

## CHINA-CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RISE OF CHINA: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Following the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, China began to engage in power competition in the CEE region for its economic and political interests. The EU regards the increase of Chinese influence in the CEE as a threat to its integrity and the interests of EU member states. The study argues that the basis of China-CEE cooperation is based on a realist thought that serves China's rise, aims to maximize China's economic power, and prioritizes Chinese interests. The study presents the basic motivations underlying China's involvement in power competition in the CEE, the impact of China's growing influence in the CEE on the dominant actors in the region, such as the EU and Germany, and also their attitudes towards China-CEE cooperation from a realist perspective.

**Keywords:** China, Central and Eastern Europe, European Union, China's Rise, Realist Thinking.

### Çin'in Yükselişi Bağlamında Çin-Orta ve Doğu Avrupa İşbirliği: Realist Bir Bakış Açısı

### Öz

2008-2009 küresel finansal krizin ardından Çin, ekonomik ve siyasi çıkarları için ODA bölgesinde güç rekabetine girmeye başladı. AB, Çin'in ODA'daki etkisinin artmasını kendi bütünlüğüne ve AB üye devletlerinin çıkarlarına yönelik bir tehdit olarak görmektedir. Çalışma, Çin-ODA işbirliğinin temelini Çin'in yükselişine hizmet eden, Çin'in küresel ekonomik gücünü en üst düzeye çıkarmayı hedefleyen ve Çin çıkarlarını ön planda tutan realist bir düşünceye dayandığını ileri sürmektedir. Çalışma, Çin'in ODA'daki güç rekabetine dahil olmasının altında yatan temel motivasyonları, Çin'in ODA'da artan etkisinin AB ve Almanya gibi bölgedeki baskın

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*aktörler üzerindeki etkisini ve ayrıca onların Çin-ODA işbirliğine yönelik tutumlarını realist bir perspektiften ortaya koymaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Orta ve Doğu Avrupa, Avrupa Birliği, Çin'in Yükselişi, Realist Düşünce.

### Introduction

Following the 2008–2009 global financial crisis (financial crisis), China began to engage in power competition in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. The financial crisis was an important factor that paved the way for improving China's economic and political relations with CEE countries.<sup>1</sup> Due to the financial crisis, many CEE countries, especially Greece, Hungary, Romania, and Latvia, eagerly sought new capital to survive economically.<sup>2</sup> The insufficient economic aid from the European Union (EU) increased their euro-scepticism and prompted them to seek new strategic alternatives.<sup>3</sup> During the financial crisis, the desire of CEE countries to keep their economies afloat triggered their economic and political rapprochement with China. The China-CEEC Cooperation Platform (currently 14+1 format), which was launched under the leadership of China in 2012, when the financial crisis was still in effect, was welcomed by many CEE countries.

The China-CEEC Cooperation Platform is a comprehensive cooperation mechanism established by China to deepen and strengthen bilateral and multilateral economic, political and cultural relations with sixteen CEE countries.<sup>4</sup> Of them, eleven were EU member countries and five were EU candidate countries.<sup>5</sup> Their economic, political, and sociocultural structures

<sup>1</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, "China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers," CHINA REPORT 56, no 1 (2020):61.

<sup>2</sup> Kong Tianping, "16+1 Cooperation Framework: Genesis, Characteristics and Prospect," Medjunarodni Problemi, (2015): 168-70, Date of Access: January 20, 2023, DOI: 10.2298/MEDJP1503167T.

<sup>3</sup> Marta Golonka, Partners or Rivals?: Chinese Investments in Central and Eastern Europe, (Warsaw: Central and Eastern European Development Institute, 2012), 1-42.

<sup>4</sup> Dragan Pavličević, "China Threat' and 'China Opportunity': Politics of Dreams and Fears in China-Central and Eastern European Relations," Journal of Contemporary China 27, no 113 (2018): 688-702.

<sup>5</sup> Gisela Grieger, "The EU Response to the 16+1 Format," European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 625.173, (2018): 1-8, Date of Access: January 20, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)625173\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173_EN.pdf).

are different. Furthermore, they have different domestic and foreign policy goals and strategies.<sup>6</sup> These differences have made it difficult for China to pursue a single-level cooperation policy for them. Therefore, China implements a multi-layered cooperation policy, including bilateral, sub-regional, and regional, in order to strengthen its economic and political relations with them.<sup>7</sup>

China argues that the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform is based on a "win-win" strategy, "mutual advantage", "common benefit", and "equal treatment" and that it will create new economic opportunities for participating countries.<sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> The Chinese government also frequently reiterates that China-CEE cooperation is aimed at strengthening EU-China relations.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to these hopeful liberal Chinese discourses, the study argues that there is a realist idea on the other side of the coin. Because China's main objectives in establishing the China-CEE Cooperation Platform are to ensure its economic rise, maximize its economic power, increase its competitiveness and expand its economic and political influence in Europe, strengthen the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and provide political support for the decisions to be made within the EU. In other words, China has initiated regional cooperation with CEE countries thousands of miles away from Chinese land primarily for its own global economic and political interests. Accordingly, the EU and Western European countries have acted with suspicion to the establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation

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<sup>6</sup> Ivana Káráskova et al., "Empty Shell No More: China's Growing Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe," China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) Policy Paper, (2018):18, Date of Access: January 20, 2023, [https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE\\_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf](https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Lilei Song and Dragan Pavličević, "China's Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework," Chinese Political Science Review 4, (2019):277.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 10," February 10, 2021, Date of Access: January 20, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202102/t20210210\\_9721141.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202102/t20210210_9721141.html).

<sup>9</sup> Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, "Summit Documents," Date of Access: January 24, 2023, [www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/](http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/).

<sup>10</sup> Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, "The Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries," Date of Access: January 25, 2023, [www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222\\_10474155.htm](http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474155.htm).

Platform. They argue that this cooperation platform is based on a "divide and rule" strategy aimed at disrupting the functioning of the EU.<sup>11 12 13</sup>

Particularly, Germany, the EU's most developed and largest country, regards China's growing presence in the CEE region as a threat to its entrenched interests in the EU and in the CEE region and suspects that China's rise may impede European integration. Germany needs to maintain its dominant economic and political influence in the CEE region. Hence, Germany tries to prevent the expansion of China's sphere of influence and the increase of Chinese competitive power not only in the CEE region, but also on the entire European continent. Germany argues that European states should act jointly against China to protect EU interests. For instance, then-German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated that the EU should develop a common strategy to counter China's growing economic and political presence in the CEE region. In other words, in his view, joint action is necessary to resist China's attempts to undermine European integration and to counter China's economic and political power ambitions.<sup>14</sup> Then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel also argued that member states where China carries out infrastructure projects should act in accordance with the EU's overall foreign policy towards China, otherwise divisions within the EU could increase.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of China's increasing presence in the region CEE after the establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform, the number of

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Lau, "China Trying to Divide and Rule in Europe, EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell Says," *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2020, Date of Access: January 20, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3084684/china-trying-divide-and-rule-europe-eu-foreign-policy-chief>.

<sup>12</sup> Evangjelia Sali, "16+1 Initiative in China-EU Relations: 'Golden Opportunity' or 'Divide and Rule,'" *China-CEE Institute*, no 25 (2018):6, Date of Access: January 24, 2023, [https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Work\\_paper-201825.pdf](https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Work_paper-201825.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Jakub Jakóbowski and Marcin Kaczmarek, "China on Central-Eastern Europe: '16+1' as Seen from Beijing," *OSW Commentary*, no 166 (2015):4, Date of Access: January 24, 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2015-04-14/china-central-eastern-europe-161-seen-beijing>.

<sup>14</sup> "EU Must Resist Chinese Attempts to Divide it – Maas," *Reuters*, June 13, 2018, Date of Access: March 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-europe-maas-china-idINS8N1PX049>.

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Wu, "Is China Using 'Divide and Rule' Tactics to Gain Influence in Europe?," *SCMP*, March 1, 2018, Date of Access: September 19, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2135244/china-using-divide-and-rule-tactics-gain-influence>.

academic studies on China-CEE relations has increased. However, despite the growing academic interest in China-CEE relations, the available literature is not rich enough. Most relevant academic studies lack a theoretical framework and empirical analysis. Hence, new theoretical and empirical studies are needed to better understand the essence China-CEE relations. The study enriches the relevant academic literature contextually by addressing China-CEE relations on the basis of basic realist thoughts and ideas. The fact that China's emergence as a new actor in the CEE region has the potential to create new power and interest struggles in the CEE region, particularly with the EU and Germany, makes it valuable to base study on realist thinking. As a result of Russia's isolation by the West due to the attack by Russian forces on Ukraine, Russia's increasing dependence on China and the declaration of an unlimited partnership between the two countries in 2022 are important for the balance of power in Europe.

The study does not attempt to address China's policies towards the CEE and its increasing presence in the CEE in line with the comprehensive principles and assumptions of any specific theory of the realist school such as structural realism and neo-classical realism, but examines them by referring to the basic ideas of the realist tradition regarding the “pursuit of power” and “rational actor”. Using a qualitative research method, the study highlights the importance of the development of China-CEE cooperation on the BRI and the China's global economic rise. The study presents the basic motivations underlying China's involvement in the power competition in the CEE, the impact of China's growing influence on the dominant actors in the CEE region, such as the EU and Germany, and also their attitude towards China-CEE cooperation and China's rise from a realist perspective. The study first presents a literature review on China-CEE relations. The study then examines China's economic rise and cooperation between China and CEE from a realist perspective. Finally, the study addresses the EU's realistic attitude towards increasing the Chinese presence in the CEE region.

## **I. Literature Overview**

Academic interest in China-CEE relations has increased since the establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform in 2012 under Chinese leadership. Central and Eastern European and Chinese academics in particular have made significant contributions to the relevant academic literature. As China-CEE relations have been neglected in academic

literature for decades, relevant scholars have been unable to build their work on a rich academic foundation.<sup>16</sup> Despite increasing academic studies on China-CEE relations, further enrichment of the relevant academic literature is needed. Most relevant academic studies lack theoretical framework and empirical analysis.

Researchers and authors initially tried to make sense of the sudden development in China-CEE cooperation. In general, they first focused on the evolution, motivation and objectives of China-CEE cooperation, as well as its potential benefits and opportunities for parties. While Chinese academics mainly focused on measures to increase Chinese effectiveness in the CEE region, Central and Eastern European academics concentrated on China's intentions and motivations in the cooperation process. It is noteworthy that academic studies present different and contradictory views on China's engagement in the CEE region. Some portray the rising Chinese influence in CEE as positive and optimistic, while others portray it as negative and pessimistic.<sup>17</sup> Authors from the CEE region appear to have split into two camps on China-CEE cooperation. Those who see China as an opportunity offer policy recommendations that will maximize their countries' national and regional benefits in the cooperation process with China, while those who consider China a threat make suggestions on how to resist it.<sup>18</sup>

In the following years, some authors such as Grgić<sup>19</sup>, Matura<sup>20</sup>, McCaleb and Szunomár<sup>21</sup> and Dimitrijević<sup>22</sup> focused on the economic consequences of China-CEE cooperation. Most of them generally argued

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<sup>16</sup> Anastas Vangeli and Dragan Pavličević, "Introduction: New Perspectives on China-Central and Eastern Europe Relations," *Asia Europe Journal* 17, no 2 (2019):361-68.

<sup>17</sup> Dragan Pavličević, "'China Threat' and 'China Opportunity': Politics of Dreams and Fears in China-Central and Eastern European Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no 113 (2018):689.

<sup>18</sup> Vangeli and Pavličević, "New Perspectives," 361-65.

<sup>19</sup> Mladen Grgić, "Chinese infrastructural investments in the Balkans: Political Implications of the Highway Project in Montenegro," *Territory Politics Governance* 7, no 89 (2017):1-19.

<sup>20</sup> Tamás Matura, "China-CEE Trade, Investment and Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no 3, (2019):1-20.

<sup>21</sup> Agnieszka McCaleb and Agnes Szunomar, "Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Central and Eastern Europe: An Institutional Perspective," inside *Chinese Investment in Europe: Corporate Strategies and Labor Relations*, ed. Jan Drahoukoupil, (Haecht: European Trade Union Institute, 2017), 121-40.

<sup>22</sup> Duško Dimitrijević, "Chinese Investments in Serbia-A Joint Pledge for the Future of the New Silk Road," *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 7, no 1 (2017):64-83.

that the economic gains of CEE countries from cooperation with China remain modest. On the other hand, some authors, such as Budeanu, asserted that the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform would create a high economic development opportunity for CEE countries. Budeanu believes that the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform is a treasure to be discovered in China-EU relations rather than a threat to be contained by the EU.<sup>23</sup> Matura and others pointed out that the Chinese government and some governments in the CEE exaggerated current Chinese investment amounts. They maintained that the official figures announced include investments pledged by China but not carried out, as well as projects financed by Chinese loans and mergers and acquisitions.<sup>24</sup> Marjan and Svetlicic also argued that the multilateralization of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform would be an opportunity for CEE countries and the EU.<sup>25</sup>

Some argue that China has the goal of using CEE countries as a trojan horse within the EU. The European Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hanh, stated that Balkan countries, particularly Serbia and Montenegro, which received infrastructure financing aid from China, had a high potential to act as China's Trojan horse.<sup>26</sup> Venne asserted that China's growing influence in Hungary could pose a threat to transatlantic cooperation.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Turcsányi argued that neither China nor CEE countries had any intention or motivation to undermine the functioning of the EU.<sup>28</sup> Bachulska also enounced that CEE countries were not willing to become the trojan horse of China.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Andreea I. Budeanu, "16+1 in China-EU Relations: A vehicle for a Sustainable Connectivity Platform," inside *16+1 Cooperation and China-EU Relationships*, ed. Chen Xin and He Zhiago, (Budapest: China-CEE Institute Nonprofit Ltd., 2018), 67.

<sup>24</sup> Tamás Matura, "Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe A Reality Check," A Research Report, the Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies, Research Report (2021):3, Date of Access: January 28, 2023, [www.china-cee-investment.org](http://www.china-cee-investment.org).

<sup>25</sup> Andreja Jaklič and Marjan Svetličič, "China and Central and Eastern European Countries within '16+1': Group or Bilateral Relations?," *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review* 7, no 2 (2019):83-100.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan Heath and Andrew Gray, "Beware Chinese Trojan horses in the Balkans, EU Warns," *POLITICO*, July 27, 2018, Date of Access: January 29, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/>.

<sup>27</sup> François Venne, "China's Trojan Horse Canters through Hungary," *CEPA*, April 19, 2021, Date of Access: January 29, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/chinas-trojan-horse-canters-through-hungary/>.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Turcsányi, "Central and Eastern Europe's Courtship with China: Trojan Horse Within the EU?," *European Institute for Asian Studies*, (2014):6, Date of Access: January

In the relevant academic literature, many authors, such as Górski<sup>30</sup>, Musabelliu<sup>31</sup>, Kowalski<sup>32</sup>, Pendrakowska<sup>33</sup>, Matura<sup>34</sup>, Dimitrijević and Jokanović<sup>35</sup>, examined China-CEE cooperation in the context of the BRI. Although the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform started a year before the introduction of the BRI, it had set many goals and projects to serve the development of the BRI. That is, the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform acts as a complement to the BRI. The CEE region is the strategically significant route of the BRI, as it is a gateway to developed Western European countries. Hence, China needs to develop its relations with CEE countries, especially for the development and success of the BRI.

Very few academics have examined China-CEE cooperation in a theoretical framework. They have addressed China-CEE relations in the framework of different theories, such as asymmetry theory, symbolic theory, structural realist theory, social constructivist theory, and regional security complex theory. Lubina argued that political realism is an unrivaled school of political thought for explaining Chinese politics and that social constructivist approaches should also be included in the theoretical framework of Chinese politics. In addition, Lubina believed that it would be valuable to examine the relations between China and CEE countries within

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30, 2023, <https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/EU-Asia-at-a-glance-Richard-Turcsanyi-China-CEE.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Alicja Baculska, "Central and Eastern Europe is no Chinese Trojan Horse," EASTASIAFORUM, December 5, 2020, Date of Access: February 02, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/12/05/central-and-eastern-europe-is-no-chinese-trojan-horse/>.

<sup>30</sup> Jędrzej Górski et al, "One Belt One Road Initiative ('OBOR'): Editorial," *Transnational Dispute Management* 14, no 3 (2017):1-8, Date of Access: February 4, 2023, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3051785>.

<sup>31</sup> Marsela Musabelliu, "China's Belt and Road Initiative Extension to Central and Eastern European Countries - Sixteen Nations, Five Summits, Many Challenges," *Croatian International Relations Review* 23, no 78 (2017):57-76.

<sup>32</sup> Bartosz Kowalski, "China's Foreign Policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The "16+1" Format in the South-South Cooperation Perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no 1 (2017):1-16.

<sup>33</sup> Patrycja Pendrakowska, "Poland's Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 7, no 2 (2018):190-206.

<sup>34</sup> Tamás Matura, "The Belt and Road Initiative Depicted in Hungary and Slovakia," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia* 7, no 2 (2018):174-89.

<sup>35</sup> Duško Dimitrijević and Nicola Jokanovic, "CEEC's-China Mechanism of Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative: From Idea to Institutionalisation - Six Years Later," *Medjunarodni Problemi* 72, no 2 (2020):311-336.

the framework of Brantly Womack's asymmetric theory.<sup>36</sup> According to Womack, in the process of asymmetric cooperation, such as China-CEE cooperation, weak actors can be restricted in determining their preferences and resources or at the point of application, while strong actors can exert leverage or control over their opponents. In addition, preferences and decisions in asymmetrical relationships can often result in (China) the strong side's favor.<sup>37</sup> Hongfei argues that the benefits obtained by the parties involved in the asymmetric cooperation will be asymmetric unless the zero-sum status is denied in the international relations competition.<sup>38</sup>

Examining China-CEE cooperation in the context of symbolic power, Vangeli argued that China tried to influence the preferences, thoughts and behaviors of CEE countries with discourses such as historical heritage, common ideology, and mutual gain.<sup>39</sup> In his work, *China's Economic Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case of Offensive Mercantilism*, Garlick examined China's economic diplomacy towards the CEE region through the critical lens of Holslag's offensive mercantilism. According to Garlick, the Chinese approach to CEE countries needs to be examined empirically and there is no evidence to suggest that China's economic diplomacy is divisive and separatist for Europe.<sup>40</sup> Matura examined the theoretical framework of his doctoral thesis on China-CEE relations through the theory of structural realism. Matura then deepens the theoretical framework of his thesis by revealing how small states such as CEE states adjust their foreign policies according to structural realism, and finally focuses on the relationship between economic dependence and political cohesion in international relations.<sup>41</sup> Sabbaghian and Singh

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<sup>36</sup> Michał Lubina, "Three Boards: Security, Economy and the New Unknown. The Complicated Relationship between China and Central and Eastern Europe," *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 4, no 23 (2019):61-81.

<sup>37</sup> Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and China's Tributary System," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no 1 (2012):45-46.

<sup>38</sup> Hongfei Gu, "Can Asymmetric Relationships Work Together? A Quantitative Approach of '16+1' Cooperation Mechanism," *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, (2019):188, Date of Access: February 10, 2023, <https://dspace.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/handle/11089/29297>.

<sup>39</sup> Anastas Vangeli, "Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16 + 1 Cooperation," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no 113 (2018):674-87.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Garlick, "China's Economic Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe: A Case of Offensive Mercantilism?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no 8 (2019):1390-94.

<sup>41</sup> Tamás Matura, "Trade, Investment and Politics between China and Central and Eastern Europe Economic Necessity or a Trojan Horse?," (PhD Thesis, Corvinus University of Budapest, 2020), 120.

addressed China-CEE cooperation within the framework of Buzan's Regional Security Complex theory. According to them, China's increased presence in the CEE has adversely affected the EU's efforts to promote policy coherence and establish a common foreign and defense policy. Therefore, the EU started to securitize China in order to limit China's influence in the region.<sup>42</sup>

This study examines the main motivations underlying China's policies towards CEE from a realist perspective. The study argues that China-CEE cooperation is essentially a pragmatic initiative led by China for the sustainability of its economic rise, the development of the BRI, the increase of its competitiveness and expansion of its political and economic sphere of influence in Europe.

## II. The Rise of China on the Basis of Realist Ideas

Many politicians, statesmen, and observers question how China can turn its rising economic power into a global political and cultural influence. China frequently recalls that its economic rise is generally oriented towards peace and development and that Chinese foreign policy also tries to build a harmonious world. However, the United States (US) and the EU are skeptical about China's economic rise and view China's foreign policy actions from a realist perspective. Many realist thinkers argue that China's economic rise and military expansion are related to its desire to become a hegemonic power.<sup>43</sup>

National interests, economic growth, and security concerns have been among the main priority issues in Chinese foreign policy from the past to the present. It allows the examination of China's foreign policy on the basis of realist ideas. The ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Zi and the wise Han Feizi can be described as the pioneers of realism with their ideas.<sup>44</sup> Sun Tzu's study, "The Art of War", contains political realist views.<sup>45</sup> According to Lo,

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<sup>42</sup> Ali Sabbaghian and Rajdeep Singh, "China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation and EU Response from the Perspective of the Regional Security Complex Theory," *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies* 5, no 4 (2021):731-32.

<sup>43</sup> European Student Think Tank, "A Liberal and Realist Perspective of China's Rise," June 25, 2016, Date of Access: February 10, 2023, <https://esthinktank.com/2016/08/25/a-liberal-and-realist-perspective-of-chinas-rise/>.

<sup>44</sup> Lubina, "Three Boards," 62.

<sup>45</sup> Suvolaxmi D. Choudhury, "Sun Tzu's The Art of War through the Prism of Political Realism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no 2 (2018):39-45.

Chinese ruling elites have grown up with a realist strategic culture shaped by the elements of struggle in a world where universal values are ignored.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, these ruling elites have acted according to realist assumptions in foreign policy. Because of this, China's foreign policy is based on a particular strategic culture and intellectual structure rather than on the objective structure of the international system.<sup>47</sup>

Political realism argues that a rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits. It also asserts that state leaders think and act within the framework of interest, which has been defined as power.<sup>48</sup> While political realism assumes that the concept of interest is a universally valid objective category, it does not assign it an eternally fixed meaning. Interest is accepted as the essence of politics, and it is argued that it is affected by the conditions of time and place.<sup>49</sup> Classical realist Morgenthau argued that international politics is a struggle power and that states play a significant role in international affairs. According to him, states act as rational, self-seeking, and opportunistic individuals to protect their national interests and accumulate maximum power for themselves.<sup>50</sup> In other words, he asserted that state behavior is motivated by the pursuit of maximum power and that power is the all-inclusive interest of states and state leaders. Realists are aware that a nation's survival depends on the pursuit of power that serves the national interest. It can be argued that their view is embodied in Chinese foreign policy from the past to today. For instance, Mao's foreign policy was generally dominated by survival concerns. In this context, the Chinese foreign relations strategies under Mao were built on protecting national security, enhancing China's international status, and safeguarding China's hard-won state sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bobo Lo, *The Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, (London: Chatham House, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Lubina, "Three Boards," 62-63.

<sup>48</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Fifth Edition, Revised, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 4-15.

<sup>49</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 1978, 4-15

<sup>50</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York: Knopf, 1948), 192.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Y. Cheng and Franklin W. Zhang, "Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis," *Politics and Governance* 14, no 3 (2009):104.

Xiaoping shaped Chinese foreign policy with the motto of "hide your strength and bide your time."<sup>52</sup> Xiaoping believed the Chinese state should have achieved something confidently and decisively without attracting attention and assuming leadership. In this context, Xiaoping adopted a foreign policy that did not make other countries anxious about sovereignty and was not based on a show of power. At first, Xiaoping's foreign policy did not get a strong reaction from realist thinkers. Xiaoping's reform and foreign policy strategies strengthened China's relations with other countries. China significantly benefited from Xiaoping's low-profile foreign policy. Xiaoping's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, also generally adhered to Xiaoping's foreign policy guidelines during their term in office.<sup>53</sup>

After Jinping became President of China in 2013, China entered a new era in its global rise.<sup>54</sup> Jinping has adopted a more assertive foreign policy than his predecessors.<sup>55</sup> Jinping has prioritized protecting the country's national and international interests, increasing its reputation, and strengthening Chinese nationalism. To achieve China's dream, Jinping has used the "striving for achievement" slogan (fen fa you wei) based on taking more international responsibility, creating new strategies for regional security and economic development, as well as identifying friend and foe.<sup>56</sup> The "Chinese dream" term expresses the desire of China to become a great political, economic, and military power in the international arena.<sup>57</sup> The declaration of Jinping's Chinese dream was tried to be explained by many intellectuals and policymakers on the basis of realist ideas.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Scott D. McDonald, "Introduction-Strategic Competition," inside *China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations*, ed. Scott D. McDonald and Michael C. Burgoyne, (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2019), 23.

<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Khoo, *China's Foreign Policy since 1978: Return to Power*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgan Publishing, 2020), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Alejandra Peña, "China's Assertive Foreign Policy Strategy. Insights from the 19th Party Congress," *Tempo Exterior* 18, no 36 (2018):39.

<sup>55</sup> Camilla T. N. Sørensen, "The Significance of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' for Chinese Foreign Policy: From 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' to 'Fen Fa You Wei,'" *JCIR* 3, no 1 (2015):55.

<sup>56</sup> Xuetong Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no 2 (2014):153.

<sup>57</sup> Peña, "China's Assertive," 39.

<sup>58</sup> Nabil Hudda, "Interpreting the Rise of China: Realist and Liberalist Perspectives," *E-International Relations*, ISSN 2053-8626, (2015):1-10, Date of Access: February 12, 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/54616>.

As Jinping aims to gradually maximize China's current strength within the scope of its 2021 and 2049 targets, it seems that realist ideas dominate the core of Jinping's foreign policy. China has aimed to 'build a moderately prosperous society in all respects' by 2021, and to 'build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious' by 2049. These two goals were included in the constitution of the Communist Party of China in 2012.<sup>59</sup> In May 2015, the Chinese government issued the Made in China 2025 document to further develop China's manufacturing sector and transform China into a technology-intensive powerhouse as part of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Five-Year Plans. The Made in China 2025 initiative aims for China to catch the technological level of the West and then surpass it, thus making China a dominant power in global high-tech production.

In addition to the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform, China has initiated different regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, to maintain its economic rise and increase its global influence. Acting on Jinping's directives, Chinese state-owned enterprises have played a dominant role in tendering for many infrastructure projects in the CEE and other geographical regions. Most of these projects have been implemented with loans from Chinese state-owned banks. Conley and others identified a total of one hundred and two Chinese economic activities in the Balkans between 2012 and 2020, with a total value of \$17.9 billion. They concluded that only 15% of infrastructure projects in these activities were subject to competitive bidding, and 93% of contracts for projects with Chinese loans or investments were awarded to a Chinese contractor or supplier.<sup>60</sup>

China has begun to change the world economic order currently led by the US with its increasing global influence and its international economic mechanisms, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank. In particular, BRI infrastructure projects, multilateral economic cooperation initiatives, and the acquisition of foreign strategic

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<sup>59</sup> Ding Lu, "China's "Two Centenary Goals": Progress and Challenge," *East Asian Policy* 8, no 2 (2016):79-80.

<sup>60</sup> Heather A. Conley et al., "China's "Hub-and-Spoke" Strategy in the Balkans," CSIS, (2020): 12, Date of Access: March 20, 2023, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200427\\_ChinaStrategy.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200427_ChinaStrategy.pdf).

assets and high-tech companies have contributed to the formation of a China-centered global order.<sup>61</sup>

Sustaining the economic rise, ensuring energy supply security, and increasing the Chinese political and economic sphere of influence at the global level can be shown as the main motivations of China within the scope of the BRI. Thanks to the BRI strategy, China has increased its potential to become the economic center of Eurasia. The BRI strategy is consistent with political realism, which argues that states that increase their relative power will attempt to enhance their political influence in different countries or geographic regions.<sup>62</sup> Among the priority objectives of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform is the development of the BRI. Chinese banks and companies have paid particular attention to infrastructure and transport construction projects that will contribute to the BRI. This has resulted in a broad range of infrastructure cooperation in the CEE region. In particular, the Belgrade-Budapest railway construction has been the most striking project in China-CEE cooperation.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the acquisitions of the Piraeus Port by China's COSCO and its strategic investments in the Port of Gdynia and the Port of Thessaloniki have increased China's influence in the CEE. All these initiatives have contributed to the development of the BRI.<sup>64</sup> All the countries participating in the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) which includes cooperation within the scope of the BRI.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Arthur S. Ding and Jagannath P. Panda, "Preface," inside *Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping: The Future Political*, ed. Arthur S. Ding ve Jagannath P. Panda, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Mustafa Malik, "Globalization with Chinese Characteristics: A Case Study of OBOR and CPEC (2013-2020)," *International Journal of Political Studies* 7, no 2 (2021):70.

<sup>63</sup> Flora Rencz, "The BRI in Europe and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Link," Briefing Paper, no10 (2019):1-3, Date of Access: February 15, 2023, <https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EIAS-Briefing-Paper-The-BRI-in-Europe-and-the-Budapest-Belgrade-Railway-Link-Final.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Frans-Paul V. D. Putten, "Ports and Chinese political influence in Europe," *Clingendael Institute*, (2019):9, Date of Access: February 15, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21415.4>.

<sup>65</sup> Green Finance and Development Center, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative," Date of Access: February 15, 2023, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

**Table 1:** Sectoral Distribution of Major Investments Made by Chinese Companies in 17 CEE Countries<sup>66</sup>, (2010-2022)

SECTOR	VALUE (million/dollar)	RATIO (%)
TRANSPORTATION	6270	31,39
ENERGY	4220	21,131
METAL	2190	10,96
CHEMICAL	2110	10,56
TECHNOLOGY	1970	9,86
ENTERTAINMENT	1050	5,25
FINANCE	550	2,75
REAL ESTATE	310	1,55
OTHER	930	4,65
PUBLIC SERVICE	140	0,70
HEALTH	100	0,50
AGRICULTURE	130	0,65
TOTAL	19970	-

**Source:** Created by the author using the China Global Investment Tracker dataset.

Security of energy supply and development of transportation networks are the most important elements for China for the sustainability of its economic rise and the success of the BRI. China has invested more in the transportation and energy sectors in the CEE region and other regions especially for the development of the BRI. Table 1 shows that the major investments (worth more than \$100 million) in the CEE region between 2010 and 2022 went mainly to the transportation and energy sectors.<sup>67</sup> In addition to the Belgrade-Budapest railway and Piraeus Port, projects in CEE region, such as Bar-Boljare Highway (Montenegro), Pelješac Bridge (Croatia), Pojate-Preljina and Novi Sad-Ruma Highway (Serbia), Preljina-Pozega Highway (Serbia), Miladinovci-Shtip Highway and Kichevo-Ohrid Highway (North Macedonia), Pan-European 5C Corridor Motorway (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and A2 Highway (Poland), are other major remarkable transportation projects financed by Chinese loans and built by Chinese companies.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> The 17 CEE countries are all CEE countries included in the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform.

<sup>67</sup> China Global Investment Tracker, "Worldwide Chinese Investments & Construction (2005 - 2023)," Date of Access: March 15, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

<sup>68</sup> Paweł Paszak, "Not only the Balkans – China enters the CEE infrastructure," Warsaw Institute, 2020, Date of Access: February 15, 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/not-only-the-balkans-china-enters-the-cee-infrastructure/>.

Realistically, the BRI may be considered as an international economic initiative launched by China to maximize its economic interests. The BRI appears to be a strategic initiative in which China is free to do what it wants and participating states generally follow the path determined by China. The BRI embodies the core element of China's global ambition and marks the shift from “a low-profile strategy” to “an assertive and striving for success” in Chinese foreign policy. Through the BRI, China aims to expand its economic and political influence in Eurasia and beyond, in line with its geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geostrategic interests.<sup>69</sup> The BRI has made China appear as a force that would weaken the US's global dominance and has increased global competition between China and the US.<sup>70 71</sup> China seeks to get the lion's share of the global capitalist economy. The BRI paves the way for a change in the current global status quo by contributing to the enhancement of China's political and economic relations with the countries in the regions dominated by powers such as the EU and the US. In this context, it can be argued that the BRI is a balancing initiative or power balance strategy against global powers like the US. Many scholars, such as Cai<sup>72</sup>, Chi<sup>73</sup>, Ghiasy and Zhou<sup>74</sup>, believe that the BRI is China's most obvious revisionist trend to date and an attempt to challenge US influence.

### **III. China-CEE Cooperation: Power Competition and Conflict of Interest**

The CEE region is a strategic area with a high geoeconomic dimension due to its economic potential, important ports, favorable natural conditions,

<sup>69</sup> Lukman Quadri, “One Belt One Road: Should Nigeria Sieve the Chinese Benevolence, or Accept It as a Free Lunch,” *AHBV* 2, no (2020):64-65.

<sup>70</sup> Weifeng Zhou ve Mario Estabén, “Beyond Balancing: China’s Approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative,” inside *China’s New Global Strategy: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)*, ed. Suisheng Zhao, (Routledge: Oxon, 2020), 36-37.

<sup>71</sup> Thanasis Karlis and Dionyssios Polemis, “The Belt and Road Initiative. A Geopolitical Analysis,” (IAME Conference Paper, Greece, Athens, June 25th -28<sup>th</sup>, 2019), 7.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Cai, “Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 2017, Date of Access: February 15, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-china-s-belt-road-initiative>.

<sup>73</sup> Chi Lo, “China’s Silk Road Strategy,” *International Economy* 29, no 4 (2015):54-71.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhou, “The Silk Road Economic Belt: Considering Security Implications and EU-China Cooperation Prospects,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, (2017):1-60, Date of Access: February 18, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2017/other-publications/silk-road-economic-belt>.

resources, cheap labor and workforce. The CEE region has historically served as a strategically important buffer between East and West in terms of geography, security, culture, and economy. For centuries, there was a struggle for power between the powerful historical Germanic and Russian states, especially in Central Europe, and major conflicts were witnessed there. In other words, the lands of Central Europe were a conflict zone where the great empires surrounding the region tried to establish dominance. Central Europe was primarily under Germanic dominance for ages, but it came under the influence of the Soviet Union following World War II.<sup>75</sup> Today, the CEE region is a strategic district and security corridor where actors such as Russia, Germany, the US, NATO, and the EU try to increase their sphere of influence for their geostrategic interests.<sup>76</sup> In addition to all these state and non-state actors, after the financial crisis, China also began to engage in power competition in the CEE region, especially for its economic, commercial and geopolitical interests.

Realist theories generally explain foreign policy issues through military and economic power pursuits and security concerns between states. Although China and CEE relations do not have a military security dimension, Serbia's import of the FK-3 missile defense system from China in April 2022, during the Russia-Ukraine War, increased suspicions that the current situation in the region would become more fragile. Serbia became the first European country to purchase air defense systems from China. Similarly, Serbia's import of CH-92A drones from China in 2020 was the first military aviation equipment shipment by China to Europe.<sup>77</sup> The military partnership between the two countries, on the one hand, strengthens China's presence in Serbia, and on the other hand, narrows the sphere of influence of the EU and NATO on Serbia.<sup>78</sup> Strengthening military ties between China and Serbia and equipping Serbia with Chinese weapons may

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<sup>75</sup> Irah Kučerová, "Geopolitics of Central Europe - A Historical View," *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Historica* 19, no 1 (2015):169-70.

<sup>76</sup> Florin E. Grosaru, "The Strategic Importance and the Actors of South-Eastern Europe," *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 3, no 1 (4) (2012):101.

<sup>77</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, "Serbia's Arms Deals Show It's Tilting Away From Russia and Toward China," *Foreign Policy*, May 11, 2022, Date of Access: August 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/11/serbias-arms-deals-show-its-tilting-away-from-russia-and-toward-china/>.

<sup>78</sup> Johan Knezevic, "Serbia the First and Only Operator of Chinese Drones and Missiles in Europe," *IARI*, January 31, 2023, Date of Access: August 10, 2023, <https://iari.site/2023/01/31/serbia-the-first-and-only-operator-of-chinese-drones-and-missiles-in-europe/>.

pose a risk for the fragile peace environment in the region. Since China does not recognize Kosovo, it did not include Kosovo in the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform. China has adopted a pro-Serbian stance on the Kosovo-Serbian issue. In addition to Serbia, China has tried to increase its official contacts regarding military cooperation with other CEE countries. For example, in March 2021, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Wenge visited Serbia, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Greece to strengthen military cooperation.<sup>79</sup> This official visit indicates China's desire to increase its influence in the defense policies of CEE countries.

China is acting in line with its national and international interests on international issues in Europe. China refrains from playing a dominant and active role in ending disputes or conflicts that threaten Europe's security. China is trying to create the impression that it is pursuing a neutral policy against Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior in the CEE region, especially considering its trade relations with the West. China remains silent towards Russia's increasingly aggressive attitude in the CEE region. For instance, China refrained from condemning Russia due to its attack on Georgia in 2008, its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its launch of a military operation against Ukraine in February 2022. China is not willing to apply pressure on Russia over its military intervention in Ukraine in order not to weaken its close economic and political ties with Russia.<sup>80</sup> China also tends to criticize US sanctions against Russia.<sup>81</sup>

Russia's isolation by the West due to its attack on Ukraine in 2022 increases Russia's dependence on China.<sup>82</sup> In addition to the isolation of Russia, China's recent exposure to EU and US sanctions may trigger the onset of bipolarity against the US and its allies by uniting China and Russia.<sup>83</sup> The announcement of "unlimited friendship" by Russia and China

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<sup>79</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "Chinese Defense Minister Visits Europe to Boost Military Ties, 'Future Joint Military Drills, Exchanges Likely'," *Global Times*, March 25, 2021, Date of Access: August 15, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219500.shtml>.

<sup>80</sup> Brian G. Carlson, "Russia's War in Ukraine", *Policy Perspective* 13, no 13 (2022):1-2.

<sup>81</sup> Natasha Kuhrt and Marcin Kaczmarek, "Why is China More Likely to Support Russia in the War in Ukraine Than in the Past?," *KCL*, February 28, 2022, Date of Access: March 24, 2023, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ukraine-invasion-why-china-is-more-likely-to-support-russia-than-in-the-past>.

<sup>82</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing's Junior Partner," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, Date of Access: March 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal>.

<sup>83</sup> Brian G. Carlson, "Fading or Staying? China's International Standing after the Ukraine Invasion," *The Future of Xi's China. Scenarios and Implications for Europe*, ed. Alessia Amighini, (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2022), 97.

on the opening day of the Beijing Winter Olympics<sup>84</sup> indicates that regional and global power dynamics will be shaped in line with the alliance of these two countries. The end of the war in Ukraine in favor of Russia and the deepening of the China-Russia alliance may lead to China's further expansion of its sphere of influence in Europe. The strengthening alliance between China and Russia worries European countries and conflicts with their interests. For instance, after Chinese President Jinping's visit to Russia in March 2023, Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated that "the Sino-Russian alliance is dangerous". Additionally, he emphasized that Poland tried to persuade China not to support Russia's aggressive policies.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned above, the common idea of all realists is that states are rational unitary actors pursuing their national interests. It is arguable that this idea lies behind the initiation of regional cooperation with CEE countries in 2012 under the leadership of China. Because China's cooperation initiation with small and weak CEE countries thousands of kilometers away from its land is based on its desire to increase Chinese economic growth and global influence rather than its desire to contribute to their economic development. In other words, China's primary goal in establishing regional cooperation with CEE countries is to support the development of the BRI, sustain its global economic rise, increase its competitiveness in Europe, expand its political and economic influence, and gain political support within the EU.

It is generally preferable for Chinese companies to carry out BRI projects and cooperate in different fields with CEE countries, where local regulations and mechanisms of transparency and accountability are weaker than in Western European countries.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, CEE countries' dependence on foreign investment provides an opportunity for Chinese companies to win infrastructure tenders and acquire strategic assets in the CEE.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ian Bond, "China and Russia: Are There Limits to 'No Limits' Friendship?," Centre For European Reform, (2022):1, Date of Access: May 29, 2023, [https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/insight\\_IB\\_ChinaRussia\\_15.12.22.pdf](https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/insight_IB_ChinaRussia_15.12.22.pdf).

<sup>85</sup> "Poland Voices Concern About 'Dangerous' Russia-China Alliance," The Moscow Times, March 22, 2023, Date of Access: May 29, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/22/poland-voices-concern-about-dangerous-russia-china-alliance-a80575>.

<sup>86</sup> Erik Brattberg et al., "China's Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2021):9, Date of Access: February 20, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>.

<sup>87</sup> Erik Brattberg et al., 9-10.

During its cooperation with CEE countries, China has frequently repeated phrases such as "mutual benefit" and "common gain." However, the general opinion in the relevant literature is that China-CEE cooperation has not yet provided sufficient economic contribution to CEE countries in practice. China is not willing to facilitate trade with CEE countries. The trade deficit of virtually all CEE countries with China has gradually increased since 2012.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the external debt of some CEE countries to China, such as Montenegro and Serbia, has also increased considerably.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Chinese investments in the CEE region have lagged far behind what was promised.<sup>90</sup> Unsatisfactory economic results of China-CEE cooperation have triggered many CEE countries, especially the Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, to question their cooperation with China. This situation has had a negative impact on the development and functioning of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform.

#### **IV. EU's Approach to China-CEE Cooperation: China as a Systemic Rival**

The bilateral and multilateral cooperation initiatives initiated by China in the CEE region after the financial crisis attracted the attention of the EU and Germany, which are the dominant actors in the region. Many Western observers, some EU leaders and diplomats argue that the essence of China-CEE cooperation is based on the 'divide and rule' strategy.<sup>91</sup> China's increasing influence in the CEE has increased their concerns about European integration and the functioning of the EU.<sup>92 93 94</sup> To put it more clearly,

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<sup>88</sup> Tamás Matura, "Editor's Welcome and Some Introductory Remarks," inside *China and Central Europe: Success or Failure?*, ed. Tamás Matura, (Budapest: Dialóg Campus, 2020), 14-15.

<sup>89</sup> UniCredit, "Western Balkans: The Burden of China's Lending to Governments," *Macro Research EEMEA Special Topic*, (2021):5, Date of Access: May 30, 2029, [https://www.research.unicredit.eu/DocsKey/emergingmarkets\\_docs\\_2021\\_179967.ashx?EXT=pdf&KEY=l6KjPzSYBBGzROuioxedUNdVqq1wFeRoBg8dvzn51cwxIFTj0Rbl4w=&T=1](https://www.research.unicredit.eu/DocsKey/emergingmarkets_docs_2021_179967.ashx?EXT=pdf&KEY=l6KjPzSYBBGzROuioxedUNdVqq1wFeRoBg8dvzn51cwxIFTj0Rbl4w=&T=1).

<sup>90</sup> Ivana Karásková, "How China lost Central and Eastern Europe," *MERICCS*, April 22, 2022, Date of Access: March 5, 2023, <https://www.merics.org/en/comment/how-china-lost-central-and-eastern-europe>.

<sup>91</sup> Lau, "Borrell".

<sup>92</sup> Gisele Grieger, "One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China's Regional Integration Initiative," *European Parliamentary Research Service*, (2016):10, Date of Access: March 2, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586608/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)586608\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586608/EPRS_BRI(2016)586608_EN.pdf).

according to those who consider China-CEE cooperation on the basis of realistic concerns, the increasing Chinese influence in the CEE may increase the political support for China in EU countries, such as Hungary, where far-right governments are in power. This may weaken the EU's ability to make decisions, especially on issues related to China, and could hinder the functioning of the EU's fundamental policies. Moreover, it may hinder the cohesion process of EU candidate countries to EU policies and move them away from the EU. In recent years, Serbia's distancing from the EU and deepening its partnership with China, as well as the veto of EU joint statements against China by Hungary and Greece, suggest that concerns about China-CEE cooperation are partly justified.

The fragile democratic structure and communist past of CEE countries are significant factors that trigger the EU's skepticism towards China-CEE cooperation. EU member states with weak democracies, such as Hungary, may use their partnership with China as a bargaining chip against the EU. A state with a weak democracy is highly likely to be influenced by strong and authoritarian states.<sup>95</sup> In addition, small and weak countries that are economically vulnerable are more likely to be exposed to excessive foreign debt. Debt policy is one of the basic strategies of Chinese economic diplomacy. The EU does not want CEE countries to be overburdened with Chinese loans. As EU member CEE countries benefit from attractive EU funds, China's concessional credits are not very attractive for them. However, non-EU CEE countries such as Serbia and Montenegro have been very interested in Chinese loans. As a result, their external debt to China has increased significantly compared to EU member CEE countries.

The EU has reacted strongly to China's 2012 proposal to create special economic zones in the CEE region for Chinese companies.<sup>96</sup> The EU has assessed this proposal as a separatist move. Under EU law, EU member

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<sup>93</sup> Jan Gaspers, "China's "16+1" Equals Much A do About Nothing?," *Reconnecting Asia*, December 5, 2017, Date of Access: March 2, 2023, <https://reconasia.csis.org/chinas-161-equals-much-ado-about-nothing/>.

<sup>94</sup> Emilian Kavalski, "China's 16+1 Is Dead? Long Live the 17+1," *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2019, Date of Access: March 5, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-161-is-dead-long-live-the-171/>.

<sup>95</sup> Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no 39 (2004): 351-366.

<sup>96</sup> Justyna Szczudlik, "Seven Years of the 16+1 An Assessment of China's "Multilateral Bilateralism" in Central Europe," *Asie.Visions, Ifri*, no 107 (2019):8-9, Date of Access: May 23, 2023, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/szczudlik\\_161\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/szczudlik_161_2019.pdf).

states cannot establish preferential zones for entrepreneurs from just one country.<sup>97</sup> The EU opposes the awarding of tenders for major projects in the CEE region to Chinese companies in violation of EU competition rules. The EU argues that competitive public tenders are required for new construction projects in the CEE. The EU has shown the strongest reaction to the projects financed by Chinese credits by initiating infringement proceedings in 2017 regarding the tender of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. Following the infringement proceedings, the Hungarian government was obliged to tender for the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line in Hungary.<sup>98</sup>

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) argues that China's acquisition of European strategic assets may affect security and public order in the EU. The ECA also asserts that the signing of a MoU on the BRI by EU member states may undermine the EU and that Chinese projects carried out under the BRI may weaken the national infrastructure ownership of the member states with geopolitical effects. Furthermore, the ECA maintains that Chinese investments expand the connectivity infrastructure exploited by organized crime and cross-border smuggling.<sup>99</sup> Against this backdrop, the EU strives to prevent the strategic business sectors in Europe from being influenced by China. For instance, the European Commission introduced new investment screening measures in September 2017 for foreign state-owned companies wishing to acquire a European port, part of energy infrastructure, or a defense technology company.<sup>100</sup>

The EU is aware of the rise of China on a global scale and the change in the balance of power in the world. Thus, the EU seeks to maintain its global status as an international power against multilateral cooperation initiatives that serve China's development. In this context, the European Commission

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<sup>97</sup> Szczudlik, "Seven Years of the 16+1," 9.

<sup>98</sup> "Budapest to Belgrade", CEPA, April 24, 2020, Date of Access: 28 May, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/budapest-to-belgrade/>.

<sup>99</sup> European Court of Auditors, "The EU's Response to China's State-Driven Investment Strategy," Review no3, (2020):70, Date of Access: March 10, 2023, [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW20\\_03/RW\\_EU\\_response\\_to\\_China\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW20_03/RW_EU_response_to_China_EN.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> European Commission, "State of the Union 2017 - Trade Package: European Commission Proposes Framework for Screening of Foreign Direct Investments," Press Release, September 14, 2017, Date of Access: March 15, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_3183](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_3183).

introduced the Global Gateway Project in 2021<sup>101</sup> so as to compete with China's BRI. The EU also deviates from its normative narrative in order to counter Chinese international cooperation initiatives. The EU views China's expanding sphere of influence globally from a realist perspective. The EU does not believe the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform and the BRI are based on win-win strategies. The EU asserts that these initiatives are divisive and mainly serve the rise of China. For instance, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, argues that China tries to implement "a divide and conquer" strategy in Europe.<sup>102</sup> Borrell also asserts that EU member states should act jointly against China because China benefits from diplomatic disagreements.<sup>103</sup> Chinese infrastructure projects, investments, and acquisitions in the framework of China-CEE cooperation and the BRI initiative have increased China's influence on the European continent. In addition to China's growing influence in Europe, China's inevitable economic rise and technological and military development have led the EU to characterize China as a "systemic rival" rather than a strategic partner.<sup>104</sup> <sup>105</sup> The term "systemic rival" refers to China's success in becoming an economic and technological competitor to the EU and the US. The term also means political and intellectual rival promoting alternative models of development and governance.<sup>106</sup>

Germany is concerned that China will transform its economic power into greater global influence and that this will change the global order.<sup>107</sup> In this context, Germany tries to securitize China by seeking to restrict its infrastructure projects in the CEE region and its acquisitions of European

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<sup>101</sup> European Commission, "Global Gateway," Date of Access: May 24, 2023, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en).

<sup>102</sup> Lau, "Borrell".

<sup>103</sup> Lau, "Borrell".

<sup>104</sup> European Commission, "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook," JOIN (2019) 5 final, (2019):1, Date of Access: March 15, 2023, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

<sup>105</sup> European Union External Service, "EU-China Relations Factsheet," April 1, 2022, Date of Access: March 20, 2023, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en).

<sup>106</sup> Li Xing and Fan Cungi, "By Defining China a 'Systemic Rival', the West may have other Thoughts," May 8, 2022, Date of Access: March 15, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1265100.shtml>.

<sup>107</sup> Han Liya and Li Chao, "Prospects of the New German Government's China Policy," CIR 32, no 2 (2022):63-70.

high-tech companies. German politician Christian Lindner argued that China did not respect German principles and portrayed China as a systematic rival to Germany.<sup>108</sup> Then-Germany's ambassador to China, Michael Clauss argued that China's parallel institutions/networks, such as the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform, are incompatible with a commitment to a strong and coherent EU.<sup>109</sup> Germany is prejudiced against the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform because Chinese investments in the CEE region violate the EU's strict investment rules, and regional cooperation with China could undermine the EU's political unity. In addition, Germany believes that CEE countries with small economies may come under Chinese influence and be exposed to Chinese political pressure in return for China's economic promises.<sup>110</sup>

China's active involvement in the production and transportation networks of Europe in the framework of the BRI initiative and the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform has geopolitical consequences.<sup>111</sup> The rapid development of Chinese technology and China's increasing influence in the CEE may put China in competition with Germany, the manufacturing power in the CEE region. Germany initially supported the BRI because of its strong commercial relationship with China and the possibility of easy access to the Chinese market. However, Germany's hesitations about the BRI increased in the following years.<sup>112</sup> Arguably, the Chinese targets under the Made in China 2025 have influenced Germany's change of attitude towards the BRI. China produces high-value-added goods as part of Made in China 2025. It is increasingly possible for these products to reach Germany's

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<sup>108</sup> Zoe Schneeweiss, "China Is Systemic Rival Threatening German Economy, Lindner Says," *Bloomberg*, March 29, 2022, Date of Access: April 20, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-29/china-is-systemic-rival-threatening-german-economy-lindner-says>.

<sup>109</sup> Wendy Wu, "Berlin Uneasy about Beijing's Growing Clout in Eastern, Southern Europe," *SCMP*, February 18, 2017, Date of Access: March 20, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2072046/berlin-uneasy-about-beijings-growing-clout-eastern>.

<sup>110</sup> Eszterhai Viktor, "The One Belt One Road from Germany's Perspective," *GEOPOLITIKA*, August 15, 2017, Date of Access: March 24, 2023, <http://www.geopolitika.hu/en/2017/08/15/the-one-belt-one-road-from-germanys-perspective/>.

<sup>111</sup> Mercy A. Kuo, "Germany, and Central Europe: Leveraging Fault Lines," *THE DIPLOMAT*, March 1, 2018, Date of Access: March 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/china-germany-and-central-europe-leveraging-fault-lines/>.

<sup>112</sup> Kuo, "Germany".

traditional markets faster and easier through rail and seaway projects carried out under the BRI. As a result, the German industry finds itself in a competitive position. In particular, the gradual development of Chinese high technology increases the potential of Chinese firms to compete with German firms. Moreover, the recent acquisition of high-tech companies by Chinese companies in Europe, such as the German intelligent robot manufacturer KUKA, has caused concern in Germany. Thereupon, Germany has begun to try to prevent strategic European companies from being purchased by Chinese companies.<sup>113</sup> For instance, Germany has proposed creating a legal mechanism that would allow Brussels or Berlin to veto security-critical investments.<sup>114</sup> Germany aims to prevent Chinese companies with political intentions from investing in and acquiring strategic assets. This means that Germany triggers the EU to adopt strict laws against the acquisition of European companies by Chinese companies.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, Germany pioneered the initiation of the Berlin Process in 2014 to balance the Chinese influence in the CEE region and to keep the Western Balkan countries in the EU's orbit. The Berlin process has been a major initiative for the Western Balkan countries, which have lost hope of joining the EU, in order to regain their trust in the EU.<sup>116</sup>

### Conclusion

In the CEE region, which witnessed great power struggles between the powerful Russian and Germanic historical states for centuries, today, on the one hand, the EU and the US, NATO and Germany, and on the other hand, Russia and China try to increase their influence, and all are in conflict of interest. Particularly following the financial crisis, China began to engage in power competition in the CEE region for its economic, commercial, and

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<sup>113</sup> Cynthia Wrage and Jakob Kullik, "After Kuka-Germany's Lessons Learned from Chinese Takeovers," CHOICE, July 2021, 2022, Date of Access: March 24, 2023, <https://chinaobservers.eu/after-kuka-germanys-lessons-learned-from-chinese-takeovers/>.

<sup>114</sup> Kevin Klyman, "The EU Joins Washington's Campaign to Contain China," April 27, 2023, Just Security, Date of Access: May 28, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/86185/the-eu-joins-washingtons-campaign-to-contain-china/>.

<sup>115</sup> "German Minister Urges Fast Passage of EU Law on Chinese Takeovers," Reuters, January 28, 2018, Date of Access: March 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-china-mergers-idUSKBN1FG0XF>.

<sup>116</sup> Marina Vulović, "The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big Ideas, Difficult Implementation," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 12, 2022, Date of Access: March 28, 2023, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C70/>.

political interests. China's military partnership with Serbia and its official contacts to increase military cooperation with other CEE countries may affect internal and regional dynamics, increase the insecurity of neighboring states, and make the sensitive environment of peace in the CEE region more fragile. China's initiatives towards military cooperation indicate its desire to increase Chinese military presence in the CEE region.

The isolation of Russia by the West due to its military operation against Ukraine launched in February 2022 has increased Russia's dependence on China. Similarly, China's recent exposure to EU and US sanctions may further unite China and Russia. This may trigger the beginning of bipolarity against the US and its allies. The announcement of "friendship without limits" by the leaders of China and Russia in February 2022 suggests that regional and global power dynamics will be shaped in line with the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Although China tries to create the impression that it is neutral on the Russia-Ukraine War, it has refrained from condemning Russia and criticized the sanctions imposed on Russia by the US. The end of the war in favor of Russia and the deepening of the alliance between China and Russia may trigger the expansion of China's sphere of influence in Europe and will increase Europe's security concerns.

The China-CEE Cooperation Platform, launched in 2012 under the leadership of China, has drawn attention as China's most effective initiative in the region. Realistically, China's main aim in its cooperation with small and weak CEE countries thousands of kilometers away from its territory is not to ensure their economic development but to sustain its own global economic rise, expand its economic and political influence, and increase its competitive power in Europe. The China-CEEC Cooperation Platform reflects an asymmetric relationship coordinated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through this cooperation platform, China aims to create a CEE region whose borders are determined by itself and which will act in line with Chinese interests and goals. While China is in the role of a dominant party controlling the functioning of the cooperation, CEE countries are in the role of a passive party that has to comply with China's plans and wishes.

The China-CEEC Cooperation Platform is an important complement to the BRI and serves the development of the BRI. The BRI appears to be essentially a policy initiative in which China is free to do whatever it wants, and participating states generally follow the path set by China. The BRI embodies the core of China's global ambition and refers to the transition from a "low-profile strategy" to an "assertive and proactive strategy" in

Chinese foreign policy. Realistically, it is arguable that the BRI serves the rise of China and tries to maximize Chinese national and international interests, and it can change the geopolitical balance in Eurasia and bring China into a major rivalry with the US.

China also frequently uses liberal phrases such as "mutual benefit" and "common gain" to win their political support and hearts. However, the common opinion in the literature is that China-CEE cooperation has not been able to provide sufficient economic contribution to CEE countries in practice so far. Many scholars agree that China's investments in the CEE region remain well below what was promised. China has not been willing enough to facilitate trade with CEE countries. The trade deficit of CEE countries with China has gradually increased since the establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation Platform. Furthermore, non-EU member CEE countries, such as Serbia and Montenegro, have become increasingly indebted to China. The economic results of China-CEE cooperation have been a disappointment for most CEE countries. This has triggered some of them to leave the China-CEE Cooperation Platform.

China's access to CEE countries' critical infrastructure, such as logistical nodes and telecommunications systems, makes China advantageous in terms of intelligence gathering. ECA argues that China's acquisition of European strategic assets, such as ports, may affect security and public order in the EU. The ECA puts forward that the signing of a MoU on the BRI by EU member states may undermine the EU and that Chinese projects carried out under the BRI may weaken the national infrastructure ownership of EU member states with geopolitical effects. Therefore, the EU strives to prevent the strategic business sectors in Europe from being influenced by China. For instance, the European Commission adopted a proposal regarding the screening of FDI in September 2017 to restrict foreign state-owned companies wishing to acquire critical European ports, energy infrastructures, and defense technology companies.<sup>117</sup> Germany, in particular, strongly supported the EU framework for FDI screening, which ensures that the essential interests of the EU are not undermined.

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<sup>117</sup> European Commission, "State of the Union 2017 - Trade Package: European Commission Proposes Framework for Screening of Foreign Direct Investments," Press Release, September 14, 2017, Date of Access: March 15, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_17\\_3183](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_3183).

The EU considers the increase of Chinese influence in the CEE region a threat to its integrity. The EU opposes China's use of local linkages, which will undermine the functioning of its decision-making mechanism. The EU fears that CEE countries will increase their political support for China in return for economic promises. The EU believes that the increase in their political support for China may harm European integration, hinder a strong collective stance against China, and undermine the harmonization process of EU candidate countries.

The EU is aware of China's global rise and the change in the balance of power in the world. Thus, the EU tries to maintain its global status as an international power against multilateral cooperation initiatives that serve China's development. The tremendous development of the Chinese economy and technology and the expansion of China's sphere of influence in Europe in recent years have paved the way for the EU and Western European countries, especially Germany, to characterize China as a systemic rival. Germany is concerned about the weakening of the German sphere of influence in Europe due to China's growing presence in CEE and the acquisition of German technology companies by Chinese technology companies. Because of these concerns, Germany is trying to securitize China. In this context, Germany leads the EU to pass tougher laws to prevent the acquisition of European technology companies and strategic assets by Chinese companies. Germany also initiated the Berlin Process in 2014 to balance the Chinese influence in the Western Balkans.

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