

# Romania-China Relations. Political and Economic Challenges in the BRI Era

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**Abstract:** *Our paper explores the bilateral Romanian-Chinese relations, including the wider context of the EU-China relationship. There is a history to Romania-China relations, which favours Romania, given the closeness of the two countries during the Cold War period. The pursuit of EU membership by Romania contributed to a diminished attention paid to other parts of the world in the 2000s. This situation is changing. The EU membership enrolled Romania in common EU policies, including trade policy. The EU-China relations developed visibly, particularly after 2003; a renewed impetus is noticeable starting with 2009, and again in 2013. Romania's renewed interest and opening towards China coincides with the year when the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched. Even though there were cancellations and delays in implementing certain common projects, there are good prospects for improvement and new openings.*

**Keywords:** *Romania-China relations, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), 16+1 Initiative, EU-China relations*

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## 1. The Romanian-Chinese relations, change and continuity (1949-2006)

During the past decades, Romania-China relations have undergone spectacular changes, ranging from strong relations, during Nicolae Ceaușescu's era, to rather fluctuating relations in the present. Politically, one may identify various periods of ups and downs, whilst economically the trend has been upward. Trading between the two countries is still going through a phase of improvement, although the overall balance has been negative for Romania for over a decade now.

Political relations between Romania and the People's Republic of China have a long history, starting in 1949, when Romania was one of the first countries which recognized the newly proclaimed republic. Starting with that point in history, relations between Romania and China passed through a golden age, thanks to the fact that both countries were part of the so-called "communist block", but also because, at some point, each decided to distance themselves from the USSR. Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule was a very prolific period for Romania-China relations, both countries living today in the shadows of those good relations. China offered support to Romania in case of an invasion similar to that of

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Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Tomozei, 2017), while Romania was considered as a mediator between China and the United States, whose relations improved with the visit of President Richard Nixon in China, in 1972. After 1980, the relations between the two countries was characterized by a period of inertia, both states focusing on their internal affairs: China with its policy of opening-up, Romania trying to pay its foreign debts (Chiriu and Liu, 2015). Soon after the Revolution took place in Romania in 1989, China accepted and recognized the new Romanian government.

A period of ups and downs for Romania-China relations followed, with Romanian leaders having different visions regarding the development of relations with China. The new relations started with the visit of former Romanian President Ion Iliescu to China in 1991, and continued with the visit of Chinese Premier Li Peng in Romania in 1994. During Premier Li Peng's visit to Europe in 1994, Romania was the only CEE country included in his itinerary, which underlines the importance Romania had for China's external relations in the region at that time (Bridge, 1994). Another auspicious moment for Romania-China relations was the visit of President Jiang Zemin in Romania in 1996, a visit that was returned by the Romanian President Emil Constantinescu in 1997. Jiang Zemin had spent some time in Romania in 1977, when he was working as engineer at ARO Câmpulung (Evenimentul Muscelean, 2011), being accustomed to the Romanian language. His affinity for Romania could have been used more by our authorities to strengthen the Romanian-Chinese relations.

The high-level visits were continued in the early 2000's with the visits of Prime Minister Adrian Năstase in China in 2002, 2003 and 2004. His second visit took place soon after the SARS outbreak, a fact that impressed the Chinese officials, who declared, regarding Romania, that "a friend in need is a friend indeed." (Ge, 2017:128) In 2003, Ion Iliescu paid another visit to China and together with his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, "announced that the two countries will develop a comprehensive friendly cooperative partnership." (Ge, 2017:128) This partnership was illustrated by Hu Jintao's visit to Romania in 2004, when Romania and China strengthened their relations. Unfortunately, Hu's visit was the last visit paid by a Chinese president to Romania. On the other side, Romania's last president who visited China was Traian Băsescu, in 2006. Being a chief of state originating from a right-wing party, Traian Băsescu did not seem to pay a particular attention to deepening Romania's relations with China, but only in keeping them at an operational level.

Romania's foreign policy in the 1990s and early 2000s was very much oriented towards two goals: becoming a NATO member, for security reasons, and becoming a member of the European Union, mainly due to socio-economic, but also to the attractiveness of core European values and norms. In April 2004, Romania became a NATO member and finalized negotiations to become an EU member in December same year. Romania became an EU Member State starting with 1 January 2007. Ever since, Romania has grown and matured as part of the European Union complex system and community of states and peoples, with whom it shares a host of common interests and challenges.

If we look at the Romanian-Chinese political relations over the last three decades, we may notice that the high-level meetings had a gap between 2006-2013, except for the visit of Prime Minister Emil Boc in 2011, which seems not to have had any palpable results.

China meanwhile developed stronger relations with the EU as a bloc (to be discussed below). Also, China contributed to the alleviation of the consequences of the financial and economic crisis the EU entered in 2009, thus playing an important role to the EU's stabilisation.

An important observation one may make with regard to the period 1989-2006 is that the level of economic development of the Sino-Romanian relation did not match the high level of political contacts that occurred during this period, which was characterized by numerous bilateral visits of heads of state or government.

## **2. The China-European Union relationship. Cooperative, competitive and challenging aspects**

### **2.1. Cooperative dimensions of the bilateral relation**

A cornerstone for the bilateral EU-China relation in the last decades is represented by the creation of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in October 2003. It is interesting to note that the first EU Security Strategy was launched in the same year (the so-called Solana strategy) and that within that document the EU asserts its vision of a multipolar, peaceful and cooperative world order. This vision converged with China's view. "It also coincided with one of the worst crises in the transatlantic relations, mainly due to disagreements over the US-led war in Iraq and the foreign policy stance of the first Bush administration." (Casarini, 2013) Germany and France were the leading EU Member States to coordinate their opposition to the American-led invasion of Iraq.

It is worth noting that the period of colder EU-China political relations corresponds to less frequent Romania-China high-level meetings and political closeness. Romania had been negotiating its accession to the EU between 2000-2004, and the foreign policy positioning as well as trade policy were the main topics in the negotiation process.

However, after 5 years, the EU-27 and China launched the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue. (Beijing, April 2008) In continuation of the informal commitments made in 2003, and as a response of the eurozone crisis, China through its PBOC accelerated the diversification of its foreign reserves to multiply its reserves in euro currency, also buying Europeans bonds pertaining to the most-hit countries by the financial crisis in the EU. 30% of Beijing's total foreign currency reserves (which, at \$3.5 trillion, are the world's largest) are euro-assets. "China's monetary activism has made the Sino-European strategic partnership stronger by identifying and pursuing a core common interest: the survival of the eurozone and its common currency." (Casarini, 2013)

Against this background of growing trade and financial interconnectedness, at the 16<sup>th</sup> EU-China Summit, held in November 2013, the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation was adopted. The 2014 Policy Paper on the EU reiterated that the EU and China "share important strategic consensus on building a multipolar world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014) – which seems to set an essential ground for the bilateral cooperation. The year 2013 was also the one when President Xi Jinping launched his new "silk road" – the Belt and Road Initiative (at that time, One Belt One Road, OBOR). In September 2015, the European Commission signed a Memorandum of Understanding

(MoU) with China: EU-China Connectivity Platform, to “enhance synergies” between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the EU’s own Investment Plan for Europe (the so-called “Juncker Plan”).

In 2016, the EU Council was assessing that “[t]he EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation fulfils an important role as the highest-level joint document guiding the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.” (Council of the European Union, 2016)

The ground for cooperation between the EU and China is represented by a series of elements: the shared preference for multipolarity, the strengthened financial and economic interconnectedness, the will to widen and deepen the cooperation and build more connectivity between China and Europe – just to mention the main ones. The BRI represents “a long-term Chinese connectivity vision with no *a priori* parameters or methods, actors or mechanisms, nor much granularity to date. It therefore allows a great deal of flexibility and could—possibly—become a leading new model of cooperation and global governance.” (Popescu and Secieru, 2018) The underlying idea of BRI is that deepened connectivity and a more complex interdependence will contribute to more cooperative interactions, to peace and prosperity. This reminds us of the concept of functionalism, advanced during the Second World War by a theorist of Romanian origin, David Mitrany, whose work *A Working Peace System* (1943) inspired one of the most important and influential theories of European integration – neofunctionalism. Mitrany identified competition between various political units as being the cause of international conflicts. He also stated that eliminating these divisions and political competitions is impossible. What is needed is to multiply the interconnections between the units on the basis of common functions (or needs). (Popescu, 2009)

## **2.2. The competitive dimensions of the bilateral relationship**

The competitive dimensions of the EU-China relationship are multiple. A series of authors and reports are documenting asymmetries in the economic relations. Apart from the trade imbalance, which tilts dramatically in favour of the Chinese side, there are other concerns as well. “Of greater concern is that in some industries the Chinese market may be closing to foreign business. For example, new restrictions on food imports, coming into effect on 1 October 2018, can be expected to hinder trade. Furthermore, the ongoing trend in multiple industries of huge state-owned enterprises being established through mergers poses a real threat to private businesses.” (European Business in China, 2017) A recent report of the European Chamber of Commerce in China remarks the areas in which Chinese investors are favoured in their access to European markets in comparison with Europeans in China. It concludes that there is much need for a successful completion of EU – China negotiations for a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, preferably within the next 12 months (European Business in China, 2017). China’s markets are not so open as declared, according to some authors. There is a need to move towards liberal commercial order that president Xi was pleading for in Davos. (Small, 2017) “From a broad European perspective, a shift by China to address the issues of EU rules, and to cooperate with the EU on joint investment projects for infrastructures would be a welcome turn of events.” (Godement and Vasselier, 2017) The green commitment of China is also

an element of division in the bilateral relations. For the EU and the Europeans at large, protecting the Earth, the quality of the air and other ecological matters, represent core values.

Starting with the 16+1 initiative in 2012, the area of Central and Eastern Europe became an area of competition in certain ways. But this is an issue to be discussed later on in the paper. The area of EU's Eastern neighbourhood became gradually of increased interest for China and the launch of the BRI enhanced this interest. Belarus is the closest to China from all post-Soviet European states. Accidentally or not, Belarus is also the state which was most reluctant to join EU initiatives, the Eastern Partnership for example, and whose human rights track record has received a lot of criticism from Brussels, as well as from Strasbourg (Council of Europe). Its economy is largely a state controlled economy. The fact that the EU has a set of economic standards and benchmarks in terms of market economy, rule of law, democracy and liberty, generates tasks and burdens for the Eastern EU neighbours (former Soviet republics) in terms of reforming their state administration and politics. The offers coming from China, loans, investments, and so on, do not have normative strings and conditionalities attached to them and seem to be more palatable on many occasions. On the other hand, a series of issues related to the security-development nexus, pillar of the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, are "seen as problematic, like issues of public mismanagement of funds, state dependence on Chinese funds, unequal distribution of benefits of the investments." (Ghiasi and Zhou, 2017)

A Chinese viewpoint stresses the fact that "TTP<sup>2</sup> and TTIP<sup>3</sup> build on the interests of the West's own network, thus blocking the strategic objectives of OBOR<sup>4</sup>" (Liu, 2017:140) Extending the free-trade within the developed world can only hinder China's attempt at extending its connectivity in the areas/regions beyond the BRI. For sure, there are other competitive aspects to the bilateral relationship as seen from Beijing, and which are less visible and less known to Europeans.

### 2.3. Challenging aspects of the EU-China relationship

Both cooperative and competitive dimensions of the bilateral relationship may generate challenging aspects. In the following lines, we enumerate and discuss some of the main challenges as seen from an EU viewpoint. BRI, China's growing economic presence in EU countries and its neighbourhood, as well as 16+1 create a series of challenges for EU, as follows:

➤ Building a common EU voice in relation to the BRI. Apart from the fact that BRI was defined in rather unclear lines by the Chinese part, leaving a lot to the inventiveness and local conditions of possible partners, there is no common policy of the EU with regard to this broad and strategically important Chinese foreign policy direction. "At present, bar the EU-China Connectivity Platform, Brussels does not have a common voice and strategic

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<sup>2</sup> Trans-Pacific Partnership. For more details about the TPP please access the following link: <https://ustr.gov/TPP/>

<sup>3</sup> Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. For more details about the TTIP please access the following link: <https://ustr.gov/ttip>

<sup>4</sup> One Belt One Road. You can find more information about OBOR/BRI at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>

response to the Belt.” (Ghiasi and Zhou, 2017) The EU needs more “understanding of all of the Belt’s implications on the EU’s own stated foreign, security and economic interests.” (Ghiasi and Zhou, 2017)

➤ Creating a common foreign policy position towards South and Central Asia – which is an important and main branch of BRI – is yet another challenge for the EU. The creation of the Eastern Partnership belongs to a recent period (2009) and it was generated both by Russia’s aggressive behaviour in Georgia (2008), as well as by the interest of post-Soviet states in developing closer ties with the EU. Will China’s BRI generate a comparable positioning of the EU with respect to South and Central Asia? This is a question which remains open to future answers.

➤ A challenge related to EU’s behaviour with respect to its own Eastern Member States (MS) has also been generated – at least as a result of the creation of 16+1 initiative in 2012. The CEE members of the EU are present within this initiative. They are less developed than their Western counterparts, they rely a great deal on European structural funds, on investments, and find themselves challenging the expansion of the Eurozone. The opportunities opened by the Chinese partners are tempting and became a subject of criticism by some Western European leaders, as we will discuss further down. How is the EU going to respond to further deepened economic interconnectedness between Eastern EU MSs and China? To what extent the political dimension of the transatlantic security alliance will impact this issue? Will the Chinese offer these countries what amounts to, as Godement and Vasselier write, a “form of competition to EU-derived funding and projects”? (Godement and Vasselier, 2017: 68) The presence of the BRI related Chinese offers to Eastern EU MSs may create a pressure and challenge to EU’s Cohesion Policy and perhaps on other policies. The two authors mentioned above discuss the issue in terms of a challenge of EU fragmentation, when writing: “were EU structural funds to dry up, new barriers to rise inside the EU, or, perhaps most challenging of all, more thoughtful and attractive Chinese offers to appear on the table, this situation might still change.” (Godement and Vasselier, 2017)

➤ The interest of EU’s Eastern neighbours in fulfilling EU’s conditionality in order to qualify for further economic agreements and advantages may suffer as a result of an enhanced presence of Beijing in the region. With respect to Belarus, for instance, Popescu and Secrieru write: “EU interests might be harmed by Chinese financial support allowing the Lukashenko regime to further ward off Western pressure to embark on political reforms.” (Popescu and Secrieru, 2018)

➤ The European Union might be faced with a deeper challenge, of reframing its relation with China in strategic terms. A new EU strategy on China is needed, believes part of the Brussels leadership. In a Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on “Elements for a new EU strategy on China”, there is the following mention and proposition: “Drive forward infrastructure, trading, digital and people-to-people connectivity between Europe and China based on an open rules-based platform with benefits for all the countries along the proposed routes.” (European Commission, 2016)

➤ Connected with the previous one, the EU is challenged to keep pace with China's impetus of emerging economy, and perhaps also with a surging demography which contrasts the ageing population of the Old Continent.

➤ Finally, but perhaps extremely important, there is the cultural challenge – which works in both senses – for Europeans and Chinese. It is not only a matter of differing political systems, ways of conducting public business, governance, but also of values, of ways in which things are done, principles and their implementation.

On the other hand, China's involvement in Central and Eastern Europe was approached with scepticism by the European Union, which sees China's forays in the region more as a *divide et impera* strategy, rather than a way to spur investments and to facilitate the development of the countries from the CEE region.

Although China developed railway links with the some of the biggest European cities, the Chinese investments in Eastern Europe are what set off the alarm for the EU. (European Parliament, 2018) Looking next door, on the Asian continent, the EU connected the dots between some of China's biggest investments and learned an important lesson. Trying to avoid a debt trap that entangled some of the countries from Asia (Sri Lanka for example), the EU wants to make sure that EU countries do not fall into the same mirage of Chinese infrastructure development. An important example in Europe's own backyard is the case of Montenegro, which has constructed a highway with Chinese loans. Without preferential interest rates and connecting an area without too much population or trade potential, Montenegro's government debt exploded to 80% of its GDP (Reuters, 2018) and threw the burden on the population by rising taxes and cutting some benefits (Reuters, 2018).

The new string of pearls that China created around Europe by acquiring shares into some of the most important European ports also created frictions with China. Rotterdam, Antwerp, Marseilles, Bilbao, Piraeus (European Parliament, 2018), to mention just a few, are some of the most important ports that China controls through its companies like COSCO and China Merchants Group International. The idea of the string of pearls developed around the Indian Ocean speaks about the possibility to use these commercial ports for military purposes. What the EU fears does not seem to be the military potential, but the fact that China can cripple its economic development.

In more general terms, the EU is somehow forced by the expansive Chinese economic impetus to deal with its own insecurities. Some EU analysts and leaders see the sub regional initiatives which involve China as a danger. "As one observer put it, "If 16+1 is not an existential threat to the EU, the addition of 16+1, 5+1 [the Nordic alliance] and 7+1 [Mediterranean Union] would certainly be on." (Godement and Vasselier, 2017:68) Is this interpretation a matter of European cultural framing? Is it a real threat? Are outside threats more dangerous than internal EU threats? How can the EU overcome its own insecurities? These, and many others, are questions raised as a result of the growing presence of China in the EU and surrounding areas.

### **3. Opportunities created by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for the EU. The value of 16+1**

#### **3.1. Opportunities created by the BRI for the European Union**

BRI creates new opportunities for the EU-China relationship. Some of the challenges presented above, as well as some of the competitive aspects discussed earlier may be seen and approached as hidden opportunities. The very fact that China launched an initiative meant to connect even more the country to Europe represents an opportunity, which may be transformed or not in advantages by the EU as a political-economic entity as well as by Member States. To give an example, China's AIIB<sup>5</sup> project, together with EBRD<sup>6</sup>, and a series of countries, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, are involved in the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP) that connects the Caspian Sea to Europe. The link of this pipeline to a Trans-Albanian pipeline and ultimately to Italy, would lead to the reduction of the EU's dependence on Russian gas. However, China's pattern of engagement is not anti-Russian. On the contrary, Beijing found formulae of engaging with Central Asian states, as well as with Eastern European countries (Belarus is the best example) without antagonizing or even engaging Russia.

The European Commission signed a Memo of Understanding (MoU) with China (September 2015): EU-China Connectivity Platform, to "enhance synergies" between the BRI and the EU's own Investment Plan for Europe. The effects of this MoU are still to be studied. The EU and China could work together to strengthen stability in Eastern Neighbourhood, as some theorists have put it. (van der Putten, 2015) To a certain extent, China's presence through loans, projects and investments in this region may act as a counterbalance to the already competitive environment created between the EU and Russia.

There is an opportunity created for the EU's foreign policy to become more robust, by rethinking at least three areas: its Eastern Neighbourhood policy, its policy in Central Asia and South Asia, as well as accelerating strategic thinking related to China.

With respect to EU's Eastern MSs, the presence of the consultations and memoranda signed in the framework of the 16+1 initiative may represent an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its Cohesion Policy, and find new ways to counteract the growing inequalities within the EU, the gap between a richer and a poorer EU. It is true, on the other hand, that there is a contrast between the approach taken by China with respect to Western EU, on the one hand, and Central-Eastern EU, on the other hand. "Chinese FDI in Western Europe, mainly in the United Kingdom, Italy, France, Portugal and the Netherlands is aimed at engaging with Europe's strategic assets and research and development networks." (Zeneli, 2016) Apart from these countries, Germany is also an important FDI recipient. At the same time, the reasons for China's interest in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are different: its

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<sup>5</sup> Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. You can find more information about AIIB at: <https://www.aiib.org/en/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. For more information please access the link below: <https://www.ebrd.com/home>

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Direct Investment.

strategic position and ability to reduce transportation costs for delivering Chinese goods to Western Europe; new market opportunities, given the 120 million citizens size of the CEE; ongoing privatization opportunities, including large scale infrastructure projects and public procurement opportunities; locating production facilities closer to their EU destination markets. (Zeneli, 2016)

Many analysts concluded that the biggest feud between China and European Union is that the latter does not seem prepared to grant China market economy status (Oehler-Şincai, 2018), not because the EU fears China, but because EU leaders believe China does not have a free market-led economy.

## **2. The importance of 16+1**

The 16+1 format is a mechanism of dialogue and cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries meant to improve trade and investments, develop infrastructure and the energy sector and also strengthen people-to-people relations. The 16 countries which take part in the forum are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. 11 of the 16 countries are EU members, while 5 are Balkan states.

The 16+1 forum took place for the first time in 2012 in Poland. Together with the BRI, it represents a Chinese strategy to extend its economic capabilities and influence toward other continents. Romania hosted the 16+1 summit in 2013, a moment that became a landmark for its bilateral relations with China. The 16+1 forum takes place every year in one of the CEE countries or in China. In 2017, the summit took place in Budapest (Hungary) and in 2018 in Sofia (Bulgaria).

The “16+1” was established before the launch of the BRI. After Europe was hit by the economic crisis, the CEE countries managed to keep their positive growth rates, and interaction with China started to increase rapidly.” (Zeneli, 2016) However, the importance given to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (regardless of their membership in the EU or not) does not say the whole story. The level of China’s investment in this region is rather low: 2.7 percent of the Chinese money invested in the global economy. (Zeneli, 2016) The main investments in the CEE are directed towards acquisition and infrastructure building. Whereas in short time, particularly EU MSs from CEE grant immediate and convenient access to EU market, in the long run, BRI is meant to create work for Chinese state companies and “create efficiencies that lead—long-term—to better, more prosperous trading partners for China.” (Wood, 2017)

As Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai notices, the CEE countries support the 16+1 initiative because “(1) they are interested in the diversification of their export markets and investment/financing sources; (2) most of them need a better infrastructure; (3) they perceive the cooperation with a strong country outside the EU as a supplementary negotiation power inside the EU (CEE-11: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) or during the EU accession (CEE-5:

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia); (4) Russia's opponents (including Poland and Romania) intend to diminish their dependency on Russian energy; (5) Poland is trying to balance the power between Russia and Germany and increase its regional role". (Oehler-Şincai, 2018)

BRI creates opportunities for EU MSs from CEE by "increasing their own leverage with, and within, the EU itself." (Godement and Vasselier, 2017:64) At the same time, some attempts on the Chinese part created disappointments for some states in this region. "Since 2013, China has been repeating the same pledge for a \$10 billion (now \$11 billion) credit line, and, in 2015, a \$3 billion investment fund. [...] The problem is that the same announcements for the same funds by China have been repeated for the past three years, without much actual disbursement of funds." (Godement and Vasselier, 2017:66) A point of contention is the "double standard" employed by the Chinese part in relation to Western and Eastern EU countries. As we have seen earlier, there is a different orientation of FDI in the two regions. The complaints coming from CEE officials point to the same direction. Yet, another criticism focuses on the fact that investments from China come with many strings attached, employ Chinese contractors and labour (Zeneli, 2016). In Brussels, on the other hand, the 16+1 forum is seen by some as "threatening its internal cohesiveness, as well as potentially building an internal pro-China lobby in Brussels." (Ghiasi and Zhou, 2017:46)

Despite all these elements of criticism, the 16+1 forum created the opportunity of leaders from China and CEE countries to discuss openly, in various formats, sign memoranda, create conditions for economic cooperation and shared benefits. The Belgrade-Budapest railway project is often given as a good example in which Chinese investments contribute to connectivity within Europe. There are other examples, involving the countries in CEE, which prove that this format has potential, even though the positioning may need recalibration.

#### **4. Dimensions and challenges in the Romanian-Chinese bilateral relations (2007-2018). New elements in the BRI era**

##### **4.1. Romania-China relations (2007 up to present). Political dimensions**

After a "political gap" in terms of high-level contacts, the bilateral relations restarted during Victor Ponta's term as Prime Minister. In 2013, Victor Ponta made his first visit to China as head of the government. In November 2013, Romania hosted the 16+1 Summit, which brought to Romania the prime ministers and presidents from all the Central and Eastern European countries and the Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang. The summit was the apex of Romania-China political relations and succeeded in re-positioning Romania on the list of China's closest friends in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). During 16+1 summit, Romania signed with China more than 10 memoranda of understanding (Stirile TVR, 2013), which proposed projects valued at 8.5 billion euros (10 billion dollars) (Digi24, 2013). But even at the moment of writing, more than four years after the summit, none of the investment projects have been implemented and some of them are still under negotiation.

After Victor Ponta's 2014 visit to China, the only important meeting for Romania-China relations was organized in 2015, between the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and the Chinese President Xi Jinping in New York, during the UN General Assembly meeting. During the past two years, Romania-China relations have been affected by the succession of many governments lead by different prime ministers: Dacian Cioloș, Sorin Grindeanu, Mihai Tudose and Viorica Dăncilă. This political instability has had a powerful impact on negotiations regarding some Chinese investments in Romania like the Cernavodă Nuclear Plant, the Tarnița-Lăpușești Hydropower Plant and the Rovinari Thermal Power Plant. For China, which is used to have a stable and long-lasting government, the Romanian political fluctuations contributed to rather stagnant bilateral relations.

The change of governments also hindered the development of closer relations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) umbrella. This may be one of the reasons why a memorandum of understanding (MoU) regarding the BRI was signed only at a level of secretary of state or vice-minister from the trade ministries of both countries, without another MoU following at a higher level. Perhaps that another reason is the lack of clarity in defining BRI. Although Romania promotes its 2015 MoU, considering itself one of the first European countries to sign such an agreement with China, in the three years since its signing, it did not attract any investment or project as part of the BRI. Though many projects like the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant, the Rovinari Thermal Power Plant, the investments of Huawei Romania or other Chinese investments in Romania may be nominated as BRI investments, in fact these projects have been proposed before the initiative has been launched, in 2013. At the first Belt and Road Forum, organized by China in May 2017 in Beijing, Romania was not represented at the level of president or prime minister, but by the deputy prime minister and minister of environmental protection, Grația Gavrilescu – unlike other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, part of the 16+1 format.

Political divisions and bureaucratic inefficiencies also had an impact on Romania's decision to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Thus, Romania was not part of the first wave of European countries which joined the AIIB as founding members in March 2015, a wave that included the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Poland. Romania started the procedure to join the AIIB in 2016, being admitted with the occasion of the first Belt and Road Forum, in May 2017. Romania is still in the process of ratifying the agreement through its internal mechanism, a process that might last until 2019.

#### **4.2. Sino-Romanian economic relations**

The Sino-Romanian economic relations did not follow an up-and-down path, but a smoother trajectory, at least when it comes to trade. During Ceaușescu's era, economic relations were very good, with Romania having a positive trade balance. After the 1989 Romanian Revolution, trade with China entered a downward trend, for about a decade, reaching a minimum of around 175 million dollars in 1997. (Chiriu and Liu, 2015) After 2000, the imports from China started growing and they overtook Romanian exports to China and the trade balance becoming negative, while the gap between imports and

exports continued to widen. In 2017, the trade balance was still negative, but total trade has followed an upward trend, reaching 4.695 billion dollars. (Ministry of Commerce of PRC, 2017) Although China is Romania 8<sup>th</sup> largest trade partner, things are very different for China, Romania occupying only the 68<sup>th</sup> position as its trade partner. (Ministry of Commerce of PRC, 2017) The negative trade balance of Romania may be seen in a larger perspective, as the European Union suffers from the same pattern.

Although there are over 10.000 companies in Romania with Chinese capital, many such companies are family-owned and SMEs, their capital amounting to only 442 million dollars. (Ministry of Justice, 2017) China is the biggest Asian investor in Romania, but it ranks only on the 18<sup>th</sup> position (Pencea and Oehler-Şincai, 2015:51) in the top of foreign investors by country of origin, which is dominated by European countries.

There are two categories of Chinese investments in Romania: the companies that invested directly in Romania and set up new industrial and technological investments, and Chinese companies which entered the Romanian market indirectly by acquiring other international companies which already had branches in Romania. In the first category, the most important companies are Huawei, ZTE, China Tobacco International Europe Company, Eurosport DHS (bicycle producer), Yuncheng Plate-Making (industrial park), Honest General Trading (tools supplier), Contex Digital Electronic. In the second category, we identified three companies: Smithfield Romania, Pirelli Romania and Rompetrol. Smithfield Romania is part of the American company Smithfield Foods, which was purchased by Shuanghui (China), now named WH Group. Pirelli Romania is part of the Italian company Pirelli, which was acquired by ChemChina. Rompetrol, also known as KazMunayGas International, is a Romanian-Kazakh company which is in process of being sold to CEFC China Energy.

While such private Chinese investments have been successful, projects negotiated by the Romanian state with Chinese state-owned companies have run into numerous roadblocks. Out of the four investment memoranda signed in 2013 (the construction of reactors 3 and 4 from the Cernavodă Nuclear Plant, the Tarnița-Lăpușești Hydropower Plant, the Rovinari Thermal Power Plant, the Mintia-Deva Thermal Power Plant), with the occasion of Li Keqiang's visit to the 16+1 Bucharest Summit, none has been implemented. There were numerous problems which have prevented these investments from materializing: corruption investigations, political instability through frequent changes of government, a lack of a long-term strategy which meant that some projects have been abandoned by different governments, bureaucratic inefficiency and red tape which prolonged negotiations, or administrative mistakes. These problems, which can be classified as non-traditional security threats, have affected not only state-to-state negotiations, but also the large private acquisition of KMG International by CEFC.

### **3. Challenges in the Romanian – Chinese relations nowadays**

Some Chinese researchers present Romania-China relations as good relations. (Ge, 2017) However, non-traditional security threats like red tape, bureaucracy, corruption, or political instability have prevented the development of better economic relations, as investments estimated at almost 10 billion dollars have failed to materialize.

The Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant is one of the most important Romanian-Chinese projects that have not been implemented. Because of the quick succession of Romanian governments, the negotiations were delayed for more than two years. The saga started in 2013, when under Victor Ponta's watch, Nuclearelectrica (the Romanian company that owns the power plant) and China General Nuclear Power (CGN) signed a letter of intent regarding the construction of the reactors 3 and 4 of the Cernavodă Nuclear Plant. The project was estimated to cost around 6.4 billion euro (8 billion dollars) (RISAP, 2015). One year later, in 2014, CGN won the public tender for the project. After another year, in November 2015, Nuclearelectrica and CGN signed a MoU for the project. According to that MoU (Nuclearelectrica, 2013), the negotiations to form a joint venture should have lasted only ten weeks, but no agreement was reached, so that the negotiations had to repeatedly be extended until the present day. In all this period of two and a half years, five prime ministers have led the Romanian Government and the negotiations at Cernavodă.

Another project that did not take shape, and the cause can be attributed to political instability, is the Tarnița-Lăpușești Hydropower Plant. This project is a pumped-storage hydroelectric plant and was linked to the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant. In 2015, when Victor Ponta was Prime Minister, Romania organized a public tender and three Chinese consortia were selected. (HotNews, 2015) But after Victor Ponta resigned, the project was removed by the next government from the list of projects in the new National Energy Strategy. (Ministry of Energy, 2016) In 2018, a different government wants to reintroduce the Tarnița-Lăpușești Hydropower Plant in the final version of this National Energy Strategy. (Agerpres, 2018)

Yet, another case proves to be more complex: the case of the modernization of the Mintia-Deva Thermal Power Plant. In 2013, it was one of the projects that were signed at the 16+1 summit, which was followed by a contract during Victor Ponta's visit to China in 2014. A few months later, the contract was dropped because the initial agreement did not have all the approvals and because the technology used by the Chinese company was considered to be outdated. (Iancu, 2015)

The Rovinari Power Plant is another project with an unclear future. Like the other two projects, Cernavodă and Mintia, it was signed in 2013 between China Huadian Engineering and Complexul Energetic Oltenia, the Romanian company that owns the Rovinari Power Plant. Although a joint venture between these two companies was established in 2016 to implement the 1 billion dollar investment (Complexul Energetic Oltenia, 2016), the project encountered difficulties and the construction of the new units has not started yet.

Sometimes, the process of negotiations did not follow a smooth path even in the private sector. The case of CEFC's acquisition of Rompetrol is the most important example. The problems started a decade ago, with the debts that the Rompetrol Petromidia refinery owed to the Romanian state. The Romanian investor, who bought the refinery, Dinu Patriciu, did not pay the debts, rolling them over. KazMunayGaz (KMG) did the same after taking over Rompetrol, which became KazMunayGas International (KMGI). When CEFC announced that it wants to buy 51% of KMGI, Romanian authorities froze its assets, including the Petromidia refinery, expecting to recover the debt. Eventually, CEFC, KMGI and the Romanian government negotiated an agreement and the transaction was

approved, but has not yet been finalized, because CEFC now has its own corruption issues. (South China Morning Post, 2018) The recent news showed that the transaction between KMG and CEFC was not finalised and the deal fell apart. (RISAP, 2018)

While all these projects have been plagued by problems and delays, Romanian politicians and officials remain interested in attracting Chinese investments. Every year there are numerous economic and trade delegations from China, visiting different Romanian counties, in search of business opportunities. The year 2018 may yet witness the finalization of CEFC's acquisition of Rompetrol and maybe even the conclusion of the negotiations for the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant, which have the potential to boost Romania-China economic relations.

Two more aspects are worth mentioning. Firstly, the fact that in the Governmental Program of the present government (2018-2020), in the Chapter dedicated to Foreign Policy, the relationship between Romania and China does not appear to be a privileged one, on the contrary. China is mentioned in the section dedicated to developing relations with Asia and Latin America (a rather marginal part of the program), and rather briefly, as follows: "In our relation with China, we will work toward further consolidation, especially in the economic area, under the Comprehensive Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation, including the implementation of projects agreed during high-level bilateral meetings or in the CEE-China format". As we saw, they are not. As we pointed in this article, the Chinese investments in Romania agreed at the 16+1 meetings are on the brink of failure, while Romania's interest for China seems to decrease with each year. Secondly, if we look at the list of EU-China connectivity projects both in 2016 and 2017, there is no Romanian project included (Grieger, 2018).

## Conclusions

The Romanian-Chinese relationship can be adequately approached only in the European and Euro-Atlantic context. Our paper presented some of the main elements that define this complex context, focusing only on the EU component, and including details as to the concrete economic and political dimension of the bilateral relationship. For at least a decade, Romania's foreign policy was dominated by its interest in becoming a NATO and EU member. This period coincided with a slower pace in developing the Sino-Romanian relations. We noted the fact that in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the economic bilateral relations did not match the high level dialogue that was present between Romania-China. The re-launch of the political dialogue at high level in 2013 encountered a series of barriers, on the Romanian side, among which the political instability in terms of the head of the government (5 Prime Ministers in 5 years) played an important part.

Romania-China relations have passed through different stages over the past decades. Economically, there has been an ascendant development, but with numerous bumps along the way, in the form of investments that never materialized. If we look at the political relations, there are periods of ups and downs, defined by the different approaches toward China of each Romanian government.

Romania's recent apex regarding its political relations with China happened during PM Victor Ponta, when Romania organized the 16+1 summit (2013) and signed numerous memoranda of understanding with Chinese companies, mostly in the field of energy projects. But although almost five years have passed since then, no notable progress has been made. Some projects were abandoned, while others, like the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant or the Rovinari Thermal Power Plant, are still in the process of prolonged negotiations. The explanations are complex and they involve administrative hurdles, red tape, political instability, corruption on the Romanian side. Smoother and more efficient relations between Romania and China are to be noticed in the private sector in comparison with the public sector.

Starting with 2007, Romania's trade became part of the Common Commercial Policy of the EU. Actually, we may notice common commercial patterns between Romania-China and EU-China beginning with the 2000s. The trade imbalance which disfavours Romania is noticeable.

To sum up, Romania-China relations have passed through many phases, but the most important aspect is that there is the potential to develop good economic and political relations. Romania's interest in getting involved in the BRI is present, and there is a legal framework for it in the MoU signed in 2015. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

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