet similar actions were undertaken by many Western European and CEE states, which illustrates growing concern of the West with the Chinese presence and influence in sensitive technological industries.¹⁹⁹

Yet it seems that Sino-Polish relations are particularly prone to fluctuate in changing tides of international politics. During the first half of 2021, the Polish government has shown some willingness to reinvigorate its cooperation with the PRC. In January, Polish Foreign

¹⁹⁷A. Bachulska, R. Turcsányi, “Behind the Huawei Backlash in Poland and the Czech Republic”, 6 February 2019, at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/behind-the-huawei-backlash-in-poland-and-the-czech-republic> (last accessed on 5 May 2022).

¹⁹⁸P. Pendrakowska, “Poland’s relation to the Belt and Road Initiative: political, economic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural dimensions” in J.C. Liow et al. (ed.) *Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative*, p. 282.

¹⁹⁹M. Schüller, “Europe’s economic and technological relationship with the United States and China: a difficult balancing act”, in S. Biba, R. Wolf (ed.), *Europe in an Era of Growing Sino-American Competition Coping with an Unstable Triangle*, pp. 123-137; I. Karásková, (ed.) *Huawei in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Forecast* (briefing paper), Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague, 2020, p. 11. Although many scholars tend to characterize Europe and/or the CEE region in passive terms as a contested area of influence in the geopolitical tug-of-war between the USA and China, Kavalsky has argued in favor of a much more complex interplay of different factors, including the active projection of international identities on the part of the CEECs, in which to interpret the confrontational shift of the Polish stance towards Beijing; see E. Kavalski, “The Unexpected Consequences of China’s Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe”, *International Studies*, 57(1), 2020, p. 2.

Minister Zbigniew Rau discussed “closer bilateral and multilateral cooperation” in a phone conversation with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi; in February, President Andrzej Duda, as one of the very few heads of state, attended the virtual 8th summit of 16+1 (at the time 17+1). In March Duda also held a telephone conversation with Xi Jinping, and in May Rau visited Beijing. These and other signals were presented in the Chinese media in the light of new COVID reality as Polish appreciation of Chinese anti-pandemic measures, despite generally negative reactions of the Polish public to Beijing’s “mask diplomacy”.²⁰⁰

Bachulska has argued that Poland’s pro-Chinese shift has to be interpreted with respect to the US presidential rotation. The Trump presidency, marked by the uneasy relationship with the EU, was also a period of unprecedented Polish-American closeness. This is why, in the new international environment of US-EU rapprochement under the Biden administration, Polish flirting with Beijing should be seen rather as a *tactical move to attract Washington and Berlin’s attention*,²⁰¹ a perception broadly in line with the agency of “identity games” in CEE countries’ engagement with China postulated by Kavalski.²⁰² Such motives are explicitly articulated by a presidential advisor interviewed by Reuters regarding Duda’s attendance at the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022, which were boycotted by the US: *as Poland's relationship with the United States has worsened under President Joe Biden's administration, it's no longer in Poland's interests to continue criticising China simply to please the Americans*.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ A. Bachulska, “What’s Behind Poland’s Sudden Change of Heart About China?”, 21 July 2021, at: <https://chinaobservers.eu/whats-behind-polands-sudden-change-of-heart-about-china> (last accessed on 5 May 2022).

²⁰¹ A. Bachulska, *ibid.*

²⁰² E. Kavalski, “The Unexpected Consequences of China’s Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe”, *International Studies*, 57(1), 2020, pp. 1-19. Kavalski writes that *some CEE countries use the BRI to emphasize their foreign policy independence from the EU, articulate a pro-Russian stance and indicate their suspicion of liberal democratic principles*. (pp. 3) With the categorical exception of a *pro-Russian stance*, other points are certainly applicable to Poland’s motivations (see the relevant discussion in the next chapter).

²⁰³ “Poland's president to attend Beijing Olympics amidst U.S. boycott”, *Reuters*, 18 January 2022, at: <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/polands-president-attend-beijing-olympics-amidst-us-boycott-2022-01-18> (last accessed on 6 May 2022). Duda’s trip to Beijing, although beyond the timeframe examined in this analysis, was a continuation of rapprochement occurring throughout the year 2021.

Chapter Four: Polish perception of the effectiveness of the

16+1

On the historical and geopolitical background of Sino-Polish and Sino-CEE relations outlined in the previous chapters, we will now conduct an analysis of the Polish political discourse concerning the 16+1 framework during the years 2012-2021. What is meant here by “political discourse”, is essentially the attitude of the Polish government and politicians towards the 16+1, and their assessment of its effectiveness in the context of Poland-China relations. During the examined period, the political power in Poland was held consecutively by two formations: the coalition of Civic Platform (PO) and Polish People’s Party (PSL) until the parliamentary elections of 2015, and by the coalition of the PiS (PiS) and Alliance (S) and United Poland (SP) until 2019, and up to the present date with second cabinet of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, which involves politicians of PiS, the Solidary Poland, and the Republican Party.

As the main source for the analysis, the author has chosen the corpus of dispatches by the Polish Press Agency (pol. *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, PAP), a Polish public news provider partly funded from the state budget. According to its statute, PAP’s tasks include “*obtaining and providing recipients with reliable, objective and comprehensive information from the country and abroad*”²⁰⁴. The Polish Press Agency (PAP) is one of the most reliable sources of media materials available in Poland; it is responsible for the publication of daily news, fragments of official statements, interviews with experts, and all information related to the government’s actions. PAP has also the responsibility to share with the public the positions of

²⁰⁴The official website of the Polish Press Agency at: <https://www.pap.pl/o-agencji/ustawa-o-pap> (last accessed on 7 May 2022).

the Polish government institutions, including both chambers of Parliament, President and Council of Ministers. On a daily basis, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, news and communications from PAP's local reporters and correspondents, as well as other worldwide agencies (such as Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Associated Press (AP) etc.), are published on the PAP Daily News Service. In the Daily News Service, we can find about 1000 items a day concerning politics, economy, society, law, etc. Polish central and local government(s), political parties, Polish media, domestic and foreign companies, and many foreign agencies all are subscribers of the PAP's Daily News Service. The PAP's Daily News Service data has been archived in digital form since 1991; this time span satisfies the requirements of the present research, as the 16+1 started to operate in 2012. The content selected according to the relevance to the 16+1 formula encompasses over two hundred dispatches and is considered illustrative of the Polish government's attitude towards the framework. In the process of data collection and analysis, the author has also included the year 2011, which has been seen as a rapprochement period in Poland-China relations leading directly to the creation of the framework.

Apart from PAP dispatches, two categories of supplementary sources will be examined insofar as they touch upon the subject of 16+1. The first category comprises the official statements regarding the Polish foreign policy by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). The statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are accessible in two different forms: a) Priorities of the Polish foreign policy (pl. *Priorytety polskiej polityki zagranicznej*, hereafter referred to as "Priorities") regarding an upcoming 4-year period, published every 4 years (2012-2016 and 2017-2021), and b) Information about the tasks of the Polish foreign policy (pl. *Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej*, hereafter referred to as "Tasks") presented by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs annually during the session of Sejm of the Republic of Poland. The author will use the Information from

2012 to 2019, as due to the Covid-19 pandemic, MoFA speeches in 2020 and 2021 were either canceled or not presented publicly in the Sejm.

As the second category of supporting sources, the author will use materials provided by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), a state-funded research institution (a think-tank) formerly localized directly under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs whose task is “*to prepare public analysis, expertise and foresight studies of the international environment and processes affecting the Polish position in the world. (...) Situated between the world of policy and independent expertise on international affairs, PISM promotes the flow of ideas that inform and enhance foreign policy of Poland.*”²⁰⁵ Information contained in Yearbooks and Bulletins published by PISM can therefore be understood as an academic basis for foreign policies pursued by the Polish government, and as such afford a valuable and relevant addition to the present analysis.

It is important to note that the denotation of 16+1 adopted for the needs of this section is narrower than the Sino-Polish relations discussed above. The interest of this research is focused on the effectiveness of 16+1 as exemplified by the case of Poland; the analytic focus is therefore placed on the questions of Poland’s relations with China insofar as they are perceived and explicitly formulated by political actors as integral to the multilateral framework of 16+1. It is hoped that the joint analysis of PAP dispatches, public information on priorities and Tasks of the Polish foreign policy issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PISM publications relating to 16+1 - with the strong emphasis on the former warranted by the sheer corpus volume - will be instrumental in answering the research question concerning the effectiveness of the 16+1 framework.

²⁰⁵ The information at the official website of the EU Euromesco network at: <https://www.euromesco.net/institute/pism-the-polish-institute-of-international-affairs> (last accessed on 7 May 2022). The section “about us” at the official website of PISM at <https://www.pism.pl> is sadly not operational at the time this thesis is being written.

The main research method followed by the author is the content analysis of the sources specified above. However, in order to provide a general outlook on the examined sources, we will first briefly present basic selection criteria and some quantitative aspects of the data.

4.1 Selection criteria and quantitative characteristics

PAP press releases are often written as brief reports from important events, highlighting core developments and any relevant news, sometimes including fragments of experts' opinions and/or interviews. A considerable share of the content to be analyzed below has been published by the PAP immediately before, during and after all eight 16+1 summits (also referred to as China Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe summits or China-CEE summits) - these releases usually cover statements containing opinions of officials and the government's policy directions.

In the author's view, the PAP should be considered a relevant and reliable source of data for the needs of this study, as the press agency is closely tied to the Polish government, and the information it publishes always comes with its accreditation. The two main types of press releases published by the PAP are the communications and dispatches. Communications are short articles provided by the official, accredited institutions, mostly located within Polish government structures. The second type of press release, a dispatch, is written by PAP reporters, who write about events they have participated in or about anything relevant and important from Poland's perspective. These provide desirable insight into the opinions of the government on particular matters and present information important from the government's point of view. A quantity of communications related to specific issues within a specified period also shows the level of official interest in that issue. Moreover, the PAP publishes the interviews with experts and/or politicians or includes fragments of their testimonies in dispatches.

The PAP would not always issue both types of releases after 16+1 summits. Communications, as already mentioned above, are more likely to be released when some event is of particular interest to a specific institution or to the government. Publishing of dispatches, on the other hand, is sometimes related to the PAP correspondents' presence during a specific event or their permanent work for the Agency in a given country. All China-CEE summits, which are the most critical events for the activities within the framework, have so far been held in different cities and countries. Sometimes, the PAP would not issue dispatches and rely only on communications. However, research on PAP archives indicates that the Agency has always issued one of the two types of press releases during or after a 16+1 summit, often more than once (similar information can be posted more than once, provided it is complemented by additional content).

Communications are also written following other official events, often citing the most essential parts of speeches. All in all, both of these types of press release provide an insight into Poland's view on the 16+1 framework, and by analyzing them, we may observe whether there occurs any change in the government's official view on Chinese-Polish cooperation, in particular any change in the attitude towards China and Poland's self-perceived role or involvement within this framework. Moreover, the PAP, by publishing interviews with experts and daily news, provides an insight into the particular actions of Poland within the initiative and the level of Polish involvement.

From the PAP archives the author has hitherto gathered 550 releases dated from January 1st, 2011 to December 31st, 2021 that relate to China, out of which 219 concern the 16+1 - including also those releases that touch upon the China cooperation with the CEE region without explicit usage of the "16+1" label. As a distinction tool, the author used hashtags such as "16+1 framework" (pol. "format 16+1), "17+1 framework" (pol. "format 17+1, "China-CEE" (pol. Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia i Chiny), "China" + "Poland" (pol. Chiny + Polska),

“China” + “Central Europe” (pol. Chiny + Europa Środkowa), and conducted the word search in the full content of all releases. It should be noted that the author applies the term “press release” also to other, less frequent types of information published in the PAP service, such as interviews with experts etc., which are also instrumental in tracing the Polish stance and level of involvement in the 16+1 framework.

It should be also noted that in some cases the distinction between Poland’s comprehensive cooperation with China and the cooperation within the particular framework of the 16+1 framework is blurred. An example is the BRI, which from 2013 has been used as an umbrella term for other initiatives, including the 16+1. In 2016, Prime Minister of Poland Beata Szydło visited China and took part in the 1st One Belt One Road Forum in Beijing. From the Poland’s perspective, this event also exemplified the Polish-Chinese cooperation. Moreover, a large part of bilateral activities from the Polish standpoint is understood as a piece of a broader cooperation, also under the BRI and the 16+1. Therefore, in order to trace the process of cooperation between China and Poland and the evolving attitude of the Polish government towards this framework, an occasional insight into the press releases not mentioning the 16+1 directly is also justified.

I have mentioned above that the total numbers of the identified relevant data are 550 China-related press releases, out of which 219 are related specifically to the 16+1 framework. We will now break these quantities down into a chronological sequence of consecutive years:

- 2011: 14 China-related press releases;
- 2012: 62 China-related press releases, out of which 41 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2013: 32 China-related press releases, out of which 12 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;

- 2014: 32 China-related press releases, out of which 11 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2015: 66 China-related press releases, out of which 34 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2016: 100 China-related press releases, out of which 47 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2017: 72 China-related press releases, out of which 30 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2018: 38 China-related press releases, out of which 8 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2019: 45 China-related press releases, out of which 15 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2020: 42 China-related press releases, out of which 1 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE;
- 2021: 47 China-related press releases, out of which 20 mention the 16+1 or the cooperation between China and CEE.

The above data can be represented graphically as follows:

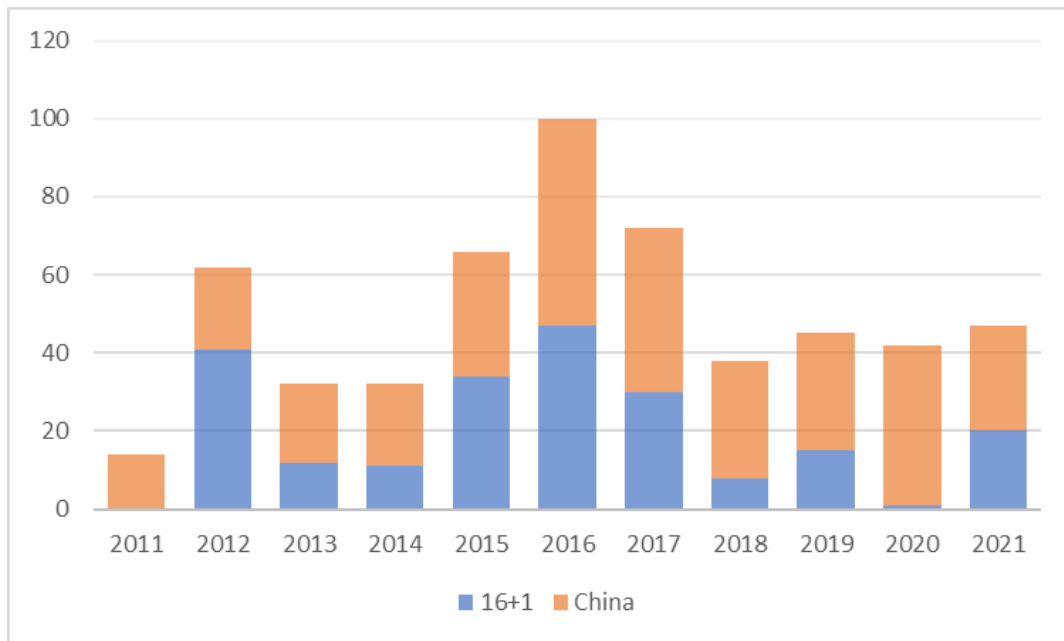


Figure 9. Annual numbers of PAP dispatches on China in the years 2011-2021

It is worth noting at this point that the annual numbers of both China-related and 16+1-related dispatches are generally reflective of the relative importance of the events occurring on the timeline of Sino-Polish relations. The unprecedented upsurge in the number of press releases related to China, among which the ones related to 16+1 occupied the highest ratio ever, came in 2012, the year of the establishment of the framework. The highest quantity of China-related information was published by the PAP in 2016, a year which might very well be regarded as the culmination of Sino-Polish relations under the 16+1 framework marked by Xi Jinping's visit to Warsaw. Subsequent decrease in the number of releases in the years 2017-2019 echoes the cooldown in relations connected to the accumulating doubts and disappointment with the tangible results of the cooperation. In 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic effectively halted much of Poland's economic cooperation with Asian partners, which is reflected in only one of the PAP press releases concerning the 16+1 framework, out of 42 relating to China. The renewed interest in the initiative is also visible in the relative increase of the relevant information from 2021, when the framework is mentioned in 20 out of 47 China-related releases.

As the author mentioned above, the second source of the present analysis will be the directions set out in the Strategy of Polish Foreign Policy for 2012-2016 and 2017-2021, developed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and approved by the Council of Ministers. Every year, these strategies are detailed in the Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy (the “Tasks”). Informally also known as “exposé”, the Tasks are presented in the form of a speech before the Sejm by the Foreign Minister, usually at the beginning of a calendar year, and are publicly available at the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As mentioned before, the author will use the Tasks from 2012 to 2019, as due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the speeches in 2020 and 2021 were either canceled or not presented publicly in the Sejm.

Analogically to the analysis of PAP press releases, the author examines whether the content of Tasks explicitly mentions Poland’s relations with China, and more narrowly the 16+1 framework. As can be seen in Figure 9, all of the exposés from the analyzed period include a reference to China, however, only 4 out of 8 mentions specifically the 16+1 framework. The framework explicitly features in Tasks from the years 2014-2017, cutting across the periods of two consecutive cabinets (last two years of the PO-PSL coalition and first two years of PiS-led coalitions), which the author considers as the period of the highest optimism towards 16+1. The years 2012-2013 can be seen as the infancy of the framework that was yet to gain recognition, which accounts for lack of relevant mention by a foreign minister. In the author's view, lack of reference to 16+1 in the years 2018-2019 may indicate that the cooperation has lost its significance from the viewpoint of Polish officials.

Date of the exposé	Cabinet	Minister of Foreign Affairs	Mentions China	Mentions 16+1
29 March, 2012	PO-PSL	Radosław Sikorski	YES	NO
20 March 2013	PO-PSL	Radosław Sikorski	YES	NO
8 May 2014	PO-PSL	Radosław Sikorski	YES	YES
23 April 2015	PO-PSL	Grzegorz Schetyna	YES	YES
29 January 2016	PIS-PR-SP	Witold Waszczykowski	YES	YES
9 February 2017	PIS-PR-SP	Witold Waszczykowski	YES	YES
21 March 2018	PIS-P-SP	Jacek Czaputowicz	YES	NO
14 March 2019	PIS-P-SP	Jacek Czaputowicz	YES	NO

Figure 10. Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy in the years 2011-2019 and the references to China and 16+1

4.2 Periodization and content analysis

Below we will conduct the content analysis of the relevant data - mainly the PAP dispatches supplemented by the statements of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the materials published by PISM. The analysis will be organized chronologically - in the overall timespan of the decade between 2011 and 2021, the author has tentatively identified five periods differentiated according to tendencies in Polish outlook on the 16+1 formula dominant in given years.

4.2.1 2011: The year of the Poland-China rapprochement

2011 can be considered as a year of rapprochement between China and Poland. It is important to mention here the visit of Polish President Bronisław Komorowski in China in December 2011, when Poland and the PRC signed the *Joint Declaration of the Republic of Poland and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of the Strategic-Partnership*

Relations. This declaration established a mechanism for a strategic dialogue of deputy foreign ministers, as well as for a cooperation at various levels between governments, legislative bodies and political parties. It was also instrumental in accelerating the Sino-Polish cooperation, as it opened the door for further activities and increased China's presence in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Based on the retrospect analysis of PAP's press releases from that year as compared to the following developments, the subject of Poland-China relations does not appear particularly significant in 2011, with only 14 of the dispatches mentioning China, out of which 12 were focused only on Komorowski's trip to the PRC.

President Komorowski's arrival in Beijing marked the first presidential visit to China in 14 years. Komorowski met with representatives of the highest Chinese authorities - President of the PRC Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Wu Bangguo (吳邦國)²⁰⁶. After signing the joint declaration, Komorowski told journalists that Poland joined the group of seven EU countries that sustain strategic partnership with China: *"this is important insofar as we are perceived as an important country in the European Union, which has its own special relations with China as well."* Komorowski also mentioned that *"it is interesting that our Chinese partners see Poland as a center that can facilitate arrangements between China and the EU"*²⁰⁷.

During the president's visit, around one hundred delegates representing Polish business and economy took part in the Beijing Economic Forum and the Shanghai Investment Forum. As Komorowski pointed out, his visit resulted in the signing of a number of Sino-Polish agreements: *"The most spectacular is that of KGHM for the supply of Polish copper, calculated*

²⁰⁶Cygonek, K. "Komorowski rozmawiał z szefami Chipolbroku i szanghajskimi biznesmenami" [Komorowski talked to directors of Chipolbrok and Shanghai businessmen], Polish Press Agency, 18 December 2012.

²⁰⁷"Prezydent Komorowski rozmawiał z władzami Chin o demokratyzacji" [President Komorowski talked with the Chinese authorities about democratization], Polish Press Agency, 21 December 2012.

*in billions of zlotys*²⁰⁸.” The framework contract for 2012-2016 was signed by the presidents of the management boards of KGHM Polska Miedź and China Minmetals Corporation. KGHM CEO Herbert Wirth told the PAP that it is “*a five-year trade agreement, the subject of which is the sale of our main product, cathode copper in the amount of 100 thousand tonnes per year, plus an option that will be concluded every year*”²⁰⁹.”

On the last day of his stay, Komorowski positively assessed the visit, emphasizing that it opens up completely new perspectives for Sino-Polish cooperation. The President expressed his satisfaction with the signing of many economic agreements between Poland and China on that day and noted that Polish-Chinese relations were elevated to the level of strategic partnership. Komorowski remarked also that his visit opened up opportunities for cooperation in many other important fields, such as culture and science²¹⁰. Two days after the visit, during the interview for the Polish news channel Polsat News, the President emphasized that Poland is open for potential investments from China. When confronted with the question regarding the failed project of highway construction in Poland by the Chinese company COVEC (see section 3.1.1, pp. 87-89), the President emphasized that such things are remembered, but not discussed: “*I perceive the declarations of the most important people in the Chinese state about supporting Chinese investments in Poland as a proof that the Chinese side is aware that this defeat [i.e. COVEC] is to some extent burdening Polish-Chinese relations, and that a new beginning must be made.*”²¹¹

Regarding the political and axiological issues, Komorowski suggested during the interview that the Polish side is interested in sharing its political transformation expertise with

²⁰⁸Bpi, Drag, “Prezydent: możemy oferować Chinom doświadczenia zmiany w państwo prawa” [President: We can offer China the experience of transformation into the state with the rule of law], Polish Press Agency, 24 December 2012.

²⁰⁹K. Cygonek, “Pekin (PAP) - Prezydent Bronisław Komorowski spotkał się we wtorek w Pekinie z przewodniczącym ChRL Hu Jintao” [Beijing (PAP) - President Bronisław Komorowski met on Tuesday in Beijing with the President of the PRC Hu Jintao], Polish Press Agency, 20 December 2012.

²¹⁰Ibid.

²¹¹Ibid.

China, mentioning that Poland “*can offer the Chinese side our practical experience in transforming a state that was extremely far from democratic standards into the rule of law.*”²¹²

At the same time, the president has been omitting the subject of human rights violations, because “*one should focus on economic cooperation, because the free market and property rights open the way (...) to the rule of law,*” as he also explained China is a country with a specific culture where you have to be able to speak in a way that does not contradict your own views and does not alienate the hosts.²¹³

The visit of President Komorowski to Beijing must be viewed on the broader geo-economic background of the diversification of Poland’s international partners in the wake of the economic crisis, a perspective that has been explored in the previous chapters. It can nevertheless be regarded also as the initial step in Sino-Polish rapprochement, although the PRC was not (yet) perceived by Poland as one of its main non-European partners.

4.2.2 2012-2014: Optimistic opening

Lack of reference to the China-Poland cooperation in the “Priorities of the Polish Foreign Policy 2012-2016” published in the beginning of 2012 indicates that at that point the PRC was not a significant factor in Poland’s international strategy. In the 29 page-long document, China was only mentioned briefly as the world’s second-largest economy, that is “*not always willing to uphold standards pertaining to human, labor and social rights, as well as those pertaining to the natural environment*” but whose position will grow.²¹⁴ Similarly, in the “Information on the Tasks of Polish Foreign Policy” presented by the Minister of Foreign

²¹²Bpi, Drag. “Prezydent: możemy oferować Chinom doświadczenia zmiany w państwo prawa” [President: We can offer China the experience of transformation into the state with the rule of law], Polish Press Agency, 24 December 2012.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2012-2016.”, March, 2012, at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwixg uTbm_D3AhWcQPUHHaykCcoQFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbn.gov.pl%2Fdownload%2F1%2F9620%2Fprpol.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1Bto4BFdVH09oN3_PGTZSu (last accessed on 15 May 2022).

Affairs Radosław Sikorski during the session of Sejm in March 2012, China was just briefly and rather pejoratively mentioned as an entity that is filling a “*vacuum in Asia*”, created by the divided Europe’s failure to assert the role of a positive model and an important economic and political player.²¹⁵

The Tasks were, however, presented before the groundbreaking visit of Wen Jiabao in Warsaw and his meeting with the heads of CEE countries, which came to be regarded as the actual circumstance of the creation of 16+1. It has already been mentioned that the importance of the visit is clearly reflected in the unprecedented increase of the number of PAP press releases from 2012 (see figure 9). Most of these releases are concentrated around Wen’s visit, accounting for the singularly high ratio of 16+1-related information (41 releases) out of the total of China-related content (62 releases).

Because of the China-CEE forum held during Wen Jiabao’s stay in Warsaw, the political statements contained in the PAP releases begin to place Sino-Polish relations within the China-CEE perspective. Shortly before the Chinese Premier’s arrival, Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jerzy Pomianowski said that the visit would be “*a perfect summary of Poland’s role in the region, as well as Poland’s role as an important partner of China.*” Pomianowski also expressed the hope that Wen’s visit would help to reverse the unfavorable trade imbalance between Poland and the PRC.²¹⁶

The initial discourse surrounding the arrival of Wen in Poland emphasized also its bilateral, reciprocal aspect. Analyst Radosław Pyffel described Wen Jiabao’s visit as the result of the Sino-Polish opening initiated by the visit of the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to

²¹⁵R. Sikorski, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2012 roku.”, 29 March, 2012, at: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=11&dzien=2&wyp=2&view=1> (last accessed on 15 May 2022).

²¹⁶Joko, Mok and Mow. “Podczas wizyty premiera Chin odbędzie się m.in. forum gospodarcze” [During the visit of the Chinese Prime Minister an economic forum will be held, among other events], Polish Press Agency, 17 April 2012.

Beijing in 2008;²¹⁷ Roman Kuźniar, an advisor in international affairs to the president of Poland, has presented Wen's visit as a token of reciprocity following President Bronisław Komorowski's visit to Beijing in 2011.²¹⁸

During the bilateral meeting with Wen Jiabao, Prime Minister Donald Tusk also referred to the President Komorowski's visit to Beijing one year earlier, but apart from that openly stated that Sino-Polish relations are on the "**highest level in their history**", and that the "*steps being taken*" mark the "*historical moment*" in both Sino-Polish relations and China-CEE relations. Tusk also expressed hope for "*balanced economic relations*" between Poland and China,²¹⁹ and described China-CEE relations as a "*sign of economic success for the whole world*", with Poland being a "*European pillar of production and services*".²²⁰ The Polish Prime Minister also referred to the attractiveness of Poland for Chinese investments as deriving from the "*potential of Central Europe*",²²¹ and emphasized that Poland is "*the largest economic partner of China in Central Europe*".²²² Such potential was, according to Tusk, manifest in CEE being "*a region of political and economic stability*" in the context of the financial crisis, from which Poland emerged as one of the few relatively unscathed economies.²²³ Also noteworthy in Tusk's rhetoric at the dawn of the 16+1 framework is the reference to the CEE region represented at the forum in Poland as "*nations, states and politicians that - all*

²¹⁷Joko, Eaw, Ura. "Eksperci: wizyta Jiabao w Polsce konsekwencją strategicznego partnerstwa" [Experts: Jiabao's visit to Poland is a consequence of strategic partnership], Polish Press Agency, 24 April 2012

²¹⁸Joko, Par, Ura, Tpo. "W środę w Polsce wizytę rozpoczyna premier Chin (aktl.)" [The Chinese prime minister begins his visit to Poland on Wednesday], Polish Press Agency, 25 April 2012

²¹⁹Joko, Mrr, Mok, Mow. "Rozpoczęła się wizyta premiera Chin w Polsce (aktl.)" [The visit of the Chinese prime minister to Poland has started], Polish Press Agency, 25 April 2012; Joko, Mok, Mow. "Tusk z Wen Jiabao m.in. o współpracy gospodarczej (opis)" [Tusk and Wen Jiabao about economic cooperation, among others], Polish Press Agency, 25 April 2012.

²²⁰Laz, Wkr, Eaw, Ura. "Tusk: Polska filarem produkcyjno-usługowym Europy (krótka)" [Tusk: Poland is the production and service pillar of Europe], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012 (bold font added by the author).

²²¹Tgo, Par, Jbr. "Tusk: Europa Środkowa to atrakcyjny region dla inwestycji (krótka2)" [Tusk: Central Europe is an attractive region for investment], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012.

²²²Ajg, Par, Jbr. "Tusk: Chiny i Europa Środkowa to nadzieja na lepszą przyszłość świata (krótka3)" [Tusk: China and Central Europe are the hope for a better future for the world], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012.

²²³Laz, Mrr, Par, Mow. "Tusk: Chiny i Europa Środkowa symbolami sukcesu i rozwoju (opis2)" [Tusk: China and Central Europe as symbols of success and development], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012.

differences considered - constitute an exceptionally consolidated community in Europe".²²⁴

This must be seen as an exceptionally optimistic portrayal in the retrospect of later criticisms of the 16+1 framework as failing to account for the heterogeneity of the CEE region (see section 2.3, pp. 56-58).

The aspirations of the Polish government regarding the Poland's role on the 16+1 platform were perhaps expressed the most unambiguously by Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak, who, during the visit of Wen Jiabao, openly remarked that "*Poland should seek to situate itself as a representative of the whole [CEE] region*".²²⁵ Pawlak reiterated this position also during his meeting with the Vice Minister of Industry and Information Technology Miao Wei (苗圩) in Beijing in the end of May 2012.²²⁶ Later in the same year Radosław Sikorski, the Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Civic Platform administration, while noting China's appreciation of Poland's role in Europe, also remarked that "*we are not satisfied with the way the political dialogue is reflected in the economy*".²²⁷ Sikorski's comment was made in the concrete context of the struggle to initiate the Sino-Polish cooperation in shale gas extraction and the claims for damages after the failed COVEC project (see 3.1.1), but can be plausibly understood also as a sign of Polish government's dissatisfaction with its trade imbalance with the PRC.

The China-CEE summit held during the visit of Wen Jiabao in Warsaw in April 2012 was explicitly mentioned in the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy published in March 2013. China was referred to as a "*super-regional power, which should more actively participate in*

²²⁴Mrr, Par, Wo. "Premierzy Tusk i Wen na Zamku Królewskim o wzmocnieniu relacji Chin z Europą (opis2)" (Prime Ministers Tusk and Wen at the Royal Castle on the strengthening of China's relations with Europe), Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012.

²²⁵Wkr, Agy, Je, Jbr. "Wan Jifei: zbilansowanie handlu i chińskie inwestycje receptami na rozwój (aktl.)" [Wan Jifei: Balancing Trade and Chinese Investments as Recipes for Growth], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2012.

²²⁶Kom, Aja. "MG ws. spotkania ministrów Waldemara Pawlaka i Miao Wei (komunikat)" [Ministry of Economy on the meeting of Ministers Waldemar Pawlak and Miao Wei], Polish Press Agency, 30 May 2012.

²²⁷Wan Jacek, Jwn, Awl, Ap, Mow. "Chiny/ Sikorski: Chcemy, by dialog polityczny wpływał na gospodarkę" [China / Sikorski: We want the political dialogue to have an impact on the economy], Polish Press Agency, 14 September 2012.

solving problems on the global scale”. It is interesting that this expectation is immediately followed in the text of the Tasks by the declaration that Poland is “*ready to provide its experience, should China ever decide to pluralize its political system*”²²⁸, which is virtually a reiteration of president Komorowski’s remarks from 2011. Although an issue peripheral from the viewpoint of the effectiveness of 16+1, it is still noteworthy that such acknowledgements of political differences between Poland and the PRC have been marginally present in the Polish political discourse during the initial period of the 16+1 framework. Human rights were, for example, a topic discussed by Marshal of the Sejm Ewa Kopacz during her visit to China in June 2013.²²⁹ Such axiological considerations are nevertheless overshadowed by the general enthusiasm over the apparently bright future of Sino-Polish and Sino-CEE cooperation. Commenting on the same 2013 visit, Kopacz made the explicit reference to the Twelve Measures of China-CEE cooperation announced by Wen Jiabao in the previous year, and stated that Poland “*as the economic leader of Central Europe should do everything to be in the center of Chinese investors’ attention*”.²³⁰ PAP press releases surrounding Kopacz’s trip also repeatedly mention the fact that the Chinese side designated Poland as their most important partner in the CEE region, as well as the perceived bilateral intention to broaden the scope of Sino-Polish economic relations in the areas of investment, trade, capital and energy sources (especially shale gas), on the national as well as regional levels.²³¹

²²⁸R. Sikorski, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2013 roku.”, 20 March, 2013, at: <https://sejm.gov.pl/Sejm7.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=36&dzien=1&wyp=2&view=1> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

²²⁹Kom, Kos. “Sejm: spotkanie polskiej delegacji z przedstawicielami chińskich władz (komunikat)” [Sejm: meeting of the Polish delegation with representatives of Chinese authorities], Polish Press Agency, 5 June 2013.

²³⁰Wan, Jacek, Jwn, Jm. “Kopacz: wizyta w Chinach znacznie przyspieszy współpracę gospodarczą” [Kopacz: a visit to China will significantly accelerate economic cooperation], Polish Press Agency, 9 June 2013. See also: Wan, Jacek, Jwn, Mki, Ura., “Chiny/ Marszałek Sejmu zachęcała w Tianjinie do kontaktów gospodarczych (aktl.) [China/ Marshall of the Sejm encouraged economic contacts in Tianjin], Polish Press Agency, 6 June 2013.

²³¹Kom, Amt. “Kancelaria Sejmu: Delegacja parlamentarna z marszałek Sejmu na czele zakończyła wizytę w Chinach (komunikat)” [Chancellery of the Sejm: The parliamentary delegation headed by the Marshal of the Sejm ended its visit to China], Polish Press Agency, 9 June 2013.

During the second 16+1 summit held in Bucharest in November 2013, Tusk remarked that the CEE region was experiencing “*the best period of its cooperation with China in history*”, while also referring to the summit as “*in a sense a continuation of the Polish initiative from the last year*” and emphasizing the role of Poland as an initiator of the region’s multilateral relationship with the PRC.²³² While Tusk did not fail to mention the expectation of the Polish government that the Twelve Measures would prove instrumental in alleviating the Sino-Polish trade imbalance, palpable from the wording of the above political statements is the growing self-recognition of Polish government as the regional leader in China-CEE cooperation.

The Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy for 2014 included a relatively lengthy reference to China and a praise to the PRC’s economy, which had been developing “*at a pace unheard of in the history of mankind*”. It has been noted that both Sino-Polish bilateral relations in the form of the strategic partnership and the regional cooperation with China had grown considerably, and that “*it is not by coincidence that Poland was the host of the first summit between prime ministers of the sixteen Central Eastern European states and China. We can already see the first results - Chinese investments in Poland and the growth of our exports. The city of Łódź has the opportunity to become the operator of the trade between the companies from the entire region and China.*”²³³ While the Tasks refer to the “*sixteen Central and Eastern European countries*”, political statements contained in the PAP press releases from the year 2014 begin to employ the designation “16+1”. The central role of Poland in the framework is often emphasized in those statements; for example, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Katarzyna Kacperczyk is quoted to have referred on one occasion to the “*potential of the Sino-Polish regional cooperation and of the development of the cooperation within the **Poland-***

²³²A. Gajcy, “Tusk: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w najlepszym okresie relacji z Chinami (aktl.)” Polish Press Agency, 26 November 2013.

²³³R. Sikorski, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2014 roku.”, 8 May, 2014, at: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=67&dzien=2&wyp=83&view=1> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

initiated 16+1 framework, which encompasses China and the countries of Central Eastern Europe.”²³⁴ Such rhetoric appropriation of the 16+1 is undoubtedly indicative of the importance that the Polish government attached to Poland’s role within it. In September 2014, Kacperczyk also described Poland as the “*key partner of China in the region of Central Eastern Europe and one of the most important partners within the EU*” in the context of the newly established BRI, in which Poland could become the “*China’s gateway to Europe*”.²³⁵

During his meeting with the PRC ambassador to Poland Xu Jian (徐堅) on the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between China and Poland, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna identified four distinct levels of the Sino-Polish cooperation: the regional level, bilateral China-Poland relations, China-EU relations and China-CEE relations (16+1), the latter level being considered by Schetyna as the most promising. Schetyna also specifically mentioned that annual China-CEE summits were initiated in Poland in 2012.²³⁶

The increased public awareness of the importance of the 16+1 framework is also reflected in a PAP press release from November 2014, entirely devoted to the 16+1 Secretariat, newly established in Warsaw and localized in the headquarters of the Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency (since 2017 the Polish Trade and Investment Agency).²³⁷

A new thread in the Polish narrative of China-CEE relations became emphasized in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. During the third 16+1 Summit, held in

²³⁴Kom, Kfk. “MSZ: o promocji polskiego biznesu w chińskiej prowincji Szantung (komunikat)” [MoFA: on the promotion of Polish business in the Chinese province of Shandong], Polish Press Agency, 30 June 2014 (bold font added by the author). It is also noteworthy that the 16+1 framework is referred to also as the “Warsaw Initiative” in the news material published on the official website of the Polish Agency of Investment and Trade at: https://www.paih.gov.pl/20141119/secretariat_16_plus_1_in_warsaw (last accessed on 21 May 2022). (Bold font added by the author.)

²³⁵Kom, Ksi. “MSZ: w Łodzi o współpracy ekonomicznej z Chinami (komunikat)” [MoFA: in Łódź on economic cooperation with China], Polish Press Agency, 26 September 2014.

²³⁶Kom, Ksi., “MSZ: Schetyna na uroczystości 65. rocznicy polsko-chińskich stosunków dyplomatycznych (komunikat)” [MoFA: Schetyna at the 65th anniversary of Polish-Chinese diplomatic relations], Polish Press Agency, 8 October 2014.

²³⁷Krz, Gma. “Powstał Sekretariat 16 państw Europy i Chin ds. inwestycji” [The Secretariat of 16 European and Chinese countries for investments was established], Polish Press Agency, 19 November 2014.

December 2014 in Belgrade, Polish Deputy Prime Minister Siemoniak (who attended the event as a last-minute substitution for Prime Minister Kopacz - see section 3.2.1, pp. 90-93) stated that the China-CEE summit mechanism “*should constitute a part of the larger Europe-Asia dialogue, aimed at peace, stability and development in the globalizing world.*” Siemoniak also expressed Poland’s desire for an increased amount of Chinese FDI, as well as the increased accessibility of the Chinese market for Polish products, which would be helpful with regard to the still unalleviated Sino-Polish trade imbalance.²³⁸

To sum up, Poland’s attitude towards the 16+1 in the first three years of its existence is generally marked by an increasing optimism. The analysis of PAP press releases from that period verify something that has been already touched upon in earlier chapters: the circumstances of the establishment of 16+1 - the visit of Wen Jiabao to Warsaw in April 2012 - were initially perceived mainly in the Sino-Polish bilateral perspective as a manifestation of the Sino-Polish new strategic partnership. When the annual 16+1 summits in Bucharest (2013) and Belgrade (2014) evidenced the PRC’s commitment to the cooperation with the whole CEE region, the Polish government assumed the narrative - well grounded in reality - of Poland being the regional leader of that cooperation. Poland’s embrace of China’s regional perspective is also reflected in vocabulary - the designation “Central Eastern Europe” (pl. “Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia”) becomes more frequent in the press releases from 2013, substituting the term “Central Europe” (pl. “*Europa Środkowa*”), more popular in earlier discourse.

In the years 2012-2014, Polish officials frequently voiced eager hopes to expand the Sino-Polish cooperation in multiple areas and to quickly mitigate the soaring trade imbalance. The 16+1, along with the BRI, were presented as frameworks instrumental in meeting these objectives. At the same time, in contrast with optimistic political portrayals, we can also see

²³⁸Gietka, M. “Serbia/ Siemoniak: Polska jednym z najlepszych miejsc do inwestowania” [Serbia/ Siemoniak: Poland is one of the best places to invest], Polish Press Agency, 16 December 2014.

markedly more balanced judgments in the publications by PISM. In the bulletin published in October 2013, Szczudlik has noted that it is difficult to find a common denominator in the group of 16+1 countries: “(e)ach state is concentrated mainly on bilateral relations, each state points towards benefits that China could obtain in tightening its relations with them (for example a strategic and central location in Europe, a ‘gate’ to other EU and non-EU markets, cheap, but qualified labor force etc.)”.²³⁹ These observations are very much in line with the scholarly discourse on 16+1 presented in the previous chapters - indeed, the academic publications by the author herself were frequently referred to earlier in this thesis. In any case, such analytical voices were effectively drowned - at least judging from the corpus of PAP press releases - in the loud political acclaim for the seemingly promising upward trajectory of the Sino-Polish partnership.

4.2.3 2015-2016: Culminating promises

The years 2015-2016 can be regarded as the zenith of optimism in Sino-Polish cooperation within the 16+1 framework. The “*intense, multi-sector cooperation*” between Poland and China is described in the PAP releases in a perspective of “*four pillars*”: the Sino-Polish bilateral strategic partnership, the EU-China strategic partnership, the 16+1 framework and the regional cooperation.²⁴⁰ The designations of “China-Central and Eastern Europe” as well as “16+1” are prominently referenced in the Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy for 2015 as “*new forms of cooperation*” and an important direction of development. A stress is laid also on regional cooperation, especially in the context of the freight train connection between Chengdu and Łódź. Although the rail connection itself is not

²³⁹J. Szczudlik, “Chińska ofensywa w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej - realizacja strategii 12 punktów” (Chinese offensive in the Central and Eastern Europe - implementation of the 12-point strategy), *Bulletin*, Polish Institute of Foreign Relations, 103(1079), 4 October 2013, pp. 2.

²⁴⁰Kom, Kfk., “MSZ: Polsko-Chiński Dialog Strategiczny (komunikat)” [MoFA: Polish-Chinese Strategic Dialogue], Polish Press Agency, 17 April 2015.

explicitly named, the Tasks mention the Poland - China regional forum held in Łódź as well as Foreign Minister's decision to open a Polish consulate general in Chengdu.²⁴¹

The analysis of PAP press releases from the year 2015 reveals that the Chengdu-Łódź connection features frequently in the political discourse as a token of Poland's integration into the BRI, but it also becomes a kind of a "success story" cliché emblematic of the Sino-Polish economic cooperation in general. In the information related to the first meeting of the Poland-China Intergovernmental Committee in June 2015, the only discussed issue recounted in any detail was the *"role of Poland in the gigantic Chinese 'One Belt One Road' initiative, which entails a network of sea and land connections between China and Europe. Poland has an exceptional position in this concept, because all rail connections between China and the EU run through its territory."* In the same dispatch, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grzegorz Schetyna, is quoted saying that ***"Poland is a country that opens the way to Europe for China in every aspect"***.²⁴² Similarly, during the meeting on the founding of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in Beijing (also in June 2015), Polish Minister of Finance Mateusz Szczurek *"emphasized the high importance of China to Poland and the role of Poland as a link between Europe and Asia"*.²⁴³

The direct mentions of 16+1 are also frequent in the analyzed corpus of PAP press releases. In April 2015, the establishment of the 16+1 Business Council in Poland was referred to as *"a project that is meant to help develop economic relations not only between China and Poland, but also [between China] and the whole region of Central Eastern Europe. Establishment of the Council is one of the Polish initiatives within the 16+1 framework"*

²⁴¹G. Schetyna, "Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2015 roku.", 23 April, 2015, at: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=91&dzien=2&wypok=37&view=1> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

²⁴²A. Borowiak, "Schetyna w Chinach; pierwsze posiedzenie komitetu międzyrządowego", Polish Press Agency, 17 June 2015. (The bold font added by the author).

²⁴³Kom Ksi., "MF: powstaje Azjatycki Bank Inwestycji Infrastrukturalnych (komunikat)", Polish Press Agency, 30 June 2015.

proposed by the Polish Prime Minister in Bucharest in 2013.”²⁴⁴ The Polish government’s unwavering insistence on positioning Poland as the initiator and the leader of the China-CEE cooperation is even more visible in the release from October 2015, where the Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna is quoted to have indicated that “***Poland is the author of the talks within the 16+1 framework between the Central Eastern Europe countries and China***”.²⁴⁵

The general shift of political authority in Poland following both the parliamentary and the presidential elections of 2015 resulted in the ascension to power of the PiS. Although quite consequential in many political and social areas, this political change is of minor importance from the Sino-Polish perspective - the new government continued the pro-China foreign policy of the preceding cabinet of Civic Platform. It has been indicated in the previous chapters that newly elected president Duda’s attendance as the only CEE head of state at the 4th 16+1 summit in Suzhou in November 2015 was a strong signal of the new Polish government’s commitment to the framework. Secretary of the President’s Chancellery Krzysztof Szczerski stated in reference of Duda’s trip to Suzhou that “*we are off to China to build new paths and bridges of cooperation mainly between Central Europe and China*”, and said that the President’s message during the Summit can be summed up in a slogan “*Central Europe is a unity in heterogeneity.*” Szczerski indicated that “*each of the countries in the [CEE] region has its own, to some extent competitive, interests with China. But at the same time the President is promoting cooperation in the region, which should lead to a greater unity.*”²⁴⁶ The question of “Central Europe” used again instead of “Central Eastern Europe” aside, such somewhat self-contradictory rhetoric reflects the awareness of the problem already indicated by experts - that

²⁴⁴ Kom, Kfk., “MSZ: wiceminister Katarzyna Kacperczyk na Europejskim Kongresie Gospodarczym (komunikat)” [MoFA: Deputy Minister Katarzyna Kacperczyk at the European Economic Congress], Polish Press Agency, 21 April 2015.

²⁴⁵ Mce, Dym, Abr. “Szefowie MSZ Polski i Chin: Polska korytarzem między UE a Państwem Środka” [Foreign ministers of Poland and China: Poland as a corridor between the EU and the Middle Kingdom], Polish Press Agency, 15 October 2015 (the bold font added by the author.)

²⁴⁶ Kno, As. “W niedzielę prezydent Duda udaje się z kilkudniową wizytą do Chin” [On Sunday, President Duda is going to visit China for several days], Polish Press Agency, 22 November 2015.

the heterogeneity of the CEE countries is a liability to multilateral ambitions of the 16+1 framework.

However, what is also seen in the content of the information released by the PAP, is the Duda's pronounced pro-Chinese position. In the comments concerning his attendance at the Suzhou summit, the president positively presented the 16+1 on the larger, Sino-European background - "*it can be said with certainty that the Central Eastern Europe - China framework has become firmly embedded in Sino-European relations*".²⁴⁷ But apart from that, Duda was also deeply impressed by the "*power, economic development and incredible changes*" which had occurred in China during the last 25 years. "*I observe this with great admiration and I hope that such rapid growth of the economic might will shortly also become the share of Poland and whole Central and Eastern Europe, and as a result will radiate on the rest of the EU*"²⁴⁸ - the lavishness of Duda's praise is unprecedented in the earlier discourse.

A strong pro-Chinese opening of Duda's presidency was positively assessed by some Polish experts. Szczudlik was quoted in a PAP press release saying that "*we have shown the Chinese that after the change of power in Poland we will continue the policy of tightening political and economic relations with the PRC.*" Szczudlik has also noted that the BRI is paramount from the Chinese viewpoint, which is why it was the right choice on the part of the President to firmly declare Poland's will to participate in it.²⁴⁹

In the Information of the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy for the year 2016 the 16+1 framework is mentioned on a par with the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which could "*bring Poland substantial profits through the operation of the goods exchange between Europe and Asia as well as the influx of investments*". Specifically referred to in the

²⁴⁷ Nocuń, K. "Chiny/ Duda: kraje Europy Środk.-Wsch. potrafią działać razem (opis)" [China / Duda: countries of Central and Eastern Europe are able to work together], Polish Press Agency, 24 November 2015.

²⁴⁸ K. Nocuń, "Prezydent Duda o partnerstwie z Chinami ws. "Jednego Pasa i Jednego Szlaku"" [President Duda on the partnership with China within "One Belt and One Road."], Polish Press Agency, 24 November 2015.

²⁴⁹ Osiński, Ł. "Eksperti: wizyta prezydenta w Chinach w dobrym momencie; nacisk na gospodarkę" (Experts: President's visit to China at the right time; emphasis on the economy), Polish Press Agency, 27 November 2015.

Tasks are also the planned visit of the Foreign Minister to China, and the visit of the President of the PRC in Poland.²⁵⁰

The first visit of the Polish Foreign Minister - a function by the time assumed by Witold Waszczykowski - to Beijing in May 2016 and his meeting with Wang Yi (王毅) was reflected in PAP press releases rather casually; Waszczykowski is reported to have raised the perennial question of trade imbalance,²⁵¹ and to have stated during the meeting that *“Poland is an important country in the region, and a strategic partner for China. It remains China’s largest trading partner in the region of Central Eastern Europe”*.²⁵² A laconic reference to the 16+1 was also included in the speech of the Minister of Agriculture Krzysztof Jurgiel, who paid an official visit to the PRC in May 2016.²⁵³

An event that attracted the most intense PAP coverage and rendered 2016 the year with the highest number of both China-related and 16+1-related press releases was PRC President Xi Jinping’s visit to Warsaw in June that year. Shortly before the arrival of Xi, Szczerki commented that the visit *“is a confirmation of the new opening in Sino-Polish relations that occurred the visit of the president Andrzej Duda in China in autumn of the previous year”*. Szczerki emphasized that Poland plays an essential role in the BRI project of land connection between China and Europe, and that it wishes to be China’s crucial partner in Central Europe.

²⁵⁴ The identical geopolitical goals were reiterated on the same occasion by Mateusz Morawiecki, at the time Deputy Prime Minister and the future Prime Minister of Poland, who

²⁵⁰W. Waszczykowski, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2016 roku.”, 20 January, 2016, at: <https://pap-mediaroom.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/msz-informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

²⁵¹ Kom, Ksi. “MSZ: wizyta ministra Waszczykowskiego w Pekinie (komunikat)” [MoFA: Minister Waszczykowski's visit to Beijing], Polish Press Agency, 26 April 2016.

²⁵² A. Borowiak, “Waszczykowski w Pekinie: Xi odwiedzi Polskę, Szydło zaproszona do Chin (aktl.)” [Waszczykowski in Beijing: Xi will visit Poland, Szydło invited to China], Polish Press Agency, 27 April 2016.

²⁵³ Awy, Par. “Rozmowy w Pekinie, Polska liczy na dalszą współpracę w dziedzinie rolnictwa” [Talks in Beijing, Poland counts on further cooperation in the field of agriculture], Polish Press Agency, 4 May 2016.

²⁵⁴Kno, Mce, Mok, Mag. “Prezydent Chin złoży oficjalną wizytę w Polsce” [The President of China will pay an official visit to Poland], Polish Press Agency, 18 June 2016.

also added that in terms of trade China is the largest Asian partner of Poland, and Poland is the largest CEE partner of China.²⁵⁵

Two additional events organized on the occasion of Xi Jinping's visit to Warsaw were the elevation of the existing Sino-Polish strategic partnership to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership and the International New Silk Road Forum. The official founding declarations of the Sino-Polish comprehensive strategic partnership were featured at length in a PAP press release, among which significant is the emphasis on the primacy of China-EU framework: *“the cooperation of the CEE states with China creates an effect of synergy with important initiatives of the European Union and contributes to the EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership.”*²⁵⁶ In the context of the International New Silk Road Forum, President Duda is quoted to have once again employed the “gateway to Europe” metaphor, expressing the hope that *“Poland shall become China's gateway to Europe, not only in a symbolic sense, but mainly in the actual economic sense.”*²⁵⁷

An interesting view was presented by Bartłomiej Pawlak, the director of the Polish Agency of Information and Foreign Investment, in an interview with the PAP: *“it is only the [functioning of the] 16+1 group (...) and the last 10 years that are characterized by more attention given to the mutual relations [between Poland and China], delayed relations being built, and the lost time being made up for. Perhaps this is the reason for the lack of spectacular Chinese investment in Poland”.*²⁵⁸ Significantly, Pawlak attributed *“the lack of spectacular*

²⁵⁵Jzi, Mhr, Malk. “Morawiecki: Polska chce uczestniczyć w realizacji projektu Nowego Jedwabnego Szlaku (aktl.)” [Morawiecki: Poland wants to participate in the implementation of the New Silk Road project], Polish Press Agency, 18 June 2016.

²⁵⁶Par. “Wspólne oświadczenie w sprawie ustanowienia wszechstronnego strategicznego partnerstwa między RP a ChRL (dokumentacja)” [Joint declaration on establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership between the Republic of Poland and the PRC], Polish Press Agency, 20 June 2016.

²⁵⁷Kno, Eaw, Woj. “Prezydent: mam nadzieję, że Polska stanie się bramą Chin do Europy (opis)” [President: I hope that Poland will become China's gateway to Europe], Polish Press Agency, 20 June 2016 (the bold font added by the author).

²⁵⁸Zab, Mag. “Prezes PAIiIZ: wizyta Xi przysłuży się też gospodarczej promocji Polski w Chinach” [PAIiIZ president: Xi's visit will also contribute to the economic promotion of Poland in China], Polish Press Agency, 18 June 2016.

Chinese investment” in Poland to the alleged slowness in the intensification of Sino-Polish cooperation. It is unclear from Pawlak’s remarks what exactly would be the schedule according to which PRC and Poland were “*delayed*” and “*making up for the lost time*”; it is however quite telling that the expert felt compelled to provide an explanation for underperformance of the cooperation between the countries. Such an opinion can be seen as a harbinger of the re-evaluation of 16+1 on the part of Poland that was to ensue in the upcoming years.

Both the questions of unbalanced trade and Poland’s aspirations to play a crucial role in the BRI were brought up by Foreign Minister Waszczykowski during Sino-Polish talks held in Warsaw in September 2016.²⁵⁹ In October, Minister of Education Jarosław Gowin visited China, where he held talks concerning perspectives of the Chinese cooperation “*with Polish scientists in the fields of power engineering, technological research, agriculture studies and environment protection*”. Gowin stated on this occasion that Sino-Polish relations are enjoying the “*unprecedented fruitfulness*”, and expressed his astonishment at the “*degree of interest*” with which China approaches the cooperation in Poland.²⁶⁰

However, much more extensively covered in the information released by the PAP was the 5th 16+1 Summit held in Riga in November 2016. Before the commencement of the meeting, Prime Minister Beata Szydło said that “*the Summit is an opportunity to exhibit the unity of the region of Central Eastern Europe*”,²⁶¹ which can be seen as a continuation of “heterogeneous unity” rhetoric employed earlier by Duda. During the Summit Szydło emphasized the importance that Poland attaches to communication and infrastructure, saying that “*we want to mutually engage in the construction of transportation, sea and rail projects.*

²⁵⁹ Kom, Pd. “MSZ: polsko-chińskie konsultacje w Warszawie (komunikat)” [MoFA: Polish-Chinese consultations in Warsaw], Polish Press Agency, 27 September 2016

²⁶⁰ Kom, Mz. “Gowin: Chińczycy liczą na współpracę z polskimi naukowcami m.in. w energetyce i rolnictwie (aktl.)” [Gowin: The Chinese count on cooperation with Polish scientists in the fields of energy and agriculture, among others], Polish Press Agency, 18 October 2016 (the bold font added by the author).

²⁶¹ Mce, Tgo, Woj. “Premier: Wiążemy duże nadzieje z rozwojem współpracy gospodarczej z Chinami (krótka)” [Prime Minister: We attach high hopes to the development of economic cooperation with China], Polish Press Agency, 5 November 2016.

*We are prepared to do that and we will be issuing such propositions.*²⁶² Significant in the light of Poland's focus on infrastructure was the establishment of the Coordinating Secretariat for Maritime Issues in Poland, a fact also covered in a PAP dispatch.²⁶³

To recapitulate, in most aspects the years 2015 and 2016 can be seen as a culmination of the optimism about the 16+1 framework already building up during the earlier years. The designations of both "16+1" and the "BRI" (including "OBOR" and "New Silk Roads") became firmly embedded in the political discourse contained in the analyzed material, and the constant appeals for a more balanced trade exchange with China aside, the portrayal of the Sino-Polish cooperation in the years 2015-2016 is overwhelmingly positive. Several strands of the official Polish narrative that can be identified from the corpus of PAP press releases from these years, two of which deserve particular attention. The first one is the BRI-related narrative of "China's gateway to Europe", presenting Poland as an obvious transportation hub in overland trade routes connecting China and Europe and an assured economic beneficiary of such a position. Such a view by extension presents Poland's participation in the BRI as a golden remedy for the trade deficit with China, apparently oblivious of the fact that the Chengdu-Łódź freight train connection has been facilitating a fundamentally unbalanced exchange with large influx of PRC goods and minimal outflow of Polish products (see section 3.2.2, pp. 93-96). Another conspicuous thread is the narrative of the "unity in heterogeneity" of CEE countries, which can be interpreted as a reaction to the inherent problem of 16+1 signaled early on in the academic discourse - the lack of a common denominator, internal differences and divisions among the CEE16 group.

²⁶²Mce, Tgo, Woj. "Premier: Wiążemy duże nadzieje z rozwojem współpracy gospodarczej z Chinami (krótka)" [Prime Minister: We attach high hopes to the development of economic cooperation with China], Polish Press Agency, 5 November 2016. The emphasis on infrastructure projects is likewise expressed by the Polish government's spokesperson, Rafał Bochenek, in his comments regarding the Riga Summit. See Tgo, Par. "Premier Szydło udaje się do Rygi na szczyt Chiny-Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia" [Prime Minister Szydło travels to Riga for the China-Central and Eastern Europe summit], Polish Press Agency, 3 November 2016.

²⁶³Grodecki, T. "Bochenek: w Polsce powstanie sekretariat ds. morskich grupy 16+1" [Bochenek: a 16 + 1 maritime secretariat will be established in Poland], Polish Press Agency, 5 November 2016.

4.2.4 2017-2019: Disappointing reality

In the beginning of 2017, Priorities of the Polish foreign policy 2017-2021 have been approved by the Council of Ministers. In comparison to the document published in 2012, this 4-year foreign policy plan referred to China in a much more extensive way, especially in terms of regional cooperation. According to the Priorities, “*by occupying a special location at the junction of Central Europe and the Baltic and Carpathian regions, Poland can play a special role in initiating cooperation between these areas*”; cooperation with China is then mentioned as one of the possible aspects of the regional development: “*in the years 2017-2020, cooperation with China under the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative may become a factor conducive to the implementation of these and other similar projects*”. What is also worth mentioning is that among many goals set by the Priorities, one is to “*look for opportunities to cooperate with non-European partners, especially with the People's Republic of China, in the implementation of infrastructure projects in our region.*”²⁶⁴ One can see that five years after the establishment of 16+1 and an apparent intensification of Sino-Polish relations, the Polish government is still exploring possible ways of cooperation. The specific wording is of significance here: China is still considered as an important Asian partner, but at the same time is presented as a potential “conducive factor” for the implementation of regional projects rather than an economic ally in its own right.

In February 2017, the annually-released Tasks of foreign policy were presented by Minister Waszczykowski. The cooperation with China is described there as a “*permanent element of Polish foreign policy*”, and an emphasis is placed on economic cooperation blooming specifically due to the visits on the highest level of President Andrzej Duda in China in 2015 and President Xi Jinping in Poland in 2016. Waszczykowski stated that the Polish side

²⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Priorytety Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2017-2021.”, March, 2017, at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/strategia> (last accessed on 15 May 2022).

wants to take advantage of the favorable atmosphere surrounding Sino-Polish relations in the previous year and “counts on further development of cooperation in the 16+1 framework”.²⁶⁵

The reality, however, did not live up to high hopes and promises. A PAP release quoted an article by the Polish daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* from April 2017, which referred to the meager level of Chinese investments in Poland in general, and Chinese companies’ preference of buyouts over greenfield investments in particular. In the article one can read that “*projects worth hundreds of millions of zlotys (PLN) can be counted on one’s fingers. Until mid-2016, the value of cumulative Chinese investments in Poland amounted to only EUR 462 million, while three-times smaller Hungary attracted EUR 2.1 billion [worth of Chinese investments], and two-times smaller Romania - EUR 741 million.*”²⁶⁶ Such a sobering portion of data showing Poland ranking behind smaller Hungary and Romania in terms of Chinese investment (especially of the greenfield type) contrasts significantly with the government’s depictions of Poland as an economic leader of the CEE region, although similar impatience gradually surfaces also in the comments of government officials. Tomasz Pisula, the former director of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency, noticed the one-sidedness of the Chengdu-Łódź railway freight, commenting that the BRI “*should work both ways. For now, the trains that come to Poland from China often return the other way empty. (...) We also have goods that we could sell to the Chinese people.*”²⁶⁷ His remarks were given before Premier Beata Szydło visited China to take part in the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 - Szydło was one of the 29 foreign heads of state and government representatives who attended that forum. The Premier

²⁶⁵W. Waszczykowski, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2017 roku.”, 9 February, 2017, at: https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-zagraniczna-ue/press_release/minister-witold-waszczykowski-o-priorytetach-polskiej-dyplomacji-w-2017-roku/ (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

²⁶⁶Mmi. “Rzeczpospolita: Chińczyków u nas na lekarstwo” [Rzeczpospolita: There are hardly any Chinese here], Polish Press Agency, 18 April 2017.

²⁶⁷Mce, Par. “Pisula o Nowym Jedwabnym Szlaku: Polska po raz pierwszy ma szansę zyskać na swoim położeniu (wideo)” [Pisula on the New Silk Road: For the first time, Poland has a chance to benefit from its location], Polish Press Agency, 11 May 2017.

herself considered this event as an opportunity to deepen bilateral “*economic cooperation with China*”.²⁶⁸

The necessity of corrections in the functioning of the 16+1 framework, including the cooperation between Poland and China, was also mentioned by Deputy Minister of Development Paweł Choraży right before the China-CEE Development Forum in September 2017. Choraży stated that “*it cannot be ignored that we should make some adjustments in this area, so that this cooperation can, without a doubt, be called a win-win relationship.*” According to Choraży, the win-win strategy should include balancing inputs and profits of both sides - “*only undertakings based on balanced involvement of partners give the weaker partner a chance for growth, and the stronger one - a fair profit.*”²⁶⁹ Before the 16+1 Summit in Budapest in 2017, Polish politicians again voiced their concerns regarding the actual effectiveness of the framework. The government spokesperson Rafał Bochenek indicated that Poland is “*committed to specific actions that will contribute to the development of economic cooperation, which will be beneficial for both parties in the long term*”. Beata Szydło also stressed that despite high ambitions, the possibilities of building an economic partnership between China and CEE based on the principle of mutual benefit were not fully taken advantage of. The Prime Minister pointed also to the question of trade: “*currently, our entire region is struggling with a large trade deficit in its relations with China. Disproportions are partly inevitable due to structural factors, but partly result also from the unequal access to markets*”. Szydło indicated that despite the fact of the 16+1 framework having created financial opportunities for investments in the region, these opportunities were not “*adapted to the realities of individual countries*”, and specifically that “*the offered credit lines should take into account different needs of states, differences in their internal regulations, as well as the*

²⁶⁸Cedro, M. “Szydło: Polska jest postrzegana przez Chiny jako brama do UE (opis)” [Szydło: Poland is perceived by China as the gateway to the EU], Polish Press Agency, 12 May 2017.

²⁶⁹Jarco, J. “Choraży: Polska i Chiny dokonują nowego otwarcia w stosunkach dwustronnych” [Choraży: Poland and China make a new opening in bilateral relations], Polish Press Agency, 15 September 2017.

regulations of the European Union.²⁷⁰ Deputy Minister Mateusz Morawiecki made similar remarks, commenting that “**with no other country does Poland have as unbalanced trade relations as with China.** (...) We have a relationship of 12:1 [in favor of China]. We import goods from China for 24 billion dollars, and we export for two billion dollars.” Morawiecki also added that despite the partial opening, entrepreneurs reported to him that China was still an “*extremely difficult, extremely closed, extremely hermetic market.*”²⁷¹

While analyzing the stance of Polish government officials in 2017, we can also notice one important development - the Polish side is starting to entertain the idea that regional cooperation of Central Eastern Europe should not be China-exclusive. In an interview with the PAP, Foreign Minister Waszczykowski mentioned that during the talks with American officials he had indicated that “*the broadest framework of cooperation in the region is 16 with China. It is not, however, stated that in the 16+1 framework, the ‘1’ must always be China. If there is an offer of economic cooperation is as good as the Chinese one, we can also engage in cooperation with the USA in the region.*”²⁷² We can clearly see that although the Poland was still actively interested in the cooperation with China at that point (see figure 9), and the ratio of 16+1-related press releases to China-related ones was still relatively high (30 releases out of 72), Polish politicians frequently pointed to the imperfections of the framework.

The issue of trade deficit with the PRC features also in The Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy for 2018, (for the first time since 2014 not mentioning 16+1) which indicate that in spite of the PRC being the largest Asian partner of Poland, with relatively good

²⁷⁰M. Cedro, “Szydło: Polska natrafia na utrudnienia w dostępie do rynku chińskiego (opis)” [Szydło: Poland faces difficulties in accessing the Chinese market], Polish Press Agency, 27 November 2017.

²⁷¹Musiał, M. “Morawiecki: Chcemy wykorzystać potencjał Bałtyku w handlu z Chinami (opis)” [Morawiecki: We want to utilize the potential of the Baltic Sea in trade with China], Polish Press Agency, 23 November 2017 (the bold font added by the author).

²⁷²M. Cedro, “Szef MSZ dla PAP: liczymy, że prezydent Trump odniesie się do kwestii obecności wojsk amerykańskich w Polsce” [The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the PAP: we hope that President Trump will refer to the issue of the presence of American troops in Poland], Polish Press Agency, 30 June 2017 (the bold font added by the author).

trade turnover, and despite the growing satisfaction with Poland's promising geographic position in the transport of goods between China and Europe, *“the challenge in cooperation with China will be reducing the deep trade deficit.”*²⁷³ Such an attitude was displayed also by Deputy Minister Jarosław Gowin who, while attending the 16+1 summit in Sofia, mentioned that the framework is facing an important test of effectiveness as a mechanism serving the interests of all its members: *“it is about the way in which it [16+1] will address the greatest challenge in our cooperation, i.e. the problem of the trade deficit between Central and Eastern Europe and China”*.²⁷⁴ The Deputy Minister remarked also that *“for now, one is winning much more than the other”*.²⁷⁵ In another release, Gowin is quoted to have suggested that *“some areas probably require corrections, so it is worth working on improving and increasing the effectiveness of this cooperation platform with tangible benefits for all members”*. Gowin also mentioned that for Polish regional policies, 16 + 1 framework *“may be one of the instruments”* of building greater cohesion, along with the Visegrád Group or the Three Seas Initiative, but at the same time *“it is important that the cooperation is transparent and is consistent with the values and principles of the EU.”*²⁷⁶ According to yet another dispatch, the Deputy Minister indicated that from the Polish perspective *“the Sino-Polish bilateral relations are as important as the 16+1 framework, and we will certainly emphasize the bilateral relations”*.²⁷⁷

The analysis of PAP's press releases also reveals a new factor within Sino-Polish cooperation: the role of the USA and the security of the CEE region, highly dependent on the Transatlantic Alliance. Prime Minister Morawiecki, referring to Poland's position on the

²⁷³J. Czaputowicz, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2018 roku.”, 21 March, 2018, at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/expose-2018> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

²⁷⁴Manołowa, E. “Na szczycie "16+1" Chiny zapewniły o otwartości swego rynku” [At the "16 +1" summit, China declared the openness of its market], Polish Press Agency, 7 July 2018.

²⁷⁵Chomiuk, M. “Gowin: rolą naszego rządu jest walka o interesy polskich przedsiębiorców” [Gowin: The role of our government is to fight for the interests of Polish entrepreneurs], Polish Press Agency, 7 July 2018.

²⁷⁶Manołowa, E. “Na szczycie "16+1" Chiny zapewniły o otwartości swego rynku” [At the "16 +1" summit, China declared the openness of its market], Polish Press Agency, 7 July 2018.

²⁷⁷Chomiuk, M. “Gowin: rolą naszego rządu jest walka o interesy polskich przedsiębiorców” [Gowin: The role of our government is to fight for the interests of Polish entrepreneurs], Polish Press Agency, 7 July 2018.

intensification of animosities between the US and China and the trade war waged early during the Trump administration, made a strong statement that Poland, if necessary, would stand on the American side: “*we would like to have a peaceful relationship with everyone, including Russia and China, but we see problems on their side, on the side of China and Russia, rather than the United States.*” In Morawiecki's opinion, “*no matter what we think of a peaceful and beautiful China, it is a country that challenges the free world of democracy and the Transatlantic Alliance.*”²⁷⁸

Together with rising concerns and lack of concrete measures that could address the existing and frequently signaled problems of the framework, the amount of PAP-released information referring both to China in general and specifically to 16+1 dropped significantly in 2018 (see figure 9). Issues outlined above could be the reason for the diminishing interest in the 16+1 framework, as well as in the Sino-Polish cooperation in general. This trend carries on into 2019 - the Information on the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy for 2019 makes only a marginal reference to Sino-Polish relations, expressing a hope that the Polish Investment and Trade Agency would “*contribute to the improvement of the trade balance in bilateral relations*” between Poland and the PRC. The 16+1 framework is left unmentioned for the second time in a row.²⁷⁹

Following the developments of 2018, voices acknowledging the US importance in the CEE region grew louder in 2019. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was quoted saying after meeting with Polish Minister of Affairs Jacek Czaputowicz that lack of direct contacts between some CEE states and the US had created “*a vacuum that Russia and China are trying to exploit,*” and that his (Pompeo's) visit ought to show that the US is still engaged in cooperation with the

²⁷⁸Kozłowska, M. “Morawiecki: Polska jest jednocześnie proamerykańska i proeuropejska (opis)” [Morawiecki: Poland is pro-American and pro-European at the same time], Polish Press Agency, 17 November 2018.

²⁷⁹J. Czaputowicz, “Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych o założeniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2019 roku.”, 14 March, 2019, at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-w-2019-roku> (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

region.²⁸⁰ At the same time, suspicions began to gather around the Chinese involvement in communication technologies abroad. The 5G network construction by Chinese companies became one of the focal points of the related discourse; Polish Foreign Minister Czaputowicz remarked that the “*European Union is open to investments, also from outside the EU (...), but on the other hand, the security issues we are talking about here will certainly influence decisions in this regard.*”²⁸¹ This statement came shortly after one of the most serious setbacks to Sino-Polish relations, when in January 2019 a director of the Polish branch of Huawei (one of the main bidders for the 5G network construction in Poland) Wang Weijing and a former officer of the Polish secret services (Internal Security Agency) were both accused of espionage for the People's Republic of China and of intelligence activities detrimental to Poland's national interests. Here the information released by PAP also provides a good reference, with a significant number of 16 dispatches from 2019 referring directly to the espionage scandal and the possible exclusion of Huawei from Polish telecommunication network tenders. US officials on many occasions publicly mentioned that Chinese technologies in the region can weigh in on the US commitment to these countries, at the same time thanking Poland for the assistance “*in efforts to defend the US telecommunications sector against China*”.²⁸²

Just two months after the news about the spy scandal had occupied the first pages of Polish newspapers, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki took part in the 16+1 summit in Dubrovnik, where he again mentioned that Poland is particularly interested in increasing exports to China due to a “*huge imbalance*”.²⁸³ Morawiecki also indicated that while willing

²⁸⁰Kozłowska, M. “Czaputowicz i Pompeo: mamy zbieżne interesy bezpieczeństwa; USA wspierają Europę Środkowo-Wschodnią (opis)” [Czaputowicz and Pompeo: we have convergent security interests; The US supports Central and Eastern Europe], Polish Press Agency, 12 February 2019.

²⁸¹Anb, Kar. “Ambasada ChRL potępia komentarze urzędników USA ws. chińskich firm” [The PRC Embassy condemns comments from US officials regarding Chinese companies], Polish Press Agency, 14 February 2019.

²⁸²Ibid.

²⁸³Roszak, M. and Kozłowska, M. “Premier: zależy nam na otwarciu chińskiego rynku na eksport polskiej wieprzowiny” [Prime Minister: we want to open the Chinese market to the export of Polish pork], Polish Press Agency, 12 April 2019.

to welcome Chinese investors, Poland's experience is not especially positive in this regard, referring to the failed COVEC project (see section 3.1.1, pp. 87-89). The Prime Minister commented that *“during the talks with Chinese partners, we indicated that there must be guarantees of the proper implementation of infrastructure investments.”*²⁸⁴ Foreign Minister Czaputowicz, after the meeting with Wang Yi in Warsaw in July 2019, pointed out in the same vein that *“the asymmetry sustained by Poland in trade with China concerns most EU member states. We want to seek an agreement together to bring about balance”*. Czaputowicz also mentioned that China *“is investing a lot in Europe, while only 5 percent of these investments are in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.”*²⁸⁵ Similarly, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Maciej Lang before the 10th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting remarked that, while Poland maintains its active and constructive role in 16+1, the framework itself is understood by the Polish side as *“as a complement to bilateral relations and an element of wider EU-China relations”*, as well as that the *“meeting should be an opportunity to review the mechanisms of dialogue and develop new areas of cooperation.”*²⁸⁶

To sum up, in the years 2017-2019, Polish officials became noticeably less optimistic about the 16+1 framework. Problems of the initiative were mentioned more frequently, among which the enormous trade imbalance and almost non-existent Chinese FDI projects are presented as the main impediments. It was also repeated more often that the cornerstone assumptions of 16+1 require adjustments and improvements, and need to be adapted to the realities of individual countries of the region. However, many politicians also indicate that if these issues were addressed, 16+1 could become an effective and mutually beneficial

²⁸⁴M. Roszak, 12 April 2019., “Morawiecki: premier Chin obiecał działania na rzecz zrównoważonego handlu (opis)”, Polish Press Agency, 12 April 2019.

²⁸⁵M. Kozłowska, “Czaputowicz: wyzwaniem w relacjach polsko-chińskich brak zrównoważonej współpracy gospodarczej (opis)” [Czaputowicz: the lack of sustainable economic cooperation a challenge in Polish-Chinese relations], Polish Press Agency, 8 July 2019.

²⁸⁶Kom, Skib, Wus. “MSZ: Wiceminister Maciej Lang na spotkaniu Narodowych Koordynatorów współpracy Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia – Chiny (komunikat)” [MoFA: Deputy Minister Maciej Lang at the meeting of National Coordinators of Central and Eastern Europe - China cooperation], Polish Press Agency, 29 October 2019.

cooperation platform with the PRC. At the same time, Polish officials emphasize the primacy of bilateral cooperation, with regard to which 16+1 plays the role of a supporting framework. In 2019, Sino-Polish relations suffered a serious setback due to the Huawei espionage case; consequently, the Polish government grew unwilling to allow the Chinese companies into the crucial 5G and telecommunication sector, a reconsideration representative of current regional tendencies and influenced by the US factor. The case of Huawei does nonetheless show the importance attached by the Polish government to security issues.

Two analyses by PISM experts, Przychodniak and Szczudlik, may be cited here in support of the author's findings. Przychodniak indicates that “*the initiative still serves as a tool to support Chinese interests in bilateral relations with separate CEE countries, rather than as a forum to accomplish common goals and projects,*” and that the results of the 16+1 framework economic cooperation are “*insignificant*”.²⁸⁷ Szczudlik notices that Poland's skepticism about initiative is on the rise, with an interesting note that participation in the framework “*allows tracking the Chinese proposals and preventing initiatives unfavorable to Poland and the EU.*”²⁸⁸ Poland's participation in 16+1 as a form of “scouting” and “neutralizing” potential hazards to “*Poland and the EU*” is indeed a far cry from the initial portrayals of the framework as a promising diversification from the overdependence on the European Union.

²⁸⁷M. Przychodniak, “The 16+1 Initiative and Challenges for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”, *Bulletin*, Polish Institute of Foreign Relations, 121 (1061), 5 December 2017, pp. 2.

²⁸⁸J. Szczudlik, “Prospects for CEE-China Relations after the Sofia Summit”, *Bulletin*, Polish Institute of Foreign Relations, 91 (1162), 17 July 2018, pp. 2.

4.2.5 2020-2021: Shifting priorities

It has already been mentioned before that due to the impact of the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021 the Foreign Minister's exposés about the Tasks of the Polish Foreign Policy were either canceled or not presented publicly in the Sejm, which is the reason for their absence from the present analysis. The presentation of Tasks was not the only event called off in the face of COVID-19; in 2020, for the first time in 16+1 history, the annual summit was delayed as well. Consequently, Poland has almost entirely shifted the focus of its foreign strategies, concentrating on halting the pandemic within the country, and providing its citizens with necessary medical equipment and support - these efforts involved also the diplomatic work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since the early months of the pandemic, Polish authorities have been communicating with their Chinese counterparts, including the president Duda's supportive letter to Xi Jinping in early February, as well as talks with the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw in February and March regarding the exchange of experience in the fight against COVID. The Chinese side decided to donate medical equipment and tests to Poland.²⁸⁹ In March 2020, President Duda spoke on the phone with Chinese President, declaring Poland's willingness to purchase medical supplies, direly needed in Europe, which was at the time unprepared for the pandemic.²⁹⁰ This soon led to the opening of the "air bridge" between the countries.²⁹¹ In April, Ukrainian Antonov An-225 Mriya, at that time the largest cargo aircraft in the world, landed in Poland, bringing almost 80 tons of medical equipment from China.²⁹²

²⁸⁹Kuźniar, A. "MSZ/ Minister Jacek Czaputowicz rozmawiał z ambasadorem ChRL w Warszawie" [MoFA / Minister Jacek Czaputowicz spoke with the ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Warsaw], Polish Press Agency, 17 March 2020.

²⁹⁰Bruszeński, G. "Prezydent: w czwartek pierwszy samolot z Chin z wyposażeniem medycznym wylądował w Polsce" [President: on Thursday, the first plane from China with medical equipment will land in Poland], Polish Press Agency, 25 March 2020.

²⁹¹Porycka, D. "Dworczyk: uruchamiamy most powietrzny z Chinami, który będzie przewoził towary do ochrony medycznej (opis)" [Dworczyk: we are launching an air bridge with China, which will transport goods for medical protection], Polish Press Agency, 26 March 2020.

²⁹²Oksiuta, A. "Z Warszawy odleciał największy samolot świata, który we wtorek dostarczył sprzęt medyczny" [The world's largest plane, having delivered medical equipment on Tuesday, left from Warsaw], Polish Press Agency, 15 April 2020.

The interest in COVID-related cooperation is reflected in the number of dispatches regarding this topic, with 25 dispatches (out of 42 China-related) referring to the exchanges in medical equipment and medical knowledge. However, the enthusiasm on the Polish side was rather short-lived, as the Polish media were soon flooded with investigative reports about lack of required certificates for some of the purchased equipment (including those transported in the Antonov), resulting in the overall public distaste - the exact ratio of faulty (non-certified) products among the supplies received from China is remains unknown. As Director of the Governmental Agency for Strategic Reserves Michał Kuczmierowski tried to explain, *“purchases of medical supplies were carried out under enormous pressure, and the decisions were made in good faith after prior verification of the supplier.”* According to Kuczmierowski, the equipment without required certification was withdrawn from distribution.²⁹³

At the same time, the topic of Huawei was again current in the political discourse, with Prime Minister Morawiecki openly saying that new forms of cooperation in the communications sector could counterbalance China’s influence: *“I would like to mention the Weimar Triangle, within which we cooperate with Germany and France. In our opinion, this is the future. As the EU, we can become stronger if we work together more closely. Let's take the development of the 5G network. I would rather expand it with Germany and France than with Huawei. We are very determined here, a year ago we arrested two Chinese spies who worked for Huawei”*²⁹⁴. On another occasion, Morawiecki argued that Europe must continue its alliance with the US, especially in the technological dimension, and that failure to secure key technology sectors would be a mistake for which *“Europeans would have to pay a heavy*

²⁹³Reb. Joz. “Prezes ARM dla "DGP": Zakupy środków medycznych realizowane były pod olbrzymią presją” [President of ARM for "DGP": Purchases of medical supplies were carried out under an enormous pressure], Polish Press Agency, 20 May, 2020.

²⁹⁴ Par. “Morawiecki dla "Die Welt": Polska chce nadrobić to, co już zrobiono gdzie indziej (wywiad, dokumentacja)” [Morawiecki for "Die Welt": Poland wants to make up for what has already been done elsewhere], Polish Press Agency, 11 January, 2020.

price,” due to the “*undesirable influence of authoritarian nations at the expense of Europe.*”²⁹⁵

All of these statements are clearly directed against Chinese investments in the 5G sector. Such palpable anti-Huawei sentiment translated into political action when the Polish government began to prepare amendments to the provisions of the National Cybersecurity System that could effectively lead to the exclusion of Chinese companies from the construction of telecommunications infrastructure in Poland.²⁹⁶

In October 2020, Poland was also one of 39 countries that appealed to China at the forum of the United Nations to respect human rights and voiced their shared concern over worsening human rights situations in the China’s Xinjiang autonomous region and Hong Kong special administrative region, precipitated by the policies of the PRC. This international appeal was subsequently criticized by China as “*politicization of human rights issues.*”²⁹⁷ Poland’s participation in the appeal is significant, as during preceding years such ethical concerns were largely shelved aside in Polish political discourse on China, overshadowed by the conciliatory rhetoric concentrated on economic cooperation.

In 2021, the topic of 16+1 reemerged in the PAP-released information. Compared to the years 2018-2020, when the framework faced decreasing coverage, the author noticed a growth of interest in 2021, with 20 out of 47 China-related releases referring directly to 16+1.

After a year-long break, the 2021 16+1 summit was held online, with President Andrzej Duda representing Poland. It was the second time that the president joined the 16+1 summit, after the one held in 2015 in Suzhou. As Secretary of State Krzysztof Szczerski declared before

²⁹⁵Niedziński, B. “Morawiecki w "Daily Telegraph": w kwestii 5G cała Europa musi stać razem z USA” [Morawiecki in the "Daily Telegraph": in the matter of 5G, all Europe must stand together with the USA], Polish Press Agency, 16 July, 2020.

²⁹⁶Ł. Osiński, “Polskie władze: propozycje przepisów ws. bezpieczeństwa 5G są zgodne z prawem UE” [Polish authorities: the proposed 5G security regulations are in line with the EU law], Polish Press Agency, 2 November, 2020.

²⁹⁷Borowiak, A. “Na forum ONZ 39 państw wezwało ChRL do szanowania praw człowieka i autonomii Hongkongu” [On the UN forum 39 states call on the PRC to respect human rights and Hong Kong autonomy], Polish Press Agency, 7 October, 2020.

the meeting, the President's attendance is guided by *"the principle that nothing important in Central and Eastern Europe can happen without the participation of Poland."*²⁹⁸ Szczerki also indicated that while the bilateral cooperation is the primary focus of the government, Polish goals include also *"regional cooperation, gaining some regional synergy, especially in terms of trade and economic recovery after the coronavirus pandemic."* The bilateral cooperation was specifically emphasized by Szczerki, who additionally mentioned that ***"each country, including Poland, has the right to an individual path to achieve its economic goals in relations with China and to establish the necessary conditions for doing so."***²⁹⁹ Such wording is quite significant, as it may indicate that 16+1 indeed has lost its significance as a forum of regional cooperation, and is seen by the Polish government only as a tool of enhancing bilateral cooperation. This is further supported by Duda's comment: *"I see this cooperation mechanism as an important platform for dialogue, complementing the channels of bilateral relations - which we continue to prioritize alongside EU-China relations as well as other regional cooperation formats."* Although the President acknowledged the pragmatic necessity of Poland's participation in the framework, at the same time he did not fail to mention its ineffectiveness: *"we still feel unsatisfied and we expect that cooperation within the 17+1 framework will start to bring more tangible and mutually beneficial results in the economic sphere - primarily in the form of China increasing imports of goods and services from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as a greater influx of Chinese greenfield investments."*³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸M. Zdiera, "Szczerki o szczycie 17+1: prezydent wezwie do otwarcia Chin na eksport z Polski" [Szczerki on the 17 + 1 summit: the president will call for China to be opened for exports from Poland], Polish Press Agency, 7 February 2021.

²⁹⁹M. Zdiera, "Szczerki o szczycie 17+1: prezydent wezwie do otwarcia Chin na eksport z Polski" [Szczerki on the 17 + 1 summit: the president will call for China to be opened for exports from Poland], Polish Press Agency, 7 February 2021 (the bold font added by the author).

³⁰⁰Dąbkowska-Pożyczka, S. "Prezydent: potrzeba szerszego otwarcia rynku chińskiego na polskie towary (opis)" [President: there is a need for a wider opening of the Chinese market to Polish goods], Polish Press Agency, 9 February 2021.

A balanced, but also essentially cautious outlook on the framework was presented by government's spokesperson Piotr Müller, who remarked that Poland and the EU should “*balance well in these [16+1] negotiations,*” and to take good care of “*the economic interests of Europe in good relations with the United States, but also in correct relations with China.*” Müller stated that Poland is “*open to economic cooperation with China, but it [the cooperation] must be fair and clear.*”³⁰¹

During the summit, Prime Minister Morawiecki again mentioned the trade imbalance as the main obstacle to the cooperation's effectiveness: “*imports from China are over 26 billion (dollars - PAP), and exports from Poland to China slightly below 3 billion (dollars - PAP). That is why we have been striving for years to at least reduce this gap. [...] Cooperation would be much better if we could propose or receive from our Chinese partners real instruments to improve this imbalance in international trade.*”³⁰² According to another PAP dispatch, the 2021 trade imbalance between Poland and the PRC broke the historic record,³⁰³ which clearly indicates that despite the government's efforts and China's assurances, essentially nothing has changed in the matter of Sino-Polish trade since the establishment of 16+1 nine years earlier. However, the pragmatic approach to the 16+1 framework is again seen in Morawiecki's words: “*Poland will be no less pragmatic than the US or France and is open to Chinese investments.*” At the same time, the Prime Minister still declared that Poland will stand together with the West in the face of threats from Beijing: “*we intend to be very coherent in a unified approach with regard to Huawei and some of the other threats from China. But these moves should be*

³⁰¹Ziemska, A. “Müller: jesteśmy otwarci na współpracę gospodarczą z Chinami” [Müller: We are open to economic cooperation with China], Polish Press Agency, 9 February 2021.

³⁰²Zdziera, M. “Morawiecki: mamy ogromny deficyt w handlu z Chinami” [Morawiecki: We have a huge trade deficit with China], Polish Press Agency, 9 February 2021.

³⁰³Ibid.

agreed on and undertaken jointly, or at least by the dominant countries. (...) Europe should agree on a common strategy towards China.”³⁰⁴

An issue indirectly related to 16+1 is also the Three Seas Initiative, initially launched by Polish and Croatian governments already in 2015. Its main goal being the promotion of the regional cooperation in infrastructure and transport, it significantly resembles 16+1 and the BRI, and almost entirely overlaps with the geographical scope of 16+1 - it has since comprised almost all CEE states. The Three Seas Initiative can be regarded as an attempt to counterbalance China’s influences in the region - such a perspective became explicitly articulated by Prime Minister Morawiecki in May 2021: *“We created the Three Seas Initiative to strengthen our identity and the strength of our economy vis-à-vis China.”* Morawiecki did not fail to mention that Poland expects larger involvement in this Initiative from the American side: *“Central Europe should be interesting for American investors and constitute a ‘gateway to the EU’ for them, especially in the period of economic recovery after the pandemic.”*³⁰⁵ Imagining Poland as the “gateway to the EU” for the US rather than China is reminiscent of the aforementioned statement by Foreign Minister Waszczykowski from June 2017 that the “1” in 16+1 must not necessarily be China.³⁰⁶ We can infer that as 16+1 lost popularity, the Three Seas Initiative came to be perceived as an alternative to the China-CEE framework.

To recapitulate, in 2020 and 2021 author has noticed the certain rapprochement between China and Poland. In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the delay of the 16+1 summit, the topic of 16+1 was virtually non-existent, although Sino-Polish relations did, for a brief

³⁰⁴Górzyński, O. “Polski premier w "Newsweeku": W sprawie Chin Polska będzie solidarna, ale pragmatyczna” [Polish Prime Minister in "Newsweek": On China, Poland will be solidarity, but pragmatic], Polish Press Agency, 9 February 2021.

³⁰⁵Obremski, M. “Premier Morawiecki o konieczności większego zaangażowania USA w Inicjatywę Trójmorza (opis)” [Prime Minister Morawiecki on the necessity for a greater US involvement in the Three Seas Initiative], Polish Press Agency, 6 May 2021.

³⁰⁶M. Cedro, “Szef MSZ dla PAP: liczymy, że prezydent Trump odniesie się do kwestii obecności wojsk amerykańskich w Polsce” [The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the PAP: we hope that President Trump will refer to the issue of the presence of American troops in Poland], Polish Press Agency, 30 June 2017.

moment, warm up due to the cooperation in the field pandemic prevention. In the year 2021, a renewed attention was devoted to the 16+1 framework, which was, however, perceived in the international context - the Polish government wished to use 16+1 as a tool of enhancing its bilateral cooperation with China, emphasizing that its stance will remain practical and that Poland will remain open for Chinese investments, while balancing its relations with the EU, US and the PRC. Government officials speak openly about the issues within the framework and lack of improvements during the last 9 years of its existence. In the author's view, the idea postulated by Szczudlik in a PISM analysis mentioned in the previous section can also be accurate - that the Polish government stance is interested in the participation in the 16+1 framework only (or mainly) to track the Chinese proposals and prevent initiatives unfavorable to Poland and the EU.³⁰⁷

Noteworthy here is also a relatively critical analysis presented by PISM's expert Przychodniak, who claimed that the 2021 Summit had demonstrated the lack of multilateral cooperation under the initiative, and that 16+1 is mainly an image-related platform and a communication channel utilized by the PRC. The mode of functioning of the framework will most likely result in the consolidation of China's bilateral cooperation with selected partners, mainly Hungary and Serbia, while in the eyes of other CEE states, including Poland, the absence of substantial economic results makes China's declarations unreliable.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷J. Szczudlik, "Prospects for CEE-China Relations after the Sofia Summit", *Bulletin*, Polish Institute of Foreign Relations, 91 (1162), 17 July 2018, p. 2.

³⁰⁸M. Przychodniak, "Szczyt 17+1: kryzys we współpracy Chin z Europą Środkową", Polish Institute of Foreign Relations, 10 February, 2021, at: https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Szczyt_171_kryzys_we_wspolpracy_Chin_%20z_Europa_Srodkowa (last accessed on 20 May 2022).

Conclusions

An important platform of cooperation between China and the CEE region, the 16+1 has featured prominently in the foreign policy of Poland. Concerned specifically with the effectiveness of 16+1 within the scope of Poland's participation in it, the author approached the research questions set out at the beginning of this thesis essentially in two steps.

The first step has been aimed at presenting the historical and social background object of the 16+1 framework along with the relevant scholarship. In the first chapter, Sino-European relations after 1989 and prior to the invention of 16+1 have been briefly accounted for. The second chapter has examined the structure and development of the 16+1 framework, including the academic insights on many issues relevant to China-CEE cooperation. In the third chapter, the author has outlined Sino-Polish relations before and during the 16+1 era. The second step, made in the fourth chapter, has been the analysis of the Polish political discourse on 16+1 as evidenced by the corpus of 219 relevant PAP press releases gathered from the decade of 2011-2021, supplemented by the documents of Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the so-called Tasks and Priorities) and commentaries published by PISM (the Polish Institute of International Affairs).

While the aforementioned first step - the presentation of the object of research along with its background and the relevant scholarship - has been necessary to conduct a meaningful discussion in the scope delineated by the research questions, the answers to these questions are derived mostly from the analysis presented in the fourth chapter. However, as the reader will see below, the findings can often be supported by or contrasted with the views of researchers referenced in the first three chapters. The conclusions presented may, hopefully, provide a reference point for the scholarship pertaining to the issues of both Sino-Polish relations and the 16+1 framework.

Based on the discussion and the analysis conducted above, the research questions can be answered in the following way:

(I) How has the Sino-Polish cooperation within the 16+1 framework developed over the years 2012-2021?

When put in a general historical perspective, the cooperation between China and Poland within the examined period is seen to have exhibited an unprecedented expansion and development, both economically and socio-politically. The invention of the 16+1, itself facilitated by trade, financial and investment vacua in the CEE region created by the impact of the financial crisis, has resulted in the significant increase in the Sino-Polish trade turnout, frequency of mutual official visits, bilateral and multilateral events, talks and general intensification in many forms of contact and exchange. The progressing institutionalization of 16+1 has engendered creation of relevant bodies within Polish government structures, such as the 16+1 Business Council situated at the Polish Investment and Trade Agency or the Coordinating Secretariat for Maritime Issues situated at the Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation. More importantly, the quick integration of 16+1 into the BRI framework brought about new emphasis on infrastructure projects, among which the most notable has been the Chengdu-Łódź freight train connection.

All of these developments were optimistically welcomed in the Polish political discourse, and became the subjects of increasingly extensive coverage in the examined sources. From frequent references to Poland as a leader in regional cooperation with the PRC in the statements of Polish officials it can be inferred that Sino-Polish bilateral relations became highly intertwined with the multilateral contexts of 16+1 and the Eurasian macro-dimension of the BRI. One could venture a statement that the 16+1 framework and the BRI became the driving force for the development of Sino-Polish bilateral relations - such an assumption seems

implicit in the commonplace “gateway to Europe” rhetoric deriving Poland’s importance from its geographical location relative to China and the West.

However, from around the beginning of 2017, the relevant political discourse began to reflect also the economic underperformance of 16+1. An increasingly frequent theme in the analyzed material is the disappointment with the low volume of Chinese greenfield FDI in Poland, underscored by the constant dissatisfaction with the trade deficit perennially sustained by the Polish side in its exchange with the PRC. Although the volume of trade increased manifold during the 16+1 era and specifically due to specific BRI-connected projects - mainly the Chengdu-Łódź connection - the asymmetry in trade has not changed. The 2019 Huawei espionage scandal and subsequent reconsideration of cybersecurity issues related to the presence of Chinese companies in Polish communication technology sector proved to be a serious setback to Sino-Polish cooperation. The earth-shaking impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, though difficult to precisely quantify with regard to Sino-Polish economic relations, has effectively interrupted the bilateral flow of both Poland-China cooperation and the activities of the 16+1 framework. The aggressive Chinese mask diplomacy coupled with the quality problems of medical supplies provided to Poland by the PRC have undoubtedly eroded the image of China in the eyes of the Polish public. Although there have been signs of apparent Sino-Polish renewed dialogue in 2021, such as president Duda participating - among the few CEE heads of state - in the last 16+1 summit held online, these activities, prone to different interpretations (see below), do not seem alter the general declining tendency in the Sino-Polish cooperation in recent years.

(II) What were the changes in Poland's stance towards the 16+1 framework?

When it comes to the attitude displayed by Polish government officials towards 16+1, the author has identified four periods characterized by the subsequent domination of different

views and moods regarding Poland's participation in the framework. The years 2012-2014 can be regarded as the period of "optimistic opening", when the actuality and importance of the 16+1 framework was slowly entering the Polish political discourse. The number of relevant press releases by the PAP grew annually, signifying the increasing popularity of Sino-Polish cooperation (a topic relatively marginal in the preceding years). Along with increasing enthusiasm towards 16+1 and the BRI, the Polish government remained invariably committed to portraying Poland as the regional leader in the CEE-China cooperation, sometimes even going as far as saying that the framework was "initiated" by Poland.

The years 2015-2016 mark the culmination of optimism and high expectations regarding the 16+1 framework, and from the sheer number of related press releases one can clearly see that the Sino-Polish cooperation has become an important topic in the political discourse. While Polish politicians still frequently emphasized the leading role of Poland in the CEE region's cooperation with China, one can identify a new tone in the Polish narrative, the one that describes CEE countries as a "unity in heterogeneity" - such wording was employed, for example, by President Duda in the context of Suzhou summit in 2015. Apparently, a realization of the inherent problem of the CEE group signaled early on in the scholarly discourse surrounding 16+1 (see section 2.3, pp. 56-58), such an oxymoronic figure of speech may nonetheless be taken also as an indication of Poland's attachment to the multilateral assumptions of the framework; simply speaking, if Poland aims to position itself as a leader of CEE, it should seek to present CEE as a unified group, capable of being led. Important from the economic viewpoint is also the "gateway to Europe" narrative, frequently employed by Polish government officials as a rationale for Poland's participation in the BRI and as a remedy to the ever-growing trade deficit.

In the years 2017-2019, the relevant political discourse reflected in the corpus of analyzed data confronts the disappointing reality of 16+1. Although the official line, presented,

for example, in the annual Tasks of Polish Foreign Policy was to maintain the cooperation with China, the emphasis and enthusiasm surrounding the Sino-Polish topic in earlier years are noticeably gone. In the corpus of analyzed PAP press releases, criticism of the framework's economic underperformance in terms of infrastructural investments, greenfield FDI and trade becomes markedly more common, with politicians directly referring to the need for corrections in the framework, as well as reviewing its mechanisms.

It is also important to note here that the present findings are in line with those of Lubina, who has analyzed the BRI-related discourse in Polish press and popular media (including Youtube channels). According to Lubina, the narrative presenting BRI as a “geopolitical chance” gave way to the one criticizing it as a “security threat” in autumn 2016 (see section 3.2.2, pp. 93-96), which is around the time - perhaps a month or two earlier - that the reservations towards both 16+1 and the BRI begin to be made their way into the political discourse analyzed above. This is however unsurprising in view of the fact that the popular and political discourses are interconnected, and that it would be difficult to definitely detach political statements from the popular sentiment.

The security-related criticism gained unprecedented momentum in the wake of the Huawei espionage scandal in January 2019, with a high ratio of press releases devoted to this subject. It is also important to note that the security threat narrative (manifest mostly in the cybersecurity and 5G-related scope) derives very much from the international factor of the Sino-American trade war and especially close relations between the cabinet of PiS and the Trump administration.

Similar factors can be identified behind the shifting attitudes of Poland towards 16+1 and China in the years 2020-2021. After the pandemic-induced pause in much of international interactions, in 2021, the Polish administration started to signal its apparent readiness to again approach the PRC. Bachulska has interpreted these actions in the Polish-American-European

context of the PiS government's attention-seeking maneuver rather than an actual token of renewed Sino-Polish friendship. However, in the author's view, the Secretary of State Szczerki's words uttered before the 16+1 summit in 2021 that "*nothing important in Central and Eastern Europe can happen without the participation of Poland*" are probably the best summary of Polish stance toward the framework in the last two years, clearly indicating that despite noticeable issues, Poland wants to be an active actor that can influence, perhaps even control the development of 16+1 in Europe. The Polish government does not want to be left out of the decision-making processes regarding the CEE-China cooperation, even if it has lost most of the initial optimism towards it. Another tendency visible from the corpus of examined dispatches is that the multilateral dimension and the regional perspective are no longer important in the Polish political discourse surrounding the 16+1 framework, which is seen only as a tool of improving Poland's bilateral relations with China.

(III) Does Poland consider 16+1 as an effective partnership?

Based on the examined data, the author can conclude that after the initial years of optimism and enthusiasm, Poland no longer considers the 16+1 as an especially effective framework, at least insofar as Poland's cooperation with China is considered an integral part of it. Even in the view of the recent apparent rapprochement, the basic economic problems continuously pointed out by Polish officials - soaring trade deficit and low involvement of China in the greenfield investment sector - remain unresolved, with any prompt breakthroughs in these matters having been rendered extremely unlikely by the ongoing pandemic. The debate surrounding 5G implementation by Chinese contractors has demonstrated the importance attached by Poland to security issues, which in the global context manifests in the Polish government's reliance on the EU and, perhaps more strongly, the US. Poland is essentially

unwilling to engage in any form of international cooperation that fails to satisfy the basic security prerequisites.

Finally, as a kind of postscript to the analysis presented above, the author would like to take note of developments that postdate its chronological scope, but are highly relevant to the Polish foreign policy and indirectly also to the future of Sino-Polish and Sino-CEE relations. It has been noted repeatedly that the Polish government has been recently displaying - for diverse possible reasons - friendly gestures towards the PRC. President Duda's visit to Beijing to attend the Winter Olympics in February 2022, amidst boycott of many other democratic countries, undoubtedly underscored the year-long series of such courtesies. However, if Sino-Polish relationship is indeed responsive to the changes in the international atmosphere such as the ones resulting from the rotation of American administration, as well as to the geopolitical issues of security, it will in all likelihood become deeply affected by the most recent tempest, having occurred immediately after the Olympics: the Russian invasion on Ukraine and the consequent, new-found solidarity of the Western world, with Poland - due to historic and geopolitical factors - occupying the foremost anti-Russian positions. Some outcomes on the Sino-Polish level have already been seen - for example, Polish soccer star and celebrity Robert Lewandowski, who had been an ambassador of Huawei for CEE region and Scandinavia since 2015, decided to terminate his sponsorship contract with the Chinese company due to reports of Huawei's involvement in Russian cyber-warfare - notably not having decided to do so even after the espionage scandal.³⁰⁹ The future developments remain to be seen, but so far the stance of Poland, which positions itself as the staunchest ally of Ukraine, and the attitude of the PRC, which in display of a self-perceived "neutrality" has refused to condemn the Russian invasion, seem to be drifting in opposite directions.

³⁰⁹ "Robert Lewandowski drops Huawei as sponsor over links to Russia", *Independent*, 8 March 2022, at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/huawei-russia-robert-lewandowski-sponsor-b2031042.html> (last accessed on 6 May 2022).

During the decade of 16+1 existence, Poland's stance toward the framework has changed significantly, and the Polish government clearly lost much of the initial confidence in the effectiveness of this cooperation format. Such an outcome results from the issues of the 16+1 itself, mainly its economic shortcomings - a low level of investments (especially in greenfield sector), the virtual absence of infrastructure projects, and an enormous trade imbalance. But as we have seen, the security considerations conditioned by the geopolitical reliance on the US, a factor essentially external to the 16+1 framework, are also at play. For Poland, the United States are the largest political ally; for the US, Poland is the guarantor of safety in the eastern flank of Europe, a role rendered especially conspicuous by the ongoing Russian aggression on Ukraine. The US factor remains paramount in Poland's foreign policy, effectively forestalling any international activity perceived as detrimental to Polish-American dynamics.

The decision of Lithuania to pull out of the framework in 2021 and the recent comments by Czech Republic government officials who are "*considering many options*"³¹⁰ regarding the 16+1 might raise questions about Poland's future participation in it. In the author's view, pragmatism will probably command the government's strategy towards China-CEE cooperation, and the Polish government is likely to stay in the 16+1 framework motivated by the principle "nothing about us without us". As a leading economy in the region, Poland wants and needs to exert influence on, or at least monitor the dialogue that Central Eastern Europe is conducting with the world's second economic power, the People's Republic of China.

³¹⁰ "Czechs Considering 'All Options' Regarding China's 16+1 Group", *Reuters*, 20 May 2022, at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-05-20/czechs-considering-all-options-regarding-chinas-16-1-group> (last accessed on 22 May 2022).

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ANNEX

Chronology of events (extracted from Polish Press Agency Dispatches)

2011

- 2011-07-10: President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski invited by the Politburo Standing Committee member He Guoqiang (賀國強) to China;
- 2011-08-05: MoFA minister Yang Jiechi (楊潔篪) comes to Warsaw with an official visit (Poland: Prime Minister Donald Tusk);
- **2011-12-17: Official visit of Poland's President Bronisław Komorowski in China** (China: President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao);
- 2011-12-20: Poland signs the *Strategic Partnership Agreement* with China.

2012

- 2012-04-25: Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visits Poland;
- **2012-04-26: 1st Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Warsaw, Poland;**
- 2012.05.12: Minister of Defense of China, gen. Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) visit Poland (Poland: Minister of Defense: Tomasz Siemoniak);
- 2012-05-30-31: Waldemar Pawlak visits China (China: Deputy Prime Minister Wang Qishan (王岐山));
- 2012-07-23: The Minister of Finance Sławomir Nowak 's visit China;
- 2012-09-10: Undersecretary of State in Polish MoFA Beata Stelmach in China (Guangzhou);

- 2012-09-12-15: Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski visits China;
- 2012-11: 1st China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting was held in Beijing, China.

2013

- 2013-04-10: The Minister of Administration and Digitalization Michał Boni's visit to China;
- 2013-04-22: First Poland-China Regional Forum held in Gdańsk;
- 2013-05-21: The minister of Defense Tomasz Siemonek's visit to China;
- 2013-06-02: Marshal of the Sejm Ewa Kopacz visits China;
- 2013-06-05: China's Ministry of Commerce's delegation comes to Poland;
- **2013-11-26: 2nd Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Bucharest (Poland: Prime Minister Donald Tusk).**

2014

- 2014-05-12: MoFA Deputy Minister Artur Nowak-Far visits Beijing (Second Strategic Partnership Dialogue meeting)
- 2014.05: the 3rd China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting held in Beijing;
- 2014-06-10: II Poland-China Regional Forum held in Guangzhou;
- 2014-09-02: The Minister of Defense of China Chang Wanquan's (常萬全) visit to Poland;
- 2014-10-08: 65 Anniversary of China and Poland relations: Minister of Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna meets with the PRC ambassador Xu Jian (徐堅);
- 2014-11-19: Creation of the Secretary of Investment of 16+1 framework in Warsaw (Deputy Prime Minister Janusz Piechociński);
- **2014-12-16: 3rd Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Belgrade (Poland: Deputy Prime Minister Tomasz Siemonek).**

2015

- 2015-04-17: III Strategic Partnership Dialogue meeting (MoFA minister Grzegorz Schetyna and deputy Wang Chao (王超));
- 2015-04-21: Inauguration of 16+1 Business Council (proposed by Polish Prime Minister in Bucharest);
- 2015-11: The 4th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting held in Belgrade, Serbia;
- 2015-05-27: The Minister of Agriculture Marek Sawicki visits China;
- 2015-06-17: Poland-China Intergovernmental Committee Meeting: Minister of Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna's visits China.
- 2015-06-28: III Poland-China Regional Forum held in Uniejów;
- 2015-07-10: MoFA Deputy Minister Katarzyna Kacperczyk's official visit to China (the 5th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting);
- 2015-07-29-30: Deputy Prime Minister and Ministry of Defense Tomasz Siemoniak visits China;
- 2015-09-02: Marshal of the Sejm Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska's visits Beijing;
- 2015-10-14: MoFA Wang Yi' visits Poland;
- 2015-10: the 6th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting held in Warsaw;
- 2015-11-22-27: President Andrzej Duda's visit in Beijing;
- **2015-11-24: 4th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Suzhou (Poland: President Andrzej Duda).**

2016

- 2016-04-19: Poland joins Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB);
- 2016-04-24: Minister of Foreign Affairs Waszczykowski visits China;
- 2016-05-04: Minister of Agriculture Krzysztof Jurgiel's official visit to China;

- 2016-05-14: Delegation of Chinese MoFA's in Poland (Poland: MoFA Deputy Minister' Katarzyna Kacperczyk, China: MoFA Deputy Minister Liu Haixing (刘海星));
- 2016-06-20: President Xi Jinping visits Poland: *Joint Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*;
- 2016-06-20: IV Poland-China Regional Forum in Warsaw;
- 2016-06-24: 7th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting held in Haikou (MoFA Deputy Minister Katarzyna Kacperczyk);
- 2016-09-27: Wang Jiarui (王家瑞) Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference visits Warsaw (talks with: Marshal of the Senate Stanisław Karczewski and Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski);
- 2016-10-13: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education's visit to China (meetings with the deputy Prime Minister Liu Yandong (劉延東), Minister of Education Chen Baosheng (陳寶生) and Minister of Science and Technology Wan Gang (萬鋼));
- 2016-10-14: the 8th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting was held in Riga (MoFA Deputy Minister Robert Grey);
- **2016-11-04: the 5th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Riga (Poland: Prime Minister Beata Szydło).**

2017

- 2017-05-12: PM Beata Szydło's official visit to China (1st One Belt One Road Forum in Beijing 14 and 15 May);
- 2017-07-12: Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Zhang Dejiang (張德江) visits Poland (meets with President Andrzej Duda, Marshal

of the Sejm and Senate Marek Kuchciński, Stanisław Karczewski and Prime Minister Beata Szydło);

- 2017-07-12: 9th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting held in Beijing, China. (Poland: MoFA Deputy Minister Marek Magierowski);
- 2017-09-29: MoFA Deputy Minister Wang Cha visits Warsaw (V Strategic Partnership Dialogue meeting);
- 2017-10-25: 2nd meeting of 16+1 Ministers of Transport and Business: Inauguration of Coordinating Secretariat of Maritime Issues in Poland;
- **2017-11-28: the 6th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Budapest (Poland: Prime Minister Beata Szydło).**

2018

- **2018-07-07: the 7th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Sofia (Poland: Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Higher Education Jarosław Gowin);**
- 2018-11-05: Deputy Minister of Entrepreneurship Tadeusz Kościński visits Shanghai (Shanghai Fair);
- 2018-11-05: Minister of Agriculture Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski's official visit to China.

2019

- 2019-03-02: MoFA Deputy Minister Wang Chao visits Warsaw (Poland: Minister of Foreign Affairs Minister Jacek Czaputowicz i MoFA Deputy Minister Maciej Lang);
- **2019-04-12: the 8th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Dubrovnik (Poland: Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki);**
- 2019-07-08: Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi visits Warsaw (Poland: Minister of Foreign Affairs Jacek Czaputowicz + 15 ministries delegations);

- 2019-10-29: 10th China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting (MoFA Deputy Minister Maciej Lang).

2020

- **9th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries canceled due to Covid-19 pandemic;**
- 2020-04-16: Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had a phone call with Prime Minister Wang Yi.

2021

- **2021-02-09: 9th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held online (Poland: President Andrzej Duda);**
- 2021-03-01: President Andrzej Duda had a phone call with President Xi Jinping;
- 2021-04-17: Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had a phone call with Prime Minister Wang Yi;
- 2021-05-29: Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau visits China (China: MoFA Wang Yi);
- 2021-07-15 Video call between Polish Minister of Infrastructure Andrzej Adamczyk and Chinese Transport minister Li Xiaopeng (李小鹏)