

Opportunities and Challenges for the Further Development of the 16+1 Framework

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Abstract

The 16+1 framework was established ten years ago, and the anniversary provides all the parties involved an opportunity to evaluate the results of the cooperation, reconsider its future, and make the amendments necessary to ensure the success of the project. The framework, from the Chinese side, was part of a series of creating multilateral forums of cooperation throughout the globe, while for the side of Central and Eastern European countries it meant an opportunity to diversify their economic relations after the 2008 global economic crisis. Business and economy were the focus of the initiative from both sides. In the first phase of the cooperation (2012–2013) the institutional structure of the cooperation was created. In the second phase (2014–2018), the framework was started to be filled with contents and was linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. In the third phase, a serious setback took place. The problems leading to the setback were caused by unfounded expectations, structural factors, cultural differences, the narrow economic focus of the cooperation, outside pressure, the politicization of China relations in the Central and Eastern European countries, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all these problems, the framework should be maintained, as it has provided and will further provide advantages for all sides in the fields of politics and diplomacy, business and economics, as well as people-to-people relations. For operating the 16+1 mechanism successfully in the future, certain modifications are suggested. The EU should be more involved in 16+1 projects, China should apply a sub-regional approach to diversify its policies, Central and Eastern European states ought to cooperate more with each other, the whole framework must be made more transparent, issues related to China should be depoliticized, some multilateral flagship projects should be launched to promote the advantages of the cooperation, and more attention must be paid to soft power. With these changes, a new phase of the 16+1 cooperation can be started, one that is adapted more to the challenges and opportunities of the new era.

Keywords: *China, Central and Eastern European states, 16+1 framework, challenges, opportunities*

1. Introduction

The 16+1 cooperation framework was established ten years ago, when the 1st Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries was held in Warsaw, Poland in 2012.¹ China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) states jointly issued the Press Communiqué of the Meeting between the Prime Ministers of China and Central and Eastern European Countries, and China put forward its Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries. It was decided that a Secretariat for cooperation between China and the CEE countries would be set up in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and summits of the heads of government of the participant countries will be held every year. Many similar documents, guidelines, and communiqués have been published ever since (Goreczky, 2017, p. 5). The 16+1 framework thus established contributed greatly to the development of the relations between China and the CEE countries.

From a historic point of view, ten years is a very short term, but the anniversary brings all the parties involved an opportunity to evaluate the results of the cooperation, reconsider its future, and make the amendments necessary to ensure the success of the project. In the present paper, I examine the context and history of the 16+1 framework, assess the challenges it is facing, and make some suggestions about its future development.

2. The Context and Background of the Formation of the 16+1

Ten years ago, in 2012, the first summit of China and CEE countries was held in Warsaw, and the 16+1 cooperation framework was established. The idea of the cooperation first came up one year before, at the CEE-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum held in Budapest in June 2011 with the participation of Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao (Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 317–318). The context and the timing of the initiative explain many of its characteristics.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I will use '16+1' throughout this paper, though it was called '17+1' between 2019 and 2021.

2.1. 16+1 in China's Global Strategy

From the Chinese side, the 16+1 was far from being a new type of cooperation framework. China, a great country with a global outlook, started to form transregional cooperation mechanisms more than a decade ago for enhancing its communication with the outside world, streamlining its diplomatic activities, and developing its international relations. A series of mechanisms were created in which China partnered with a group of countries from a certain region. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004, and the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China–CELAC Forum) in 2014 (Horváth, 2020, p. 630). Formal dialogue with ASEAN and the EU was started even earlier. This means that the formation of the China–CEEC Cooperation Framework was just one step in a series aiming at facilitating China's cooperation with different regions of the world. These mechanisms make it possible for China to deal with whole regions, not with small countries one by one, and follow a more strategic approach to different parts of the world, avoiding problems of coordination in its network of almost two hundred bilateral relations. The establishment of the 16+1 caused some misunderstanding in the CEE region, as some leaders and the public interpreted it as a sign of China treating its relations with the CEE region as a priority, while it was just a logical part of the process of the formation of China's new global diplomatic mechanisms.

For China, the focus of the 16+1 cooperation is economic relations. While the CEE region with its population of more than 120 million and its relatively underdeveloped economy is not of primary significance for China, its huge growth potential, and its need for investment and infrastructure development make it a region worth upgrading contacts with, not to mention the fact that most of the CEE countries are EU members. Critics of the cooperation emphasize the geopolitical nature of the framework, but there are no proofs that China has any serious geopolitical interests or intents in the CEE region. No Chinese investment in any strategic sector has been made in the region, and CEE does not play an important role in China's global grand strategy. If we compare Chinese trade and investment data in Western European and CEE countries, we can conclude that even ten years after the formation of the 16+1 Chinese presence in the CEE region is marginal, as several small and medium-size Western European countries receive more Chinese investment and trade more with China than the whole CEE region combined (Horváth, 2020, p. 635–640; Karásková et al., 2020, p. 35–47).

2.2. The Impact of the 2008 Crisis

From the side of Central and Eastern Europe, the timing of the establishment of the 16+1 framework is of utmost importance. In the 1990s and the 2000s, most countries in the CEE region have been preoccupied with either nation-building or Euro–Atlantic integration. The majority of the 16 CEE states succeeded in joining the EU and NATO by the first decade of the new millennium. The region has grown to be heavily dependent on its Western partners and has become a semi-periphery of the traditional West. This brought about great economic opportunities but also a certain level of vulnerability. The 2008 global financial crisis led to the realization of this overdependency on the West. The crisis caused a serious economic downturn in the CEE region, and its main export markets and sources of investment, Western Europe and the United States also struggled with problems. GDP levels fell and unemployment rose in the whole region, and leaders strove to find alternative export markets and investment sources. As China was not as heavily impacted by the crisis and maintained a healthy growth level, its weight and prestige grew significantly. It was reasonable that in the years following 2008 CEE countries turned to the main engine of global growth when trying to diversify their economic relations. China was not only a logical choice because of its economic performance, but certain CEE leaders considered developing their relations with China as a way to gain more room for maneuver and ease their dependence on the West. Thus, when China initiated the 16+1 framework, CEE countries joined it with great enthusiasm.

The huge role the 2008 crisis played in the CEE countries' decision to welcome China's overtures underlines the fact that the CEE countries also consider the 16+1 framework mostly an economic opportunity, so similarly to China, the 16 European states focus on the economic contents of the framework as well. It should have been, however, clear from the outset that China cannot and will not substitute the West in the relations of the CEE countries. It can only play a subsidiary role as a source of investment and export market for some niche products. Most CEE countries are so deeply integrated into the Western ecosystem that China is not a real alternative for them.

3. Phases of Development of the 16+1 Framework

China's efforts to create regional mechanisms of 'bilateral multilateralism', and its increasingly global outlook on one hand, and the CEE's countries' ambitions to diversify their economic and, to some degree, political relations, find new business opportunities, FDI sources, and export markets, on the other, provided the context of the formation of the 16+1 cooperation. While the mechanism achieved considerable success, such as the development of trade, investment, educational, cultural, and scientific cooperation, the short history of the 16+1 framework is not that of continuous linear development. After the idea of the framework first came up in 2011, and 16+1 was formally established in 2012, the cooperation went through three different phases of development.

3.1. 2012-2013

In the first years following the 2012 Warsaw Summit, in the first phase of the evolution of the cooperation, the institutional structure of the cooperation was created. The participant countries, the format, and the main areas were agreed upon, and it was decided that summits of the heads of government would be held every year. The Twelve Measures put forward by Wen Jiabao set the direction and content of the 16+1. The 2013 Bucharest summit issued the first joint document, and the participants established the Secretariat for cooperation between China and CEE in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the system of national coordinators, the system of regular meetings, and the system of sectoral coordination centers. 16+1 became a flexible mechanism but has not turned into an international institution or legal entity (Richet, 2018; Liu, 2020, p. 30-31; Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 318-319).

3.2. 2014-2019

In the second phase of the cooperation from the 2014 Belgrade summit to the 2018 Sofia summit, the 16+1 framework began to be filled with content. The cooperation was linked with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Goreczky, 2017, p. 6-7), the sectoral coordination centers were finalized, and some concrete projects, such as the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway were launched or agreed upon (Zhu, 2017). To answer critiques about the possible division of the European Union, in

this phase it was frequently emphasized that participants will try to integrate the 16+1 cooperation more closely into the framework of China's relations with the EU and increase the synergy between 16+1 and other Eurasian connectivity projects (Dimitrijević & Jokanović, 2020, p. 320-325).

3.3. 2019-Present

The third phase, starting around the 2019 Dubrovnik summit, brought about a setback in the cooperation, and a need for a comprehensive recalibration surfaced (Kavalski, 2021; Jing, 2020). The intensification of the US-China rivalry since 2018, its impact on EU-China relations, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the general disappointment in the framework in the CEE region, and some other factors had a negative effect on the 16+1 framework. As a result, while Greece joined the mechanism in 2019, founding member Lithuania left it in 2021, and six CEE countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovenia) decided to send ministers instead of their heads of state or government to the 2021 virtual summit, signaling its relative unimportance to them (Sharma, 2021).

16+1 was established with a high level of expectations and enthusiasm, its institutions and mechanisms, necessary for its functioning, were created, and some projects were started, but its development lost its momentum even before the COVID-19 pandemic made international cooperation difficult. In the following sections, I attempt to identify the reasons for the slowing down of the development of the framework and put forward some suggestions to readjust it to ensure its future success.

4. Hurdles and Challenges in the 16+1 Cooperation

The setback of the 16+1 can be explained by several factors. The most important are the following:

- structural factors;
- cultural differences;
- economic focus;
- outside pressure;
- and the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Structural Factors

Expectations on both sides were unrealistic from the outset, as fundamental structural factors impede economic cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe. The latter has neither the natural resources nor the developed technology sought after by China, so export opportunities of CEE countries to China are limited due to the lack of demand on the Chinese side. The greatest part of CEE export to China is taken by Western multinational companies operating in the region, and their access to the Chinese market is not influenced by the 16+1 framework. Dismantling trade barriers leads to the increase of trade imbalance and China's surplus. Both China and the CEE are rich in cheap labor force capable of conducting medium-level assembly work, and on the international market, they are competing with, instead of complementing each other. A similar economic structure explains why Chinese FDI in the CEE countries is limited. On the other hand, the infrastructure development needs of the CEE countries do not fit China's expectations. The majority of the 16 states are EU-members, have a relatively developed infrastructure network, and have easy access to cheap EU funds to finance constructions. As a result, they do not show great interest in China-financed infrastructure projects. Only a few non-EU countries provide opportunities to Chinese companies (Karásková et al., 2020, p. 50; Sharma, 2021). Beijing has offered development packages to CEE countries (infrastructure projects financed by Chinese development banks and implemented by Chinese companies on market prices) similar to those applied successfully in developing countries in Africa and other parts of the world, without customizing them to local needs, which was not very appealing to most CEE partners.

4.2. Cultural Differences

Apart from the geographical distance, cultural disparities and the lack of information have led to several misunderstandings in China-CEEC relations. CEE leaders did not take into account the communication differences between Chinese and European people, tended to take usual Chinese courtesies and politeness as signs of deep commitment and promises, and overestimated the importance of the region to China. The Chinese side underestimated the huge differences between the 16+1 countries and tried to treat Central and Eastern Europe as a unified region, failing to consider their social, economic, political, and cultural disparities as well as their traditional rivalries. These all created too high expectations on both sides that inevitably led to disappointment.

4.3. Economic Focus

Because all parties, especially the European ones focused on the economic aspect of the cooperation, the lack of successful investment projects and the only moderate growth of CEE exports have overshadowed all other areas of 16+1. While fields of cooperation like student exchange, scientific and cultural projects, political contacts as well as tourism showed great development, the media and the public in the CEE countries focused solely on Chinese investment in the region and export to China. The lack of spectacular growth in these fields created the false impression that the whole 16+1 was not working and was thus not worth the efforts. The long-term effects of such developments as the exponential growth of students studying in each other's country or the formation of networks of sectoral cooperation have not been taken into account, as media only dealt with short-term gains or lack thereof.

4.4. Outside Pressure

The international environment has changed significantly since the time of the formation of 16+1. Most of the participant European countries are members of the EU, and ever since the inception of the 16+1, the cooperation was treated with some mistrust and suspicions (Jing, 2020, p. 174–175; Liu, 2020, p. 37–39). As mechanisms like the 16+1 are alien from the EU, the intents of the participants were misunderstood, and the initiative was portrayed by some Western European politicians and media as an attempt by China to 'divide and rule' the European Union (Karásková et al., 2020, p. 11; Sharma, 2021). European suspicions were mitigated after some years when it turned out that the mechanism was not a game-changer in China's European policy, the overwhelming majority of Chinese FDI still went to Western Europe, and the CEE region was not flooded by Chinese infrastructure projects. However, at the same time relations between the United States and China have become tenser, and starting around 2018, it has become part of US strategy to put pressure on its allies to scale back their ties with China. This included encouraging CEE countries to exclude Huawei and other Chinese companies from the building of their 5G network, stop construction projects that involve Chinese companies and reduce the intensity and level of political relations (Jing, 2020, p. 175–176; Liu, 2020, p. 39–40).

In great power competition, small countries can choose between bandwagoning and balancing, and the CEE region provides examples for both, moreover, the choice of

countries may change with the change of governments. The American efforts were successful in many cases, several countries joined the Clean Network Initiative, and Romania canceled the building of a nuclear block by a Chinese company. The practice of sending ministerial-level representatives to the 16+1 summits instead of heads of government can also be partially attributed to American pressure. The Russia card is used extensively. Countries that consider Russia a serious security threat and rely heavily on the US in their national security, tend to submit easily to American pressure in their China relations that are economically unimportant anyway. Baltic countries are the most spectacular cases (Jing, 2020, p. 175–176). At the same time, for non-EU member CEE countries China has become an important partner, and many projects have been completed in the Western Balkans with the participation of Chinese companies. This created a division in the 16 CEE countries as regards their China policies.

The US also put pressure on Western European states, and some actors in traditional EU countries started to treat China and Chinese initiatives like the Belt and Road and 16+1 as threats. China was labeled a ‘systemic rival’ in an official EU document, and a screening mechanism on Chinese investments in the EU was established. The governments of major European economies pushed through an agreement in principle on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China at the end of 2020, but the ratification of the agreement has been blocked by the European Parliament and postponed indefinitely. Relations with China are now a subject of debate in the EU, and while Western European decision-makers do not want their companies to stop conducting highly profitable business with China, many of them want to realign their political ties. This also increases the pressure on CEE countries to avoid establishing close cooperation with China. Maintaining good Chinese relations by some CEE countries is frequently portrayed as a betrayal of European values or acting as ‘Trojan horses’ of malign Chinese forces (Kavalski, 2021, p. 35).

The pervasive influence of American opinions is reflected in the narratives in the European press coverage on China. While most politicians, especially those in government positions tend to be realistic, the media, including those in the CEE region, adopt the general anti-China stance characteristic of mainstream American publications and usually portrays China in a negative light. Chinese ‘malign influence’, ‘debt-trap diplomacy’, ‘cyber threat’, ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, etc. have become stock phrases used repeatedly in reports on Chinese presence in the region. This has led

to the increase of negative perceptions of China in the public as reflected in opinion polls and studies (Dams, 2021).

4.5. Politicization of China Relations

Not independently of foreign influence, issues related to China have become topics of domestic political debates and election campaigns. China relations hadn’t played any part in political discourse before, but in recent years Chinese investments, infrastructure projects, trade, political and diplomatic actions served as the subject or pretense of political struggles, a phenomenon in which national interest sometimes became secondary in the competition for votes (Kavalski, 2021, p. 36–40). Typically, opposition parties criticize ruling politicians for maintaining too good relations with China, and some concrete projects are attacked as well. Such projects are, for example, the ill-fated highway project in Montenegro, frequently pictured as a case of China’s ‘debt-trap diplomacy’, the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrad railway and the planned establishment of a campus of Fudan University in Hungary, the activities of a shady Chinese company named CEFC in Czechia, etc. The frequent changes in government in the CEE countries are also a challenge for cooperation with China, as the change of the governing party frequently brings about a change in the China policy of these countries (Liu, 2020, p. 36–37).

The question of Chinese influence itself, invariably portrayed as malign, is also a topic of debate, and in some cases, scandals broke out concerning Chinese-financed projects in academia. These have led to a growing awareness of public sensitivity towards Chinese ties on the part of the decision-makers and scaling back Chinese relations to win voters has become the choice of several CEE politicians. There are, however, differences in this regard in the 16 CEE states, notably the Serbian and Hungarian governments remained committed to the further development of Chinese relations; for example, in Europe only they used Chinese COVID-19 vaccines.

4.6. COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic harmed both China’s prestige and reputation and China-CEEC ties. China is the country where the virus was first identified, and the dominant narrative in Western media is that the mishandling of the situation by Chinese authorities in Wuhan is the main cause of the global pandemic. Conspiracy theories

about the origin of the virus also appeared. Chinese efforts to counter the impact of the pandemic on the country's reputation had little effect, and the international 'blame game' about the virus continues until this day (Kavalski, 2021, p. 46–49). Chinese vaccines are heavily criticized for being less effective than American ones. Polls show that opinions about China have turned to the worse in the whole Western world, including Central and Eastern Europe (Silver, 2020; Dams, 2021), and this pushes many decision-makers to try to distance themselves from China. The pandemic has made people-to-people relations almost impossible, projects were halted, personal negotiations were postponed, student exchange programs were scaled back, and international tourism collapsed, so the positive effects of the 16+1 cooperation and its concrete results became almost invisible. The annual 16+1 summit was first postponed, then held online with less publicity and impact (Jing, 2020).

All these factors led to a visible setback in the evolution of the 16+1 framework, manifested in the low-level representation of six CEE countries on the 2021 virtual summit, Lithuania's decision to leave the cooperation altogether, and open criticism of the framework by some previously pro-China CEE leaders.

Thus the 16+1 framework faces many challenges, but these challenges can be overcome, and the cooperation can gain new momentum. It is important to recognize the advantages and achievements of the cooperation, as well as the opportunities it brings to all participants.

5. Advantages and Results of the 16+1 Framework

The 16+1 cooperation framework, despite all problems and criticisms, has been successful so far and will provide good opportunities for the participants in the future. There is one country, Lithuania, that considered these opportunities not worth the cost of staying in the framework, but Vilnius is in a special position because of the proximity of Russia and the tangibility of the Russian threat. This is understandable in the case of a nation that spent most of the 20th century under Soviet occupation. China, of course, has nothing to do with the historical vulnerability of Lithuania, but as the security of the country relies heavily on the United States, it is prone to succumb to American pressure in questions that are not of strategic importance, and relations with China belong to this category. It is hard to prove, but one can

suspect that the US played a crucial role in Lithuania's decision to leave 16+1. As the two other Baltic states are in a similar position, they may sooner or later follow the example of Lithuania or become more passive in their China relations. This, however, is more related to European geopolitics than the 16+1 cooperation framework itself.

In politics and diplomacy, the 16+1 platform makes it possible for Central and Eastern European countries to access the government of a major power directly, establish links on the highest level, get first-hand information on the plans, undertakings, and motivations of China, and form political ties that may facilitate cooperation on other areas such as investment, trade, and people-to-people relations. The framework also makes it possible for CEE countries to coordinate policies and concrete measures with China on such global issues as climate change and pandemic control.

While the participants frequently emphasize that CEE countries were among the first to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China right after its founding, contacts between the region and China have traditionally been weak in the past 70 years. Economic relations were underdeveloped, high-level visits were sporadic, policy coordination was almost non-existent, and people-to-people relations were minimal. CEE countries are simply too small to have fruitful relations with China on a bilateral basis. Thanks to the 16+1 framework, dialogue on many levels and in many sectors became institutionalized, and CEE leaders and officials gained the opportunity to exchange views and information on various topics with their Chinese counterparts. Without the 16+1 framework, CEE states would have much less room to maneuver, as their Western dependency would not be moderated by their direct links with one of the most important centers of our multipolar world. On the other hand, China created an opportunity to promote its interests in the CEE region, take part in meaningful cooperation with countries here, and enhance its presence in the European Union through the EU members of the region. Chinese decision-makers now have more information on this part of the world, something important for a major power with a global outlook. While the 16+1 cooperation did not replace bilateral relations, the former complements the latter and gives a new impetus for their development.

In the field of business and economy, while the development of relations has not met expectations so far, significant development did happen (Liu, 2020, p. 24–27). For example, when the 16+1 was established, one of the aims was to reach a trading volume of USD 100 billion by 2015; this did not happen in time, but the 100 billion

threshold was finally reached in 2020, and China-CEEC trade growth has averaged 8% annually since 2012 (China secured bumper, 2021). This is a substantial increase. Chinese FDI in the region has grown somewhat, and infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans played an important role in the development of those countries (Zhu, 2017, p. 99–100). Business forums and sectoral dialogues connected to the 16+1 made it possible for companies to establish direct contacts, CEE countries took part in events like the China International Import Expo, and interregional tourism flourished before the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments would probably be less significant without the 16+1 cooperation. The linking of the 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative will create synergies, and these may strengthen their effectiveness and provide more opportunities to develop ties.

The most important development happened in people-to-people and cultural relations, including student exchange programs (Zhu, 2017, p. 102–103; Jing, 2020, p. 167–168; Liu, 2020, p. 27–28). These do not create immediate gains and are hard to measure but are crucial in laying the foundation for the long-term improvement of China-CEEC relations. Apart from the geographical distance, the greatest hindrance in the relations is the lack of information and understanding between the parties. The intensification of educational, cultural, and other direct ties is the only way to overcome these problems. Efforts in these fields will only pay off in the long run, but they will surely have a positive effect on the China-CEEC ties. CEE students who study in China today will work on relations between their country and China tomorrow, and this is also true for Chinese students studying in the CEE region.

6. Suggestions

Because of the opportunities the 16+1 framework provides for the development of political, economic, cultural, and other ties between China and the CEE region, the maintaining of the cooperation would be beneficial for all participants. However, some changes should be made to increase its effectiveness and recognition, and the framework should be adapted to the new global and regional situation. The platform needs some readjustments, and a reboot may be necessary with modified content, methods, and aims after the pandemic. Working together in the past decade has provided the countries with enough experience and understanding to recalibrate

their cooperation to serve their needs and national interests better. Hereby some suggestions are made about the changes necessary for the further development of the 16+1 cooperation.

6.1. More Involvement of the EU

As we have seen, one of the main hurdles of the 16+1 cooperation is that it is treated with suspicion by many EU and Western European leaders. Naturally, Western European companies do not welcome a fearsome competitor, China on a market considered their dominion, and their antipathy is reflected in their political representatives' stance. Political and ideological differences between China and the West are also significant. However, suspicions could abate to some degree if EU institutions were involved in 16+1 projects and discussions. China-CEEC cooperation should be treated as a part of China-EU cooperation in which EU leaders should have a say. Though some CEE countries are not members, the EU has huge stakes in them, and what happens in the Balkans is of strategic importance for Brussels. Therefore, the participation of EU representatives in the 16+1 events should be institutionalized, and projects should be open to third parties. The cooperation of Chinese, Western European, and Central or Eastern European companies in infrastructure and other projects would make any 'divide and rule' accusation baseless and untenable. Such multilateral projects should be encouraged.

6.2. Subregional Approach

Another problem with the 16+1 cooperation is that while China treats Central and Eastern Europe as a unified region, in reality, it is deeply divided, and does not have a common identity. Most participants are members of the European Union, while others are not, and these two groups of states have different aims and room for maneuver. EU members are part of a larger system of policy coordination, and their sovereignty is limited in many areas, including those that may serve as fields of coordination with China. Non-EU members are freer, and, at the same time, more vulnerable. Countries neighboring Russia and having negative historical experiences with it are more prone to follow American recommendations on China to strengthen Washington's commitment regarding their security. Other countries tend to be more independent in their choices. CEE countries also differ in their size, level of economic development,

history, religious background, cultural and political traditions (Goreczky, 2017, p. 6.). In the past decade, it has turned out that the 16 CEE countries could not act in a unified way, and due to their different conditions China's approach to them should be diversified and customized. While the 16+1 format should be maintained, it would be more efficient to divide the CEE region into subregions in concrete projects. These could be the Baltic States, the Visegrad Four (V4) countries, the Western Balkan, and the Eastern Balkan states. Countries in these subregions have a lot of similarities, and the chance to complete projects with them successfully is larger.

6.3. CEE Cooperation

From the European side, the CEE countries should have more cooperation with each other, and their China policies should be harmonized, at least on a subregional base. It would be useful for all sides if CEE countries negotiated a common stance before 16+1 summits, initiated common projects, and were more proactive in the development of their China ties. The initiation of at least three-sided projects (China and two CEE countries) should be encouraged. The reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway is a good example in this regard, but more such projects are needed. While East-West connectivity projects, fitting for the present center-semi-periphery status of Western and Eastern Europe, are extensively funded by the EU, North-South projects, essential for CEE intraregional cooperation, are supported to a much lesser extent. The involvement of Chinese companies and financial institutions in such projects could contribute to the development of the ties between the different CEE countries, as well as between China and the CEE states, and could complement EU-sponsored projects.

6.4. Transparency

The 16+1 framework is frequently criticized for not being transparent enough, and finding reliable information on it is indeed a difficult task. As the framework is a rather flexible one, no founding document or charter has ever been issued, and the structure has evolved gradually with continuous modifications. A full description of the present structure of the framework is missing from the webpage maintained by the Secretariat (www.china-CEEC.org), and documents of the summits, a list of the national coordinators, and various news related to China-CEEC relations

are presented without context. The centers for sectoral coordination are not even mentioned. In most news coverage, bilateral and 16+1 events are not differentiated, and it is impossible to find a complete list of 16+1 projects. In both official documents and media reports, finished projects, projects under construction, projects already agreed upon, and planned projects are not treated separately, and it is quite hard to tell which project is finished, and which is only talked about. For those working in the cooperation, its structure and mechanisms are simple, but for outsiders, the system of different Dialogues, Forums, Mechanism, Meetings, and Symposiums is hard to unravel. Too much emphasis is put on formal reports of official events, and the real content of the cooperation frequently remains hidden. Putting forward concrete aims and projects is greatly needed, as the content of the cooperation in several areas is somewhat unclear. The cooperation is not branded well, and communication on it is not unified. Information on the 16+1 framework should be presented in a much more standardized, simplified, up-to-date, and comprehensible way, and public relations experts should be consulted to develop a more professional communication strategy. This strategy should take into account the customs, cultural background, and expectations of the CEE countries.

6.5. Depoliticization

As Chinese relations are becoming more and more politicized in the CEE countries, just as in the whole world, efforts should be made to depoliticize them. China and the CEE region do not have any kind of strategic rivalry, political dispute, or ideological conflict (Jing, 2020, p. 180), and none of the parties can win anything by burdening the relations with political issues. Participants can afford to maintain a pragmatic relation profitable for all and can refrain from linking the relations with their political agenda. For this, self-restraint is needed from all sides. CEE political parties should not make Chinese relations part of their campaigns, and it is advisable that China does not respond to all provocations. While depoliticization is a difficult task, developing relations between China and all political actors, including opposition ones, might contribute to it.

6.6. A Flagship Project

16+1 relations could be greatly enhanced if there were at least one successful flagship project that may serve as a model for other projects and as a reference for the public. This project should include more than one CEE country in the EU, be widely publicized, and clearly serve the public good. Financing must be transparent, and China's achievements in high-tech should be put on display by the project. This flagship project should be one in which short-term company interests and profits are secondary, and the public relations gains are fully recognized and taken into account when calculating the liabilities and assets related to the project.

6.7. More Focus on Soft Power

The knowledge of China in the CEE region and understanding of the CEE region in China is rather superficial, and misunderstandings are common (Zhu, 2017, p. 107). The soft power of China is low in the CEE countries, and CEE soft power is practically non-existent in China. This is a great hindrance to China-CEEC relations, as only mutual understanding and recognition can serve as the foundation of common projects and cooperation more sophisticated than simple transactions. States should invest in cultural diplomacy, student exchange, scientific cooperation, and similar fields. However, the most important would be the encouragement and support of individuals and institutions to form direct ties with each other. At present, most soft power initiatives are launched by official actors, such as embassies and national cultural and educational institutes, but their effectiveness is questionable. Official institutions represent the official culture that has limited effects, while popular culture is not promoted by them, even though it may make a much larger impact. Thus, the establishment of direct contacts between schools, universities, museums, festivals, cultural and music agencies, theatres, artists, and musicians should be encouraged, and official control must be minimal. An example of South Korea may be followed where cultural export is supported by the government, but its contents are left to those who create it. The most important would be the further expansion of student exchange programs, as these create an ever-growing community of people who have a stake in developing the relations and can be its agents in different fields of life.

7. Conclusion

The institutional structure and the mechanisms of the 16+1 cooperation framework have been established in the past ten years. Substantial development has been achieved in the field of trade, investment, people-to-people relations, and political cooperation. The importance of China has grown significantly since the formation of the 16+1 and is expected to grow further, and China's Belt and Road Initiative created opportunities for all countries along its corridors. Global challenges appeared, such as the acceleration of climate change and the pandemic, which makes international cooperation essential. While the international situation is getting more complicated, mostly because of the tensions between China and the United States, the cooperation of CEE countries and China can be maintained and developed further.

The 16+1 cooperation is a flexible framework that can be easily adjusted to the changes of the global and regional situation and is suitable for the management of the relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe. Some modifications should be made, and a comprehensive reboot may be necessary after the pandemic, to ensure the long-term success of the framework. As an interregional and intercultural platform, the 16+1 cooperation can contribute to the stability of the world order, ease international tensions, and help create prosperity for all participants. Our world faces problems that cannot be solved by individual countries, and 16+1 can be one of the international mechanisms that play a substantial role in ensuring peaceful and sustainable development for all mankind.

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