

Joint Master Programme of China & International Relations

CHINA ENTERING EUROPE'S BACKDOOR

Analysis of China's strategic narrative within
the Cooperation between China and Central
and Eastern European Countries with a focus
on the Czech Republic and Serbia

Master Thesis

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Summary

The growing and gradually non-negligent presence of China in the international arena has received a noticeable attention, as the state appears to gain a greater prominence with each year. China has entered the sphere of multiple foreign actors through a grandiose manner by introducing its initiatives, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the Sino-Latin American Cooperation Fund, both of which focus on promoting multilateral relations. Another ambitious initiative was introduced by Beijing in 2012 when the state presented its China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) cooperative platform, however the mechanism is perceived slightly different as it entered a sphere of the European Union's (EU) influence.

When establishing the initiative, China has focused its attention on 16 countries directly or indirectly under the influence of the region's dominant actor, the EU. As such, Beijing's interest in establishing deeper relations with the CEE countries may have been perceived warily in Brussels, therefore, it was the purpose of the thesis to determine which strategic narrative China projects in the region. The theoretical framework of the English School has additionally been utilised to further establish the character of the cooperative platform.

On the instances of the Czech Republic and Serbia it has been assessed that Beijing projects its presence as a peaceful partner aiming for mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation with no intent to compete with the already established dominant party, the EU. China has been found to respect the possibility of states shaping the international society as it encourages the EU integration which Serbia desires to be part of, as well as the PRC also recognises the importance of state sovereignty regarding the question of Kosovo. Furthermore, it has been established that China further encourages the countries involved in the 17+1 initiative to abide by the

legislation already put into motion by the EU, thus strengthening its position as a non-competitive entity in the region. All of these claims and actions have been found to be in accordance with the guiding theory of the English School which served the thesis for assessing the China-led mechanism as one that seeks benefits through partnership of partnering rather than contesting other actors.

Based on the concept of strategic narrative, it has been concluded that the PRC desires to be perceived by the international community as a normal power aiming for collaboration with both the states included, as well as with the EU. Moreover, by sharing its values and goals of win-win cooperation, mutual benefit, respect and equality, and common stability of peace themes which are consistently indicated in the annual *Guidelines for Cooperation* has been recognised as China projecting in the region a national narrative, which is crafted around the state's identity as an equal and cooperative partner always seeking to benefit all.

Key words: China-CEEC cooperation; 17+1 initiative; strategic narrative; the Czech Republic; Serbia

Keystrokes: 93 107

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1 Introduction

Ever since its policy of opening up in 1979 and due to its rapid economic growth, China has grown into an actor with a greater influence locally and internationally. Locally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) rose to prominence when it was accepted as a dialogue partner into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1991, giving thus the country possibility to cooperate with the Association and get involved in the regional matters (ASEAN, 2018). Internationally, the country's position improved after its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, which enabled China to maintain its improving economic conditions (WTO, n.d.). Furthermore, with its growing experience and confidence in dealing with other international actors, especially with ones classified along with China as 'developing', the PRC has embarked on a quest of leading these countries toward development.

Firstly, the country initiated a multilateral framework with countries of Africa under the name of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000. Secondly, after years of practice and considerable success, Beijing introduced the Sino-Latin American Cooperation Fund in 2012 with a focus to promote Sino-Latin American relations and to improve status of the developing countries of the region through economic and trade support (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Grenada, 2018). Throughout the years, both frameworks proved to reach favourable outcomes thus prompting China to expand its focus to another region of the world, namely Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In the same year, 2012 in Warsaw, China established another multilateral framework, which includes 16¹ countries of the former Eastern Bloc; 11 of which are member states of the European Union, EU, (Bulgaria, Croatia,

¹ At the time of conducting the paper, the initiative consisted of 16 Central and Eastern European countries. However, as a result of the dynamic nature of the international relations, the platform was enlarged on April 17th, 2019 by Greece, thus becoming 17+1 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The author acknowledges these developments, nonetheless, due to its novelty and Greece not being initially included, it is not taken into consideration when discussing the platform, as the aim of the thesis is to analyse China's dealings prior to this occurrence. The implications of these developments for the thesis are further described in chapter 3.4 Delimitations.

the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and five are expected to be granted accession (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia). According to the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main objective of the initiative is to explore, among other areas, economic cooperation between China and the 16 countries, policy coordination, transportation, etc. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

Due to the region's history, the PRC's sudden interest may come as a less of a surprise since it may have been one of the first incentives for considering the area (Kowalski, 2017). After the Second World War, the countries of the CEE were formerly known as the Eastern Bloc, which was under strict rule of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The inclusion in the Bloc has disabled the states to be exposed to political, economic, and social development, thus causing them to decline in a long run (Sawe, 2018). Nevertheless, the later dissolution of the Bloc, essentially initiated by Poland and former Czechoslovakia, eventually brought an end to the struggles, but not in all of the areas. In comparison to the West, the CEE countries to this day lack behind mostly economically (Djankov, 2016). This may be one of the main reasons for why China has considered the region. As in the case of the African forum and the Sino-Latin American Cooperation Fund, where China seized the role of an experienced brother wanting to help other developing countries in their pursuit of progress, the 17+1 initiative may serve as another tool for cooperation with the other states while simultaneously guiding development.

Now however, seven years later since the establishment, the question of whether the PRC desires to divide Europe between the EU and itself, as the initiative was initially understood, may be rendered as less relevant, because no such action is visible on Beijing's part. On the other hand, a question of what image in relation to its presence in the EU's sphere of influence in the Central and Eastern European countries China desires to project on the international community through this initiative may appear as more topical. In the contemporary age of perception and

media, abundance of information from both official and non-official sources often make it difficult to determine the narrative an actor desires to present. It is even more challenging when narratives enter the international arena consisting of a number of actors where each entity possesses a certain history and experience. China is one of the countries that still have an opportunity to form and dictate its narrative in the international realm, as it is rather new in the international community since its open-door policy from 1979, as well as it has the means to shape the international perception through its measures of external projection (Petras, 2018; Brady, 2015). As strategic narratives are often directed at audiences in an effort to make other actors perceive one in a certain way, the PRC may therefore utilise this approach to convince the European actors of the nature of China's presence in the region (Roselle, et al., 2014).

1.1 Problem Formulation

Due to numerous varying interpretations of Beijing's intentions in introducing the China – CEE cooperation, the aim of the thesis is to answer the following research question:

Which strategic narrative does China utilise in the Czech Republic and Serbia through the China-CEEC cooperation?

The focal point of the thesis is to analyse the strategic narrative Beijing projects in the region with an in-depth look at the Czech Republic and Serbia as China's projection in the CEE countries appears as understudied within the international community. Thus, the intention of the paper is to fill in some fraction of research on the topic of Chinese presence in the Central and Eastern European region and narrative it uses.

1.2 Outline of the Research

The thesis is further divided into several chapters, where the purpose of each is briefly described in this section serving as a tool for a better navigation for the reader.

Introduction is set as the first chapter of the paper, where the key assumptions of the project are identified. The chapter is set to lay ground for introducing the 17+1 initiative and the way it is structured. The following section of the *Problem Formulation* is further included to explain the reasoning behind the thesis' research.

The purpose of the second chapter, *Literature Review*, is to present works previously written on the topic of the China-CEEC framework, prior to the enlargement of the initiative, and China's presence in the region to provide the reader with a better understanding of the issue. The positioning of the project within the academia is also depicted here.

The following chapter of *Methodology* is set to illustrate the structure of the thesis in order to provide an easy navigation through the work. Also, the aim is to provide the reader with clear understanding of the intentions of this research and the methods used to obtain new knowledge on the topic. This chapter further addresses the question of chosen theory and concept, and choice of data that were deemed as fitting for answering the problem formulation in the most accurate manner. Lastly, the chapter describes delimitations that were set to bring a better knowledge on the investigated topic and justifies the decisions made.

The *Theory* section presents a concise introduction to the theoretical approach implemented to give the reader an overview of key assumptions as well as critique it has received. The passage also illustrates the concept of strategic narrative and its objectives. Use of the chosen theory and concept are also outlined, so that their purpose for the research is evident.

The aim of the fifth chapter is to establish a supplementary knowledge for the analysis part of the thesis by delineating background of the Czech relations with the European Union and the PRC, respectively, as well as Serbian relations with the two entities. The background on the Czech-EU and Serbia-EU relations is included due to the perception of the Union as the fundamental actor influencing Europe, thus being the essential competitor of the CEE region for Beijing. Presenting the most important

for the research historical events between the considered legislative bodies serves as a tool to provide a more comprehensive knowledge of the relations.

The consecutive chapter is concerned with analysing the statements made and actions taken by China in relation to the two countries in question. The aim is to present facts with a use of the theory and theoretical concept and to paint a clearer picture of the strategic narrative the country is developing in the 17+1 cooperative platform. The interpretation and final notes of the thesis' findings are presented in the concluding chapter.

2 Literature Review

The following chapter provides an overview of the literature previously written on the topic of the China-CEEC cooperation - its progress and challenges. Moreover, it discusses the use of the writings for the purpose of the paper.

The 16+1² initiative officially introduced in 2012 has since drawn a noticeable attention in academia. Several scholars (Song, 2016; Istenič, 2017; Musabelliu, 2017) do not fail to remind the public that the ambitious project involving 16 Central and Eastern European countries serves as cooperation furthering the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), rather than standing as an individual project. As Song (2017) argues, the multilateral framework is solely a Chinese initiative that depends on establishing institutional ties with the governments of the CEE states, which subsequently allowed Beijing to successfully enter the region. Furthermore, Istenič (2017) also perceives the post-communist countries as crucial partners in exediating 'China's flagship project', however, one must not omit the fact, that the past commonality of shared ideology does in no way serve as an advantage for the PRC. Some authors (Kopecký, et al 2016;

² Throughout the Literature Review chapter, the studied cooperative platform is referred to as "16+1", due to the presented written academic material on the topic being conducted before Greece joining the framework, thus considering only the original 16 states.

Li, 2017; Song 2018) point out the wide cooperation between China and the 16 European countries is challenged due to the reality of lack of knowledge about each other. In the past, Beijing has been traditionally more focused on learning about the Western, more prosperous, countries in order to be able to cooperate and to establish partnerships, nonetheless, the PRC in its endeavour to reach less profitable parts of Europe now must learn new ways once again. Song (2018) explains Beijing is not prepared for strict regulations of the European Union (EU), lacks good planning, and has poor managerial and financial skills, as manifested in a failed project of building 50 km long highway between Warsaw and the German border. Kopecký, et al (2016) continues by presenting the Chinese part as admitting to its lack of extensive knowledge of how to do business with other cultures as well as lack of experience of how to work in the highly regulated and transparent European market.

Reacting on this set back some of the scholars (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017; Song 2018) remain sceptic toward the multilateral cooperation and call attention to the initiative's disability to deliver in economic terms and to the indications of further obstacles when advocating for more trade and investment activities. Song (2018) in his article claims the EU regulations are so strict the promised \$10 billion from the PRC is almost impossible for the CEE countries to receive. Consequently, causing China to turn its focus to non-EU member states of the 16+1 framework. The posed regulations may have an influence on Beijing's investment to a certain degree as it has shifted its attention from building infrastructure to gaining a position as a subcontractor in some of the countries (Kopecký, et al., 2016). The Economist Intelligence Unit, EIU, (2017) also reports lack of any visible economic progress and points out the projects advertised by Beijing six years ago are still in their early stages of negotiations. As for Prague and its recent favourable look to the east, Czech President Miloš Zeman attended Chinese military parade in 2016 in a hope of receiving \$4 billion investment with a possibility of \$10 billion more in upcoming five years (Kowalski, 2017). In case of Belgrade, Beijing continues to invest in Serbia's companies, where the most important financial support

was in Iron Works Ltd. in Smederevo, essentially lifting the weight of burdening the Serbian government's budget (Jojić, 2017). Nonetheless, a question arises whether the promises of the economic assistance are to be expected eventually. Adding to this, another issue that is discussed in some of the works (Kopecký, et al, 2016; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017) is the PRC's noncompliance with the idea of Juncker investment plan for the region. The plan aims at creating much needed for the region new job opportunities for the locals.

From a Chinese perspective, the CEE countries enjoy an advantageous position as they lie in between of the western world and the East and as such some academic writers (Kong, 2015; Kopecký, et al, 2016; Kowalski, 2017; Istenič, 2017) indicate Beijing's intent of using the 16 states involved in the 16+1 cooperation as a gateway to Europe. Li (2017) also argues the Czech Republic since improving its relations with the PRC expected to be a bridgehead for Chinese businesses desiring to enter the EU. Similarly, Serbia enjoys the advantage of its location in Western Balkans and its current status as a non-EU member state, which promotes its importance as a meaningful link between Europe and China (Dimitrijević, 2017). According to Kong (2015) and Istenič (2017), the initiative serves as an exploration tool of the European market, which has a potential of a diverse export destination essentially enabling China to increase its trade volume with Europe. As such, China has already opened several banks in four well-positioned countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Serbia (Istenič, 2017).

Moreover, the diversity of the region is often recognised as another obstacle to the framework. As the countries are young democracies, questions of re-emerged political tensions, dissimilarities in their legislative system, asymmetry of economic needs, differing business mentalities as well as the membership in the EU and regional security often surface during talks of implementing the project. Also, the regulatory framework of the member states of EU does not follow the non-member states administrative frame making the process of the cooperation more complex (Kong, 2015; Istenič, 2017; Musabelliu, 2017). However, one must bear in mind China has an

experience in reaching out and uniting other regions of the world under the umbrella of big projects such as BRICS, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), so it possesses the knowledge on how to promote the initiative (Kong, 2015). In the same vein, Song (2018) presents the CEE states as positively accepting the 16+1 initiative since it brings an opportunity for the states involved to improve the infrastructure and opens more trade options.

Studying the process of the implementation of the initiative, some of the academics (Kong, 2015; Istenič 2017; Li, 2017; Musabelliu, 2017; Song, 2018) label China's entrance as both proactive and pragmatic. Firstly, Beijing observed the economic situation in the region during the 2008 financial crisis and only after assessing the area as stable initiated the 16+1 framework. Secondly, the convenient transportation network proves to add to the region's attractiveness as well as Chinese growing economic importance on a global scale (Kong, 2015; Li, 2017). After the 2008 financial crisis the latter advantage has made it easier for the PRC to step into the CEE states, as they due to the economic stagnation and often difference in opinion with the EU, looked for a new partner to help the incline of the financial sector (Istenič, 2017; Li, 2017; Song, 2018). A number of authors (Kong, 2015; Vangeli, 2018) have also recognised the post-economic crisis backwardness of the CEE region as a benefit for Beijing rather than a disadvantage. Vangeli (2018) claims that to the PRC the countries of the CEE are "*a region with untapped economic potential*". Nevertheless, Istenič (2017) does not fail to point out the region is still unknown territory for Beijing and as such the framework is still too new to manifest any expected progress of economic prosperity for the countries.

Opening up each other's market is noted in numerous writings as well (Kong, 2015; Musabelliu, 2017; Song, 2018). Kong (2015) assures of the benefit of the large Chinese market being open for businesses in CEE countries and encourages them to explore the new economic opportunity. On the other hand, Musabelliu (2017) is not as optimistic about the open market as she acknowledges lack of reciprocity; for Chinese companies to enter European business sphere appears to be much easier than

it is for the European enterprises to enter the Chinese market. Song (2018), furthermore, supports the claim that in order to acquire sustainable economic cooperation dynamic market force must be in place.

The 16+1 initiative is an ambitious project with trade at its centre, therefore, it is another topic discussed among scholars. Previous research showed (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017; Istenič, 2017; Li, 2017; Song, 2018) that the trade imbalance with China is another concern of the CEE region as the PRC invests in high-tech sectors, banking, telecommunications, and energy sectors, which are off-limits for European investors. Thus, Beijing is perceived as creating an uncompetitive environment and causing the Western EU countries to be suspicious of its intentions. EIU also draws attention to the uneven distribution of the investment among the 16+1-member countries. According to Istenič (2017), Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary are China's top trading partners and enjoy the most attention. As such, Kowalski (2017) also speculates that the Czech Republic gains economic returns due to its demonstration of political compliance with China, which has in recent years increased. In the same way, Serbia is another great recipient of the PRC's investments, especially in infrastructure, which remarkably deepens the Sino-Serbian relations (Dimitrijević, 2017). Nevertheless, EIU identifies once more lack of any significant trade boost in the other states of the initiative.

Also, the political factor of the 16+1 framework cannot be neglected. It was reported in the literature (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017; Istenič, 2017; Musabelliu, 2017) that the PRC is using the initiative as a mean to divide Europe. Istenič (2017) claims China wants to influence the decision-making process in the EU through investment, however, she again does not fail to report lack of enough evidence of Beijing's strategic attempt to do so. Also, it cannot be omitted that 11 of the 16 countries involved in the framework are members of the European Union and so China grounding the project must recognise the superiority of the EU for the 16+1 initiative to be successful. Therefore, following the logic, Beijing requires "*synergy between CEE-China and EU-China relations*" (Istenič, 2017).

This section presents a review of recent literature on the topic of the 16+1 cooperative framework between China and the CEE countries with an aim to examine the findings of other scholars. As the recent relations between the Czech Republic and China and between Serbia and China within the platform are not as extensively studied, the chapter serves as a groundwork for the project with an aim to extend the understanding on the topic. Recognition of the previously acknowledged challenges for implementing the initiative and delivering of the results further aid to deepen the comprehension of the PRC's ambitions in the region.

3 Methodology

The purpose of this section is to present the method used for the conduction of the paper, explain selection of theoretical approach, and to present which data is utilised to best answer the problem formulation. Delimitations are also included to provide a better understanding of the positioning of the research.

3.1 Method

The paper consists of qualitative document analysis concerning the China-led 17+1 initiative entailing 16 countries of the CEE region, and newly Greece. The reason for considering such an approach is to gain a better understanding of what strategic narrative China projects on the international community, and in the Central and Eastern European region. As this research comprises of qualitative document analysis, it is presumed necessary to include discourse component, which serves as a useful tool in the process of analysis due to its provision for consideration of written texts on the topic and thus brings a more comprehensive understanding of China's projection. The documents considered serve to study statements that reflect the state's actions and intentions.

3.2 Selection of Theories

The International Relations (IR) theory of English School has been selected as one of the theories applied for the research to set the basis for China's ambition of introducing the cooperative framework in the CEE region. The English School approach is complemented by the concept of strategic narrative, which aims at providing an understanding of what narrative the PRC adopts and by which it wants to be perceived in the respective countries, in the EU, and by the international community. Strategic narrative is understood in the research as a tool of soft power, which is also challenging to measure or clearly define, therefore it is necessary to be aware of a possibility of narratives being interpreted differently depending on the author.

3.3 Choice of Data

The information selected for the thesis constitute of both primary and secondary data. Primary data consist of the annual *Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* from years 2012-2019 as the main point of departure in assessing China's strategic narrative in the CEE region. The data is further supplemented by the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* by which the state guides its foreign affairs. The *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* is also considered due to the significant presence and influence of the EU in the involved countries, hence posing the EU as the main recipient of the narrative. The aim of the official statements is to present a stance China claims to take and to gain an understanding of its objectives and goals regarding the 17+1 initiative. Secondary data include articles and scholarly writings regarding the topic, which are utilised to provide further evidence and/or understanding of the analysed narrative.

While choice of data is a crucial part of conducting research, recognising limitations is just as important. Therefore, it is necessary to state that due to author's language limitations, sources of Serbian or Chinese language were not investigated,

however, some documents and articles in Czech are included. The research is based predominantly on sources in English language from both Western and Eastern authors.

3.4 Delimitations

Due to the wide scope of the 17+1 initiative, the study is narrowed down to focus on two countries within the framework, to examine Beijing's incentives. The attention is aimed at the Czech Republic due to significant Chinese investments, interest in Czech mostly technical know-how, and deepening people-to-people cooperation while being a member of the European Union, as well as due to the state's latest favouritism toward the East from West. The case is deemed as interesting especially because of the historical notion of Czech citizens fighting fervently for democracy in 1989, making it one of the first countries breaking off from the Eastern Bloc. The second focal state is chosen to be Serbia, as it is the biggest recipient of Beijing's economic support as a non-EU member state in the 17+1 platform. The two states are deemed as interesting cases in regard to how China exerts its picture in the region as both of them experience certain degree of the EU influence. Furthermore, due to the latest evolvments in the studied China-CEE cooperative mechanism of Greece joining the framework and the stage the research was at in the given time, it is necessary to highlight that possible events or actions taking place after April 17th, 2019 are not taken into consideration when analysing China's narrative projected through the initiative.

4 Theory

The following chapter serves as an introduction to the theory and concepts used during the process of analysis. The main assumptions and thoughts of the English School and strategic narrative are outlined, as well as the intended use of the theory is presented to define the basis for the paper. Furthermore, a critique of the English School is outlined to introduce the position of the theory within the IR.

4.1 The English School

The English School is traditionally presented as emerging in the late 1950s when the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics first met and discussed matters of international relations. The School's name appears as misleading as its connection to England is not as strong as it implies. It has never focused in particular on Britain and it has never considered any specific English ideas. What is more, the initial ideas of the School came from American basis and some of the founding scholars were not from the British island either. Other alternatives for the term were proposed, such as International Society School, however, the international society appears in this approach as one of three core concepts, thus the term 'English School' remains as the predominant (Buzan, 2014, p. 5). Hedley Bull, one of the main representatives of the approach, upheld that "*international societies can exist in the absence of linguistic, cultural or religious agreement*", which is proven to be true by the existence of such society in present days by numerous international cooperation (Linklater, 2005). Due to its position between two extremes of IR theory - liberalism and realism - the English School is often regarded as a 'middle ground' as it refuses the liberals' claim of foreign affairs being an evolving world community and the realists' perception of states being self-sufficient and self-centred. Following this logic, it also acknowledged that there is anarchy present in the international arena, however, a belief in cooperation is likewise advocated for (Linklater, 2005). The founders of the School aimed at filling in the gap between the two opposing classical theories of the International Relations (IR) by adopting more historical, philosophical, legal and sociological approaches and by stressing the importance of an international society (Buzan, 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, proponents of the School acknowledge the lack of a world 'government' ruling over sovereign states, while simultaneously point out the presence of common interests, institutions, and organisations. These are established and shared by the states to shape the mutual relations, which drive respective actions of states (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). As such, the idea of sovereign

states forming a society with no need for submission to a hegemon is one of the main beliefs of the School (Linklater, 2005).

4.1.1 Key Assumptions

The English School considers the field of IR as a whole and as such three key concepts of the *international system*, *international society* and *world society*, which are lateral with the three traditions of IR – *realism*, *rationalism*, and *revolutionism*, were developed (Buzan, 2014, p. 12). However, when studying IR, one must bear in mind that in order to do so adequately, all of the concepts need to be accounted for as they are considered by the School intertwined in the international arena.

For realists, ‘international anarchy’ is the main focus, whereas for rationalists the idea of ‘international dialogue and intercourse’ is the most important and ‘moral unity’ of humankind is advocated for by revolutionists (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). Accordingly, the international system (or else classified as realism) is set as anarchical with concern for power politics, where states are the main actors who seek to pursue their own interests (Ibid). In his book ‘The Anarchical Society’, Bull (2002) describes international system to be established “*when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole*” (Bull, 2002, pp. 8-13). As for pursuance of states’ goals in relation to other states, international system advocates for no legal or moral restrictions in doing so as there is no central government to dictate such conditions (Ibid).

International society, also known as rationalism, is based on institutions and mutual interest of states. It focuses on the creation and preservation of shared norms, rules and institutions as a group of states, as well as it recognises a state’s ability to shape the international society and vice versa (Ibid). As Linklater explains, “[a] pragmatic need to coexist is enough to produce [...] a ‘diplomatic culture’”, which consists

of conventions and institutions upholding order between states with distinctive cultures, ideologies, and ambitions (Linklater, 2005). Bull (2002) also maintains that economic and social interaction between countries is the most favourable of international actions.

Lastly, world society represents revolutionism or else the ideas of Kant, where the emphasis is on transnational social bonds, which are obtained by individuals and non-state international organisations with a humanitarian purpose, rather than on the importance of states (Bull, 2002, pp. 23-26). Furthermore, rights, justice, and cooperation are closely observed by this thought (Buzan, 2014, pp. 12-13).

Another essential objective of the School is concerned with the *international order* and *international justice* that form international relations. According to the proponents of this theoretical approach, international order is reflected in the design or arrangement of international activity, which aims at maintaining the essential goals of the society of states. On the other hand, international justice is concerned with moral rules influencing the rights and duties of states and nations (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). In continuation of these two objectives, Buzan (2014) developed two other defining concepts of the English School, namely the idea of *pluralism* and *solidarism*. At first, they may seem opposed and mutually exclusive, however, to assume so would be a mistake as they agree on the common institutions, rules, and values but differ in their standards of these. The mentioned concepts essentially focus on answering the “*great conversation*’ of how to find the best balance between order and justice in international society” and “*play an instrumental role in linking together the English School’s triad of concepts*” (Buzan, 2014, pp. 15-16). As such, pluralists argue for the importance of state and interstate order with support for the status quo as well as emphasise the significance of state sovereignty. Solidarists, on the other hand, turn their attention to individuals as the fundamental members of international society along with a claim of human rights being prior to the rights of sovereign states. They also show a tendency to either go beyond state-system with some other form of organisation or develop it to cooperation on shared projects (Ibid).

Buzan (2014) further developed several categories of international societies that ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the School, namely:

- *Power political* – international society of pluralist character with minimal presence of institutions and shared values. It is greatly based on antagonistic tendencies with a probability of war with some other states always present. Nonetheless, diplomacy, alliance forming, and trade are limited (Ibid, pp. 79-80).
- *Coexistence* – a pluralist society ruled by Westphalian institutions such as the balance of power, diplomacy, territoriality, war, great power management and international law (Ibid, pp. 79-80).
- *Cooperative* – solidarist approach of society, which degrades war as an institution with a possibility of creating new institutions in its stead. For instance, joint projects with a shared market economy or shared pursuit of human rights are of common occurrence (Ibid, pp. 79-80).
- *Convergence* – demonstrated by the development of a certain degree of shared values among states that prompt them to take on similar political, legal, and economic forms. It is represented by deep solidarism, where consequently significant changes in both primary and secondary institutions of international society are anticipated (Ibid, pp. 79-80).

4.1.2 Critique of the Theory

Since its founding, the English School moved from a club-like organisation, and positioned itself more decisively within IR. With its increased recognition it has attracted a lot of attention, which in part resulted in criticism. It is recorded the theory has been denounced as not rigorous enough in its description of key assumptions leading some scholars to even question whether the School should be considered as an IR theory (Buzan, 2014, pp. 21-38). However, in Buzan's book Wæver argues that the School "*has the ability to combine traditions and theories normally not able to relate*

to each other”, such as realism and liberalism, thus making it a meaningful part of the IR platform (Ibid). Additionally, advocates of the theoretical approach make a claim that due to the concepts developed within the presented theory, understanding of international relations goes beyond simple interpretation of state’s actions as it considers also a social vision of international order (Ibid). Furthermore, the English School with its wide range of implemented concepts, which draw some elements from two opposing theories as well as included the latest trend of economic significance, earned many comments from scholars of given theoretical thoughts.

Traditionally, there are three predominant critiques of the English School – realists, liberalists and international political economists. As the main assumptions of realism is the balance of power and states’ constant desire for security and rivalry, it is very sceptical of the ‘international society’, the main focus of the School’s thinking, due to the realists’ belief of states being bound only by their own national interests rather than by “*common set of rules in their relations with one another*” (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). Nevertheless, the English School theorists are not discouraged by such criticism and argue that the bonds among states are all the more strong and effective; states bind themselves to each other by treaties consciously and with a mindset of following them with legitimate interest that other states recognize and respect. According to liberals, English School neglects to acknowledge the influence of domestic politics on international relations and ignores the progressive change in international relations linked to the domestic governance, as international politics, in accordance to the School, is reoccurring and repetitive (Ibid). Lastly, scholars of the international political economy strongly question the English School approach for excluding economics and developing world from its considerations. James Mayall, in Jackson & Sørensen, argues that there is “*an economic community in the international society [that] bound[s] states together in a complex web of economic ties and mutual interdependence*”, which is difficult to ignore (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013).

In spite of the critique the English School has received over the years, it has earned a rightful position among classical theories, which may be apparent by an

emergence of its new leading scholars, such as Buzan, Jackson or Linklater (Buzan, 2014, p. 10).

4.2 The Concept of Strategic Narrative

Evolution of international relations, media ecology and desire of one country to be perceived a certain way by another state gave an impetus for narratives to be observed. In recent years, the power of narrative is gradually more visible as actors in the international arena recognise the potential of using such tool. It is argued that the power of narrative lies within its ability to connect seemingly unrelated occurrences in the international arena (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, p. 7). Their ability to speak to the values, interest and prejudices of a targeted audience further makes narratives more attractive to utilise by actors (Schmitt, 2018). On that note, strategic narrative is described by Roselle, et al as “*a game of persuasion and influence*” as political actors have the capability to expand their influence and/or manage to change the environment they engage in (Roselle, et al., 2014). As such, main representatives advocating for strategic narrative Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle explored the concept as being the new soft power. Similarly to soft power, strategic narrative is just as difficult to measure, however, its purpose is to form and project a picture by which a given state desires to be perceived in the international community, so that it can be received and interpreted in a suitable manner (Roselle, et al., 2014). Schmitt argues, the ‘strategic’ aspect of this concept does not lie within the idea of a narrative to be important, but within actors’ ability to make them into what they want (Schmitt, 2018). By consciously utilising strategic narrative, political actors frame themselves to a given picture due to their selection and subjective propagation of certain elements of their history or actions. As Miskimmon, et al. explains, the purpose of framing is to shape public opinion. The framing may be recognised with short-term or long-term goals, which are focused on creating a positive impression of a state within the international realm. Overall, strategic

narrative is used to encourage positive opinions about the state itself (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, pp. 8-10).

There are three different approaches one may take when analysing strategic narrative. When focusing on how a strategic narrative was *formed*, it is necessary to attentively trace and analyse texts, and interviews, which shall provide an explanation of what are the internal political pressures influencing the process of forming the state's strategic narrative. *Projection* of the strategic narrative is another approach, which is studied by following "*the flow of narratives through the media ecology*", such as network, content and textual analyses of a state (Roselle, et al., 2014). Lastly, a *reception* of a strategic narrative is the most tedious method to be applied as it may require years to analyse, due to strategic narrative's requirement of needing years to be received by others, which is then studied through literature of political communication (Ibid). Miskimmon, et al. in his book on strategic narratives recognises a number of actors playing a role in the international arena. Firstly, *unipole* or else *hegemon* is described as one of the biggest actors, which should enjoy the most freedom in its projection. Secondly, *great powers* are presented due to some not agreeing with an idea that hegemon directs ways of international community but accept presence of great powers. These are characterised by sovereignty with an independence of action, leadership through which they possess the ability to structure the system, and responsibility to others. *Normal powers* are usually recognised as economic systems rather than actors within the international sphere. Often their narrative implies that they should be more self-interested. Another actor identified is generally perceived as dangerous, due to its shifting position, namely *rising powers*. These are known to raise concerns among other actors as with their gaining position they might aspire to change the system, which could influence decision making and foreign policy of that actor. Lastly, *weak states* or *rogue states* are considered, however, on a lesser scale as their narratives usually have minimal or no impact on the system. These states are defined as weak by cause of geographical, physical, or major economic constraints (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, pp. 34-40).

Furthermore, there are three different types by which strategic narrative is understood. *International system narratives* (otherwise known as system narratives) are concerned with a structure and future of international affairs (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, p. 7). The function of such a narrative is to identify who the players are, describe the way the world is structured and how it operates (Roselle, et al., 2014). Another level, *national narratives* (also recognised as identity narratives), are fashioned around an actor's identity in international affairs, where state's story is described along with its values and goals (Roselle, et al., 2014). As a last level *issue narratives* are concerned with topical and contextual problems, where actions undertaken by state's authority are set in context along with recognition of the important actors, issue and explanation of what actions need to be taken to resolve the issue (Roselle, et al., 2014). In other words, issue narratives “[seek] to shape the terrain in which policy discussions take place” (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, p. 7).

As previously mentioned, the main aim of strategic narrative is to persuade actor A to perceive actor B in the way actor B wants to be perceived. Nevertheless, strategic narratives may vary in the way of who presents it and which type is used, so Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle set out four levels by which narrative may be analysed, namely very thin, thin, thick and very thick analysis. *Very thin* analysis is also recognised as rationalist analysis as it is characterised by analysing observable interaction among actors with given preferences and in accordance to rational understanding only what can be observed can be truly explained. Furthermore, very thin analysis is characterised by looking only into claims made in public and it is necessary to note that “communication is understood as signalling intentions, [and] cheap talk used to manipulate impressions” (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, pp. 14-16).

Thin analysis is also recognised as study of communicative action as rational actors are perceived as trying to persuade one another by making convincing claims. Analysis is considered thin due to perception of actors being rational players with somewhat stable preferences and identities as well as due to a possibility of observing

a debate sorting out weak and unconvincing claims. Such debates are approached in media ecology, which is considered as a public sphere (Ibid).

Media ecology becomes very important for conducting more in-depth analysis. It is used as a tool by actors to communicate their actions, which may cause other players to react in response. Therefore, this kind of *thick* analysis is also dubbed as complex or reflexive communication. Language is no more treated as passive, but it is used as an instrument that can set actor's identity, status, image, and reputation. Due to the communication happening in the public sphere of media ecology, it is more unpredictable, and language may be complemented by visuals and symbols (Ibid).

Lastly, Miskimmon, et al. recognised the most enhanced level of analysis, which is also known as post structural – a *very thick* analysis. In such, actor designs a certain discourse with clear identity forms for others to fill. In this environment discourses' conditions of pre-given structure take time to change; they operate "*through generative power (...) rather than strictly behavioral power of one actor over another*". Here, media ecologies are perceived as one more way of projecting given discourse of a way international relations are conducted (Ibid).

4.3 Use of the Theory

The theory along with the strategic narrative concept both described above serve as a guiding tool for the thesis, enabling it to investigate and attempt to understand the narrative China desires to project on the international community through the 17+1 framework, where establishing deeper connections with the initial 16 Central and Eastern European countries may be perceived as the main objective.

5 Brief Pre-Initiative Relational Background

5.1 The Czech Republic

Relations with the European Union

Talks for the newly established country of the Czech Republic to join the European Union (EU) could start no sooner than after 1993, when Czechoslovakia peacefully seceded consequently enlarging international community on January 1st by two independent states – the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Shortly after the dissolution Prague turned its focus toward the EU with an aim of acceding eventually. This goal was achieved on May 1st, 2004 in what can be marked as the largest accession to the Union in a single year as in total ten European countries became member states (European Union, n.d.). The EU gives an impression of being based on funds it provides for its member states through various projects while it adheres to contribute to the development of less economically capable countries via financial means of richer member-states. The Czech Republic is no exemption of such practices and the country has received countless number of more or less visible funds in numerous sectors ever since its inclusion (EU Funds in the Czech Republic in Pictures, 2015). Due to the EU's focus on improving the quality of life of citizens within the group, the projects initiated in the Czech Republic are mostly people-oriented. For instance, some of the major undertakings were aimed at creating new job opportunities for locals, providing the state with opportunities to be more competitive in the international arena as well as they focused on attracting more tourism into the country to boost its economy (Ibid). Nevertheless, the Czech Republic has since its accession been in comparison to some other EU member states in a less visible position in Brussels (Michálek, et al., n.d.). Thus, since 2004, the two entities seem to live in a mutual harmony with no significant involvement in each other's functioning.

Relations with the People's Republic of China

Diplomatic relations between the PRC and the Czech Republic date back to January 1st, 1993 immediately after the Czechoslovak dissolution, when Beijing was among one of the first international actors to recognise the Central European country as a sovereign entity (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Beijing, n.d.). However, the quick acknowledgement did not have an easy way for the relations to develop. The newly established European country insisted on the diplomatic principle of 'human rights first', which caused many upheavals with China. Anyhow, the position was later weakened as the first Czech President and passionate advocate for democracy and its beliefs, Václav Havel, ended his two terms in 2003 and other leaders stepped up to the position. In 2004, when the second Czech President, Václav Klaus, set off on Presidential visit to the PRC the boom of mutual official visits was initiated, although, political relations between the two countries were still at lower level in the period from 1993 to 2012, even though economic and trade cooperation was ongoing (Li, 2017). Bilateral affairs improved remarkably as the two countries have since been involved in multilateral fora (such as the United Nations system and the EU-ASEAN+3 events), regional and provincial cooperation, and economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that despite the latter being important for the country, trade balance with Beijing is disadvantageous for the Czech Republic "*due to bureaucratic obstacles and other technical specificities of the Chinese territory*" (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Beijing, n.d.). Nonetheless, when the Czech Republic as an EU member state cooperates with China, it does so 'on the basis of the common EU position', thus following the EU guidelines on given matters (Ibid.).

5.2 Serbia

Relations with the European Union

Belgrade's political affairs with the EU started to develop in 2003, when Serbia was for the first time identified as a potential candidate for accession, which prompted

the Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations to be initiated. However, these discussions were paused due to Serbia's lack of compliance in essential matters (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, n.d.). After the country's reconsideration of European partnership for Serbia was adopted in 2008, which "[set] out priorities for the country's membership application" and a year later Belgrade officially applied for accession to the EU (European Commission, n.d.). The process of negotiations regarding the membership is still ongoing, however, in 2012 Serbia was granted EU candidate status, which are to present day followed by official accession negotiations (Ibid). The former Yugoslav country continues to be affected by its history, due to Kosovo, which strives for independence but even ten years after Pristina's declaration, Belgrade still finds it difficult to accept such action, thus causing it to be a hindrance in talks with the EU. Ever since its establishment, the original idea of the European Union has been to unite European countries under the same roof, however the friction between the two legislative bodies makes it more difficult for Serbia to accept certain conditions (Simić, 2018). Therefore, the state remains in its candidate status, while revisiting chapters presented by the EU that need to be agreed on, in order to be included in the EU.

Relations with the People's Republic of China

Despite tendency of perceiving China as a newcomer in the Western Balkans, diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Beijing go well beyond contemporary Serbian history. At the time, the affairs were very characteristic due to China's interest or lack thereof to interact with the country often depended on its behaviour toward the Soviet Union, the state's most important influence (Johnson, 1971). Essentially, the diplomatic ties were established in 1975 and in 1977 President Tito went for an official visit to the PRC. From then on state visits were ongoing until 2006, when the Republic of Serbia was formally founded. The country presents its foreign affairs in a complex manner due to its past and present influences from the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China, respectively. Therefore, the country defines its

affairs as based on ‘four pillars of diplomacy’ (Bastian, 2018). Nonetheless, as mentioned in the previous section, Serbia continues to aspire for a member-state status in the EU, while at the same time it keeps in mind its goal to maintain strategic partnership with the other three international actors, which could be treated as complimentary objectives. To reinforce its position and connections in Serbia, Beijing one year after the official emergence of Serbia opened the first Confucius Institute in Belgrade and second in Novi Sad. In demonstration of mutually sympathetic relations, in 2009 during Serbian presidential visit, a strategic partnership between the two countries, for Beijing translated as the most important kind of cooperation, was established (Ibid). The bilateral relations further continue to develop in friendly spirit, which may be troublesome for some international actors in the discussed region.

6 China’s Strategic Narrative in the CEE Region

During the second meeting of China-Central and Eastern Europe Business Forum in 2012 in Warsaw, the then premier Wen Jiabao presented *China’s Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries*. This event is regarded as the starting point of the platform and simultaneously where the PRC’s main objectives for the 17+1 initiative were presented (Kong, 2015). On one hand, arguably due to the lower level of development of the targeted countries, Beijing in accordance with the Twelve Measures bases its presence on mutually beneficial economic interaction among the nations involved, as it proposed to set up a special credit line designated mainly for projects focused on infrastructure and technology. Furthermore, China vowed to expand bilateral economic cooperation, examine possibility of financial cooperation, and to set up investment cooperation fund between China and the CEE countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2012). On the other hand, people-to-people and cultural exchanges are included in the document as well. For instance, a desire to share the Chinese culture with citizens of the states participating in the initiative through Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms program is

expressed, as well as a suggestion of setting up tourism-promoting cooperation (Ibid). Arguably, all the expressed aspirations may be translated as practical manifestation of China's aim to be perceived as a partner willing to seek ways in which the cooperation benefits all the parties involved. Likewise, it may be debated that by establishing these institutions and culture-endorsing cooperation, the PRC manifests its desire to be understood not only as an economic entity, but also as a civilization. Also, these actions may be translated as the country's desire to raise an awareness in the countries involved, so that they may come to a better comprehension of China and its goals and possibly shall it be needed to support policies beneficial to it in the European community. In recent years, these objectives of mutual benefit and people-to-people cooperation are still upheld by the 17+1 framework, however, with an evolvement and more enhanced shaping of the platform new aims are addressed.

From 2013 onwards, high officials of the China-CEE partnership meet annually to discuss results of the previous year along with goals and ambitions for given year, which are articulated in annual *Guidelines for Cooperation*. Throughout these documents, intentions of win-win cooperation, mutual benefit, respect, equality, and common stability and peace are repeatedly stressed, which may be interpreted as Beijing continuously reaffirming the international community of its good and non-changing intentions for this region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014; Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2015). Nonetheless, it is also noteworthy that the objectives of the platform articulated by China reflect the state's *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* based on which the Chinese government steers its foreign affairs. The principles call on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). The alignment of the aims of the cooperative platform with the Five Principles may be translated as Beijing's aim to create shared values and goals, where by extension doing so may be perceived as the PRC's tendency to comply with the

pattern of international society, as well as framing itself to the national narrative, which is crafted around the country's identity of the peaceful, all-beneficial and non-threatening entity.

In the Czech Republic, the **win-win cooperation** and **mutually beneficial dealings** are seen mostly on know-how basis as the country has an extensive knowledge and experience in various sectors. One of them is manifested in China's interest in Czech nuclear power industry as the European partner “ (...) *has advanced technology and good performance*” in this area of expertise, whereas the PRC has the financial resources to support their existence (Li, 2017). Accordingly, Beijing expressed its desire to take part in the expansion project of the Dukovany and Temelín nuclear power plants, which was enthusiastically welcomed by Prague. In 2016, during President Xi's visit to the Czech Republic the parties signed agreements between Czech power enterprise ČEZ and Chinese counterpart China General Nuclear Power, which not only included points on the expansion project, but also contained a notion of the Czech side binding itself to aid China in acquiring European license for its nuclear power plants. Such license is essential for a country to be able to take part in any tendering process for constructing nuclear power plants in the EU (Klímová, 2016). Another example of cooperation between the two countries, where the PRC demonstrates its willingness to learn from others, while benefiting both parties, is found in aviation industry. The Czech Republic is recognised among the best aircraft manufacturers worldwide with ‘a century-long tradition’ followed by an expertise in constructing complete aircrafts and extensive know-how (Pašek, 2017). Such attributes appear to be appealing to China, due to its aspirations of gaining a knowledge on how to build airplanes, thus be eventually more self-sufficient in this branch. Nevertheless, Prague is expected to benefit from this assistance by interconnecting the two countries via more frequent direct flights, thus opening up opportunities for Czech airlines (Kopecký, et al., 2016). Cooperation between the two countries within the 17+1 framework is further seen in Czech proposition of Industry Plan 4.0. The aim of this scheme is to provide a further knowledge on China's goal of

shifting “*from a big manufacturing country to a powerful manufacturing country*” by 2025, which would result in the Czech Republic eventually receiving technologically advanced products (Li, 2017). Arguably, considering the abovementioned events, China’s economic aid and beneficence have resulted in Prague’s favourable perception of its partner, which may be seen by the state’s willingness to assist Beijing with obtaining the EU-recognised license for constructing nuclear power plants, as well as the number and variety of cooperation. Likewise, it may be debated that the narrative the PRC has projected throughout the years has resulted in the state being able to attain something in return from the participant country, while simultaneously continue to project its image of all-beneficial partnership.

In the *Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation* the parties expressed a desire to reinforce people-to-people cooperation, which was followed by the Moravian-Silesian region of the Czech Republic establishing relations with Jiangsu province, China in 2013 (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2015; Moravian-Silesian Region, 2013). The collaboration is aimed at providing not only financial support from the PRC to transform the predominantly metallurgical and black coal mining region into an area with advanced engineering and IT sector services, but also the partnership focuses on cultural cooperation in art education and exchange study programmes for talented youngsters (Moravian-Silesian Region, n.d.). To build-up on the already established regional relations, in 2018 delegation from the Moravian-Silesian region visited not only Jiangsu province, but also Shanxi province, where the parties signed an agreement to educate Czech physicians in traditional Chinese medicine, as well as exchange programme for lecturers and students was established (Moravian-Silesian Region, n.d.) The Czech willingness to further develop partnership with another province of the PRC may be interpreted as the initial cooperation being successful and truly reflect the promises of mutual benefits. Interestingly, the last year’s poll, conducted by the European Commission, the public especially in the partnering Moravian-Silesian region is recorded among the three least EU-trusting regions (European Commission, 2018). Contentiously, based on this

deeper cooperation and people's higher awareness of Chinese culture, the public opinion is turning favourably toward the PRC, which adds to the argument of Beijing's favourable projection in the country being effective. Also, the Sino-Czech cooperation in both economic and social sectors follow well the assumptions of the international society, which perceives this kind of a partnership favourably.

Among the other actors of the 17+1 initiative, Serbia may be perceived as one of the less economically developed countries, therefore, China's beneficial involvement for both parties is more physically evident. Firstly, one of the major areas the PRC has stepped in to assist Serbia is in infrastructure development. Due to Belgrade's longstanding difficulties with funding infrastructure projects, China under the umbrella of the cooperative platform was able to provide financial aid for the project of constructing some stages of highway E-763 going across the country from Belgrade to the Adriatic coast (Dimitrijević, 2017). In the same vein, in 2016 Serbia and the PRC signed an arrangement to provide funds by China's Exim Bank for a modernisation of the Belgrade-Budapest railroad (Jojić, 2017). The significance of this project is manifold. Not only is the 350 km long high-speed railway already an important link between Hungary and Serbia, the parties also put forward a proposal of building another track, which would serve for both cargo and passenger transport, thus providing more options for import/export and travelling (Dimitrijević, 2017). Furthermore, Belgrade expressed a vision of connecting the railway project with the Greek port of Piraeus, also financed by China and which would therefore “(...) *provide Serbia a better transit between Greece and Europe*” (Jojić, 2017). Still, the significance of connecting the two projects is reaching further as by accomplishing to do so, China could reach its objective of connecting Europe with Asia through its Land-Sea Express Passage, which could essentially strengthen its position in the region. However, China in its endeavour to be perceived as a peaceful presence especially by the EU, expressed thorough premier Li Keqiang its wish for the railway project to be beneficial also for strengthening cooperation between the PRC and the EU (Dimitrijević, 2017). China's desire for deeper partnership with the EU lies in accordance with the objectives of the

international society, which perceives economic interaction among countries as most favourable for international affairs. Furthermore, Beijing's interest in mostly financial aid to Serbia and simultaneous collaboration with the EU may be interpreted as representing the cooperative type of relations, where actors seek to create or work together on joint projects, rather than compete against each other. Nevertheless, such efforts of partnering are also beneficial to the PRC's image in the region, as through the extensive and ambitious plans the state substantiates its aim of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation.

Secondly, the aftermath of war and privatisation left Serbia's heavy metal and chemical industries in financial struggles, which potentially could result in social and economic instability within the country. However, China in accordance with the presented objectives of the 17+1 initiative of win-win cooperation and mutual benefit, encouraged its largest heavy metallurgy enterprise, Hesteel Company, to buy Serbia's largest ironmongery – Smederevo. By doing so, Serbia through Hesteel Company's investments was given an opportunity to become competitive in the industry in Europe and thus economically beneficial once again (Ibid). Thirdly, the presence of the PRC in Serbia under the China-CEEC framework and its mutually beneficial cooperation is evident in agricultural and food products cooperation. *“China is the world's biggest agricultural products importer,”* whereas for Serbia agriculture as a sector has a great potential for development, thus for Serbia exporting corn, meat and other products to the big Chinese market would work in economic favour, while Chinese consumers would have an access to Serbian high-quality products (Jojić, 2017).

Another of the aims is further highlighted in the *Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and CEE countries*, namely **mutual respect**, by which the participant countries are expected to preserve state sovereignty and abide by *“ (...) their respective laws and regulations, and in the case of EU member states, relevant EU legislation and regulations will also be observed”* (Cooperation between China and

Central and Eastern European Countries, 2015). To manifest China's commitment to this objective of the initiative and to further assure the international community of the country's accordant intentions, Beijing in Serbia's question of Kosovo and its self-declared independence officially does not support Pristina, as doing so would conflict with Serbia's sovereignty (Jojić, 2017). Likewise, on the point of respecting EU laws and regulations for EU member states, Beijing in accordance to the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* does not project any hostile tendencies toward Brussels. On the contrary, the PRC since the establishment of the initiative has and continues to encourage EU member states, which are part of the 17+1 platform, to act in accordance to legislation of the EU in motion³. Similarly, by advocating for mutual respect and supporting the existing state of Serbia, China may project its value of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs also enclosed in its *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). Moreover, based on the mentioned *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* the essential goals of the society of states is peace, prosperity, and sustainable development for the benefit of all to which China essentially agrees by its tolerating of the agreement. Through such action it may be argued the PRC itself does not project a will of creating rules for the states, however, it adheres to preserve them, which is manifested by Beijing's constant reaffirmations throughout the *Guidelines for Cooperation*.

These *Guidelines for Cooperation* further to the mutual respect add an augment of **common stability and peace**, which is highlighted in both *The Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation* from 2017 and the last meeting of the high officials of the 17 countries

³As evidenced in: Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2015; Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019

involved in the cooperative mechanism, which took place in Dubrovnik, Croatia on April 17, 2019. In the Budapest Guidelines

“[t]he Chinese side reaffirms that it attaches great importance to China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership, that it supports the road of integration chosen by EU members in an independent manner, that it wishes to see a united, stable and prosperous Europe, and that it will promote China-EU partnership of peace, growth, reform and civilization.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

Such claim specifically made by the PRC, may be once again translated as the country's desire to be understood as no threat, au contraire, Beijing aspires to be perceived as a supportive partner. As such, it is also necessary to recognise the fact that China abides by its declaration in the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* of its encouragement for the EU continuous integration and is supportive of Serbia's desire of full accession to the EU (European Union, 2013; Dimitrijević, 2017). By making supportive claims of this kind, China acts in accordance with the pluralist view of the importance of status quo, thus the country's intentions may be regarded as aligned with this assumption. Also, by lack of any positive or negative involvement of the PRC in the process proves the state's preference of giving the space to Serbia and the EU to shape the European international society. Additionally, the countries participating in the 17+1 initiative recognise the unsteadiness and uncertainty of the world, due to which they stress the necessity to consent to the principles of the UN Charter, which calls for maintaining international peace and security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017; United Nations, 1945). Repeated notion of China and the CEE countries of their commitment to the UN Charter in the Dubrovnik Guidelines only emphasises the point of Beijing's aim at further improving its image of competing entity in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). On that note, in the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* China also emphasises the support of *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda* goals of acting in

accordance with the aims of the UN Charter, which further corresponds to the characteristics of pluralist claim of interstate order. Similarly, by Beijing's indications of supporting the essential goals of maintaining international peace and security it is recognised as focused on preserving international order.

Rapid economic growth of China in recent years enabled the state to gradually gain certain degree of prominence, which may be perceived warily in the international community, especially in the EU, due to its proximity to the involved region. To address as well as to refute this concern, the 18 countries participating in the cooperation, by extension China, accentuate the **equality** of all the member countries of the 17+1 cooperative platform. In accordance to the Sofia Guidelines, any new evolvments regarding potential involvement of observing entities must be subject to discussion among all of the participants of the initiative, whereas China does not possess more decisive vote than the other members (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). For instance, it is recorded in the communique issued along with the Suzhou Guidelines, that *“[t]he possibility of involvement of other partners in specific 16+1 projects and activities will be decided based on the principle of consensus”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Also, the China-CEEC cooperative mechanism highlights its inclusiveness in the platform for any interested parties to join the cooperation and expand its potential (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017). The notion of the openness did not go unnoticed as since 2015, only three years since its establishment, the first three observers, namely Austria, the EU, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, were documented to take part in the 17+1 cooperation's summit in Suzhou, China. Representatives from these entities were all noted as present and were followed by delegates from Belarus, Greece and Switzerland the next year, thus the number of observers growing to six in total (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015; Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2016). In the 2014 summit, the participants

for the first time officially articulated a possibility of expanding the cooperation, thus once again proving the inclusive element. However, not to collide with the EU legislation, assurance of enlarging in conformity with the countries' “(...) *respective laws and regulations, as well as in the case of EU member states, the EU legislation, regulations and policies stemming from their membership*” was marked (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). China may be argued to be a unique actor in the region of Central and Eastern European countries, because it may be perceived as an unstable rising power by the EU due to the PRC's expanding and non-neglectable presence and influence around the globe. The already mentioned Forum on China - Africa Cooperation, Sino - Latin American Cooperation Fund, and the PRC's membership in ASEAN may serve as examples. Based on the above mentioned arguments, it may be argued that due to such concern on the EU part and China's aim of abiding by its peaceful narrative, Brussels in order to sustain the peace and security, recognises Beijing as an equal partner with which it can address “(...) *regional and global challenges together*” (European Union , 2013). However, when focusing strictly on the CEE region, the PRC presents itself as a normal power, which is by definition perceived as an economic system providing mostly financial aid where needed.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of the thesis was to establish which strategic narrative China projects in the Central and Eastern European countries through the 17+1 initiative as the state's growing presence in the region may be concerning to Europe's dominant actor, the European Union. To come to a better understanding of the presented narrative, the focus was turned to two states involved in the cooperative, namely the Czech Republic and Serbia, respectively. The former served as an example of an EU member state with direct influence from Brussels, and the latter displayed an aspiring state to join the EU, which is required to gradually conform to the legislation and rules of Brussels. Furthermore, the Czech Republic has been chosen for an in-depth analysis

of Beijing's transmitted image due to the recent shifting from its Western lookout to the East, which is evident in the public's more favourable opinion of the PRC and the increased deals between the two countries. On the other hand, Serbia has been selected due to its unique approach to foreign affairs, as it bases its international dealings on four different actors, namely the EU to which it desires to ascend, China, which is becoming very involved in the state, the US, and Russia. However, for the purpose of the research the US and Russia have not been considered in the analysis as the two states do not influence the PRC's narrative projection within the China-CEEC cooperation. The method utilised for the thesis has proven to be of assistance as it enabled the research to be focused in the direction of examination of Beijing's aim of framing itself to a given strategic narrative. Furthermore, the approach of very thin analysis has been chosen as the most fitting, due to its observing nature and the lack of any ongoing international debate on the topic of which strategic narrative China projects in the region. The purpose of such debate would be to, sift through cheap talk that may be used for shaping impressions of a country.

The theoretical framework of the English School and the concept of strategic narrative have also proved to be well fitting for providing a better understanding of China's presence in the CEE region. Based on the key assumptions of the English School, it has been established that the PRC follows the thought of the international society and international order, which depend on institutions, advocate for mutual interest, and aim at preserving the essential goals of the international actors. In the case of China, these are demonstrated by the state's continuous support and promotion of the UN Charter calling on peace and stability in the international community. By Beijing's implementation of China's *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* in the *Guidelines for Cooperation*, issued annually by the member states of the 17+1 initiative, the PRC may be further regarded as desiring to project its norms and values on the international actors. Nevertheless, China may be perceived in the region as both an unstable rising power as well as a normal power. Due to the state's increasing and more evident presence in the international affairs and seemingly

sudden interest in the CEE region, the already dominant actor, the EU, may perceive China as a competitor. However, Beijing continues to this day to acknowledge the EU as the leader and encourages all its partners of the China-CEE cooperation to comply with the rules and legislation put forward by Brussels, thus essentially presenting itself as no threat to the already established main actor. Based on the Czech Republic and Serbia cases, it has therefore been identified that China actively advocates for deeper cooperation with the CEE countries. However, the state has been deduced not to follow the solidarist approach as the cooperative assumption of the English School suggests. On the contrary, in its dealings with the 17 countries of the cooperative platform, the PRC recognises the importance of maintaining status quo and state sovereignty, thus adopting the pluralist view. This is evident in the lack of any involvement on Beijing's part in the question of Kosovo's self-declared independence, which directly affects Serbia; therefore, China lets the EU to address this issue. Thus, once again the PRC may be concluded to indirectly acknowledge the EU superiority in the region and express its support for the EU integration, which Beijing also declared in the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*. Due to the absence of China's reaction on the Serbia-Kosovo issue, the state is also further identified as showing an inclination to be guided by the thought of the international society advocating for a state's, or an entity's, ability to have an impact on the international community.

Based on the PRC's extensive and diversified cooperation, which includes both economic and social interaction, it has been deduced that the state adheres to project an image of a normal power striving for mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation. Namely, in the Czech Republic it is evident by Beijing's interest in nuclear power plant cooperation, which would benefit Prague by gaining financial assistance to expand its two nuclear power plants and China by being able to obtain an EU-recognised license for constructing such power plants within Europe. Moreover, the Sino-Czech cooperation is apparent in the aviation industry, where the PRC is gaining a knowledge on technology and aircraft assembly, while Prague is to enjoy the benefit of a growing number of direct flights to China, hence providing new opportunities for

Czech airlines. Lastly, the partnership is represented in Prague's desire to aid Beijing in its goal of becoming a powerful manufacturing country with high quality products, thus proposing the Industry Plan 4.0, which is expected to essentially deliver technologically advanced goods from China's large market. The collaboration is demonstrated social sphere by the partnering of Moravian-Silesian region with Jiangsu and Shanxi provinces in China, which results in people-to-people exchanges, trainings and programmes. In the case of Serbia, the mutually beneficial cooperation is embodied in China's economic assistance in infrastructure projects, which include construction of parts of highway E-736, connecting the capital with the Adriatic Sea and construction of Belgrade-Budapest railroad. The Belgrade-Budapest railroad presents itself as one of the major projects as it has the potential of connecting with another China-initiated project, the Land-Sea Express Passage, whilst benefiting all the EU, Serbia, and China. Beijing has expressed its desire to conduct the project jointly with Brussels, thus proving its intention of being perceived as a peaceful partner seeking cooperation beneficial to all parties as the undertaking has a potential of an easier access for both the PRC and the EU to each other's markets. Furthermore, the acquisition of Smederevo ironmongery by a Chinese company and cooperation in the agricultural sector also proves to be beneficial for both parties, thus illustrating the state's effort in being perceived as getting involved in projects that are indeed beneficial to both parties.

Moreover, it has been assessed that Beijing also stands by its other main objectives of mutual respect, common stability and peace, and mutual equality, which are aligned with the state's *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* and likewise are expressed throughout the *Guidelines for Cooperation*. By doing so, China is recognised as further strengthening its strategic narrative in the region with no desire to contest the EU, while simultaneously projecting the PRC's own values on the international community of the China-CEEC platform and advocating for preservation of shared international goals of the society of states. Conclusively, it has been assessed that Beijing through the China-CEEC cooperative platform aims at being perceived as no

competition to the dominating actor of the region, the EU, while striving for projecting its core values embedded in the *Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence*, which are essentially aligned with the objectives of the EU and the UN Charter advocating for peace and stability within the international community.

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