

Quo Vadis 17+1?

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Having spent eight years in the China-CEE framework, European members of the initiative may raise the questions: how shall we proceed with the cooperation? Is the 16+1 successful? What future does the initiative have? How does the accession of Greece affect the whole process?

In the following short comments, some of the most well-known experts of the 16+1 address these questions and shed some light on the challenges and opportunities both China and its CEE partners have to face.

Andreea Brînză



The 16+1 format was a good idea, but the implementation of the project was disappointing. Because China did not explain from the beginning what it wanted through the 16+1, many frictions appeared within the EU and even within the internal political environment of the 16 countries. China has also failed to promote the initiative, which was also affected by the fact that there was too much noise and too little action. In other words, there were too many negotiations and meetings for too few projects that were actually implemented. Many of the Chinese projects in Central and Eastern Europe that were under negotiation have been either cancelled or delayed. Let us take the example of the Cernavodă Nuclear Power plant project, which has been under negotiations since

2013. We also must look toward the flag-bearer Chinese project in Europe: the Budapest-Belgrade railway. Talks started in 2013, but the actual construction work in Serbia started only in 2018. Furthermore, the projects that have been actually implemented, like those of CEFC in the Czech Republic, or the motorway in Montenegro, are all troubled somehow.

It also should be emphasized that populist and anti-EU leaders are the ones who are more prone to cooperate with China under the 16+1 format. This means that China didn't succeed in attracting other European countries to cooperate in the 16+1 or Belt and Road (BRI) projects, because China wasn't able to define and support its projects (the BRI and the 16+1) in Europe. Without explaining with clarity what are its intentions and actions regarding the BRI and the 16+1 in Europe, China left a place for misunderstandings and suppositions. The EU's cautious attitude toward China was also emboldened by the fact that China is not promoting a balanced cooperation with the CEE countries, ruled by the ubiquitous Chinese slogan of win-win cooperation, but a more China-advantageous strategy, by using Chinese loans, mandatory quotas for using Chinese workforce, and Chinese labour standards or environmental standards.

The main obstacle in the way of the 16+1 will be the rearrangement of the world, from a unipolar world to a bipolar one, with China and the US as the leading powers. Because of this, a race to choose one's allies has already started, and the Huawei case has proved that the EU countries are more prone to take sides with the US.

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Jing Men



The 16+1 is an initiative from Beijing to promote its business and investment relations with the 16 Central and Eastern European countries. Yet, it is strongly politicized in Europe. An overriding concern on the 16+1 initiative is that China would divide and rule the EU. Furthermore, the different situation in each of the 16 countries, their uneven economic development, and their respective relationship with China only make the 16+1 mechanism more complicated. Therefore, up until now, the 16+1 initiative is perceived negatively by the EU. Yet, my argument is that instead of

complaining about and criticising on this initiative, the EU should manage to turn it into an instrument, which is helpful to realise its own objectives. If guided in the right direction, this mechanism can be useful not only to promote cooperation between China and those Central and Eastern European countries, but also supportive to the EU's cooperation with its member states and the Balkan countries. In other words, the EU should take the initiative to bring the 16+1 under the framework of a high-level dialogue between the EU and China on the investment and business cooperation in the 16 countries – such dialogue should uphold “openness, inclusiveness and transparency” and observing “international rules and market principles”. The Chinese government pledged in the most recently published policy paper on the EU that it “welcomes a united, stable, open and prosperous Europe, supports the European integration process, and remains committed to developing ties with EU institutions, member states and other European countries in a comprehensive, balanced and mutually reinforcing manner.” The EU, therefore, should push for actions from China towards a rule-based and transparent cooperation framework that benefits all the countries involved.

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Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai



Joseph S. Nye reminds us that we live in the era of “contest of competitive credibility”, when “narratives become the currency of soft or attractive power”. In his turn, Bardin H. Nelson underlined almost 60 years ago that strong opposite argumentations can influence and convince us even contradictory truths. If China presents itself as a “sun that warms us” and the established powers, on the contrary, assert that China is “the sun that burns us”, which image is more credible? Definitely, “the sun that burns us”. We must be exposed to the “sun” in order to decide whether it burns or it warms us. 16+1 framework is the right place to do that as it opens new cooperation opportunities and new ways to better understand each other.

China's achievements in terms of development represent the most valuable asset of its image but its interpretation is not uniform worldwide. China's level of development

is seen in the large developed countries as a “threat” to their already obtained advance. On the contrary, in the developing/emerging ones, it is seen as a “desired status”. Most of the Eurosceptic CEE countries are trying to escape the position of Dependent Market Economies and from this perspective China is seen as a reliable partner, complementary to the EU.

The Dubrovnik summit reconfirms this perspective of complementarity and also the commitment towards compliance with the “EU law and politics”, “European and international standards”, principles of “mutual respect, mutual benefit and fair competition”, “transparency and non-discrimination”. In a period when the gap between expectations and achievements under the 16+1 framework seems to have started to diminish (not because of the achievements, but on the contrary, due to the decreasing expectations), the Dubrovnik Guidelines for cooperation underline for the first time the need for a “result oriented approach” and put emphasis on the objective to facilitate the access of CEE products to the Chinese market “in order to build a more balanced economic partnership between CEECs and China”.

At the same time, Greece’s accession to this platform is not against the EU unity but a confirmation of its pivotal position in terms of connectivity. Good transportation links are the prerequisite of economic growth and this is not only a national desiderate but also a European one. China can be for the EU and also for CEE a real strategic partner – the sun that warms us –. It is against its own national interest to become a “systemic rival” – the sun that burns us –.

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Richard Turcsanyi



When it comes to the question, how successful the 16+1 is, the answer depends on what one sees as goals of the 16+1 platform, but in any case, we are leaning somewhat towards failure rather than the success. I describe the 16+1 experience so far as “hot politics, cold economics”. These dynamics is in no one’s interest, but especially so for the CEE countries who have envisioned mainly economic goals of the cooperation with China. Although few economic results are not in China’s interest either, the increase of political profile in the region has some benefits for China alone.

The main challenge for China-CEE cooperation is to find a purpose or “raison d’etat”. It seems the two sides are not economically complimentary. Politically, they do not see eye to eye either, and with no major material benefits expected, the enthusiasm of the CEE countries to develop cooperation with China will further decrease, in turn negatively affecting China’s standing in the region. Still, my guess is that 16+1 will survive in one way or another, but I do expect some changes when it comes to its institutional architecture – possibly downgrading the level of diplomatic exchanges and using more ‘down to the ground’ rhetoric on both sides, acknowledging limited expectations when it comes to economic results of the cooperation.

Nominally speaking, the 16+1 process currently includes perhaps any thinkable area of cooperation, hence I think the issue should not be to come up with new areas, rather than fill the existing ones with more substance - and perhaps choose and focus on those areas where some achievements can realistically be made. Especially for the CEE countries, insistence on substance over the form should be a goal, as it is in their interest to have things done, rather than just create an impression of active cooperation - which is not really productive under the surface, but still makes their EU peers anxious.

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Anastas Vangeli



After seven years, 16+1 has become a regular, routinized platform for interaction between China and the countries from Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE). Over time, CESEE countries started exercising more agency in their relations with China, too. Yet, what has greatly shaped the discourse on the cooperation were the external discourses that often painted the cooperation as China's “divide and conquer” strategy in Europe.

The Dubrovnik Summit takes place right after the EU-China Summit in Brussels. This will generate two competing narratives: that the two summits are in tune, rendering the “divide and conquer” narratives obsolete; or that the Dubrovnik Summit undoes

whatever consensus reached in Brussels. Depending on their own interpretation and interests, some of the sixteen countries will pursue greater cooperation with China, while others will adopt a vigilant approach. The smartest ones can take a page from the Western European playbook: employ tough rhetoric, while signing lucrative deals. However, in Dubrovnik there will be also one big elephant in the room: the US and its strategic competition with China, which will make things for the sixteen much more complicated.

One of the potential ways to transcend the narratives of geopolitical competition will be through the emphasis on tripartite cooperation between China, CESEE and other European countries. It is only natural that the focus will be now on Croatia, the host of the Summit, and the Adriatic coast – weeks after Italy joined China's BRI. Greece demonstrated interest in taking part in the China-CESEE cooperation in light of the solution of the Macedonian name dispute. Austrian voices promote Vienna as a financial hub for 16+1. Last but not least, Chancellor Merkel recently voiced a firm but constructive attitude the BRI, leaving room for German-Chinese cooperation in CESEE. These developments, too, will shape 16+1 in the years to come.

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