

## Impacts of the New Silk Road on Eastern European Countries

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*China's rise of economic power is moving towards the next step. With the "New Silk Road" or the so called "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" China aims not only on strengthening its international influence on economics but also on politics and culture in the countries they are investing. In this respect, countries in Central and Eastern Europe are of special interest for China. As a gateway to Western Europe, the political influence of China in those countries can strengthen China's position against the European Union.*

*To examine this phenomenon the author studied the published literature of the last years and analysed the Chinese investments into the single Central and Eastern European countries. He used a catalogue of five criteria and categorized the 17 countries, which participated in the 17+1 initiative with China, according to China's involvement in the economic and political sphere of the countries.*

*The outcome of the analyses show, that in some countries the Chinese funded projects develop well. In other countries, the progress of the projects lacked way behind the scheduled time. In six of the 17 countries, no infrastructure investments related to the "New Silk Road" plans could be detected. Furthermore, the study shows, that there is a strong correlation between a China friendly politic in the specific countries and the Chinese activity as well as the funding.*

*This leads to the assumption that the Chinese investments in Central and Eastern Europe are just the vehicle for strengthening the political and cultural influence in the countries as well as in the European Union.*

**Keywords:** One Belt One Road, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China, Influence, 17+1

Although the world is facing nationalistic tendencies in more and more countries and many economists discuss the development of de-globalisation, China is continuing to strengthen its influence on western economies through their "New Silk Road" project. The "New Silk Road", which is also known as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) or the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) project was introduced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping to promote his vision of international infrastructure and trade route projects between the Pacific Ocean from Asia and the Baltic Sea in Europe (Wu & Zhang, 2013). One area relevant to the initiative stretches from East and Southeast Europe to Central Europe. It is considerably made up of post-soviet states, which are now part of the European Union or within stages of entering. Those countries are of great interest to China, as they pose as an intersection between the Eurasian Land-Bridge Economic Corridor and maritime routes leading to Africa. The area appears to be the shortest route to enter the European market (Trifunovic 2020). Therefore, it was obvious that China had to invest great effort in some of those countries to convince them to take part in their "New Silk Road" project. For that reason, in 2012 China started bilateral negotiations with 16 states in Central- and Eastern Europe (CEE) and created its 16+1 initiative that became the 17+1 initiative after Greece joined in 2016. To encourage the economic corporation between the 17+1, China announced 12 measures, especially investments into land-, maritime- and digital infrastructure (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012).

Now, after almost 10 years of development, the Chinese investments seem to lack behind the proposed initiatives. In some of the countries the planned projects haven't even started yet (Šimalčík, 2020).

Against this background, this paper shows the actual status of the Chinese Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) into the CEE countries. In addition, the paper examines other possible motives of Chinese investments than just economic cooperation.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that China massively promoted the development of a digital infrastructure compared to the maritime and land infrastructure and invested large sums in telecommunications and media presence. Regarding these measures, the United States of America (USA) and the European Union expressed major concerns against the implementation of the Chinese digital infrastructure. Primarily it is about the 5G technology provided by the company Huawei that currently is the marked leader. However, Huawei's infrastructure is believed to enable surveillance of the Chinese government (Yap, Chuin-Wei, 2019). As a counteraction, the USA started "The Clean Network" initiative as a comprehensive approach to safeguarding citizen's privacy and companies' sensitive data against aggressive actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party. For their own security, the USA as well as the EU asked the CEE countries to participate actively in this initiative (US Department of State, 2020). Another interesting factor is the Chinese media presence in the CEE countries. Through own networks and in cooperation with local media houses China is able to influence the public politically with formats produced by the Chinese state media (Karásková, 2019).

To enlighten the situation, the author reviewed the literature of the recent years to find out, if there is a correlation between a China friendly attitude from the CEE countries and the proposed FDIs. For that reason, the author selected five criteria based on the Chinese overall involvement and classified the 17 countries to examine whether they meet these criteria and if such a correlation can be detected.

### **Historical Background**

The travel routes that we know as "The Silk Road" were established about 130 BCE during the Chinese Han dynasty. This land-based network of routes was used for exchanging goods and culture between Asia and the West until the conquering of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans closed the routes to boycott trade with the West, and therefore diminished their importance (Mark, 2018). In fact, this was the beginning of the "Maritime Silk Road" as the Europeans started to explore the world by ship and finally reached Asia on the seaway. The next steps towards a modern silk road followed in the 1980's when the Chinese government encouraged its state-owned enterprises and private companies to invest in strategically relevant sectors abroad (European Court of Auditors, 2020). At the same time, the era of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ended. One of the major reasons of that breakdown were the high liabilities of their member countries against western banks. Therefore, Chinese investments into the CEE countries were highly appreciated. During the 1990's, the European Union was very ambitious to integrate the countries on the former western boarder of the USSR into the EUs infrastructure. With the Trans-European Railway project (TER) and the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) the European Union was upgrading its overall infrastructure through roads, railways, airports and waterways (The European Parliament and Council, 1996). At the same time, Chinese leaders were ambitious to enhance the relationship with Europe. Trade increased steadily and China became Europe's fourth largest trading partner (Commission of the European Communities, 1994). After China entered the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, the European Union launched its first policy paper to collaborate with the Peoples Republic of China (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). In 2008, the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) made the first significant Chinese investment for the modern Silk Road in Europe when they invested into the Greek Piraeus's port in Athens to expand the Chinese companies' operations in the Eastern Mediterranean (Putten van der, 2014). Due to the effects of the financial crises, the economies especially in the CEE countries

declined and opened the countries for financial support from China. The first who took the chance in 2011 was Hungary's Prime Minister, Victor Orban. In a bilateral meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao, the Chinese granted investments and the purchase of government bonds (Austria Presse Agentur, 2011). It was also Jiabao, who announced "China's 12 Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries" at a visit in Warsaw in 2012. The measures included a \$10 billion credit line and a \$500 million investment fund to boost the exchange of goods with the region (Szcudlik-Tatar, J., 2013). In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a speech in Kazakhstan and proposed to build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB), "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI), or the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative (OBOR). The speech was the premiere of the metaphor "New Silk Road" (Wu & Zhang, 2013). At the same time, the EU and China were in the middle of negotiating the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation that was signed in November 2013. The agenda took no reference to the previously announced Chinese ambitions of building a "New Silk Road", nor was there a reference to the China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) format (Makocki, 2016).

### The New Silk Road

The idea behind this project that was officially introduced in 2013 is the establishment of a joint infrastructure between China and Europe to enhance trade by land and sea. The vision on land promises to connect Europe with China through a network of railways, highways, and logistical hubs, whereas the idea for the "Maritime Silk Road" is based on a string of industrial ports along the coastlines from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean Sea (Freymann, 2019). To support the land-and maritime-based routes, China also launched the Digital Silk Road (DSR), which digitally connects participating countries. With China as the main driver the DSR aims to improve the connectivity of the participating countries by developing digital infrastructures such as data cables, 5G networks, data processing, storage centres, and satellite navigation (Ghiasi & Krishnamurthy, 2021).

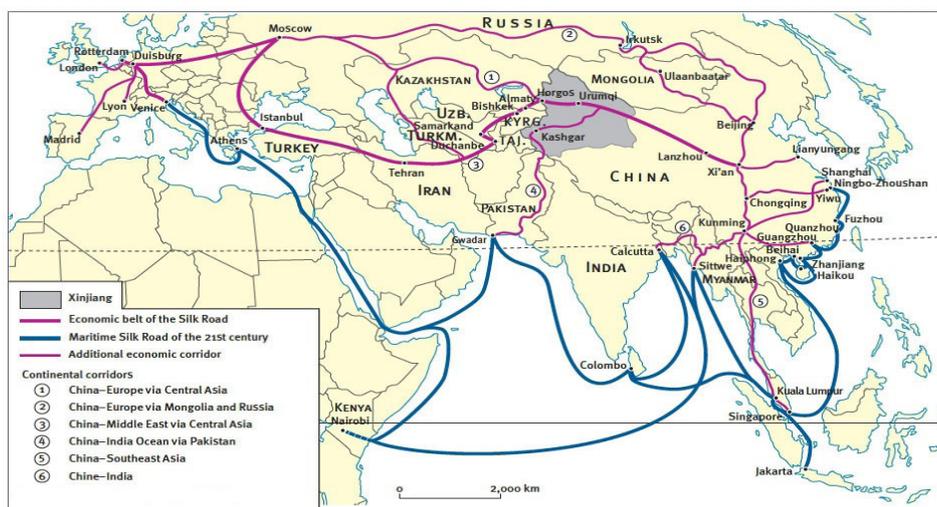


Figure 1: Routes of the New Silk Road

### The CEEC Format (17+1)

The idea of economic partnerships between Central and Eastern European countries and China emerged at the Trade Forum held in Budapest in 2011. For that reason, China defined the following 16 countries as essential in that field. The "16+1 Format" include 11 EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)

and five non-EU members (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) as well as China Greece joined the initiative as a member in 2019, relabelling the cooperation as “17+1 Format” (Ciurtin, 2019).



Figure 2: The 17 + 1 Partners

### Activities in the 17 CEECs

To get an inside view into the situation of the “New Silk Road” project the author selected five significant criteria based on the Chinese overall involvement and classified the single CEE countries into the different sections. The results reflect the actual status of the BRI development.

### 1. Infrastructure projects

Chinese investments into infrastructure projects indicate the geo-strategic importance of that country and reflects the vision of the BRI. Currently China is investing in nine of the 17 CEE countries that are mentioned below.

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** In 2017-2018, a consortium discussed and agreed on a highway project between Baja Luca and the Croatian City Split (Tonchev, 2017).
- **Bulgaria:** The Logistical Center-Varna and the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) signed a contract in 2019 for the joint upgrading of the city’s port infrastructure (Filipova, 2019).
- **Croatia:** In January 2018, China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) won a tender to build the Pelješac Bridge in the southern part of Croatia (Silk Road Briefing, 2018).
- **Greece:** In 2008, the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) made investments into the Piraeus seaport, obtaining a 35 years management concession (China Daily 2008). Later in 2016, COSCO bought 51% of the Piraeus Port Authority and 60% of the Greek railway company PEARL SA (Putten van der, 2016).
- **Hungary:** A consortium of Chinese companies and the Hungarian State Railways (HSR) started to refurbish the Belgrade – Budapest line (Xinhua News Agency, 2015). A fast track railway track to link the Piraeus Port over Northern Macedonia with the TEN-T infrastructure.
- **Montenegro:** In Montenegro, the Government signed 2019 a contract with China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) to build a highway to the northern part of the country, the Bar-Boljare highway (Mardell, 2019).
- **Northern Macedonia:** Macedonian authorities signed 2015 a contract with Sinohydro, a Chinese state-owned company, to construct two highways between Kičevo and Ohrid, and

Miladinovci and Štip (Krstinovska, 2019).

- **Poland:** The Chinese engagement in Poland started 2013 with the refurbishment of the railway cargo lines connecting Lodz – Chengdu and Warsaw – Suzhou. Furthermore, the maritime connection between Gdansk and Shanghai was integrated into the BRI (Szcudlik, 2016).
- **Serbia:** In April 2011, the state-owned China Road and Bridge Company (CRBC) constructed a bridge crossing the Danube River. Furthermore, China, Hungary and Serbia agreed to refurbish the railway connection between Budapest and Belgrade (cf. Matura, 2016). In July 2018, Serbia signed a further deal with China Railway International (CRI) and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) for overhauling the railway line, the Novi Sad – Subotica section (Ralev, 2019). Moreover, Serbia was the first country that actively introduced the digital infrastructure of Huawei in 2020 (?) and installed cameras equipped with facial recognition (Vierecke & Rujevic, 2021).

## 2. Chinese loans

As a part of the business model, China provides loans to those countries who share a common interest to reach the target of the BRI.

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Chinese banks provided loans for constructing the Banja Luka to Prijedor motorway and developing coal-fired thermal power plants by Chinese companies (Tonchev 2017).
- **Hungary:** For the refurbishment of the Belgrade – Budapest line China provided Hungary a long-term loan of 85 percent of the total budget (Matura 2016).
- **Montenegro:** The Exim Bank of China provided 85 percent of the capital needed for the government’s contracts with China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) to build a highway to the northern part of the country (Mardell 2019).
- **Northern Macedonia:** The Chinese Export-Import Bank provided a loan for the construction of the two motorways (Krstinovska, 2019).
- **Serbia:** The Chinese Exim Bank is providing loans of approx. 85 percent of the Serbian infrastructure projects (Ralev, 2019).

### 1. Political support of China

The support of Chinese political narratives, for example the “One-China policy” or the “mask-diplomacy” indicates a countries attitude against China beyond pragmatic economic relationships.

- **Czech:** In case of China’s “mask diplomacy”, the first contingent of supplies was welcomed at the airport by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and other government officials. (Fürst, 2016)
- **Hungary:** Hungary’s President, Victor Orban, together with the Hungarian parliament are Beijing’s closest partners in Central and Eastern Europe. (Paszak, 2021)
- **Serbia:** In Serbia, President Alexander Vucic kissed the Chinese flag to publicly acknowledge the aid and billboards in the capital Belgrade thanked “Brother Xi” for his assistance (Vierecke & Rujevic, 2021)

### 2. Chinese media influence

Through the collaboration with telecommunication companies and media-houses in some of the CEEC countries, China is able to publish its state produced media content and influence a country’s educational sphere or political narratives. China is actively broadcasting in the following countries.

- **Albania** (Taylor, 2019)
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (Shopov, 2021)

- **Bulgaria** (Shopov, 2021)
- **Hungary** (Paszak, 2020)
- **Montenegro** (Mardell, 2019)
- **Northern Macedonia** (Xinhua, 2020)
- **Serbia** (Vierecke & Rujevic, 2021)

### 3. Security initiatives against China

Due to massive security concerns, related to the Chinese “Digital Silk Road” model the United States launched the “Clean Network Initiative” as a comprehensive approach to protect citizens’ privacy and companies’ most sensitive information from aggressive intrusions by malign actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party. 13 of the 17 CEEC participated in this initiative. Four countries still rely on the Chinese technology.

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (Shopov, 2021)
- **Hungary** (Paszak, 2020)
- **Montenegro** (Mardell, 2019)
- **Serbia** (Vierecke & Rujevic, 2021)

**Table 1: Matched criteria**

17 + 1	Infrastructure projects	Chinese loans	Political support	Media influence	No security concerns	Matched criteria
Hungary	x	x	x	x	x	5
Serbia	x	x	x	x	x	5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	x	x		x	x	4
Montenegro	x	x		x	x	4
North Macedonia	x	x		x		3
Bulgaria	x			x		2
Albania				x		1
Croatia	x					1
Czech Republic			x			1
Greece	x					1
Poland	x					1
Estonia						0
Latvia						0
Lithuania						0
Romania						0
Slovakia						0
Slovenia						0

#### Chinese influence on the 17 CEECs

The matched criteria shown in Table 1 are not suitable to determine to what extent Chinese Silk Road activities have an impact of a country. Nevertheless, it provides an indicator which countries experience a heavy impact of Chinese Silk Road activities and may be subject to a Chinese focus. The most affected countries are Hungary and Serbia followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia. While the railway project between Belgrade and Budapest has already started, the development of the infrastructure in the other three countries is poor. Even if some projects, like the railway connection between Greece and Central Europe is way behind the proposed plan, the Chinese managed that their state-owned companies entered the European

market mostly being paid by loans with interest provided by China or competing for construction tenders for projects also financed by the European Union (Kester, 2020). Through such projects, China ties countries into partnerships and increases its political and economic influence in Europe. With projects under the Silk Road label, or the latest activity fitting to the so-called “vaccines diplomacy,” the Chinese have established themselves as a soft power in Europe (Paszak, 2021). Moreover, the Coronavirus pandemic brought a new bargaining environment for China. Providing medical supplies and vaccines helped China to generate positive news in terms of supporting its allied European countries. Nevertheless, China needs to be careful about its reputation. Some projects are in delay, indebted the host country, are subject to corruption scandals, or threaten security or the environment. Construction sites with 90% Chinese workers are part of the Chinese strategy but leave a bitter taste in the host countries. Furthermore, the Clean Network Security Initiative has brought countries to deny the involvement of Chinese companies in their digital infrastructure. Apart from Hungary, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro, all the other states have supported the U.S.–led initiative preventing China from implementing a significant digital aspect to the Silk Road (The U.S Department of State, 2020). Moreover, some of the countries condemned China's treatment of minorities and the actions against Hong Kong's protesters. As a result, they cancelled the contracts with China or even think about leaving the 17+1 format (ERR News, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The Chinese “New Silk Road” project has triggered a focus on infrastructure development in Central- and Eastern Europe. Bilateral agreements between China and the single CEE countries as well as some strategic investments promised a successful start. The way China conducted the projects over the years, paired with the introduction of their digital elements led to an increasing dependency of the CEE countries on China and to a growing mistrust. As a result, many projects came to a standstill or have even been cancelled. Although the Chinese could not realize their entire ambitions, they will still use their existing foothold in Europe to work towards their goals. Countries that host projects of Chinese companies will definitely face Chinese influence. If these countries benefit in any way from Chinese activity, it is due to their supportive individual bilateral relationship to China and strategic aspects in the long-term, like access by sea or location within transport corridors. It appears the “New Silk Road” project was just a tool for Chinese influence, which is currently diminished by the United States and the European Union. Nevertheless, countries located in the planned corridors may benefit from increasing trade or tourism. Even if the “New Silk Road” can not yet be claimed as an overall success, China has established itself in the European market.

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