

CHINA'S 'NEW REGIONALISM': ECONOMIC AND DEVELOPMENTAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE)

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Abstract: Under the fifth generation of Chinese leadership led by President Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) abandoned the low-profile strategy of *'hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time'* and unveiled the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), however, a shift in Chinese foreign policy was noticeable as early as 2011 when the idea of intensified China-CEE cooperation was introduced. Yet, it was not until 2012, when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao declared the 'Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with CEE', that Chinese regionalism in CEE was formalized under the '16+1' Cooperation for Development Initiative.

Observations on the existing literature and the format itself lead to a basic question: *what are the driving factors of Chinese multilateral regionalism in CEE?* The aim of this paper is to evaluate the economic, geopolitical and ideological reasons for launching the '17+1' Initiative and BRI in the CEE region.

Keywords: regionalism; cooperation; partnership; development; infrastructure; strategic thinking; conceptual frames

China's 'New Regionalism'

Under the fifth generation of Chinese leadership led by President Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) abandoned the low-profile strategy of *'hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time'* by unveiling the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), however, a shift in Chinese foreign policy was noticeable as early as 2011 when the idea of intensified China-CEE cooperation was introduced. Yet, it was not until 2012, when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao declared the 'Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with CEE', that Chinese regionalism in CEE was formalized under the '16+1'¹ Cooperation for Development Initiative.

¹ Thereafter referred to as '17+1', as Greece joined the format in 2019.

Since the announcement of both the '16+1' and BRI, the Chinese intentions behind these Initiatives became a controversial topic within media, scholarly debates, and political dialogues. Generally speaking, the narratives could be divided into two categories: those following the rationale of the Realist school of thought, who view the Chinese-led initiatives as '*charm offensive*' and '*divide et impera*' strategy; and on the other hand, the Liberalist, who perceive the Chinese-led intensified economic and developmental cooperation as a 'win-win' opportunity.

Observations on the existing literature and the format itself lead to a basic question: *what are the driving factors of Chinese multilateral regionalism in CEE?* The aim of this paper is to evaluate the economic, geopolitical and ideological reasons for launching the '17+1' Initiative and BRI in the CEE region.

The first part of this paper addresses theories that account for the phenomenon of regionalism in the era of globalism, focusing on multilateral regionalism with 'Chinese characteristics' and the unique case of the '17+1'. The second part analyses the strategic thinking of both the PRC and CEE in their decision to cooperate under a regionalist framework of their own. The third part examines the behaviour of CEE countries vis-à-vis China by breaking down the 'bloc' into three categories. Lastly, the paper offers an investigation on how the trending narratives surrounding the '17+1' Initiative limit the format, the EU cohesion, and the overall Sino-European relations.

Regionalism in the Era of Globalism

While the general notion of regional multilateralism is the desire of groups or states to control the global environment by pooling their sovereignties and resources according to a post-Westphalian logic, there are several other perspectives on regional governance: i) regionalism as a form of resistance and opposition; ii) regionalism as a state-led project that facilitates the implementation of the neoliberal ideology; iii) regionalism as a deliberate defensive and revisionist response to the economic and competitive pressures posed by economic globalization and the emergence of global governance; iv) regionalism as an attempt to provide less developed, marginalized countries with a viable alternative and opportunity to confront the global multilateral level, grounded in a particular historical background and political culture.²

Given these definitions, I argue that the case of Chinese multilateral regionalism in the CEE region is a unique hybrid. On one hand, the '17+1' is a platform intended to pool Chinese industrial materials, overproduction and

² Synthesis of Kacowicz, 2018, p. 66.

workforce, on the other, it is an emanation of the post-EU-accession dissatisfaction of the CEE countries who are still bearing the consequences of the global financial crisis and are now searching for solutions outside the EU framework, in the face of the PRC.

Even more so, on the Chinese side, launching the '17+1' Initiative is a revisionist strategy in the global governance arena, as the PRC is conducting unprecedented mental mapping of the region. Furthermore, the Initiative is indeed an attempt to provide the less developed part of Europe and the Balkans an opportunity for infrastructure and economic catch up with the West. Lastly, although the 12 members within the format are EU member states, and the other 5 are already on the agenda of future EU enlargement, with the exception of Greece, a country excluded until 2019, all other within the '17+1' share a particular historical background – that of a communist past.

In addition to the hybrid nature of the Initiative, it is rightful to acknowledge that it is a multilateral regional fraction within another regional grouping – that of the EU – which remains China's largest trading partner. Just as 'global and regional approaches can be potentially competing authority structures'³, multilateral regionalism, led by an outsider of the western value system, such as China, which 'cherry-picks' members who are already part of a larger regional grouping possess great challenges to the 'institutional arrangements in which the two logics complement one another'⁴. Moreover, risks of 'uncoordinated fragmentation and competition that undermines global norms are potential threats'⁵ that undermine the fruitfulness of such sub-regionalisation. Even though the '17+1' is creating new regional institutions and networks, rather than replacing existing, the Initiative does not directly challenge the status quo of CEE; instead it attempts to establish China as a proactive actor in the region and the international stage. Therefore, there is potential for synergies and 'overlapping processes in the issue areas of economics'⁶ and development between regional governance under the '17+1' and the EU structures.

Besides, on a broader scale, the '17+1' should be understood as a vehicle for the BRI global infrastructure project, given the timing of the initialization of the format as well as the rhetoric surrounding the Initiative. While BRI encompasses much larger geographical area than CEE, the latter comprises a quarter of the countries involved in BRI. Therefore, both Initiatives in the CEE region seem to be intertwined and mutually reinforcing. As noted by Pavličević, 'from

³ Hettne & Söderbaum, 2006, p. 230.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kahler, 2017, p. 97.

⁶ Kacowicz, 2018, p. 69.

a functional perspective, '16+1' can be understood as a means of delivering BRI⁷. In addition, through the interplay between global and regional initiatives in the CEE region, China, as a pivotal state, 'maintains one foot in regional politics and the other in the global politics'⁸, as well as realizes its 'economic interests and aims to advance its role in global institutionalism'⁹.

Regionalization under '17+1' has established voluntary relations that find expression in pragmatic-wide ranging cooperation in sectors ranging from 'trade, finance, industry, agriculture, forestry, energy, environmental protection, science and technology, culture, education, media, tourism, sports, and health care'¹⁰; literally any domain one could name with the exception of security and sovereignty. The creation of such regional cooperation (even purely mercantilist, without any political considerations), however, 'seem to oppose that of the neoliberal 'harmony of interest' in the world economy'¹¹.

Hence, the promotion of 'alternative forms of social and political organizations at the regional level'¹² is to a great extent perceived by outsiders of the '17+1' format as a 'denial of the single universal cosmopolitan culture'¹³ anchored in the common European identity.

Strategic thinking of the PRC

President Xi Jinping's vision of BRI consists of two major projects: Silk Road Economic Belt – road, trade and infrastructure networks between China and Europe and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – Asia-Pacific sea-based network. The CEE region is involved in three of the PRC's Silk Road economic corridors, namely the Eurasian Land Bridge (China – Mongolia – Russia) Corridor, and the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor – both of which cross the Baltics and pass through Poland before reaching Western Europe, and the Central-Asia Western-Asia Economic Corridor, connecting China with the Middle East and Turkey¹⁴. On the maritime connectivity, planned routes exist through the Black Sea (Bulgaria and Romania), the Adriatic and the Baltic coasts, which overlap with the US-led Three Seas Initiative (TSI), also known as 'Trimarium'. All the above- mentioned projects under BRI make the 17 CEECs important partners for China due to their geographical location.

⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

⁹ Kahler, 2017, 97.

¹⁰ Katrandzhiev, 2017, p. 80.

¹¹ Kacowicz, 2018, p. 68.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vangeli, 2017b, p. 104.

Apart from that, it is noteworthy that the global financial crisis slowed down the world economy, including that of the PRC, which too has been witnessing an economic decline and difficulties to push forward with its domestic reforms. These circumstances combined with the decline in global demand, and the consequent Chinese overproduction, present a critical juncture in Chinese capitalism, thus, require growth stimulation. In this context, BRI is an innovative way to maintain the essential economic momentum. In the post-financial crisis era, characterised by economic decline, many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) face a profitability downturn 'with returns on domestic infrastructure turning negative'¹⁵, therefore, the '17+1' infrastructure development projects should be understood as a mechanism to deal with China's overcapacity issue, in a way which would, in turn, facilitate the development of the CEE countries. The much-needed modernization of CEE railways, highways and aviation infrastructure are a great opportunity for China to export its overcapacity, thereby, tackle a major domestic problem. Moreover, much of the cooperation within the '17+1' is framed under the BRI¹⁶ – the emergent hallmark project of 'Budapest – Belgrade – Skopje – Athens' railway is one example of how the BRI and '17+1' merge together.

In addition, on the Chinese side, intensified Sino-CEE cooperation is seen as an opportunity to further integrate Chinese firms into the global economy and as a means to secure economic growth, which is a core national security of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Similar to the CEE countries, China seeks to upgrade and diversify its foreign trade and overseas investment options. Furthermore, foreign direct investment (FDI) flows in the region are helpful to reduce the high levels of savings, thus, to reduce the international pressure on the renminbi appreciation. Chinese FDI in the region is, therefore, market-seeking, as it provides access to Chinese companies not only to the EU but also to the markets of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Mediterranean and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). In addition, the CEE region serves as a strategic gateway to the EU markets as the EU membership of the 12 CEE countries allows Chinese investors to gain from low FDI taxes, to avoid trade barriers and practice the so-called 'tariff jumping FDI'.

Additionally, recognizing the untapped market potential of the EU, under the BRI, China aims to modernize land and maritime trade routes to facilitate and further optimize trade with the old continent. Trade deficit is often the base for accusations on China of using economic incentives for political means. However, in spite the data demonstrating insignificant trade relations between

¹⁵ Jones & Zheng, 2019, p. 320.

¹⁶ Vangeli, 2017a, p. 1.

China and the 17, and their trade deficit – especially that between Poland and China, where the former imports 12 times more than it exports¹⁷, CEE is of key importance for the former. With regards to trade, from the Chinese viewpoint, the region is seen as a ‘collective whole rather than from the perspective of an individual country’¹⁸, thus, in trade terms, for China the CEE region is as important as any of the major Western European countries. Above all, it could serve China as an entry point to reach the EU market, which regardless of the ongoing debt crisis, Eurozone crisis and Brexit, remains the world’s biggest single market, and as such attracts Chinese investments.

Besides, China is driven by efficiency-seeking due to the region’s high skilled and well-educated yet cheap workforce, compared to the Western Europe. In that sense, CEE is seen as training field for the Chinese companies, which lack experience and know-how, and are interested to invest in the EU. Opportunity costs evaluation suggests that it is much cheaper to acquire the knowledge, necessary to access the more complex Western EU markets, through CEE practice.

If the analysis ends here, clearly the Initiative has a strong domestic angle and mercantilist rationale, as the BRI is essentially, a gigantic tool for China’s supply-chain management of redirecting surplus savings, exporting overproduction and giving construction companies work abroad. Yet, as previously mentioned, the ‘17+1’ is a hybrid form of regionalism with multiple layers.

Broadly speaking, with BRI and its corresponding intuitions, President Xi pursues China’s national interests in domestic and foreign terms. Ideologically, the rhetorical campaign surrounding BRI is anchored in two concepts – ‘*China Dream*’ and ‘*community of common destiny/shared future*’, and the Chinese leadership has explicitly linked China’s diplomacy efforts to these core visions. Therefore, the ‘17+1’ under BRI, appears to epitomize PRC’s strive for an alternative normative world order – one based on the ‘Five Principles of Coexistence’, mutual security and common development. The envisioned new global landscape is to ‘established through international rules and experiences of both developed and emerging countries’¹⁹, an idea which could be traced back to the spirit of the Bandung Conference of 1955, which sought to ‘protect and strengthen the new world order and pushed against the limitations of the newly established status quo as it had been envisioned by its great power founders’²⁰.

For all these reasons, the region is seen as a key investment destination and an important emerging market for China, while the industrial and finan-

¹⁷ Matura, 2018, p. 181.

¹⁸ Butler, 2018.

¹⁹ Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 322.

²⁰ Dirlik, 2015, p. 619.

cial capabilities of former make it a strategic developmental partner for the CEE countries.

Strategic Thinking of the CEE countries

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the CEE countries' gradual recovery faced the need of a new reliable economic partner, therefore, they turned to China to seek economic diversification and trade promotion. In this post-crisis context, the China-CEE cooperation should be understood as a 'remedy' for the slow regional revitalization of CEE, which is the main reason why CEE governments turned Eastwards. As Wang Yiwei argued that 'this ['16+1'] is not about dividing Europe... CEE countries are second-class citizens in Europe even if they join the EU – now they are looking east.'²¹ Wang's observations are indeed in accordance with reality and to a large extent account for the 'post-accession' disappointment of the 12. Besides, as former Soviet countries, the CEE region had undergone dramatic transitions in the past three decades, often associated with 'shock therapy'. This experience makes China an attractive partner, as it encourages economic reforms in the region, without imposing a normative blueprint – a characteristic anchored in the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' which distinguishes the PRC's foreign policy practices from those of others.

In addition, despite that Chinese capital is highly welcomed in the region for the economic recovery of the CEE countries, infrastructure projects are of remarkable need. As a matter of fact, 'a citizen of a Western European country has on average twice as many kilometres of motorways compared to a citizen from a CEE EU member state'²². Estimates suggests that in order for the CEE countries to catch up with their western neighbours, they need '€615 billion investments in transport and infrastructure'²³. Within that context, the China-CEE infrastructure cooperation, under the broader BRI, is considered an important source of capital flow in the region that has the potential to fill the East-West development gap. In the case of the non-EU members – the Western Balkans – the inflow of Chinese capital and infrastructure projects is of particular importance, since EU funds are not available for these states.

Moreover, the '17+1' should be viewed as an opportunity for the CEE region to increase its exports to China, thereby, reduce the considerable China-CEE trade deficit, which is a serious issue in the overall Sino-EU relations as

²¹ Crawford & Martin, 2018.

²² Pepermans, 2018, p. 185.

²³ Ibid.

the numbers hit the remarkable sum of \$55.45 billion in 2016²⁴. Outside the EU, trade deficits are also problematic, especially in ‘extreme cases like Serbia where the value of imports is 63 times higher than the value of exports to China’²⁵. The format is, therefore, seen by the 17 as the only opportunity to do business with China and facilitate two-way trade flows.

Overall, CEE sees Chinese FDI and infrastructure projects as an opportunity to narrow the development gap between Western and Eastern Europe. The ultimate goal is economic catch up with the rest of Europe and reduction of the region’s periphery subordination to the West.

Different attitudes of CEE countries towards China

The literature emphasising on how the ‘17+1’ Initiative undermines EU’s cohesion – because the 12 might act as a pro-China bloc – is largely limited by not recognizing the heterogeneity of the CEE region, that attempts to form various regional identity communities: such as the Visegrád four, the Western Balkans, the Baltic countries and the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), etc. A condition under which, the CEE countries are not a single political community and are unlikely to form a strategic entity due to their political and economic diversity.

In the words of Prof. He Yafei, we need to look at the EU individually to form the whole picture of the EU²⁶, claim equally valid for the countries involved in the ‘17+1’ format. In fact, the only similarity between the CEE countries is that they are all former socialist states who share the common need of Chinese capital flow. Apart from that, the 17 do have different approaches towards the PRC. Broadly speaking, three categories could be recognized: i) assertive industrialists; ii) accommodating mercantilist; and iii) EU followers – all of which have no interest to go against or obstruct the EU²⁷.

The *assertive industrialists* include Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, which have limited political trust in China and are solely interested in becoming ‘free riders’ of China’s investment. The *assertive industrialists* also consider human rights, democracy, and Tibet as issues obstructing development of bilateral relations. Those countries distance themselves from China and insist on stronger EU position vis-à-vis Beijing. Poland’s foreign policy strategy is the most significant within the grouping of CEE *assertive industrialists*. Not

²⁴ Chen & He, 2018, p. 73.

²⁵ Matura, 2018, p. 180.

²⁶ Concluding lecture of the ‘Global Governance and Diplomacy in the New Era’ course, PKU 2019.12.16.

²⁷ Jing, 2013, p. 12.

only it is a key hub for the BRI, but also interested in joining the 'Three Seas Initiative', which indicates Polish intentions 'to keep the Trans-Pacific alliance in place'²⁸, in order to counter any possibilities of geopolitical leverage of the Chinese projects in the CEE region.

In contrary, the *accommodating mercantilists* – Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia – are willing to deepen the pragmatic cooperation with China based on 'the assumption that good political relations with China will lead to commercial benefit'²⁹, therefore, maintain friendly relations by supporting the 'One China policy' as well as PRC's position on the Tibetan issue. Serbia, infamous for endorsing China's stance on the South China Sea, is perhaps the most staking example of an accommodating mercantilist. Yet, the case of 'detention and deportation of Falungong activists during the China – CEE Leaders Meeting in 2014 in Belgrade'³⁰, is the most significant case of profound Chinese support. Serbian Premier Vučić responded to international criticism in an interview for China's CCTV: 'When some people wanted to protest against China for some reason, we did not allow it. I said I'm responsible for it, you can protest against us, but not against our friends. We are very loyal and faithful friends ... We hope that this cooperation [between Serbia and China] will continue'³¹. Such pro-China stance not only concerning the South China Sea issue, but also human rights, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the market economy status, should be attributed not so much to infrastructure deals and investments under the '17+1' Initiative, but rather to the long-history of Sino-Serbian relations, especially within the context of deepened relations since the late 1990s after the episode of the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.

Finally, the group of the *EU followers* – the EU-spirited Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina – all of which are heavily dependent on the EU for sorting out their main concerns of maintaining stability, consolidating democracy and ensuring regional security. In turn, Croatia and the prospective EU members of the Western Balkans, with the exception of Serbia, 'do not consider the relationship with China central to their foreign policy'³² but rather a means for funding their infrastructure development.

The political and economic diversity, which accounts for divergent interests of the CEE countries, is an important factor limiting multilateral political cooperation within '17+1' format. Another set of factors is related to the EU

²⁸ Górski, 2017, p. 36.

²⁹ Jing, 2013, p. 12.

³⁰ Pavličević, 2018, p. 695.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jing, 2013, p. 13.

membership of the 12 states which obliges them to follow the EU rules, hence, constrains the expansion of multilateral political and strategic cooperation, under which any possible undermining is prosecuted by the EU institutions. That being said, following the distinction of different attitudes towards China within the CEE region, pro-China attitude in the broader EU framework is considered risky for CEE participants, whose core interest, above all, is the EU's unity and integrity.

The social construct of limitations to the '17+1' Initiative and BRI

This part will analyse the limitations of using dichotomous perspectives, or as Dragan Pavličević phrased it – the use of 'bifocal lens'³³, to depict China either as an 'Opportunity' or as a 'Threat'. It is important to acknowledge the problématique of using binary normative paradigms and conceptual claims, which project preconceived understandings, neglect empirical assessment and in turn articulate 'a sense of disillusionment and anxiety'³⁴.

Articulating the China as a 'Trojan horse' in CEE and neglecting the nuanced picture of the region exerts direct negative impact on the relationship between East-West EU members, and overall the Sino-EU relations, thus, limits the possibilities of constructive engagement and positive results. In line with that, it is important to trace the origins of the Eastwards direction of CEE countries and any pro-China sentiments within the EU. This step is required as the current mistrust between the West and the East of the EU reinforces tensions and in turn, fosters more Euroscepticism within the 12 while making the PRC a more attractive partner. The circulating narrative that the CEE countries are unreliable or incapable of 'promoting EU interests when engaging in external relations'³⁵ consequently not only feeds the fears that CEE countries are an obstacle to the EU consensus, which is at the core of the China as a 'divider' narrative, but also fosters divisions between the EU's more established and newer members.

Moreover, negativism towards the newly accession countries, based on their cooperation with China, adds to the sense of 'post-accession disappointment with EU membership'³⁶ as CEECs feel antagonism against their alternative option for economic catch up and development and are left with the impression that sub-regional partnership is not welcomed within the EU (especially partnership with countries who do not share western values).

³³ Pavličević, 2018, p. 693.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 690.

³⁵ Butler, 2018.

³⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, optimism can also be problematic as it endorses the overly simplistic discourse of China as the opportunity for developmental catch up with the West. This narrative is equally toxic as it often neglects the existing procurement and implementation challenges, the possibilities of a 'race-to-bottom', as well as the risks behind 'loan-and-build' contracts, conditions that further reinforce the widely shared view, that China has not launched the '17+1' for the good of the CEE region, as the 17 are largely being blamed from the West for being lured. Understanding the strategic thinking of both China and the CEE countries involved in the '17+1' initiative, therefore, is essential not only for overcoming the biases but also for a better comprehension of the needs of all parties involved, including the wider EU, and the creation of realistic targets that are satisfactory for all. Overall, as mentioned previously, the '17+1' initiative offers a great opportunity for diminishing the developmental gap between the Eastern and Western Europe through infrastructure projects facilitated by China, as well as a way to decrease the existent trade deficit between the region and the PRC.

Evidently, the use of dichotomous conceptual frames is unfruitful when analysing the '17+1' initiative, therefore the provision of a more nuanced and realistic picture of the China-CEE relations under BRI and '17+1' is needed so that multilateral, cross-regional cooperation led by China under the aforementioned Initiatives would have a positive impact for the CEE region and the overall Sino-European relationship in the long-term.

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