

ROMANIAN RHETORIC ON CHINA'S 16+1. DIFFRACTION OF POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

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Abstract

From an epistemological prospect, the upsurge of the conventional establishment within the New World Order remains mutually conditional at times, yet different at a notional level. Regarded as an innovative tool in Central and Eastern Europe, 16+1 is a cooperation platform solely conceived in China's laboratory of regional diplomacy. Quintessentially, terms associated with China's 16+1 remain diffused and altered, despite the pursuit of accelerating the concretization of the platform itself and the adjacent projects. Therefore, this article plans to explore how these fractions reflect in Central and Eastern Europe on a smaller scale, namely through analyzing China's 16+1 platform in the case of Romania.

Keywords: Romania, China, 16+1 platform, cooperation, regional politics.

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Introduction

As the Cold War ceased to exist, the international world order experienced a point of fundamental change, as its "abrupt end"¹ caused major stirs across the globe. Different levels of a variety of sectors (be it the academia, government domains, transnational bodies, the greater public opinion, or media outlets) still assess the dimension of this event today and debate the implications that remain conspicuous. Among these, it is argued that globalization lays at the forefront of major reckonings that precipitated the terminal Cold War. Despite agreeing on the fact that "globalization is a long-term cyclical process"², the conceptual approach of this has changed. It does not merely represent a fresh matter in global affairs, yet since globalization "increased in prominence"³, the phenomena started blending in consonance with the new international political context. Therefore, notions affiliated to this new context of international politics reveal, in brief, amongst others: the arguable position of the United States of America (USA) as its "foreign policy has understandably shifted toward other priorities..."⁴, some fierce debates on "the issue of power"⁵ and its projection, the impact of "regional dynamics"⁶, the creation of "distinctive political spaces"⁷ (*inter alia* Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)), or the rise of

¹Stewart Patrick, "The Evolving Structure of World Politics, 1991-2001", in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *International Relations Since the End of the Cold War. New and Old Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 16.

²George Ritzer, *Globalization: The Essentials*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 18.

³Geir Lundestad, "Introduction: The Past", in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *International Relations since the End of the Cold War. New and Old Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 5.

⁴Michael Bernhard, Krzysztof Jasiewicz, "Whither Eastern Europe? Changing Approaches and Perspectives on the Region in Political Science" in *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, no. 2, vol. 29, 2015, p. 313.

⁵Michael Cox, "After the West? Toward a New International System", in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *International Relations since the End of the Cold War. New and Old Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 287.

⁶For further reference, see *Ibidem*, pp. 287-288.

⁷For further reference, see Jackie Gower, "Towards one Europe?", in Richard Sakwa, Anne Stevens (eds.), *Contemporary Europe*, Third Edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 52-53.

China⁸. This spherical approach constitutes a dimension towards understanding the newly created tectonic plates in international relations and beyond.

The essential imperative of this article is to identify main factors that explain Romania's country-level attitude towards China's 16+1. It does not compare 16+1 to similar Chinese-led platforms, but it rather aims at elaborating on several stances that could develop some potential policy recommendations for improving Romania's position in China's 16+1. Additionally, it intends to offer a broader approach upon regionalism and the impact of China's 16+1 in Europe. As a result, this article also reflects upon positions and attitudes towards 16+1 in a much more regional-oriented context, since this is overlapping various other forms of macro-regionalism. Narrowly, on the other hand, it seeks to investigate whether 16+1 is genuinely a stimulant for division or cohesion, especially for those members that are already part of the EU.

After establishing a broader frame of reference in respect to China's 16+1 in CEE, this article intends to answer *Why is Romania passive towards China's 16+1?* This question remains critical not only to Romanian scholars and beyond, but also poses a set of convictions coming from the Chinese scholarship and Chinese governmental agents. These convictions are a reflection today of the enriched history of the Romanian-Chinese relations – at both bilateral and multilateral levels, especially from 1949 to 1989.

Understanding China's 16+1: unknown dichotomy

The upsurge of the conventional establishment, to the extent that globalization had made "the world... indeed [to] become smaller"⁹ is most discernible throughout the 1990s. As Stewart Patrick observes, one large-scale shift is the strengthening of "regional and subregional organizations as frameworks for collective action..."¹⁰ Alternatively, the "enviable position"¹¹ of the USA became arguable, and a welter of new concepts arose.

⁸ Chen Jian, "China's Prolonged Rise. Legitimacy Challenges and Dilemmas in the Reform and Opening-Up Era", in Geir Lundestad (ed.), *International Relations since the End of the Cold War. New and Old Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 251.

⁹ Geir Lundestad, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Stewart Patrick, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹¹ Michael Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

In this regard, for instance, Michael Cox debates matters concerning power and regionalization which nowadays could be identified primarily through the European experience of regionalization and the Chinese experience in the matter of power. Therefore, since the European Union (EU) is regarded as the most eloquent example of regional institution-building, and acknowledged as an acclaimed trendsetter in terms of regionalism, ontologically, similar bodies have taken form in this new international political context across Asia, Africa and the Americas. Some of these are orchestrated by great powers (e.g. NATO, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation etc.), while others have been initiated and managed locally (e.g. EU's macro-regional strategies).

Beyond doubt, it is not solely the merit of the EU that similar bodies have been created across the globe. The trend of multipolarity, as a primary impetus of the New World Order, facilitated a more comprehensive approach to regionalisms, yet the EU, in its aggregated form, inspired similar practices silently. In this sense, it is indicative to point out Ian Manners' observations that Simon Duke evokes, according to which the European experience, although within certain limits of normative assertions, had galvanized a change in the conception by adding a constructivist perspective to the thrust of the same normative power¹². Thereupon, this neoteric angle prepensively implies that "the EU has become a force in international affairs, especially in trade, development cooperation, and the promotion of regional integration, democracy and good governance, human rights and, to an increasing extent, also in security policies"¹³.

Synchronously, in the same post-Cold War context, the concept of an Eastern European construct faded¹⁴ mainly due to the integration of Central and Eastern European states into both the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, recent regime change and continuous political ontogenesis created "spatio-temporal unevenness"¹⁵

¹² For further reference, see Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 2, vol. 40, 2002, p. 263; Ian Manners, "The normative ethics of the European Union" in *International Affairs* no. 1, vol. 84, 2008, p. 45, both cited in Simon Duke, *Europe as a Stronger Global Actor. Challenges and Strategic Responses*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 23.

¹³ For further reference, see Michael Bernhard and Krzysztof Jasiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹⁴ Tsveta Petrova, "Diffusion and the Production of Eastern Europe" in *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, no. 2, vol. 29, 2015, p. 499.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 500.

that could be translated into a unique point of reference in various theoretical and practical fields. For this reason, CEE benefits from significant attention not only in the academia, but also in the practical paradigm of international affairs.

Particular attention is given also to China's 16+1, since its construction is still an ongoing process, despite having been noted that it "took an institutional form" in 2012¹⁶. The primary objective is "to facilitate and deepen exchange and cooperation between China and sixteen CEE countries"¹⁷. Apart from broad definitions offered by the scholarship, an imperative feature that is easily to observe is that not all countries participating in China's mechanism are member states of the EU. In this regard, Chinese scholars highlight that it does not impose a threat to the existentiality of the 16+1, nor to cooperation between the EU and China. Huang Ping, Liu Zuokui et al. assess that, in fact, 16+1 is an "inseparable" component for the cooperation between the EU and China, especially since those non-EU countries "regard integration into the EU as an important national strategy and a future development direction"¹⁸. Also, it is argued that China's CEE mechanism "provides positive complement for China-EU trade relations"¹⁹. Thus, it is crucial to assess that while "China's trade with the EU fell by 3.1%", trade with CEE displayed "an obvious growth"²⁰, being "better than that with the EU's older member states"²¹. In other words, 16+1 is vastly perceived, narrowly, as a valuable accomplishment for Beijing in CEE as well as in the EU, more broadly²².

A major peculiarity is that, generally estimating, the Chinese scholarship has a much more enthusiast approach to studying about and reflecting upon the 16+1 platform in comparison to their CEE counterparts.

¹⁶ Martin Hala, "Forging a New <Eastern Bloc>" in *Journal of Democracy* no. 2, vol. 29, 2018, p. 84.

¹⁷ Dragan Pavličević, "<China Threat> and <China Opportunity>: Politics of Dreams and Fears in China-Central and Eastern European Relations" in *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 113, vol. 27, 2018, p. 688.

¹⁸ Ping Huang, Zuokui Liu et al., *The Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (16+1): 2012-2017*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² For further reference, see Martin Hala, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

This attitude represents a threat to the delivering of the platform, and is substantially transferred into the practical paradigm of international and regional politics. Being heavily reflected, for instance, through Martin Hala's argument, China's 16+1 "has received little attention in the West, and it is not widely known or understood even in the region itself"²³.

The same New World Order witnessed a rising China. As Chen Jian discusses, "from a Chinese perspective... the Cold War did not end in the early 1990s but rather in the late 1970s..."²⁴ This frame of reference, connected to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policy, is of particular importance to scrutinize. *Firstly*, this represents a decision "to shift the [domestic] focus from political movement to economic development"²⁵. *Secondly*, once the effects of reform concretized internally, the Chinese leadership sought to further improve relations with the West and beyond. Hence, the end of the conventional Cold War facilitated *inter alia* China's rise internationally and determined more pro-active stances in global issues²⁶. *Thirdly*, the vacuum forsaken by the Soviet Union left space for Chinese avowals and, with the rise of multilateralism, it offered impetus towards affirmation. Overall, as the scholarship endorses, "China's economic rise is seriously impressive"²⁷, albeit Beijing "remains quite isolated internationally"²⁸ and "without a very clear idea of what it is doing"²⁹ in current projects, nominal high-level political forums or major security issues (from the perspective of high politics).

Dragan Pavličević shares Hala's belief, bringing into debate additional arguments that are related not only to CEE's recent historical past and current ambitions, but also related to China's foreign policy strategies that were deficient in building strong policy in the region until

²³ Dragan Pavličević, *op. cit.*, p. 688.

²⁴ Cai Fang, Ross Garnaut, Ligang Song, "40 years of China's reform and development: How reform captured China's demographic dividend", in Ross Garnaut, Ligang Song and Cai Fang (eds.), *China's 40 Years of Reform and Development: 1978-2018*, Acton: The Australian National University Press, 2018, p. 5.

²⁴ For further reference, see Chen Jian, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-252.

²⁵ Cai Fang, Ross Garnaut and Ligang Song, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁶ For further reference, see Chen Jian, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-252.

²⁷ Michael Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

²⁸ Geir Lundestad, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁹ Michael Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 285

more recent times³⁰. In this way, as Pavličević claims, "CEE countries have transitioned from <not knowing about China> to <not knowing what to do about China>"³¹. The same disconnecting pattern is identified by Weiqing Song who considers that China's 16+1 initiative "is in sharp contrast to the lukewarm relationship between China and the CEE countries during the majority of the Cold War period and in the post-Cold War era"³². Song considers that China and CEE countries "are attracted to each other on the basis of economic pragmatism"³³ rather than "political opportunism"³⁴.

Subsequent parts of the specialized scholarship debate that 16+1 is still in "a process of creative and rapid institution-building"³⁵. As a consequence, major stakeholders do tend to participate in forums and vastly debate or assess the implications of China's 16+1 for both China itself and the sixteen CEE states. However, this tendency has proven that compelling action is lacking pragmatism and remains limited in its effectiveness, beyond a few factual achievements³⁶. Scrutinizing this could also be reflected in the academia, and hence it is facile to deduct that the specialized literature remains amorphous. Dragan Pavličević remarks this trend by pinpointing that "two competing discourses have emerged, each providing diametrically opposed interpretation of China's engagement of the CEE"³⁷. Consecutively, it heavily influences "what issues should be prioritized within that relationship and what measures and policies should

³⁰ For further reference, see *Ibidem*, pp. 688-689.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 689.

³² Weiqing Song, "China's Long March to Central and Eastern Europe" in *European Review*, no. 26, vol. 4, 2018, p. 755.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 756.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Anastas Vangeli, "16+1 as a Laboratory: Lessons China's New Relations with CESEE Can Teach Us about the Future of the Belt and Road Initiative" in Ping Huang, Zuokui Liu (eds.), *How the 16+1 Cooperation promotes the Belt and Road Initiative*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2018, p. 15.

³⁶ According to Weiqing Song, one of these major, factual achievements could be regarded as the "China-proposed Hungary-Serbia project [that] stands out as a typical example [...] representing a flagship project between the world's second largest economy and the CEECs". Other projects include "constructing a thermal power plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, constructing a nuclear power plant in Romania, acquiring a steel plant in Serbia, and signing an express freight railway agreement with Poland".

For further reference, see Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 761.

³⁷ Dragan Pavličević, *op. cit.*, p. 689.

be taken to properly address them [...]”³⁸ due to the fact that, Pavličević continues, “they play a key role in shaping expectations, interpretations and eventually policies toward China, which in turn are bound to significantly influence the trajectory and outcomes of <16+1>”³⁹.

Collateral ambiguity is further reflected also in the generic terminology that assigns China’s 16+1. They remain constrained to either mechanism, initiative, platform or format. Therefore, it reflects the ambiguity not only of the scholarship, policymaking or even governmental agents, but also the fact that 16+1 is not regarded as an institution in a traditional sense. For this reason, this article avoids labelling China’s 16+1 as an institution or organization. *Per contra*, it is vital to assess a study advanced by Ping, Liu et al. as they present a welter of “cooperation mechanisms or platforms constructed or to be constructed”⁴⁰ under the umbrella of 16+1. Accordingly, it is at ease to determine that China’s platform is heading towards becoming an institution itself, split with secretariats between various CEE locations and Beijing, but the process of institution building has not yet ended. Such arguments are acknowledged by the CEE scholarship; hitherto these projections do not represent any sort of concern, nor stimulate interest for an in-depth study on behalf of the Chinese scholarship realm. Despite these cognitions, concrete institution-building plans epitomized, for example, under the auspices of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which established a “16+1 Secretariat for China-CEEC Cooperation”⁴¹ in order “to coordinate the cooperation between various Chinese institutions and the 16 CEE Countries and to promote the collaboration with authorities of 16 CEE countries”⁴². Tags affiliated with these institution-building efforts are ambiguous, although Jakub Jakóbowski offers the most accurate protrusion as being “sectoral cooperation mechanisms”⁴³.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Huang Ping, Liu Zuokui et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

⁴¹ Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 759.

⁴² Huang Ping, Liu Zuokui et al., *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴³ For further reference, see Jakub Jakóbowski, “Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCE” in *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 113, vol. 25, 2018, p. 667.

Nonetheless, taking into account that policymakers in Beijing are well aware that CEE is one of the regions with "the greatest potential"⁴⁴, it is indicative to succinctly consider Angela Stanzel et al. explanations, based on Long Jing's ascertainment, according to which China's 16+1 also has an "image problem"⁴⁵. This issue is examined based on what the authors claim to be enthusiasm (depending on the potential each country possesses), willingness to cooperate (based on various sets of political identities), and EU's "suspicion of China's possible geopolitical intentions"⁴⁶. A succinct, yet complementary ethos to such arguments could also be found in what Vangeli claims to be the "absence of a stamp/logo... for the activities carried under this initiative"⁴⁷.

In contrast to Stanzel's relatively superficial framework, Weiqing Song offers a much more accurate narrative that explains how China-CEE relationship and, implicitly, China's 16+1 are "impeded by a number of economic, normative and geo-political obstacles"⁴⁸. For the same reason, Dragan Pavličević debates the notion of "bifocal lens", based on Chengxin Pan's assertions, which considers extensively "normative paradigms"⁴⁹, and supports the assumption according to which China's perception is either "a source of enrichment"⁵⁰ or one that "imbues China's politics, political economy and policies with the menacing qualities"⁵¹. As a result, Pavličević believes that "rather than being based on a comprehensive empirical inquiry... the perceptions of 'Opportunity' and 'Threat' are rather projections of the 'meaning', hopes and fears others attach to China in line with their own preferences, anxieties and pre-conceived understanding of self and others"⁵².

⁴⁴ Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 758.

⁴⁵ For further reference, see Jing Long, "Opportunities and Challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe", ('一带一路'倡议在中东欧地区的机遇和挑战, Yidai yilu changyi zai zhongdongou diqu de jiyu he tiaozhan) in *Guoji guanCha*, no. 3, 2016, pp. 118-130, cited in Angela Stanzel, "Dividing without antagonizing: China's 16+1 image problem", in Angela Stanzel et al., *China's Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Anastas Vangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 756.

⁴⁹ Dragan Pavličević, *op. cit.*, p. 690.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 691.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

In a much more archetype pattern, China's 16+1 remains commented upon due to the fact that "China has created a mirror for Europe's internal problems and fading influence"⁵³, especially by accommodating "what Russia perceives as its primary sphere of influence"⁵⁴ in CEE. In other words, participating CEE countries "largely form a geographic belt immediately adjacent to the post-Soviet space, but exclude Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine"⁵⁵. Thence, beyond the argument pertaining to geography and assembling a mechanism that could facilitate cooperation under the same aegis with CEE, 16+1 reminds stakeholders of some considerable geopolitical implications.

Yet, other arguments that align with similar deliberations are linked to China's adoption of the "pivot state strategy"⁵⁶ and designation of several countries to the level of strategic partnerships. Among these, partnerships with Serbia and Poland "[...] were upgraded to comprehensive strategic partnerships in June 2016 and another one with Hungary was established in May 2017. It is noteworthy that in China's diplomatic glossary, a comprehensive strategic partnership is the highest level of diplomatic relationship"⁵⁷. In addition, it remains "difficult to pinpoint the rationale and contribution of each country"⁵⁸. This further indicates the existent ambiguity and contributes to the tergiversation of China's 16+1 from within CEE. Under these circumstances, the scholarship assays CEE narrowly by dissecting analyses through "regional specifications"⁵⁹, such as the Visegrád Group (V4), the Balkan or the Baltic regions⁶⁰.

Undeniably, this attitude does reinvigorate the purpose and results of 16+1 at this stage of its development, though it could grasp more division if this remains static in the future. Arguments that depict these analyses are

⁵³ Anastas Vangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Martin Hala, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 760.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ Anastas Vangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Marek Hrubec, "Innovation in Understanding and Cooperating the Macro-Regions: The Potential of Promotion of the <16+1 Cooperation> and the Belt and Road Initiative" in Ping Huang; Zuokui Liu (eds.), *How the 16+1 Cooperation promotes the Belt and Road Initiative*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2018, p. 40.

⁶⁰ For further reference, see Ping Huang, Zuokui Liu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

solely linked to economy and investment, and thus such tendencies will further politicize the economy of CEEu states⁶¹. In spite of that, China is facing rather confined challenges in the region that should and could be addressed effectively and in a more prompt demeanor. As the same Vangeli highlights broadly, in agreement with Weiqing Song and Martin Hala, China has not accommodated with "EU procurement rules which do not allow for direct award of contracts without going through an open tender"⁶².

Nonetheless, "labor regulations, specific technical requirements, environmental standards, obligations to consult local communities are also quoted as challenges needed to be dealt with Chinese companies while investing in infrastructure"⁶³ or trade deficits⁶⁴. In fact, Weiqing Song presents a distinct case, which embodies such beliefs by means of "the failure of a Chinese state-owned construction company's (COVEC's) attempt to complete the construction of a 50-km long stretch of highway between Warsaw and the German border"⁶⁵. Song clarifies that, "as the project progressed, COVEC was found to lack good planning, be ignorant of the strict regulations and labor standards applying, and to have poor managerial and financial skills"⁶⁶. As a result, "the Polish government cancelled the contract and demanded compensation in 2011. The whole story was considered a big blow to China's ambition to export its infrastructural capabilities to the West"⁶⁷.

Genesis of the rhetoric: pursuing economic interests or ensuing political values?

Apart from these general forethoughts, it is far-reaching to determine Romania's stance regarding China's 16+1. Beyond the arguments pertaining to geopolitics, pivot states and various challenges faced on different levels, Romania's position resonated with the European ones, and thus "no in-depth

⁶¹ For further reference, see Martin Hala, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶² Anastas Vangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Weiqing Song argues that "almost all of the CEECs have suffered considerable trade deficits in trade with China". For further reference, see Weiqing Song, *op. cit.*, p. 762.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 761.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 761-762.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 762.

analysis"⁶⁸ had been provided "until the end of 2016"⁶⁹. Conceivably, Romanian interests are easily identified in "areas of energy, agriculture, infrastructure, communications, IT, and tourism"⁷⁰. In addition to this, as the Romanian scholarship reveals, Romania is ardent to maximize its "strategic advantages arising from its status of EU member state and Black Sea and Danube riparian state, in order to facilitate the transit of goods between China and the EU"⁷¹.

"Despite the fact that Romanian-Chinese relations, prior to 1989, were unique, based on thorough mutual support, this trend did not remain linear"⁷² as it is exhibitiv "to characterize today's bilateral *state of the art* as <not in [the] strategic> perspective"⁷³. Ana Pantea observes that "overlapping and generally endorsed scholarship arguments debate the fact that <Romania's relationship with China and other traditional partners decreased in intensity during the process of EU accession and integration>"⁷⁴. Thereupon, it became clear that "Romania lost numerous opportunities, including the historical advantages in developing economic cooperation with the largest emerging economy, China"⁷⁵.

In a similar way, Ana Pantea examined in 2018 a series of communiqués issued by the Government of Romania, noting that "it is critical to observe that its position [of the Romanian Government] gained some sort of a pattern: not only have they been delivered under the accustomed 16+1 framework, but also in most part of the bilateral meetings and major summits, Romania..."⁷⁶ has been mainly represented by lower ranking government officials⁷⁷. "For example, at the 2015 China-CEE Summit, held in

⁶⁸ Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, "Sino-Romanian relations under the New World Order" in Weiqing Song (ed.), *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe. From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, London, New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 187; *apud* Ana Pantea, "One Belt, One Road Initiative and Its Geostrategic Significance for Eastern Europe" in *Knowledge-Based Organization*, doi:10.1515/kbo-2018-0025, vol. XXIV, no. 1, 2018, p. 174.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, pp. 174.

⁷³ See Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁷⁴ See Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, *op. cit.*, *apud Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷⁵ Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, *op. cit.*, *apud Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁷⁶ Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁷⁷ For further references, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "România va găzdui prima conferință ministerială și târgul în domeniul energiei în cadrul formatului de cooperare China – Statele Europei Centrale și de Est (16+1)", 2017, [<http://mae.ro/node/43935>], 13 November 2018.

Suzhou, Romania sent cabinet level ministers, even though the meeting was dedicated to Presidents or Prime Ministers"⁷⁸. Contrary to this, "Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary or Poland were all represented at a higher level"⁷⁹. However, at the 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2019 Summits, Romania was represented at the level of Prime Minister⁸⁰. This is peculiar to assess because it is

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat pentru afaceri bilaterale globale, Monica Gheorghiu, la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali ai Cooperării China - Europa Centrală și de Est (16+1)", 2017, [<http://mae.ro/node/43598>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "România va organiza la București Forumul partidelor politice din formatul Cooperării China - Europa Centrală și de Est (16+1)", 2017, [<http://mae.ro/node/42469>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat Alexandru Victor Micula la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali ai Forumului de cooperare China - Europa Centrală și de Est (16+1)", 2016, [<http://mae.ro/node/38811>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Consultări bilaterale între secretarul de stat pentru afaceri globale, Daniela Gîțman, și ministrul asistent al afacerilor externe din Republica Populară Chineză Liu Haixing", 2016, [<http://mae.ro/node/38500>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Întrevederea secretarului de stat Daniela Gîțman cu delegația Comisiei pentru afaceri externe a Adunării Naționale Populare a R. P. Chineze", 2016, [<http://mae.ro/node/37768>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat Alexandru Victor Micula la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali ai Cooperării China - Europa Centrală și de Est", 2016, [<http://mae.ro/node/37600>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Întrevederea secretarului de stat Radu Podgorean cu o delegație de lucru a MAE chinez pentru cooperarea 16+1", 2016, [<http://mae.ro/node/35394>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat Radu Podgorean la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali ai formatului de cooperare R. P. Chineză-Europa Centrală și de Est", 2015, [<http://mae.ro/node/34372>], 13 November 2018).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat Radu Podgorean la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali ai Cooperării China – state din Europa Centrală și de Est", 2015, [<http://mae.ro/node/32881>], 13 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Participarea secretarului de stat Radu Podgorean la reuniunea coordonatorilor naționali din Forumul de cooperare China-ECE", 2014, [<http://mae.ro/node/26655>] 13 November 2018, *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁷⁸ Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁰ For further references, see Government of Romania/Chancellery of the Prime Minister, "Participarea prim-ministrului României, Viorica Dăncilă, la Summit-ul șefilor de guvern ai formatului cooperării 16+1/Europa Centrală și de Est-R.P. Chineză", 2019, [<http://gov.ro/ro/stiri/participarea-prim-ministrului-romaniei-viorica-dancila-la-summit-ul-sefilor-de-guvern-ai-formatului-cooperarii-16-1-europa-centrala-i-de-est-r-p-chineza&page=1>], 12 April 2019.

connected, to a certain extent, to Chinese political values and, more vastly, to the image perception of an emerging China that is projected on other state actors in the process of socialization.

In the attempt to debate the lack of enthusiasm, answers could be found in the fact that there is an inconsistency "at the level of political correctness"⁸¹. The sudden and "successive domestic changes..."⁸² had an impact on "Romania's foreign relations, especially those with the Far East"⁸³, despite establishing a strategic partnership with the Republic of Korea⁸⁴, while high-level dialogues have been initiated with Japan towards yet another similar partnership⁸⁵.

It is easily observed the unequal balance of/in Romania between political values, economic interests and national security. Perhaps it could also be argued that Romania sacrifices most of its values in exchange for pursuing interests. Therefore, "Romania lacks pragmatism when tackling [the greater welter of] international relations due to internal [dilemmas]... while things seem to have already been caught up in... a vicious repetitiveness"⁸⁶. The establishment became incapable of generating leadership stances based on values and pertinent strategies abroad. As a consequence, geopolitical innovation is not aggregated.

The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "The Sofia Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries", 2018, [http://english.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2018/07/16/content_281476224693086.htm], 11 April 2019.

Government of Romania/Chancellery of the Prime Minister, "The Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries", 2013, [<http://gov.ro/en/news/the-bucharest-guidelines-for-cooperation-between-china-and-central-and-eastern-european-countries>], 19 November 2018.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries", 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1224905.shtml], 11 April 2019.

⁸¹ Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ For further reference, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Parteneriatul Strategic cu Republica Coreea", 2018, [<https://www.mae.ro/node/4854>], 2 December 2018.

⁸⁵ For further reference, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Relația Specială a României cu Japonia", Bucharest, [<https://www.mae.ro/node/4853>], 2 December 2018,

⁸⁶ Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

In the same train of thoughts, the Romanian scholarship relevant to China's 16+1 "is fractured and dismissed by governmental agents"⁸⁷. This pattern is brought into light by a recent study conducted by Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru. Having "conducted a series of interviews with government officials, Sinologists and journalists in Romania"⁸⁸, Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru discover one peculiarity that arises from the following postulation: "*Do you appreciate that the current Romanian government supports strengthening cooperation relations with China? - Yes; - No; - I do not know*"⁸⁹. And "admittedly, Oehler-Şincai and Liu conclude that this <let to positive answers among the ministerial experts and negative answers among the Sinologists and journalists>"⁹⁰. Thus, the assumption articulated by the author through the results and the relevance of this article becomes valid, revealed through this complex study that is now inserted within in the specialized literature.

On the other hand, the same Ana Pantea debates some "several optimistic aspects [that are] worth mentioning. *First[ly]*, the 16+1 Summit, in 2013, was held in Bucharest"⁹¹, demonstrating political desire. *Second*, Romania accepted "to host the Center for Dialogue and Cooperation on Energy Projects"⁹² at the level of sectorial cooperation, which grants Romania unicity and specificity within 16+1. *Third*, in September 2016⁹³, "the Romanian government [...] approved the start of discussions on the conditions under which the country could become a member of the AIIB...."⁹⁴, a process that

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁸⁹ Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, *op. cit.*, p. 193 *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, *op. cit.*, *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ For further reference, please see Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, "About", 2016, [<http://ceec-chinalatvia.org/page/about>], 19 November 2018, *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

⁹² Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*; Mădălina Cerban, "Cioloş: Centrul pentru Dialog şi Cooperare în domeniul proiectelor energetice, înfiinţat la Bucureşti" in *Agerpres*, 2016, [<https://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2016/11/05/ciolos-centrul-pentru-dialog-si-cooperare-indomeniul-proiectelor-energetice-infiintat-la-bucuresti-19-50-13>], 20 November 2018.

⁹³ For further reference, please see "A Welcome Catalyst for Sino-Romanian Ties" in *Beijing Review*, 2017, [http://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/201705/t20170504_800095401.html], 3 December 2018.

⁹⁴ Janne Suokas, "Romania seeks to join Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" in *GB Times*, 2016, [<http://gbtimes.com/business/romania-seeks-join-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank>], 19 November 2018, *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

concluded in mid-2017⁹⁵. *Last*, Romania "was the second CEE country that <signed a MoU for the development of bilateral cooperation in the economic zone of the Silk Road>"⁹⁶. Other efforts in this direction have slightly concretized recently also in domestic politics (through establishing a network of ministerial expertise) or by means of explorations of European politics (*i.e.* Romania's Presidency of the Council of the EU which propelled strongly an EU-China Summit)⁹⁷.

Ana Pantea, lecturer at Transylvania's Babeş-Bolyai University, being one of the few to have been studying the issue of improvement, endorses the fact that Romania has the potential to "play a role in the energy sector, critical infrastructure, and the peaceful use of the outer space"⁹⁸. From a generic mindset, Pantea believes that Romania "needs a wise multilateral foreign policy" due to its strategic Euro-Atlantic engagements and position, – "major geopolitical actor on the Black Sea" –, and recommends in such a way to "build a strong policy with the East"⁹⁹. Perhaps some concrete policy ventures are to be found in Hungary's *Opening to the East Policy*¹⁰⁰.

Finally, China's 16+1 is regarded as one of the most complex and important projects of the moment, although being a tentacle of the greater Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It represents one of the footprints that China desires to emulate upon CEE, in particular, because of historical ties and growth – both economic and political. Accordingly, its economic and geopolitical significance will shape not only the transmitter, but also the receivers.

What could be imperatively critical is whether bilateralism might speed up Romania's 16+1 engagement. In this succession of striking interrogations, considered for further research, the secluded credo does not necessarily have to emerge from Hungarian, Polish or Serbian examples¹⁰¹, but rather it has to loom distinctly. This distinctiveness could further be

⁹⁵ Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, "AIIB Further Expands Its Membership", 2017 [https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2017/20170513_001.html], 1 July 2019.

⁹⁶ Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincăi and Liu Minru, *op. cit.*, p. 188, *apud* Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*

⁹⁷ Interview with Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincăi PhD, 5 April 2019, Bucharest, Romania.

⁹⁸ Interview with Lecturer Ana Pantea PhD, 29 April 2019, Cluj-Napoca Romania.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ For further reference, see Ling Yuan, "How China and Hungary have boosted ties in recent years" in *Xinhua*, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/01/c_137575090.htm], 2 April 2019.

¹⁰¹ See Ana Pantea, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

created around affinities and sensibilities, around the concepts of constructiveness and long haul vision as well as political responsibility and economic balance.

Conclusion

Having identified main factors that lead to explain Romania's country-level attitude towards China's 16+1, it is indicative to summarize that Romania's passivity is related to its wait-and-see policy, as Oehler-Șincai points out¹⁰². In a broader sense, Romania's self-positioning in relation to 16+1 and also at a bilateral level with China is dependent on external factors¹⁰³. This being said differently, Romania is in a state of dilemma towards finding "the right balance between EU interest and its own priorities..."¹⁰⁴ In compelling an even robust explanation, it remains critical to assert that, although ambitious, Romania prefers to remain context-dependent and conditionally passive. Hence, its passivity is simply a matter of choice in conducting its China foreign policy. Contrasting examples include Romania's status as co-initiator of the EU's Strategy for the Danube Region, Romania's clear engagement in the Three Seas Initiative or its confined strategic partnerships. This dilemma is also a reflection of more thorough a certain ascertainment, such as the decades-long processes of discovering and refurbishing a political identity in order to propel a stronger political culture, domestically. Romania refrains from transmitting political values through bilateral examples, but this may not be the case only with China or Turkey, and prefers to advocate for them in multilateral forums¹⁰⁵. However, Romania does not hesitate to bilaterally transmit various political values to the Republic of Moldova¹⁰⁶, for example, or to Serbia¹⁰⁷, as revealed by the practical paradigm of international politics.

¹⁰² For further reference, see Iulia Monica Oehler-Șincai, "Political values: A sensitive issue almost absent from Romania's relations with China" in Tim Nicholas Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias, Alice Ekman (eds.), *Political values in Europe-China relations*, ETNC Report, 2018, pp. 75-78.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Iulia Monica Oehler-Șincai, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, "Parteneriate strategice și relații speciale, Republica Moldova", [<http://mae.ro/node/1677>], 16 April 2019.

Furthermore, Romania's participation in 16+1 is dynamic to the extent that has had more consistent positions on the platform and on the ascending welter of achievement; be those achievements political or economic. The linear narrative and its subsequent Romanian rhetoric, on the other hand, at unconditional times, is at the risk of altering. This risk could come if, at some point in the future, Romania will start to place greater importance on advocating openly and deliberately for European-centered liberal political values in relations with China, at bilateral level, rather than passing them as it is the norm today, namely through forums and multilateral agendas that were constructed congruently.

Some of the main effects of Romania's passive attitude include less attraction for major investments and diminished appetite for Chinese investors, in particular, and less geopolitical leverage in CEE and, generally, in the EU. Besides, this passivity reflects upon major stakeholders (*i.e.* government agents, citizens and business environment) in dissimilar procedures. Comprehensively, China's interest in Romania and its motivation to explore Romania decreases, while this aspect increases Romania's dilemma in connection to those greater aspects of bilateral relations and, implicitly, of 16+1. On the contrary, this matter of choice is yielding also positive results. It has the potential to build more sustainability and ensure a balanced foreign policy in relation to the aggregation of great powers, if practiced only for a limited time and if it remains context-dependent. In this manner, Romania could grasp advanced leadership stances at EU level in the future and have the means of becoming more persuasive in European politics.

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¹⁰⁷Christoph Hasselbach, "Romania blocks Serbia's EU candidacy, for now" in *DW News*, 2012, [<https://www.dw.com/en/romania-blocks-serbias-eu-candidacy-for-now/a-15774734>], 16 April 2019.

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