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Issues facing China's soft power in the 16+1 Platform

Abstract. The 16+1 Platform of cooperation is not only an economic project, but also a vehicle for China to spread its soft power appeal in the region. The aim of the article is to demonstrate the issues facing Chinese soft power in the Central and Eastern European Countries that are members of the 16+1 Platform. Firstly, we give a brief look at the historical and cultural hurdles China must overcome in wielding its soft power in the CEECs. Next, we focus on the impact the economic results of the 16+1 cooperation has had on Chinese soft power appeal. Afterwards, attention shifts to the role the EU's own soft power plays in increasing or decreasing China's attractiveness in the region. The conclusion is that China's soft power in the region is linked to its economic hard power. With the 16+1 cooperation not fulfilling expectations, China's appeal in the CEECs is suffering as well.

Keywords: Soft Power; China; 16+1 Platform; Central and Eastern Europe; One Belt, One Road; Belt and Road Initiative; New Silk Road; Investment; CEEC; CEE; EU

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Проблеми застосування концепції «м'якої сили» Китаю в рамках Платформи 16+1

Анотація. Платформа співробітництва 16+1 є не тільки економічним проектом, але й способом поширення Китаєм своєї «м'якої сили». Метою цієї статті є показати проблеми, що постали перед Китаєм у країнах Центральної та Східної Європи (ЦЄ), які є учасниками Платформи 16+1. По-перше, ми коротко розглянемо історичні та культурні бар'єри для Китаю в країнах ЦЄ. Далі ми зосередимося на вивченні впливу на привабливість Китаю в регіоні економічних результатів співпраці. Після цього буде представлено значення власної м'якої сили ЄС в регіоні та її вплив на привабливість Китаю. У статті зроблено висновок про те, що «м'яка сила» Китаю в регіоні ЦЄ безпосередньо залежить від його економічної «твердої сили», а отже, обсягів і результатів економічної взаємодії. Співпраця в рамках Платформи 16+1 не наповнена економічно в належній мірі, що призводить до погіршення іміджу Китаю і можливостей для застосування ним «м'якої сили» в країнах ЦЄ.

Ключові слова: «м'яка сила»; Китай; Платформа 16+1; Центральна і Східна Європа; один пояс, один шлях; новий шовковий шлях; інвестиції; ЦЄ; Євросоюз; ЄС.

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Проблемы применения концепции «мягкой силы» Китая в рамках Платформы 16+1

Аннотация. Платформа сотрудничества 16+1 является не только экономическим проектом, но и способом распространения Китаем своей «мягкой силы». Целью этой статьи является показать проблемы, которые встали перед Китаем в странах Центральной и Восточной Европы (ЦВЕ), которые являются участниками Платформы 16+1. Во-первых, мы кратко рассмотрим исторические и культурные барьеры для Китая в странах ЦВЕ. Далее мы сосредоточимся на изучении влияния на привлекательность Китая в регионе экономических результатов сотрудничества. После этого будет представлено значение собственной мягкой силы ЕС в регионе и ее влияние на привлекательность Китая. В статье сделан вывод о том, что «мягкая сила» Китая в регионе ЦВЕ напрямую зависит от его экономической «твердой силы», а значит, объемов и результатов экономического взаимодействия. Сотрудничество в рамках Платформы 16+1 не наполнено экономически в должной мере, что приводит к ухудшению имиджа Китая и возможностей для применения им «мягкой силы» в странах ЦВЕ.

Ключевые слова: «мягкая сила»; Китай; Платформа 16+1; Центральная и Восточная Европа; один пояс, один путь; новый шелковый путь; инвестиции; ЦВЕ; Евросоюз; ЕС.

1. Introduction

The 16+1 Platform of cooperation between the People's Republic of China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) was heralded as a great opportunity for the CEECs to benefit from China's dramatic economic rise and, later on, its Belt and Road Initiative. However, six years after its official start in 2012, the scholarly consensus is that the platform failed to live up to the expectations of the CEECs (Stanzel, Kratz, Szczudlik, Pavličević & Doyon, 2016, p. 2-3) [1]. This is a setback for China and its efforts to present itself as a benevolent economic great power which offers mutually beneficial «win-win» cooperation to partners across the globe. Such self-presentation is an essential pillar of China's soft power, or power of attraction, towards other countries. China aims to develop its soft power to prevent its potential partners from seeing

China's economic rise and global economic ambitions as a threat to their own economies, either as a powerful competitor or through its unfair trade practices. This view is a version of the so-called China threat theory, which will be mentioned below. The main goal of this article is to demonstrate how the problems of the 16+1 Platform are undercutting China's attempts to spread its soft power appeal in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. This involves the partial goal of presenting the interconnectedness of China's economic power and its soft power. Another partial goal is to show how the soft power of the EU is a factor in China's soft power offensive in CEE. After a review of the literature and the statement of purpose, the article will present the challenges that China needs to overcome in its attempts to increase its soft power attractiveness in the 16 CEECs. It focuses on the economic (and, to a lesser extent,

cultural and historical) factors that lower China's appeal in the CEECs and thus are impeding China's assertion of its soft power. The article then turns its attention to the role of the EU and its own soft power as a counterweight to China's soft power efforts in the region.

Firstly, it is necessary to define soft power. The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye, in his 1990 work *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He further developed these thoughts in the article *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye divided power into two categories: hard power and soft power. The hard power of a state is at work when it has to expend resources, either military or economic, to change the behaviour of another state (Nye, 2004, p. 256, 266) [2]. In contrast, soft power increases the attractiveness of the given state and its policies even without it having to expend a significant amount of resources to get the same effect. The soft power of a country comes from its culture and values as well as whether other states see these values and the given country's foreign policy goals and actions as legitimate (Nye, 2008) [3]. Nye also claimed that the role of soft power is rising in contrast to hard power. The reason is the growth of interdependence between states and the communications revolution (Nye, 1990, p. 160-161) [4].

Some background to the 16+1 Platform is also needed. The basis for the establishment of the platform was laid in 2011 in Budapest, Hungary, as part of an official visit by China's then prime minister Wen Jiabao. It consists of China on one side and sixteen CEECs on the other. The CEECs involved comprise 11 EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia - all of them were among the so-called «new» members, i.e. those countries that joined the EU in and after 2004), as well as 5 non-EU countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). These five Balkan countries are all candidates for EU membership in various stages of progress. This platform is a very loose grouping of states without any formal institutions other than a secretariat. This sole permanent organ is located in Beijing, and it is part of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first official 16+1 summit of the heads of governments took place in 2012 in Warsaw, Poland (Eszterhai, 2017) [5]. This set the trend for subsequent annual summits and marked the official beginning of the platform. After 2018, it was suggested to switch from annual to biannual summits. Behind this move were the weaker than expected results of the Platform. Since Chinese soft power is dependent on its economic power, this development is detrimental to China's appeal.

Methodology. In this paper, Chinese names were transcribed into English using the pinyin romanization. Information was obtained mainly from the electronic databases of scientific journals as well as from the Internet portals of the principal research institutions that focus on China in CEE. Research was conducted mainly by the method of study of scholarly sources. Among the methodology used were the description and analysis of texts by various scholars on the topic and the synthesis of their findings into a coherent narrative. The paper is written from the viewpoint of the discipline of International Relations (specifically the neorealist school of IR), and therefore it uses the terminology of IR. In this vein, states will be studied as unitary actors in keeping with the neorealist paradigm. Internal policy debates within these states will thus not be highlighted.

2. Brief Literature Review

For any article on soft power, the main authority is Joseph Nye, who originated the concept in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He further refined it in his 2004 article *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. A Chinese approach to soft power is provided by Jian Wang, editor of *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* (2011). The most up to date perspective on China's handling of its soft power is by Eric Li in his article in *Foreign Policy* titled *The Rise and Fall of Soft Power* (2018).

Since the 16+1 Platform was founded, a number of scholars have emerged in the CEECs studying the effects of increased trade and investment relations with China on their countries and the region. In Slovakia, one of the foremost specialists on China is Richard Turcsányi, author of the policy recommendation paper *Postavenie a možnosti spolupráce Slovenska s Čínou v rámci platformy 16+1* (*Position and possibilities of cooperation between Slovakia and China within the 16+1 Platform*) from 2016. He also penned in 2016 articles such as *Fico pre rozvoj vzťahov s Čínou neurobil prakticky nič* (*Fico did practically nothing for the development of relations with China*). Another important scholar is Gabriela Pleschová with articles such as *Čína v strednej Európe: Prečo má Čína záujem o Slovensko a jeho susedov?* (*China in Central Europe: why is China interested in Slovakia and its neighbours?*) from 2015. A leading Hungarian researcher is Viktor Eszterhai, having published articles such as *The Geopolitical Significance of One Belt, One Road from a Historical Perspective*, *The new model of transregional cooperation in a changing international order?*, and *The presentation of the «16+1 Cooperation»* (all from 2017). From Poland, an important scholar is Justyna Szczudlik, among whose works is a book chapter *When the Silk Road meets the EU: towards a new era of Poland-China Relations*. All of these scholars have written extensively on the economic aspects of the cooperation between China and the CEECs, as well as expounded on the benefits and drawbacks of the 16+1 Platform. However, the topic of Chinese soft power appears to be relegated to a status of lesser importance. This article attempts to add to this aspect of 16+1 cooperation.

An «outside» Western European view is supplied by Angela Stanzel, who, as part of her focus on the BRICS also touches upon the subject of the 16+1. Relevant examples of her work include the articles *China's Belt and Road - new name, same doubts?* (2017) and *China's Silk Road to Nowhere?* (2015). She also contributed as an editor to the analyses *Grand Designs: Does China have a «Grand Strategy?»* in 2017 and *China's investment in influence: the future of 16+1 cooperation* in 2016. A leading Chinese scholar is Chen Xin, an editor of a work *How the CEE Citizens view China's Development* (2018).

Think-tanks where the aforementioned scholars and analysts congregate include the Institute of Asian Studies in Bratislava, Slovakia, the Pallas Athene Geopolitical Institute and the China-CEE Institute in Budapest, Hungary, Sinopsis in Prague, the Czech Republic, and Euractiv with branches across the EU.

3. Purpose

The 16+1 Platform of cooperation was met with enthusiasm by the 16 involved CEECs when it was first proposed by China in 2011. Seven years on, however, it appears that cooperation did not fulfil their expectations. The amount of mutual trade between China and the region was lower than the CEECs hoped for. The same goes for the volume and destination of Chinese investment. One example of waning enthusiasm was the decision to hold the annual 16+1 summits only every two years. Though the volume of trade and investment demonstrates the objective state of economic relations, it also ties into a less tangible problem of the China-CEE relationship. China has not been able to increase its soft power in the CEECs. The perception of Chinese soft power is entwined with its economic activities in CEE since, as Nye claims, soft power is not separable from hard power (in this case, China's economic power). With the disappointing level of economic relations China is not able to use them to raise its attractiveness as a benevolent partner in the region. On the contrary, certain Chinese trade and investment practices leave its CEE partners wary of Chinese intentions. Examples may be in the CEECs' suspicions of unfair trade practices or China's attempts to penetrate strategically sensitive sectors of the CEE national economies like nuclear infrastructure.

The objective of this paper is to examine the reasons for China's inability to expand its soft power in the 16 CEECs. A better understanding of this issue may help in identifying the problems of China's engagement in the region and also help make

the 16+1 relationship more effective. This should lead to a more productive relationship in economic terms, as well as more understanding between China and its 16 regional partners.

4. Results

4.1. The Basis of Chinese Soft Power in CEE

The ostensible reason why China initiated 16+1 Platform was that there were still a big difference in the economies of the «newer» EU members, as well as the EU candidates, compared to the «older» ones. China thus needed a platform to deal with these countries and their specificities. However, it posed a difficulty for China's appeal in the region. The one thing all CEE members of the 16+1 Platform have in common (apart from their geographical position) is a shared heritage of being part of the Soviet bloc. However, the shared identity of a communist past made it more difficult for China to gain the favour of these countries through its soft power. To wield soft power effectively, it is necessary to know your audience, and it is questionable whether China realized it when proposing the 16+1 Platform. The soft power of Western Europe and the US is much more firmly entrenched in CEE. This has deep roots, as CEE is part of the broader European culture which is built on Greco-Roman philosophy, statecraft and law, Christianity and the tradition of liberalism, the enlightenment and capitalism, which are also the defining characteristics of Western civilization. However, the factors pulling the CEECs towards the West and its values are also more recent. These factors were the strongest after the fall of the communist regimes in CEE. Western Europe and the US became the models to which the CEECs aspired. Two of the most visible forms of this are the ambitions of all CEECs to join the EU and NATO. Hence, the CEECs take steps to align their political and legal processes in line with the Western understanding of democracy and rule of law, and to conform their economic policies to EU standards of socially-oriented free market capitalism. The above mentioned processes took place in the name of a «return to Europe», which was synonymous with the understanding of West (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 5) [6]. On the contrary, much of the attraction and legitimacy of the 16+1 Platform is supported solely by China's economic power, a form of hard power, which is in a counter position with the West.

The loose multilateral cooperation inherent in institutions such as the 16+1 forum is an integral part of Chinese soft power projection, apart from the obvious economic motivations. Because of its growing power, it is beneficial for China to appear as a team player. It wants to show that it can make compromises and cooperate with other countries within a regional or global coalition of equals. China is now putting this method of operation into use in Europe for the first time, in the form of the 16+1 Platform. This strategy was inherited from its former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. It was meant to calm those states that had reasons to fear the growth of a strong China. Such a negative view of China's rise became known as the China threat theory (Suzuki, 2009, p. 779) [7]. In Europe, this theory only has an economic dimension (Vangeli, 2018, p. 4) [8] in contrast to Southeast Asia, where the political-military dimension is prominent. It could mean that the spread of Chinese soft power is easier in CEE, but it is offset by the cultural difference of CEE (in history, religion, values and intensity of contact).

China's economic and soft power offensive in CEE was aided by the fallout from the economic and financial crisis following 2008 (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 6) [6]. The economic recession led to the weakening of the neoliberal Washington consensus in favour of models which advocated greater state involvement in the economy, with China and its model being the main success story of the period. China weathered the crisis much better than most of the West, with a larger measure of state involvement in its economy than what the Western world until then saw as acceptable. It was therefore in a prime position to serve as a model of which way to go for those disaffected with the traditional neoliberal policies of the Washington consensus. While there has not been much progress in this sphere, it did serve to redeem China and its «Chinese model of development» economic policies in the eyes of Western societies and make it a more viable economic partner (Vangeli, 2018, p. 2, 8) [8]. Such a

development was also significant for the CEECs, which had to contend with reduced trade demand as well as investment supply from their traditional Western partner markets suffering from the economic downturn. The abovementioned factors eased the creation of the 16+1 Platform in 2012 as the culmination of CEECs efforts to redirect their trade to other markets as well as Chinese efforts to fill the void left by the decrease in CEE trade and investment with their Western partners.

4.2. Influence of the Performance of the 16+1 Platform on Chinese Soft Power

Despite initial hopes, there has been disappointment among the CEECs about investment from China, namely its volume, structure and destination. Regarding the volume, there was less Chinese investment than the CEECs expected (Pleschová, 2015a) [9]. This ties in to criticism about the structure of China's investment. The CEECs were hoping for greenfield investments to develop infrastructure and create job opportunities. However, most Chinese investments in CEE were acquisitions, aiming to obtain technological know-how and gain a foothold in the European market (Stanzel, Kratz, Szczudlik, Pavličević & Doyon, 2016, p. 8) [1]. Such focus by China fits with its general investment strategy in the EU, where China aims to acquire know-how in high-tech industry. It poses a risk that China would reverse-engineer the know-how and use its economic advantages to take over the markets where the EU has been dominant (Baláz, 2014, p. 20) [10] and has led to caution in the CEECs towards cooperation with China, in keeping with the China threat theory. The destination of Chinese investment also faces criticism. There is also a perception in several CEECs of favouritism by China towards the larger CEECs which could be illustrated by the fact that in 2014 80% of Chinese trade with CEE went to just five countries: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania, and 95% of investment from China went to just six countries - the ones above plus Bulgaria (Stanzel, Kratz, Szczudlik & Pavličević, 2016, p. 3, 6) [1]. Hungary was a leader in gaining Chinese investment (Drapáková, 2017) [11].

The described above trend may be changing as China is redirecting its focus to the EU candidates in the Western Balkans, among which Serbia is becoming China's favoured partner. One reason for this shift is that these countries are a good alternative destination for Chinese investment due to their lower manufacturing costs and location between the Mediterranean Sea and the EU, as well as their employment structure, which is relatively more concentrated in low-tech and low value-added sectors. They are also hungry for investment to lower their unemployment rates and brain drain which makes them more amenable to China's conditions (Gabrielová, 2012, p. 72-73) [12]. The impact of such situation on their EU aspirations may however become an issue, making them a battleground between the EU's and Chinese soft power. Mirroring the EU's own enlargement fatigue, there is also a certain «candidate fatigue» in the candidate CEECs (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 4, 7) [6]. The main reason for that is the prolonged waiting period with no realistic end in sight for the Western Balkan candidates. It leads to a dampening of enthusiasm for the EU membership. There is also a perception that during the migrant crisis the EU shifted its problems onto the countries situated along the Balkan migrant route.

While the data from Table 1 shows that Chinese investment in the CEECs has increased substantially since the turn of the millennium, the acquisition-focused nature of the investment meant that it did not have the impact on job creation and infrastructure development that the CEECs expected (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 11) [6]. It means that the China's soft power could not lean on the impression of economic results. The largest investment was the acquisition of the BorsodChem chemical plant in Hungary, bought by Wanhua Group for USD 1.6 billion in 2010 (Matura, 2018) [14]. This acquisition, however, predated the 16+1 Platform, and China has not been able to match it. The problem is that the proposed giant investment projects are perpetually delayed, like the nuclear power projects mentioned in the next chapter and the Hungarian part of the Belgrade-Budapest railway (announced

in 2014, but delayed several times - last time in December 2018 when a new tender was called due to fear of a cost overshoot) (Budapest Business Journal, 2018) [15] or they fall through, such as the proposed acquisition of the U.S. Steel Košice steelworks in Eastern Slovakia by HeSteel Group (Brocková, 2016, p. 64) [16]. The HeSteel Group previously acquired the Smederevo steelworks in Serbia for USD 49.6 million in 2016 which was touted as a flagship example of successfully completed Chinese investment in the region (Fu, 2017) [17]. But while this type of acquisition-focused investment helps keep the companies afloat and thus preserves jobs, it is far from the greenfield investments the CEECs expected. For example, since the Platform was started in 2012, until 2017, China announced USD 3.5 billion in investment to Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet the country remains at the tail end of Chinese investment in the region.

Similarly, in the same period, Czech President Miloš Zeman often talks about the significant amount of investment that cooperation with China will bring, and China announced USD 3 billion of planned investment in the Czech Republic (Kynge & Peel, 2017) [18]. President Zeman himself claimed the number would be CZK 95 billion, or about USD 4.3 billion. However, the real figure so far has been one third of this amount in the 2012-2017 period of time (Menzelová, 2018) [19]. There has not been any flagship investment project to capture the attention of the Czech public, meaning China is not able to parlay its investments into soft power in the country. On the contrary, the Chinese presence in the country is seen through the lens of corruption scandals and fears of Chinese espionage and subtle attempts at influence - a hindrance rather than a benefit for Chinese soft power.

Meanwhile in Slovakia the government was full of ideas regarding projects for Chinese investment for several years - apart from the above mentioned steelworks, there was also talk of China investing in the Bratislava airport, spa resorts, an automobile factory, a hydroelectric power plant or the extension of the broad-gauge railway through Slovakia to Vienna, but none of the plans have been taken up, let alone come to fruition (Buchlaková & Kováčová, 2016) [20].

Hungary, as seen above, has not been able to attract Chinese investment comparable to BorsodChem, which has also led to a sense of disillusionment, since the BorsodChem acquisition represents almost three quarters of all Chinese investment in Hungary (Matura, 2018) [14].

Therefore, despite progress in amounts of Chinese investment, it is difficult for China and the CEEC governments to promote it and create a popular perception of China as a strong prospective economic partner that brings tangible benefits for the common citizen. So far, there are no symbols of success of the mutual economic partnership which could be parlayed into soft power, since the megaprojects have not yet gotten off the ground or have fallen through. This is thus less of a quantitative question of how much investment a country received from China, but more of a psychological issue of perception.

Concerning the regional fears about Chinese investment practices, it is possible that they may also stem from a culture gap between the Western and Eastern (Asian, Chinese or Confucian-inspired) approach to doing business. East Asian culture, including business culture, is strongly paternalistic, with a strong Confucian sense of hierarchy. It may be one of the factors influencing the Chinese to structure the 16+1 Platform (as well as other multilateral projects) in a bi-multilateral fashion, where cooperation in practice takes place between China on one side and all other partners on the other. These partners tend

Tab. 1: Foreign direct investment of the People's Republic of China in the 16 CEECs, 2005-2016, in millions of US Dollars

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Albania	0.50	0.51	0.51	0.51	4.35	4.43	4.43	4.43	4.43	7.03	6.95	7.27
Bosnia	3.51	3.51	3.51	3.51	5.92	5.98	6.01	6.07	6.13	6.13	7.75	8.6
Bulgaria	2.99	4.74	4.74	4.74	2.31	18.6	72.56	126.74	149.85	170.27	235.97	166.7
Croatia	0.75	0.75	7.84	7.84	8.1	8.13	8.18	8.64	8.31	11.87	11.82	11.99
Czech Republic	1.38	14.67	19.64	32.43	49.34	52.33	6.68	202.45	204.68	242.69	224.31	227.77
Estonia	1.26	1.26	1.26	1.26	7.5	7.5	7.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
Hungary	2.81	53.65	78.17	88.75	97.41	465.7	475.35	507.41	532.35	556.35	571.11	313.7
Latvia	1.61	2.31	0.57	0.57	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.94	0.94
Lithuania	3.93	3.93	3.93	3.93	3.93	3.93	3.93	6.97	12.48	12.48	12.48	15.29
Macedonia	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.26	2.09	2.11	2.11	2.1
Montenegro	-	-	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	0.32	4.43
Poland	12.39	87.18	98.93	109.93	100.3	140.31	201.26	208.11	257.04	329.35	352.11	321.37
Romania	39.43	65.65	72.88	85.66	93.34	124.95	125.83	161.09	145.13	191.37	364.8	391.5
Serbia	-	-	2	2	2.68	4.84	5.05	6.47	18.54	29.71	49.79	82.68
Slovakia	0.1	0.1	5.1	5.1	9.36	9.82	25.78	86.01	82.77	127.79	127.79	82.77
Slovenia	0.12	1.4	1.4	1.6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	26.86

Source: Kong, 2015 [13]; Stanzel, Kratz, Szczudlik, Pavličević & Doyon, 2016 [1, 9]; and Huang, Liu, et al., 2017 [14].

not to have the same intensity of cooperation among themselves, nor a common platform toward China. Such cooperation may look more like a series of bilateral agreements rather than a multilateral institution (Sohn, 2011, p. 81) [21]. Such approach may also reflect Chinese interpretations of its past role as a great power, when China was at the centre of its own subsystem of international relations. In relation to that, China is trying to overcome its experiences of the past two centuries, when it was an object rather than a subject of international relations. Specifically, first during the «century of humiliation» between 1839-1949, when it was a semi-colonized country, then during its isolation under Mao Zedong, when it was seen as a junior partner in the communist bloc and deprived of what it saw as its rightful place in the UN Security Council and other institutions of global governance. It would therefore make sense that it is now turning to past models of international relations when it was a key actor in the international subsystems of which it was a part. Furthermore, in contrast to the Western approach to conducting business according to formalized rules between autonomous actors, the East Asian approach places emphasis on community and relationships. This may account for the informal, loose type of cooperation which is more ad hoc and organic than the formal intergovernmental organizations prevalent in the Western world. On the other hand, it also facilitates circumvention of the rules and corruption, since the formal mechanisms guarding against such behaviour are weaker or nonexistent (Lajčiak, 2017, p. 41) [22]. If this culture gap interpretation is correct, it would show the need for China to step up its self-presentation in the CEECs to educate them about its values and business models, e.g. through intensifying the work of the Confucius Institutes, or more frequent and longer interpersonal exchanges.

4.3. Chinese Soft Power in the Context of EU Influence in CEE

The CEECs, both current and aspiring EU members, also need to take into account the position of the EU and its powerful «older» members. China's engagement in CEE exacerbated the economic and ideological rivalry between China and the EU (Pleschová, 2015, p. 582) [23]. The EU has invested considerable economic and soft-power resources in the CEECs to make them more prosperous and democratic, or more «Western». When the 16+1 Platform launched, the EU responded warily to the initiative. The main reason for the EU's concerns was a fear of China using a «divide and conquer» approach to Europe and the EU. According to this position, China is using the 16+1 Platform as an attempt to drive a wedge between the old and new EU members to weaken the EU, especially as an economic rival to China, as well as to increase China's own influence within it. Even though the CEECs were supportive of the 16+1 cooperation at first, they have also partially internalized these concerns, which of course diminish China's appeal in the region. Hence, the caution of the EU-member CEECs towards deeper cooperation

with China increases. At the same time, China declares that cooperation within the 16+1 Platform is complementary to cooperation with the EU (Grieger, 2016, p. 4) [24].

Another reason for the cool reception of the 16+1 Platform was a fear that China would gain undue influence in the strategic enterprises of the members (Szalai, 2017) [25]. Here we can see the China threat theory at work. A prime example is the Chinese interest in the nuclear power projects of the CEECs, notably in Cernavoda in Romania, Temelín and Dukovany in the Czech Republic, Belene in Bulgaria, and smaller projects in Slovakia and Poland (Biao, 2018, p. 2) [26]. For a more specific example, there was controversy over an attempt by a Chinese company to win the contract on expanding the Czech nuclear power plant in Dukovany without a tender (Sinopsis, 2017) [27]. However, these fears have largely been alleviated because of the slow progress in 16+1 cooperation in general so far, and in the area of nuclear power in particular. Although the Chinese political and business delegations visiting these countries regularly make speeches on deepening cooperation, and negotiations with the aforementioned countries are taking place, as of 2018, there has been no actual final agreement signed between China and any CEECs on investment into nuclear infrastructure (Biao, 2018, p. 2) [26]. The lack of progress, either on nuclear cooperation or other proposed large investment projects, create a negative image of China as an unreliable economic partner, which does not help its soft power. The same goes for China's image as a country that engages in unfair trade practices, such as in the steel industry. Due to its subsidizing of its steel industry, China has been a frequent target of anti-dumping measures from the EU (Fojtíková, 2017, p. 17) [28]. This image of China has also been internalized by the 16 CEECs with their fragile industries.

One of the issues between certain CEECs on one side and the EU (or EU institutions and the western EU members) on the other side, reflects the changing attitude towards human rights and sovereignty, which is visible in the West. This attitude is expressed by the idea that state sovereignty is secondary to the respect of human rights, and that the international community has the duty to speak up or even to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign state if these rights are being suppressed (Mráz, 2017, p. 155) [29]. The EU has become a major advocate of such an interpretation, which is understandable, since it gives the supranational institutions a basis on which to found attempts to exercise power over the EU members. It also bolsters the institutions' claim of being the guardians of the common values, human rights and rule of law in the EU and beyond.

However, many of the CEE EU members have not internalized this approach to sovereignty. On the contrary, due to their experience as members of the Soviet bloc, they consciously guard their remaining sovereignty and are not willing to allow the EU to meddle in what they see as their internal affairs. This stance was seen in the four Visegrád group countries and Romania in the issue of accepting EU migrant quotas. It is most developed in Poland and Hungary, which now often face criticism from the EU institutions for weakening their commitment to democracy and changing into «illiberal democracies». This shows how the soft power of the EU is slipping in the region. It is coupled with the threat of economic (i.e. hard power) sanctions, like loss of access to EU funding, toward these countries (Vangeli, 2018, p. 10, 13) [8]. In such situation, the countries are turning to alternative powers like Russia and China as balancers of EU influence, especially with Chinese investment being a potential substitute for EU funding (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 2, 4, 6-7) [6]. There was thus a drop in EU soft power in CEE due to the migrant crisis and the fallout from the Brexit crisis. Part of the Brexit fallout has been an expected decrease in EU funding for CEE member states following the withdrawal of the UK, which was a net contributor to the EU budget, or the EU trying to reassert its relevance (and possibly work toward deepening integration) by criticizing the political developments in several member states, notably Hungary and Poland. The drop in EU soft power is thus being matched by a rise in the soft power of the alternative Russian-Chinese «pole» which

is considered by the main alternative to the Western Euro-Atlantic pole of the EU, the USA and NATO, and it is therefore a natural alternative for the anti-mainstream populist and radical currents that have arisen in EU member state politics in general, but especially in CEECs' politics in particular, as a result of the migrant and Brexit crises. The Russian-Chinese pole has gained relevance at the same time, due to Chinese development of the Belt and Road Initiative (formerly the One Belt One Road project), also known as the New Silk Road, as well as the Russian turn to China following the imposition of EU sanctions in 2014 as a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea (Švec, 2018, p. 184, 195) [30]. However, China has a soft-power advantage over Russia, since it can combine its soft power with economic hard power, unlike Russia, which is economically much weaker. Furthermore, Russia is still seen as a security threat by many of the CEECs due to history and proximity, while China threat theory has mainly an economic dimension in CEE.

Since the EU has to expend a certain amount of hard power, it shows that the soft power of the EU is also preconditioned by its economic power, just like China's (and in concordance with Nye) (Vetrovcova & Harnisch, 2018, p. 6) [6]. A discontent in the CEECs toward the EU gives China a measure of soft power over the region since its own attitude is that each country should be free to choose its own political and economic model which fits its own historical and cultural context. However, a longer period of time is required to see to what extent this can be a relevant soft power tool for China in the relatively developed members of the 16+1 Platform.

5. Conclusion

The undertaken analysis has shown that there are many obstacles for the full development of Chinese soft power in CEE. The principal issue is that its soft power is connected to hard economic power. Since economic cooperation has not lived up to the CEECs' expectations, China's soft power did not have the opportunity to develop as much as China would have desired. On the contrary, it has suffered due to certain aspects of China's approach to the region. These aspects include not backing up by China its grandiose declarations with actual results in the form of investment, taking questionable steps in sensitive areas of the economies of the CEECs, notably nuclear power, and trade and investment practices that might be perceived as unfair. Apart from the lower than expected volume of investment from China, there is also a feeling of discontent about the form of investment such as a preference by investors for acquisitions instead of the greenfield investments the CEECs were hoping for. It leads to suspicions that Chinese enterprises are attempting to reverse the know-how of the acquired companies. China's perceived favouritism towards the aforementioned larger CEECs in allocating investment is also seen as a source of disappointment by the remaining CEECs that regard themselves as having been left out of the main scope of China's interest. Such public attitudes naturally hurt Chinese soft power in the region, since it can lead to perceptions that China is only pursuing its own economic benefit to the exclusion of a CEE-wide benefit. It would also appear that China's slogans of mutually-beneficial win-win cooperation do not apply to countries that as yet have nothing to offer China and are beneath China's notice. Nevertheless, this may change as China shifts its focus from the EU member states in the platform to the candidate states of the Western Balkans.

It is possible that some of these questionable aspects may be due to a culture clash between Eastern and Western forms of organizing the economy and doing business. If so, it would be crucial for China to improve its image and ensure that the CEE societies are familiarized with East Asian culture and values. It is one of the main reasons why the increase of Chinese soft power would be beneficial for the region. At the same time, Chinese soft power must also contend with the soft power of the EU in CEE. While previously the EU's soft power was unassailable, it has been weakened in recent years. Firstly, this was due to the older members and EU institutions' insistence on migrant quotas to which especially the CEE EU members opposed. The second reason was the EU institutions' negative reaction to internal developments

in Poland and Hungary, coupled with threats to restrict access to EU funding, which led to an opening for China as an alternative pole which the CEECs could leverage against the EU. However, the EU's soft power in CEE is still much stronger than China's one. Not only because of cultural and political factors, but also because the EU's economic power in the region is much more prominent.

The influence of the EU and China does not have to be mutually exclusive. The most often suggested solution to China's problems in CEE is for China to engage the EU more to overcome both the EU's reservations and the CEECs' reluctance. Given that Western European countries, seen as the core of the EU, are much more important trading partners for China than the CEECs, it is in China's interest to address these concerns. The shifting of 16+1 summits from the annual to biannual basis may be a sign of China's loosening its direct engagement in CEE to appease the EU. It is to be hoped that all entities involved can find common ground on which to build real mutually beneficial cooperation.

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