

BRIEF

TIME TO LEAVE CHINA'S "16+1" INFLUENCE TRAP

| FILIP JIROUŠ |

Last week Estonia and Latvia followed Lithuania and quit what used to be known as 16+1, as the Czech Republic and other participating countries become increasingly vocal in their scepticism of the initiative. The 16+1 format, officially known as Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (中国—中东欧国家合作, *Zhongguo-Zhong Dong Ou Guojia Hezuo*), was launched in 2012 as a China-centric initiative incorporating 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. In 2019, Greece—which is heavily indebted to China—joined, and the platform was briefly renamed 17+1. While it is officially described as an economic cooperation platform, its real achievements and the PRC's approach to it show that trade and investment were never its true focus. Rather, the PRC used it as a propaganda and influence tool, wasting CEE diplomatic capacity on activities that only benefited Beijing. The lack of benefits and abundance of risks have recently led several CEE countries to reassess their participation in the 16+1 format. The time has come for the rest of the participating countries to join their Baltic neighbours and ditch this PRC influence vehicle.

politicians, scholars and others. This is evidenced by, for instance, the extensive involvement of the International Liaison Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部, *Zhongyang Duiwai Lianluo Bu*),

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A RISKY ENDEAVOUR

CEE countries have for years voiced frustration with 16+1, arguing that Beijing failed to deliver on its promises of investment and market access, prompting experts in the region to call Beijing's activities in this area "the economic diplomacy of empty promises".¹ The 16+1 format is not an economic cooperation platform. Rather, it is a label for influence operations targeting

a CCP influence organ, in 16+1 events targeting both junior and senior politicians.² In 2015, the Czech counter-intelligence described the ILD as a "specific Chinese intelligence agency".³ Often under the guise of economic cooperation, the ILD profiles and co-opts CEE political and business elites to advance CCP interests in the region.⁴ The main, recurring ILD 16+1 event—the China-CEEC Political Parties Dialogue (中国—中东欧政党对话会, *Zhongguo—Zhong Dong Ou Zhengdang Duihua Hui*)—gathers high-ranking politicians from the region who then often promote CCP policies at the expense of their own states' best interests.⁵ The ILD also engages politicians in individual countries, including Estonia.⁶

Academic exchanges for 16+1 involve not only the ILD but also the Ministry of State Security (MSS, 国家安全部, *Guojia Anquan Bu*),

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the PRC's main civilian intelligence agency.⁷ A former high-ranking MSS officer now runs the official 16+1 think tank platform as well as the China-CEE Institute (中国—中东欧研究

院, *Zhongguo-Zhong-Dong-Ou Yanjiu Yuan*). The platforms have mobilised former Czech Communist secret police agents, as well as scholars from the region, for propaganda and influence operations.⁸

BOILING FRUSTRATION

As the promised economic benefits failed to materialise, awareness of the 16+1 platform's risks has grown significantly among CEE states. Thus, several 16+1 member countries have recently shown discontent with the platform. Bulgaria, Slovenia, Romania and the Baltic states refused to send heads of state to the last 16+1 (virtual) summit in February 2021. Moreover, some CEE countries complained about the lack of benefits during the videoconference.⁹ A few months later, amid a diplomatic spat with the PRC, Lithuania officially announced it would stop participating in 16+1 activities. This eventually led to China imposing an unofficial economic embargo on Lithuanian companies and their partners.¹⁰ This May, a Czech parliamentary committee unanimously adopted a resolution urging the government to review its participation in the China-centric platform.¹¹ Most recently, Estonia and Latvia announced they stopped

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participating in the format, preferring standard bilateral exchange and the EU-China platforms. This means that the China-centric initiative was reduced to 14+1, or even less.¹²

While Beijing is aware of CEE states' discontent, it remains invested in 16+1. It likely intends to exploit the platform or at least its participating states to gain access to the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine. This was heralded by this year's PRC diplomatic missions tasked with assessing CEE interest in 16+1 and "explaining China's position on Ukraine".¹³ The mission appears to have failed to raise 16+1 enthusiasm, given that a recent ambassadorial round table in Beijing to celebrate 10 years of 16+1 attracted diplomats from only 11 of the participating countries.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the 16+1 cooperation remains worrying, given the recent attempts by

Poland, Kyiv's staunchest ally and the largest CEE country, to expand collaboration with the PRC, which has so far led to little benefit for Poland but significant political gains for the PRC.¹⁵

The PRC has proven to be a dubious partner. Its unofficial embargo of Lithuania, bypassing WTO rules and punishing commercial subjects for purely political reasons, as well as its long-term cooperation with Russia, indicate that extensive long-term cooperation with Beijing can threaten CEE countries' security and stability.¹⁶ NATO's new description of the PRC as a security challenge, as well as the EU's 2019 designation of China as a systemic rival, imply that further escalation can be expected.¹⁷ Measures should be taken to mitigate security and economic risks.

HIJACKED FOREIGN POLICY

In rushing to engage with China, CEE countries have often relied on lobbyists and "China hands" who have conflicts of interest. Through or in coordination with these individuals, Beijing exploits the existing knowledge asymmetry between China and the rest of the world, and often effectively repurposes segments of democratic states' institutions to serve PRC interests.¹⁸ Thus, state resources are allocated to serve PRC political goals, and limited diplomatic capacity is wasted on dubious projects that bring no benefit to European societies.

An extreme case is the Czech Ministry of Industry and Commerce's (MIC) Chinese-Czech Centre for Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation, first announced at an ILD dialogue in 2017. The Centre was established as part of the PRC

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National Development and Reform Commission International Cooperation Centre (国家发展改革委国际合作中心, *Guojia Fazhan Gaige Wei Guoji Hezuo Zhongxin*).¹⁹ Due to the lack of "a mirror institution to the NDRC", the MIC decided to outsource the Centre's daily operations to

a lobby group surrounding Jaroslav Tvrdík, a former minister of defence employed by PPF, a Czech corporation heavily invested in the PRC market.²⁰ This is what the reliance on “China hands” with conflicts of interest can lead to: a nominally Czech state institution run by the PRC state, with Beijing and its allies sitting at both ends of the table.²¹

Between 2013 and 2020, successive Czech governments have often relied on Tvrdík and PPF in their outreach to the PRC, which, due to the group’s business interests in China, has created a serious conflict of interest. In addition, PPF covertly ran a pro-CCP propaganda campaign in the country’s media and among political circles.²² While the Centre’s activities have achieved no tangible benefits for Czech society, they helped institutionalise PRC influence in the country.²³ Thus, the asymmetrical NDRC-MIC relationship led to the Czech state handing over a part of its foreign policy to both a local lobby group and the PRC.

Additionally, the Centre introduced the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (新疆生产建设兵团, *Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan*), a PRC paramilitary organisation, to Czech businesses as a prospective partner. If Czech firms established cooperation with the entity, they could face serious consequences, given that it is sanctioned by the US for participating in the Uyghur genocide.²⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CEE countries should **abandon 16+1**. At the very least, they should stop sending officials of vice-ministerial or higher rank to 16+1 events, to avoid wasting their precious diplomatic capacity on interactions that yield no benefits.
2. CEE countries that are EU members should **exploit the full potential of the EU-China exchange platforms and standard bilateral mechanisms** to promote their interests vis-à-vis Beijing rather than participate in dubious China-centric initiatives.
3. CEE countries should **focus on the markets of Asian countries**—such as Taiwan, Japan and South Korea—that **respect the rule of law** and uphold democratic values and thus have limited or no political risk when compared to the PRC’s system. The lessons of the risks of cooperation with the PRC can be taken from the cases of Australia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and even Estonia. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine also revealed the short-sightedness of extensive cooperation with countries that violate international law and where governments have limited incentives to act rationally and predictably.
4. To guarantee that engagement with the PRC serves national interests, **it should be managed by personnel with the necessary expertise and supervised to avoid any conflict of interest**. Countries should not let their foreign policy be hijacked by dubious actors.
5. CEE states should **seek cooperation with like-minded forces** in Europe, including, but not limited to, other CEE countries, to build joint responses rejecting Beijing-centred initiatives such as 16+1 and BRI.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Martin Hála, Jichang Lulu, “[Lost in translation: ‘Economic diplomacy’ with Chinese characteristics](#)”, Sinopsis, 11 March 2019 (viewed 25 June 2022).
- ² Filip Jirouš, “[16 + 1: China’s Push Into Central and Eastern Europe Loses Momentum](#)”, China Brief, 22:12, 1 July 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ³ “[Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2015](#)”, BIS, 1 September 2019 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ⁴ Filip Jirouš, “[16 + 1: China’s Push Into Central and Eastern Europe Loses Momentum](#)”, China Brief, 22:12, 1 July 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Frank Jüris, “[Estonian parties in the CCP’s grip: The International Liaison Department’s influence activities](#)”, Sinopsis, 25 September 2020 (viewed August 7 2022).
- ⁷ Filip Jirouš, “[16 + 1: China’s Push Into Central and Eastern Europe Loses Momentum](#)”, China Brief, 22:12, 1 July 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).
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- ⁹ Stuart Lau, “[China’s Eastern Europe strategy gets the cold shoulder](#)”, Politico, 9 February 2021 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ¹⁰ Sofija Lapėnienė, “[Lithuania’s FM failed to anticipate China’s full retaliation over Taiwan](#)”, LRT, 11 January 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).
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- ¹² “[Eesti ei osale edaspidi Kesk- ja Ida-Euroopa riikide ning Hiina koostööformaadi](#)”, Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 August 2022 (viewed 11 August 2022); “[Latvia ceases its participation in the cooperation framework of Central and Eastern European Countries and China](#)”, Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 August 2022 (viewed 11 August 2022).
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- ¹⁴ Wang Lutong 王鲁彤, Twitter, July 15 2022 (viewed July 18 2022).
- ¹⁵ Filip Jirouš, “[16 + 1: China’s Push Into Central and Eastern Europe Loses Momentum](#)”, China Brief, 22:12, 1 July 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).; Łukasz Sarek, “[Panda bonds that tie: Poland’s ruling party sets its sights on Beijing](#)”, Sinopsis, 18 November 2022 (viewed 23 June 2022); Łukasz Sarek, “[Polska – stabilny partner Chin w Europie](#)”, 4 August 2022 (viewed 10 August 2022).
- ¹⁶ See Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, Nils Wörmer (eds.), “[Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?](#)”, Springer, 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ¹⁷ “[NATO 2022 Strategic Concept](#)”, NATO, 29 June 2022 (viewed 11 July 2022); “[EU-China – A strategic outlook](#)”, European Commission, 12 March 2019 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ¹⁸ On repurposing and knowledge asymmetry see Jichang Lulu, “[Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster](#)”, Sinopsis, 26 November 2019 (viewed 11 July 2022).
- ¹⁹ “[První zasedání Čínsko-českého centra pro spolupráci v rámci iniciativy Pásmo a Stezka](#)”, MIC, 2 August 2017 (viewed 12 July 2022). The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has earned the nickname “small state council” (“[小国务院](#)”, Xiao Guowuyuan) for its broad powers and agenda (“[名称在变、初心不变：93岁“老发改人”回忆国家发改委67年成长史：中国经济导报记者公欣采访离休干部于永平](#)”, NDRC, 30 September 2019 [viewed 12 July 2022]).
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- ²² Martin Hála, “[Making Foreign Companies Serve China: Outsourcing Propaganda to Local Entities in the Czech Republic](#)”, China Brief, 20:1, 17 January 2020 (viewed 12 July 2022).
- ²³ To add to the existing engagement risks, the overall CCP influence in the country was spearheaded by the controversial military-intelligence-linked company CEFC (later taken over by the state-owned giant CITIC), which employed Tvrdík. Thus he became an intersecting point between a local oligarch with business ties in the PRC and the CCP intelligence-influence operations in the Czech Republic. Martin Hála, [Centrum pro integraci do Čínyevropy](#), Sinopsis, 21 July 2017 (viewed 12 July 2022).
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