



## **Belt and Road Initiative**

Challenge or Opportunity?

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## **Abstract**

Under the current leadership of the President Xi Jinping, China's external engagement has been growing. The new Chinese vision of development is frequently put under the Chinese geostrategic project, known as *Yi Dai Yi Lu* – One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative. The initiative assumes cooperation between China and some Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, which in the past has been close to People's Republic of China (PRC), as they belonged to the Communist political block. Right now, through implementation of OBOR, the past cooperation is now again flourishing. China has become the second largest trade partner to all Visegrad countries. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), among other projects, aims at alternative energy sources, mining companies, and electrical power lines and stations.

Gradual involvement of China in Central and Eastern Europe has however met serious of obstacles, many of which come from the European Union. The Chinese intentions towards CEE has been unclear to the EU. They are often perceived as a geopolitical challenge to the EU, as they allow extended Chinese influence on the EU member countries. This research aims to analyse the EU's concerns and their sources, using the international relations theoretical framework of hard and soft power. Are China's intentions towards the CEE indeed posing a challenge to the EU, or is it rather an opportunity?

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## 1. Introduction and problem formulation

During his visit to Warsaw in 2012, Wen Jiabao, the Prime Minister of China of that time, introduced “12 Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries” (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2012). This meeting involved 11 European Union member states<sup>1</sup> and 5 Balkan states<sup>2</sup>, which became a basis for the 16+1 forum. The meeting in Warsaw was acknowledged as the first 16+1 format summit. The 16+1 forum became a platform for regional cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEE)<sup>3</sup>.

The 16+1 format is a diplomatic platform coordinated by the Chinese government in order to create institutionalized relations. China and the CEE states meet annually to reach agreements, facilitate investments and implement projects, as a result strengthening the cooperation. The platform has been institutionalized gradually: in 2012 a Permanent Secretariat at the Chinese Foreign Ministry has been established, followed by creating a Permanent Secretariat for Investment Promotion in Warsaw in 2014, not to mention several associations, organizations and think tanks (Polish Investment and Trade Agency, 2014).

The 16+1 platform remains an important point in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Introduced in 2013 by the Chinese government, One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative as it is also called, is a grand inclusive strategy on global level. The official document on the Initiative issued by the Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative states that the aim of the program is to “maintain an open world economic system, and achieve diversified, independent, balanced, and sustainable development” (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017, p. 1).

The BRI takes its inspiration from the ancient Silk Road, therefore it is known as the New Silk Road as well. Basing on the historical trade route, needs of international cooperation and Xi Jinping’s proposal, the BRI comprises of five routes, divided into

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<sup>1</sup> That is: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

<sup>2</sup> That is: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this thesis the term CEE would be used to describe the 16 countries involved in the forum, rather than according to OECD definition: “Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) is an OECD term for the group of countries comprising Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” (OECD, 2001).

The Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, presented in details below:

#### The Silk Road Economic Belt

- From Northwest and Northeast China to Europe and the Baltic Sea via Central Asia and Russia;
- From Northwest China to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea via Central and West Asia;
- From Southwest China to the Indian Ocean via the Indochina Peninsula;

#### The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road

- From coastal ports of China to Indian Ocean and then to Europe via the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait;
- From coastal ports of China to South Pacific via the South China Sea.

The BRI framework was created basing on the above routes, including the so called “six corridors”, one of which is the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor. This corridor reaches Central and Eastern Europe, running through China, Central Asia and Russia. It includes building a logistic system, such as creating China-Europe rail connection, or establishing economic and trade development (Office of the Leading Group..., 2017).

The increasing involvement of China in the CEE region together with institutionalized cooperation in the form of 16+1 platform, has become the source of concerns of the European Union (EU) and representatives of its member states (Kołodko, 2018). From the very first summit in Warsaw it has raised suspicions on its’ purpose and nature. 16+1 and the BRI has been repeatedly called a “Trojan horse” within Europe, through which China intends to obtain influence in the region, weakening the EU’s position (Butler, 2018). The initiative is said to lack transparency, which became the incentive for the EU’s insecurity and suspicions.

Majority of concerns have been directed towards growing Chinese investments in the CEE countries in recent years, especially since some CEE leaders see it as an alternative to the EU cooperation. In 2018 Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister, said that

"Central Europe needs capital to build new roads and pipelines. If the EU is unable to provide enough capital, we will just collect it in China" (DW, 2018).

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is known for her view on China's involvement in the EU as "greatest challenges", while the German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, said that China is "constantly trying to test and undermine the unity of the European Union", aiming to gain influence in individual states with "sticks and carrots" (SMH, 2018). According to Policy briefing of The German Marshall Fund, the BRI has an impact on the European Union in terms of unity, security and increases competition for trade and investments (Mohan, 2018, p.2).

On the other hand however, scholars debate on China's presence in the CEE as a way to unify the economic world, create new opportunities and tighten economic relations. Therefore appears the question – why is the EU perceiving the BRI as a challenge and is unable to see it might be an opportunity?

While many of the raised concerns regard the economic tensions, this thesis seeks to investigate the EU's fears towards China from the political perspective. Is China's involvement in the CEE countries under the Belt and Road Initiative creating a challenge for the EU's unity? Will the CEE countries turn away from the EU and become more pro-Chinese, accepting the new model of development? And most importantly, what are the reasons of the EU's suspicions and are they indeed reasonable?

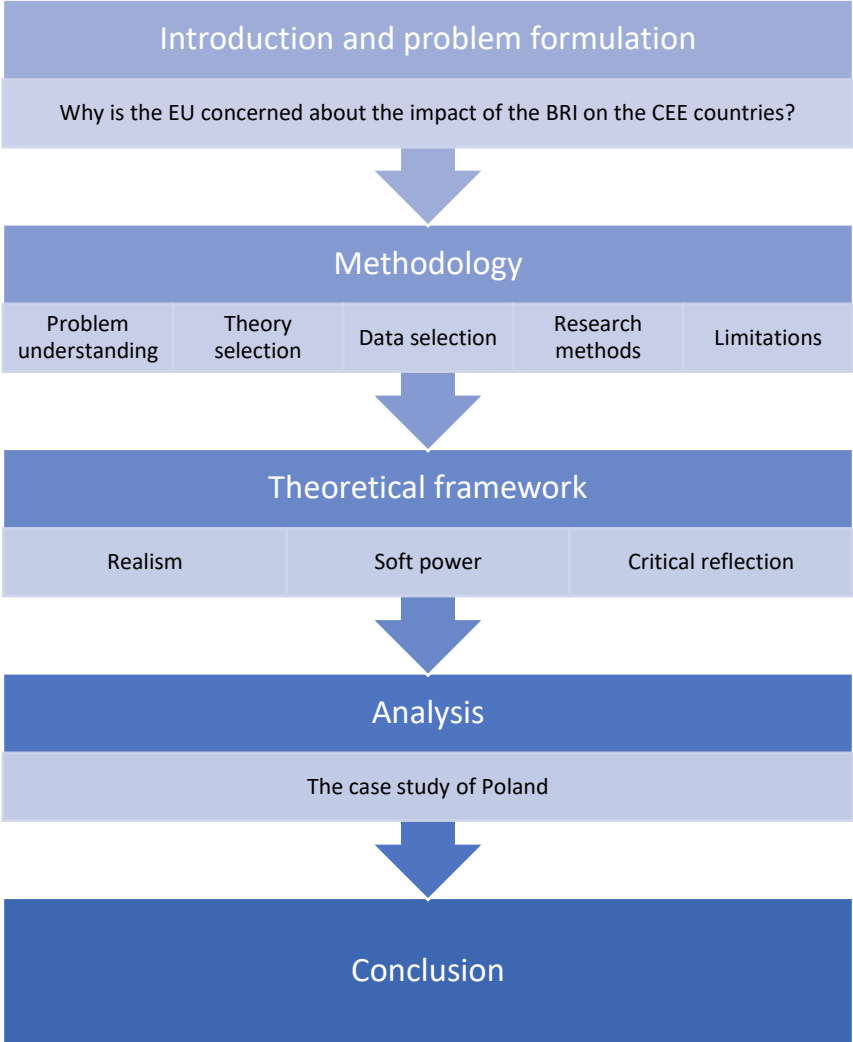
Thus based on the above, the following research question has been formulated:

**Why is the EU concerned about the impact of the BRI on the CEE countries?**

This paper intends to provide answer to the above research question by explaining the EU's standpoint through the major international relations (IR) theory of realism. The theory will be supplemented by the concept of the soft power introduced by Joseph Nye, aiming to analyse the attractiveness of China and the real chances of it being a potential political challenge to the EU integration and unity. This approach, compounding both hard and soft power, aims to provide an objective answer to the complex research question.

The following chapter provides more detailed explanation on the author’s approach to the research question, including the information on methods and sources used throughout the paper. Next, the two theories, realism and its strand, the offensive realism, together with the Nye’s soft power concept, are presented. This is followed by the analysis chapter, where the dataset from Poland significant for this research is presented and confronted with the EU’s standpoint seen through the lens of realist theory and the concept of soft power. All findings are then summarised in the conclusion, which provides a final answer to the research question.

The graph presented below illustrates the structure of this thesis:



## **2. Methodology**

This chapter intends to present the methodological approach chosen for this thesis, serving as a specific roadmap to this research. It is divided into five subchapters, each focusing on different aspects. It starts with showing how the problem is understood by the author and how was it formulated. Due to deductive nature of this research we start with introducing the choice of theories to later move on to explaining the selection of data. Then the research methods used are presented, explaining how the question is intended to be answered. Finally, the limitations to this research are presented.

### **2.1 Problem understanding**

The economic challenges introduced by implementation of the BRI in the CEE region take the majority of scholars attention. There is relatively limited data available on the political aspects on this matter. Therefore the main purpose of this thesis is to present a research important from the international relations point of view, rather than strictly economic one. The intension is to see whether there is a possibility for China to gain more political influence in the CEE region, and accordingly become the challenge for the EU, it's power and importance in the CEE region.

As a starting point, based on the available sources, it is assumed that the EU indeed feels challenged by the China's interest in the region, not only in terms of economy but also in terms of international relations. For the purpose of this thesis, two types of European concerns could be distinguished. First of all, the EU fears that China is trying to gain more economic power, that eventually leads to political and security issues. This type of concerns are summed up in the concept of hard power.

The EU is the most powerful actor for the 16 countries involved. The CEE countries, especially the 11 member states, are severely dependant on EU's legislature. China is a great power that used to have no direct interest in the CEE up until the year 2012, when the 16+1 diplomatic platform was established. China's intentions and rather sudden interest in the region are not transparent enough, causing the concerns from the EU's side. Facing Eurosceptic voices, and weakened by the potential Brexit, the EU fears that the BRI through institutionalized 16+1 forum, can become an alternative especially for countries of less significance in the EU. As it is understood here, the EU is worried that



through economic relations, China will become more important actor in terms of politics too.

Another type of European concerns that could be distinguished here could be discussed within the terms of the soft power concept. What could be the major European fear in terms of the soft power, is that by gaining more control over the CEE countries, China would drag them away from the EU and European values, leading towards authoritarianism, weakening the unity of the EU and its core values, including the democracy. One of the EU's major concerns in the relation with China has also been the human rights violations in this country, which status is again far from the European norms. This has been continuously discussed during the annual summits, including the China-EU summit in April this year (Council of the European Union, 2019).

With this assumption, this thesis analyses what is the reason of the EU's concerns and whether those fears are reasonable. The research question shows that we are intending to understand the EU's concerns. This is done within the framework of two IR theories, seeking to explain why the involvement of a great power can become a potential threat.

The research is then supplemented by the case study of Poland. It shows the relations between Poland and China, as well Polish approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative per se. Together with recent examples of direct China's involvement in Poland, specifically the ongoing dispute on Huawei company's involvement in building the 5G network and the new development model diffused by the BRI, this case study intends to check what are the chances of China to spread its political values in this region. The framework used in this case study is based on the concept of the soft power. Findings are then combined to provide the answer for the research question.

## **2.2 Theory selection**

Theories of international relations provide a conceptual framework for the analysed dataset and the case study. The theory becomes a foundation, a conceptual lens, through which the research question is being analysed.

For the purpose of this thesis the offensive realism theory has been selected. This is one of the strands of the major international relations theory, realism, which explains why the China's raising power and increased involvement in the CEE is perceived by the EU

as a challenge. Using this particular theory we can understand the EU's concerns and insecurities, and thus answer the research question. Offensive realism explains how and why states strive for power and how they perceive the security.

However, offensive realism shows just one side of the research question. It focuses purely on hard power, that is as mentioned before, the security, politics, and economic issues. Thus, to see the "bigger picture" an additional concept is introduced – Joseph Nye's soft power. This provides the explanation of different, yet equally important, concerns of the European Union towards China. It shows why the EU fears spreading the Chinese values and norms over the CEE region through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Supplementing the hard-power focused offensive realist theory with the soft power concept gives us an answer to the complex research question, that is explains why is the EU concerned about China's interests in the CEE region. Through this theoretical framework we can examine two types of the challenges that the BRI could cause. We seek to understand whether these concerns are indeed reasonable and whether China can become an alternative to the EU. The two theories are then applied on specific examples and two case studies from only one CEE country to get a deeper understanding and analysis of China's "attractiveness" in the eyes of CEE countries, particularly Poland.

### **2.3 Data selection**

This thesis is based on the secondary research, using qualitative data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include, for example, the EU policy papers and the official statements and documents issued by the Chinese government. Secondary sources used throughout the paper include international relations literature, academic researches and articles, as well as mass media – newspapers articles and other online publications. This shows that the data acquired for the purpose of this research is archival and document-based (Lamont, 2015). Moreover, to ensure better understanding of the discussed phenomenon, variety of quantitative data from secondary sources is presented and discussed.

Very important dataset for this research is used in the analysis chapter, as this particular section serves as a core for providing the answer to the research question. The cases

described in this chapter has been specifically selected to illustrate the theoretical framework. Two cases has been chosen for this research, both illustrating Chinese involvement in Poland through the BRI.

One of the cases focuses on building the 5G network, which is imbedded the Belt and Road Action Plan. According to the official Belt and Road Portal, “Under the action plan, China will deepen cooperation on infrastructure standardization and support facility interconnection network construction in the period of 2018-2020” (Belt and Road Portal, 2017). Huawei, a major Chinese company, is involved in building the network along the Belt and Road Countries. Huawei company’s involvement in building 5G network has been accused of posing security challenge and created a wave of criticism from several countries. The case study focus on Poland’s response to this specific situation aims to illustrate and explain the hard power-based concerns of the EU.

In order to illustrate the soft power concerns, the second case study shows the Belt and Road Initiative as a soft power tool in hands of the Chinese government. The data presents the BRI as a way of promoting the Chinese development model abroad, which has been criticised for its involvement in spreading Chinese values and promoting authoritarian rule. This includes Poland’s approach to development and a short assessment of the probability of this model to be successful in Poland.

Sources used throughout the research are specifically chosen to be as much up to date as possible, considering the fact that the cases chosen for the analysis are still ongoing. Following the newest updates on the cases is important for the credibility and relevance of the research. Access to such information was gained mainly through social media, and especially Twitter accounts such as Polish *CyberDefence24* or the official Ministerial accounts.

What more, other data selected for the research, including the theoretical part is relatively new as well, considering the fact that the Belt and Road Initiative has been introduced only around six years ago. The term *soft power* is relatively novel too, as the term was coined in 1990s and has been gaining popularity among scholars ever since, together with an increasing interest in recent years of soft power in China specifically.

The sources were accessed in both English and Polish language. Possibility to use the latter ones is especially important taking into account the case study selection chosen for this thesis. Using data written in Chinese was not possible due to author's insufficient knowledge of this language. More explicit information about this and other limitations are presented in section 2.5.

## **2.4 Research method**

As it was mentioned previously in this chapter, the analysis in this thesis is carried out through the perspective of international relations and with the usage of IR theories and concepts. One of the most commonly used methods in the field of international relations is the case study (Elman, 2007). Case studies and qualitative methods proved to be advantageous while studying complex phenomena. Considering the problem formulated in this research and its compound nature, using case study seems to be an obvious choice.

The analysis is placed within the international relations theories and concepts framework, which provides the foundation for the analysis and enables an in-depth understanding on the processes in question. This means that the analysis is done through the deductive approach – the arguments are rooted in the core assumptions of selected IR theories, and supported by the selected cases.

The case study focuses on the example of Poland, providing more detailed dataset and space for more in-depth analysis. Even though China uses the “regional model” and sees the 16 CEE countries as one group, the cooperation is based more on bilateral relations. There are many differences in political, cultural and economic aspects between the 16 members of the forum, that treating them as one group in this research would not provide sufficient and reliable data. On the other hand, presenting each country separately would not be suitable for the scope of this paper and would not be feasible considering the time limitations of this thesis. Thus the example of Poland has been chosen.

It is also worth mentioning, that Poland is at the same time a member of the EU and NATO (which shows country's connections to the Western world), geographically part of the Central and Eastern Europe region (considered as less developed part of the Europe), and involved in the Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 forum. Choosing a country that is at the same time benefiting from China and the West, rather than just

from one of the two, ensures the research objectivity and a more interesting, yet also more complex analysis.

Selected cases are to reflect the two major strains in the European concerns. One aims to represent the fears based on the concept of the hard power, and one proving the Chinese soft power has an impact on Poland and constitutes a possible challenge for the European Union and its core values. Applying the two supplementary theories ensures that the analysis of the thesis' topic is complete.

## **2.5 Limitations**

The most important limitation of this research derives from its topic – the Belt and Road Initiative. Information about the Initiative and its purpose is limited and often a subject of criticism. Uncertainty and lack of data in terms of the BRI plans and aims creates the possibility for many interpretations and therefore makes the research very complex. To understand it fully, an in-depth analysis of the Initiative itself is needed. It is however not possible to provide such in this paper, considering its scope and that the focus of the research question is put on the EU and its views, rather than the Initiative on its own.

The BRI is still in a way “work in progress” and its effects cannot be fully evaluated now as well. Even the case studies are still ongoing and what is true for the time being could easily change within time, thus posing another limitation for this research. There is also limited data on the BRI direct effects in Poland as the majority of the plans are in its initial stages. Moreover, the topic of the China model is severely neglected in the Polish sources and the approach towards cooperation with China changes together with the government successions.

The data used in this research comes from variety of sources, including primary data from the Chinese government publications and the EU's papers. Using such data, especially from the Chinese side, requires an amount of critical thinking, especially when compared to the Western ones. On the other hand, using the latter creates certain bias as well – it provides a very Western, not China-friendly perspective for the analysis.

Language barrier, that is inability to access the original sources written in Chinese, could be considered as another source of limitations. Accessing sources written in English or Polish decreases objectivity, as they are usually written from Western perspective.

Another aspect is the scope of the analysed phenomena. We should bear in mind that talking about the CEE region we are dealing with 16 different nation states, with different approaches to bilateral relations to China and the EU. This is obviously the reason just one particular country has been chosen for deep analysis, yet what needs to be remembered is that the findings of this analysis cannot be automatically applied to every single state in question, as they are not universal.

The limitations of this thesis are also based on the selection of the theories. The complexity of the research question enables usage of multiple IR theories. Limiting the choice to just two, creates a certain bias in the analysis. The offensive realism theory is very often criticised for example for its inability to explain the peaceful cooperation between the states and the emergence of the EU. In this research one of the main actors is this particular institution, therefore from the very beginning its position and importance in the China – EU relation is undermined. What this theory is failing to explain as well is the ongoing cooperation between the two actors, expressed *inter alia* by the annual EU-China summits.

The second chosen theory, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, is on the other hand criticised for its irrelevance in the foreign policies and the study of international relations. What more, soft power of a particular country is impossible to be measured on a satisfactory level. It is also argued by scholars that the concept of the soft power cannot serve on its own as a theoretical framework, substituting the hard power. It is however complementary to the hard power, and this proves useful in the scope of this research.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The following chapter intends to introduce the two international relations theories, that act as a theoretical framework for the purpose of this research. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first two sections provide the information about theories chosen for this research, that this realism and the concept of soft power. After introducing their core assumptions, the last section would provide a critical reflection on the theories.

### 3.1 Realism

The realism theory in international relations dates back to the times of ancient Greece, and it still remains a cornerstone of international relations study (Orsi,2018). The core assumption of realism is that the international system is an anarchy, where the states are the most important actors, leaving other actors such as international organizations with far less importance. This also involves undermining the treaties and agreements between nations.

According to the realism, the international relations and politics is a struggle between great powers and their lust for domination, inevitable for the state survival. It is based on a very pessimistic view on human nature and international relations, where the conflict is unavoidable and the national security highly valued (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013).

The broad concept of realism is defined by Wohlforth (2012) as being based on three core assumptions, that is *groupism*, *egoism*, and *power-centrism*. *Groupism* indicates that the most important and influential actors are indeed the nation states. The second assumption, *egoism*, refers to the states behaviour and their perceiving of own interests as a priority. The final assumption, *power-centrism*, is relating to power as a central feature of the international relations.

There are several schools of realist thought distinguished. The most primary distinction of realism is between the classical and structural realism. The classical realism is based on the idea, that the pursuit of power is rooted in human nature, as described in Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*. Morgenthau is the leading classical realist thinker, perceiving the human desire to take advantage of others as universal, and the same could be said about international politics (Open University, 2014): "Politics is a struggle for power over men, and whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and the modes of acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating it determine the technique of political action" (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 195).

Second most prominent strand of the realist theory is the structural realism, contradicting the classical belief that it is in human nature to strive for power. In case of structural realism, the pursuit of power is rooted in the nature of international system.

This anarchic system causes lack of trust between states, which eventually leads to security issues and competition between the states (Open University, 2014).

An even further distinction of realism divides the structural strain of thought into defensive and offensive realism. The fundamental difference between the two strands of the structural realism is based on the understanding of state's pursuit for security and power. The defensive realism thinkers argue that the best, that is – the safest, way of approaching the international politics is to stay moderate. Waltz (1979) argues that accumulating just sufficient amount of power ensures the security, while striving for as much power as possible could have negative effects. Security is what ensures states' survival. A very different approach is presented by Mearsheimer and the offensive realism, which is discussed in more details in the following sub-chapter.

### **3.1.1 Offensive realism**

Realism is a complex theory of international relations, comprising of several strands. Considering the scope of this thesis just one of those strands has been chosen to become a theoretical framework for the analysis – the offensive realism. Moreover, this particular strand of realist thought proves to be highly accurate for the situation and concepts analysed in this research. This is discussed further in this section, but before focusing on applying offensive realism as the theoretical framework, its assumptions are outlined first.

As it was mentioned in the previous section, the offensive realism is one of the strands of the structural realism, standing in the opposition to the defensive realism. According to the assumptions of the offensive realism, states seek to maximise their power, which would ensure their security in the anarchy of international system. This eventually leads to an inevitable conflict, as it is through wars the states gain power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). The bipolar system, meaning only two dominating great powers, is considered as the most peaceful system, while the multipolar one is less balanced and more likely to lead to conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001).

According to Mearsheimer (2001), the major offensive realist scholar, “a state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system” and therefore states approach each other with mistrusts and a constant fear of an upcoming conflict. This is especially visible in



relation between great powers, and their zero-sum approach to international politics. Being a hegemon guarantees survival and security, thus the states strive for power. In their pursuit for power, the states not only try to take advantage of other states, but also make sure not to be taken advantage of, which means constant mistrust and uncertainty in their relations.

Mearsheimer (2001) defines hegemony as “domination of the system”, in the meaning of the entire world. Yet the scholar proposes more narrow use of the concept and describes the regional hegemons, that dominate particular geographical parts of the world, implying that it is nearly impossible for a state to become a global hegemon. Thus what a great power wants is to become a hegemon, with a possibility of expanding its influence over the nearby, geographically accessible regions. According to this scholar, China for instance is very likely to become a hegemon in Asia (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013).

Offensive realism recognises that the survival is the most important goal of the state. Moreover, it accepts that there are secondary goals complementing the pursuit for power. For instance, the great powers seek greater economic prosperity, which eventually leads to greater military potential, enhancing states’ possibility to survive (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Facing the threat the states can act in a defensive way as well, by either the strategy of balancing or buck-passing. The balancing strategy means that the threatened state accepts its position as the one deterring the aggressor, while buck-passing is an “attempt to get other states to assume the burden of checking a powerful opponent while they remain on the sidelines” (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 76).

At this point it is important to apply the theoretical framework proposed by the offensive realism in the research. The European Union is an important international actor, especially at a regional level. It is not a state, therefore its importance from the offensive realism point of view could be undermined, yet it is definitely more than just an international organisation (Della Sala, 2018). Deriving from the offensive realism, we could conclude that the EU, as an important regional actor, is in its pursuit for becoming a regional hegemon in the CEE region, speaking in realist terms. It fears any kind of involvement of other powers there, and does not want to be taken advantage of. China striving for economic influence in the region through the BRI becomes a challenge for

the EU, its security and integration. The EU's concerns are therefore rooted in the perception of China's actions as offensive, assuming that China's ultimate goal is to become a hegemon on the expanse of the EU.

Even though Central and Eastern Europe is not easily accessible for China in geographical terms, the Middle Kingdom is metaphorically building a road to access it, specifically the New Silk Road. This Road does not necessarily mean gaining military access, yet it means economic gains. As it was mentioned previously, economic gains lead to greater wealth, which could then facilitate the military power.

Moreover, China has undergone a significant change in their foreign politics in 2012. China under the leadership of the President Xi Jinping aims to achieve an important role globally, not only regionally in Asia (Vangeli, 2019). Thus the EU acts against China's plans, blocks initiatives and contradicts China's investments in order to prevent access to the CEE region. The EU is also expecting its member states to react in the same manner. Speaking in terms of the offensive realism, the EU applies both the strategy of balancing and buck-passing.

This theory explains how the EU sees China and why is it concerned: China, as a nation-state, is from definition more powerful and important than an international institution. It is an emerging power, trying to accumulate more power, possibly aspiring to become a regional hegemon and aspiring to add to the CEE region to its sphere of influence, on the expanse of the EU.

What should be underlined here, is that China approaches the CEE region as a whole, but focusing mainly on bilateral relations with each CEE state individually – as it is understood through the offensive realism, the individual nations are more important than the institutions, organizations, or any kind of agreements between the states, that is the 16+1 platform in this case.

China's plans put together under the Belt and Road Initiative remain uncertain, which in terms of offensive realism creates mistrust and lack of cooperation. The uncertainty means that the EU, as a form of defence mechanism, is assuming the worst possible scenario in the offensive realism sense – that China's main goal is to gain more power on the EU's expanse, thus leading to the security concerns.

Overall the offensive realism helps to understand the EU's vision of China and its involvement in the Central and Eastern Europe, through the Belt and Road Initiative, in terms of hard power – that is security and economic issues. To get a better understanding of the situation in question, the next section would focus on the concept supplementary to the hard power – the soft power.

### **3.2 Soft power**

Together with growing importance and involvement of China in global politics, and especially through One Belt One Road Initiative, a question regarding Chinese values and norms has been arising - will China try to promote and spread them? This creates another aspect of the EU's concerns about China's involvement in the CEE region. It is not only about the economic, military and political issues, so the hard power, but also about the soft power. This particular concept is presented in the following section, providing another angle for the theoretical framework.

The concept of soft power has been developed by the American scholar Joseph Nye in 1990s, who defined it as “the ability to affect others to get the outcomes that you want” (Nye, 2008). According to Nye, the main difference between soft and hard power is in the way the actor achieves the desired objective. The soft power, Nye argues, is when the goal is accomplished by affecting the target's behaviour through attraction, which eventually leads to sharing the same objectives: it is “the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own” (Nye, 1990, p. 168).

The hard power, in comparison, is when the goal is achieved in different way. The method is referred to “sticks and carrots”, where the “sticks” is a threat and coercion, and the “carrots” represents attracting with economic benefits (Nye, 2008). Moreover, the scholar claims that using hard power is financially and politically costly, while utilizing the soft power, which is considered to be mainly free of cost, helps to limit the usage of the expensive hard power: “the more you spend on attraction, the less you have to spend on carrots and sticks” (Nye, 2008).

What is even more, the potential consequences of failing in soft power usage are far less crucial than in the case of the hard power, as using the hard power can be considered as arrogant and repulse the target (Nye, 2008). Nye argues that using soft power is as important as using the hard power, as it helps to counter the resistance from the target and facilitates achieving the desired outcomes. It is however more diffused and less direct than the hard power, less easily controlled by the government than military or economy. The soft power functions “indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes” (Nye, 2004, p. 1).

In the international system, according to Nye, the following three resources produce the soft power: *culture*, *values*, and *policies*. Firstly, he claims that other countries are more likely to agree with the views presented by the country, which culture is attractive (Nye, 2016). Similarly, if the values of the state are attractive to others, can produce positive outcomes, and if the state is indeed living up to those values, it could lead to creating the consent from the target country: “attraction often leads to acquiescence” (Nye, 2008). In terms of *policies*, the scholar argues that “when our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced” (Nye, 2004, p. 256). Therefore it is of great importance how the policy of a country, and particularly the foreign policy, is perceived by the target country. Those policies should be pursued in the interest of others too in order to increase the legitimacy of the country. This concept is defined by Nye as *a global public good* (Nye, 2009).

### **3.2.1 Soft power in China**

After Nye coined the term in 1990s, the soft power started gaining significance in China. In 2007, during the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Hu Jintao in his speech stated that the Party should “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country” (Hu, 2007). Developing soft power in case of China has been called “a smart strategy” because the hard power of this country has been increasing very fast, thus the soft power should be employed in order not to frighten the neighbouring countries (Nye, 2012).

At this point we should discuss what are the three soft power resources in case of China. Starting with culture and values, this particular resource has always been considered as attractive with its Confucian values, rituals and harmony. For several years now China

has been opening Confucius Institutes around the world, where foreigners can learn Chinese language and culture (Nye, 2012).

Talking about Chinese politics and foreign politics in particular, it is inevitable to mention the change that occurred within several years. China has severely adjusted its diplomacy: in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century China has joined the World Trade Organization and wide variety of other organizations present regionally, contributed to the UN peacekeeping operations, and settled some disputes on territories. Such actions improved Chinese soft power and decreased the likelihood of other countries allying against this rising power (Nye, 2012).

The global role of China has switched to even more proactive after the leadership succession in 2012. One of the characteristics of this proactive new diplomacy is that China is promoting a non-Western alternative to global order, focused on goal-oriented approach and “novel China-centered institutional mechanisms of international cooperation” (Vangeli, 2019, p. 58).

Right in the centre of the new Chinese diplomacy is the Belt and Road Initiative, introduced in 2013. This global initiative puts together all novel and existing policies and ideas, becoming an important resource for the Chinese soft power. Through the OBOR China is believed to gain influence on the ways on the governance and policymaking of other countries (Vangeli, 2019). According to Francis Fukuyama’s predictions, “the whole of Eurasia, from Indonesia to Poland will be transformed in the coming generation” (Fukuyama, 2016).

Looking through the EU’s perspective, the new Chinese diplomacy transferred to this region through the OBOR in the CEE region could create a challenge. The EU has problems promoting its own values and policies, automatically creating space for less democratic ideas to develop, and at the same time – making space for China (Vangeli, 2019). Chinese values and norms are not entirely in line with Western ones, but can be attractive to some countries of the CEE regions, which eventually would lead to undermining the EU’s role and importance in the region.

The norms and values, facilitated by the BRI, that could become a challenge to the EU go in line with the assumptions of the so called China model. According to Vangeli (2019), Belt and Road Initiative facilitates the following norms and principles: *sovereignty first, rule-by-law, flexible means to a common end, priority of growth and stability*.

The first principle reflects the Chinese foreign policy, and its belief that every country has a right to set its own development path. This principle stands in the exact opposition to the Western consideration of universal values, and can be associated with *inter alia* nationalism. *Rule-by-law* contradicts the EU's value of *rule-of-law* and reflects Chinese understanding of law as "means in hands of the authority through which they govern" (Vangeli, 2019, p. 75). The next principle described by Vangeli is *flexible means to a common end*. This shows China's goal-oriented approach, based on improvisation and flexibility, rather than having a concrete model of policy. Last distinguished norm diffused by the BRI is the *priority of growth and stability*, indicating the direction of politics towards authoritarianism. This principle shows that the economic success requires a dominant leader, and opponents of the leader are opponents of the economic prosperity: "All forms of counterhegemonic discourse, be it in the realm of politics or society, are thus taken not only to be threatening to the incumbents, but to be bringing into question the prospects for growth, and thereby social well-being" (Vangeli, 2019, p. 77).

Summing up, the above described norms and values are seen as promoting the autocracy, as the alternative for democracy and the so called Washington Consensus. This could be particularly attractive for states that have not enjoyed a significant development following the Western approach, and this includes post-Soviet states of the CEE region.

Thus, in the eyes of Western world, including the European Union, China's soft power could be challenging. Chinese culture and tradition could be seen as interesting, yet the values, norms and policies of this country stand against those represented by the EU. Belt and Road Initiative, as a mean of facilitating those norms and values to the CEE region, is being targeted and seen as challenge from the EU's perspective. The next

chapter focuses specifically on explaining why is the EU concerned with the Chinese soft power based on the case of Poland.

### **3.3 Critical reflections**

Before switching to presenting the case study and analysis, a critical reflection on the above described issues is provided. Starting from the beginning, the realism theory has been a subject of great criticism, *inter alia* because of its undermining the importance of non-state actors, such as international institutions. This thesis focuses of the European Union, therefore by using this theory, as a part of departure we assume its lesser importance in the EU-China relations. This at the same time explains why is the EU so concerned about China's actions, providing an immediate answer to the research question. Yet it is a short-sighted and pessimistic view. Looking at China from realist perspective makes it literally unable to see any positive aspects deriving from China's presence in the CEE region, that is for example economic profit and infrastructure development for countries such as Poland (Kołodko, 2018).

What should also be looked at is that realism and its offensive strand assumes that war is inevitable in a struggle for power. War, in its military sense, seems unlikely to begin between China and the EU. We have to bear in mind that the two counterparts are in constant relation and peaceful cooperation. During annual EU-China Summits, the sides discuss what should be improved in their cooperation to make it peaceful and fruitful. It seems like the offensive realism provides limited to none explanation for this, as it assumes there should be no agreements, no trust and reluctance for cooperation to ensure the security. Therefore again we can call this theory short-sighted. It explains however the reasons behind EU's concerns which after all is the main aim of this paper.

The concept of the soft power, regardless Nye's convincing argumentation, has been challenged by the critics for its lack of credibility. It is argued that the soft power is far less effective than the hard power in international politics: "soft power is merely the velvet glove concealing an iron hand" (Ferguson 2004, p.24). It is used here to support and complement the realist theory, and therefore follows its pessimistic views in seeking the explanation for the EU's concerns.

Not all values and norms diffused by OBOR should be seen as a challenge. It has been recognised by scholars and even mass media, mind only the famous *The Time* cover saying “China Won”<sup>4</sup>, that the Chinese Model can indeed be successful and maybe it is time to switch from the Western approach and accept the possibility of new development. As Polish economist, Grzegorz Kołodko said in one of his works, “Increasing presence of China in Europe should not be feared, but skilfully used” (Kołodko, 2018, p. 179).

However, we should remember that the concept of soft power was originally coined to explain the US position after the Cold War and its success in spreading liberal values. Thus, what has to be taken into account is that Chinese soft power differs from the Western ones. Chinese soft power is severely limited by the government, which is “unwilling to unleash civil society” and therefore creates limitations in China’s soft power (Nye, 2012). China is addressing a broad CEE region, 16 different countries, that might share similar features but are nevertheless 16 different states, with different governments, legislatures, and different approaches to China in terms of soft power. This means that China, while treating the CEE as a whole, is likely to fail in spreading their influence through soft power – what will be welcomed in one country, could be repulsive in the other (Nye, 2012).

#### **4. Analysis**

This chapter introduces two cases of direct China’s involvement in the CEE region through the One Belt One Road initiative. Considering the scope of this thesis, both cases were chosen from the same country: the Republic of Poland. Each case is selected specifically to suit the theoretical framework presented in chapter 3. The case discussed as first illustrates and explains the realist perspective of the EU towards the BRI, while the second one is devoted to the concept of the soft power. However, before we move on to the analysis, in order to fully understand the situation in question it is inevitable to present the relations between Poland and China, especially focusing on Poland’s approach to the BRI.

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<sup>4</sup> Link to the cover article: <http://time.com/magazine/south-pacific/5007633/november-13th-2017-vol-190-no-20-asia-europe-middle-east-and-africa-south-pacific/> Accessed on 27 April 2019



#### **4.1 Poland and the BRI**

First Sino-Polish diplomatic relations developed significantly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on the socialist nature of both countries. It was highly influenced by the Beijing-Moscow relations: in 1960s the Warsaw-Beijing diplomatic and economic relations ceased to exist, to be rebuilt two decades later, especially in the economic sphere due to Deng Xiaoping's new policy of "opening up" (Ambasada Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Pekinie, 2012) Throughout over the next 20 year the bilateral relations on trade and economy were developing, but were not extensive. The image of China in Polish media was rather negative, focusing on human rights violations and negative assessment of ongoing reforms. What has to be taken into account is that Poland's foreign policy has been deeply influenced by the country's systemic transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, resulting in repulsive approach of the Polish government and society towards the authoritarian rule (Szczudlik, 2018).

Currently, the relations between Poland and China exist on four, overlapping levels, as discussed by Pendrakowska (2019, p. 3): "(i) bilateral level, (ii) ties developed in the realm of 16 + 1 cooperation mechanism, (iii) connection established between China and Poland as a member of the European Union, and (iv) relations developed through the BRI format". Even though the scholars agree that it is hard to say which level is the most important, Warsaw's policy towards Beijing is shaped within the EU-China relations. Poland is a member state of the EU, therefore Polish policymakers have to follow legal regulations from Brussels.

Poland's priorities in foreign policies are focused around its role in NATO and its position in the region. Yet Liu Zuokui of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argues that while China is definitely not a top priority in Polish foreign politics, Warsaw is turning more eastwards. This change, Liu states, is a result of the ongoing Poland-EU tensions over the migration crisis and courts' independence (Pendrakowska, 2019).

Since the announcement of the BRI initiative in 2013, the Sino-Polish cooperation has been put under its framework. From that time Chinese presence in Poland has been increasing, which is especially visible in the economic sphere: in 2006 only 76 Chinese companies were present in Poland, while in 2013 this number increased to 829 (Segrato & Popowska, 2016). The most famous projects put under the BRI is the Łódź-Chengdu

cargo railway connection (extended to Xiamen in 2015), as well as plans for building the logistic hubs in Łódź and Małaszewicze (Szczudlik, 2016).

There is however no simple answer as to how Poland sees the Belt and Road Initiative. Without a doubt, Warsaw sees the potential benefits of economic and political nature, and a chance to boost regional infrastructure. Participating in the BRI is a chance for Poland to gain more influence in the international sphere. Warsaw aims to be seen as a highly important player in the Initiative due to its strategic geographical location.

Poland's approach to the Belt and Road Initiative went through several stages, reaching a peak of optimism in June 2016 when the President Xi Jinping visited Poland. Former Prime Minister of Poland, Beata Szydło, was actively building the relations with Beijing, and using Chinese capital was in line with Polish government's plan on infrastructure development and reindustrialization (Szczudlik, 2016). This turned into more sceptical approach at the beginning of 2017, when in January Antoni Macierewicz, the Polish Defence Minister of that time, blocked purchase of a parcel that was meant to be used for building a logistic hub in one of the BRI projects. Minister Macierewicz is also famous for publicly criticising the Initiative, stating it is a potential threat to Poland's independence (Majmurek, 2017).

Regardless the clearly negative comments of the former minister, there is no clear standpoint of the Polish government towards the BRI: "it is relatively difficult to elaborate a common strategy on a national level toward a project which is not fully developed yet" (Pendrakowska, 2019, p. 15).

#### **4.2 China's hard power challenge**

Having shortly introduced the relations between China and the Republic of Poland, we are now switching to the analysis of chosen two case studies. First the case of Huawei company and the security concerns it poses is analysed.

In the past few years the Huawei company became the largest manufacturer of the telecom equipment in the world. Currently, it is the only company with the capability to produce all elements of the 5G network – the wireless mobile technology of next

generation. The company has established cooperation with companies worldwide, slowly achieving its plan to dominate the 5G market. Huawei's development goes in line with PRC's national innovation strategy plan to become a digital technology superpower. Developing digital infrastructure is also embedded in the Belt and Road Initiative (Kaska et al, 2019).

Possibility of using Huawei's solutions raised concerns on national security based on assumptions, that Chinese technology providers are cooperating with intelligence agencies. The company has been already accused of industrial espionage in previous years, inter alia by the Australian intelligence. In the beginning of 2019 Huawei officials have been detained in Poland on the same grounds. Other concerns regard fundamental differences in individual rights between China and the West. The EU strictly protects individual privacy (inter alia the General Data Protection Regulation) and intellectual property. Chinese policy, on the contrary, puts national interests over the individual rights (Kaska et al, 2019).

Few European countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom and France, have taken steps against Huawei's involvement in building the 5G network. For instance, Germany has shown concerns about the Chinese National Intelligence Law and fears that the Huawei could be used by the Chinese government for sabotage and spying, as according to Article 7 of this law all companies are required "to support, provide assistance, and cooperate in national intelligence work, and guard the secrecy of any national intelligence work that they are aware of (Hoffman & Kania, 2018). The security agencies in France have been informing the government about the potential risks from Huawei's side for over a decade now (Brattberg & le Corre, 2018).

The European Commission has acknowledged that Huawei has a chance to become the top telecommunication supplier in the EU, receiving subsidies from state banks in China, and that the Chinese technology could give Chinese authorities access to sensitive data, and pose other security threats such as cyberattacks. In December 2018, Andrus Ansip, the Vice President for Digital Single Market of the European Commission, shared his opinion in the following words: "I think we have to be worried about Huawei and other Chinese companies", he said (Brattberg & le Corre, 2018).

Huawei's domination in the industry creates also an economic concerns in the eyes of the European Union as it fears becoming overly reliant on the Chinese 5G infrastructure. This industry is expected to play major role in digitalization of global economy, developing new sectors and advancing existing ones. The European Commission estimates that the economic benefits could reach €113.3 billion per year and create 2.3 million new employment opportunities by the year 2025 (European Commission, 2017). The EU is therefore in a peculiar "5G race", loosing of which could have severe repercussions on Europe's economy.

In Poland, Huawei has been present since 2004, and has its headquarters in Warsaw since 2008, representing the Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia regions. The company gives job to around 900 people, two thirds of which is local staff (Tomański, 2019). Since 2018 the company is testing the 5G technology in Poland with cooperation with two major telecom companies, Orange Polska and T-Mobile Polska. Huawei has been associated mainly with good quality smartphones until the January 2019, when in the first week of the month the Internal Security Agency (Polish Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, abbreviated ABW) has detained two Huawei officials: Polish and Chinese nationals (Bellon, 2019).

Wang Weijing, executive director of Huawei Poland, and Piotr D., former ABW officer and Orange Polska employee, were arrested on spying allegations. The officials were allegedly providing sensitive information to the Chinese government, counting against the Republic of Poland. The situation has met immediate response from Huawei: Wang was dismissed from the job. The company claims his dismissal was based on fact, that Wang damaged company's global reputation. His alleged actions however have nothing to do with the company, Huawei claims (Bellon, 2019).

Even though the company has denied its involvement and Wang claims all allegations against him are wrong, the case has raised serious security concerns in Poland, voicing banning the Huawei from the 5G network development in Poland. Poland's President Andrzej Duda in an interview with Polish online magazine money.pl said that he is "definitely closer to cooperating with European firms or with those from the US than with producers from Asia" (tvn24.pl, 2019). The ABW issued recommendations to Polish ministries on the usage of Huawei products and services, yet their content

remains classified. Polish Minister of Internal Affairs, Joachim Brudziński, called to take a joint approach on Huawei on the EU and NATO forum (Koper, 2019).

The case had been commented by the Chinese side as well. Huawei in its official statement underlined that they are “working with the government and partners in Poland to convince the authorities that far from posing a threat to networks in the country, our technology will help improve connectivity” (tvn24.pl, 2019). Chinese Ambassador to Poland, Liu Guangyan, stressed the importance of this company in Polish telecoms development. He claims that if Poland bans Huawei from its national market, the loss would equal 8.5 billion Euro to Polish economy. Liu adds that “the 5G network construction process will be delayed by two to three years” (Chen, 2019).

In the end of March 2019 the EU issued security guidelines for the member states on how to approach the development of national 5G networks. The states are to assess the possibility of cyber threats to their national infrastructure by the end of June 2019 and share the results with other members. As stated by the European Commission in official press release :“Any vulnerability in 5G networks or a cyber-attack targeting the future networks in one Member State would affect the Union as a whole. This is why concerted measures taken both at national and European levels must ensure a high level of cybersecurity” (European Commission, 2019b).

This clearly shows why the European Union sees Chinese involvement in the region as a security challenge. The alleged espionage case in Poland proves that the EU’s concerns are indeed justified. Speaking in terms of realist theory, the EU sees China’s actions as offensive: trying to influence other regions on the expense of other actors. Moreover, as outlined in previous paragraphs China’s goal is to become a global digital superpower, which poses a challenge to the European Union. This goes in line with offensive assumptions that the state’s ultimate goal is to become a hegemon. The position of a hegemon is to be achieved through conflict. In this particular situation we are dealing not with a military conflict per se, as the offensive realism assumes, but with a peculiar race to 5G development in which companies take part, including American, European and Chinese ones.

Regional companies, such as Nokia or Ericsson, even though invested in by the EU, are not developing quickly enough. China is therefore a big competition to the EU: it could provide the systems faster and cheaper. So far China is a leader in this 5G race, winning of which means implications for European Union, including its economy (Brattberg & le Core, 2019). Winning the 5G race leads to great economic benefits – what has to be remembered is that according to the offensive realism striving for economic prosperity is another major goal of the state.

Uncertainty and constant mistrust is another feature that characterises the EU-China relations. The case of arrests on the basis of alleged espionage in Poland proves that the EU and Polish government are suspicious towards Chinese involvement in 5G network development in the country. What more, the EU interprets the Chinese National Intelligence Law as potentially allowing the usage of backdoors in the systems for the benefit of China. The Chinese officials explain that the law is misinterpreted by the EU side, with the Huawei's statement that "a mistaken and narrow understanding of Chinese law should not serve as the basis for concerns about Huawei's business" (Hoffman & Kania, 2018).

The Polish case of January 2019 was firstly a trigger for Polish government to exclude Huawei from Polish 5G development. Karol Okoński, Deputy Cyber Security Minister, stressed the importance of security standards rising: "When it comes to new investments, we are quite determined to set clear government expectations when it comes to the security of used equipment" (Koper & Płucińska, 2019). Such approach would bring Poland in line with the EU directives on toughening the rules on 5G network development.

Yet, Polish infrastructure relies too heavily on the Chinese equipment. As mentioned before, the biggest mobile operators in Poland, T-Mobile Polska and Orange Polska, use the Huawei's equipment. Complete banning of the company would delay the new technologies implementation and increase its costs. According to Okoński "Poland is not able to finance the replacement of Huawei equipment by the (telecoms) operators" (Koper & Płucińska, 2019).

Poland's decision proves that China is indeed a real challenge for the EU: the member state opposes the EU's directives and continues working with Huawei. This could be interpreted in several ways. First, according to offensive realism, China is gaining economic influence in Poland, which could pave the way to become the most important power in the region. Secondly, it diminishes EU's position – again, according to offensive realism, China's becoming of a hegemon happens at the expense of the EU.

Nevertheless, many local providers in Europe are still cooperating with Huawei, at least eight countries signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) and around twelve tested the Huawei's solutions. Altice, Portuguese major wireless provider, has signed a deal with Huawei by the end of 2018 (Brattberg & le Corre, 2018). Unlike in the US, China is not seen as a strategic rival, but EU is pressured to take steps towards limiting Chinese involvement in building the 5G network and protecting network security.

This company is a global leader of the industry, and “simply banning Huawei from supplying 5G equipment or removing them from existing networks in Europe is unlikely” (Brattberg & le Corre, 2018). Their products became very popular on the European market within just few years, managing to gain credibility in the eyes of their consumers, and building company's image as a reliable network provider. The case in Poland proves that the EU and member states indeed feel insecure and see the Chinese involvement through the lens of the offensive realism. What they could be missing here because of their suspicious approach, based mainly on the US allegations, is a possibility for quick and stable development of the new generation network. The Huawei company commenting on the arrests in Poland sums up well why the cooperation could be an opportunity rather than a challenge: “The real threat facing Poland isn't Huawei, it is the politics of fear that will prevent the country from realizing its technological and economic potential” (Huawei Europe, 2019).

#### **4.3 China's soft power challenge**

In the theoretical part of this thesis the concept of soft power has been introduced, together with the term understanding in China. The importance of the soft power in China in general has been underlined and called strategically smart. The Belt and Road Initiative is an important resource of the Chinese soft power, sharing the successful story

of the Chinese economic development and the vision of harmonious and prosperous China, the so called Chinese dream. This chapter provides further analysis of the concept, and focuses specifically on the soft power that has been diffused through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Belt and Road Initiative is usually associated with economic cooperation and infrastructure development. According to Huntington (1996) nation's soft power is dependent on its hard power, that is an economically successful country would be seen as more attractive also from the cultural and ideological perspective. The Initiative proves the success of China, disseminates the success story, and therefore becomes a resource of the soft power. It has been called by scholars "the most ambitious manifestation of China's economic diplomacy activities" (Yagci, 2018).

This "success story" of the Chinese nation has been emphasised under the President Xi Jinping's leadership, and incorporated into the concept of the Chinese dream. China wants to be perceived as a harmonious society, working hard for better future for the nation, a stable economic partner and trustworthy member of the international community. China also seeks for understanding and recognition of its political system. The concept of China dream became a national ethos of a kind, a powerful soft power creation, showing the world that China is to become a global superpower thanks to the Chinese model of development (Barker, 2017).

The China model, called also the Beijing Consensus (in contrast to the Washington Consensus), has not been officially defined, nor its competitive nature towards Washington Consensus was confirmed. The term, however pragmatic, is usually associated with its focus on investment, export-orientation, and most importantly, is based on the authoritarian leadership (Ambrosio, 2012). The term Beijing Consensus, shown as a competitive model to the Washington one, was first used by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004. However, the Chinese development model has been already present for over 40 years now, starting from the Deng Xiaoping's reform.

Zhang Weiwei, Chinese scholar from Fudan University, in his publication *The China Wave*, distinguished eight characteristics of the Chinese development model, which are as follows: "(1) Practice-based reasoning, (2) strong state, (3) prioritising stability, (4)



primacy of people's livelihood, (5) gradual reform, (6) correct priorities and sequence, (7) a mixed economy and (8) opening up to the outside world" (Zhang, 2011, p. 90). Depending on Zhang's findings, we can say that China model is based on practice, implementation and an inductive approach, setting clear objectives for long-term, stable, development, focused on improving quality of people's lives through a gradual and prioritised reform. The state is centralised and strong, with a mixed economic system: a socialist market economy, opened to the world and participating in the global market.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the President Xi Jinping has underlined the importance of the Chinese development model and declared the aim to promote globally. The latter is achieved through the Belt and Road Initiative. The international development strategy and great economic integration, based on the Chinese development model, is to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, exactly the way it did within China (Gitter, 2017). Through this Initiative and its large scale, China is showing the world its own capacity and proves the success of the Beijing Consensus. China's successful story attracts other nations to implement the Chinese development model (Nye, 2005). The BRI becomes here a tool of the Chinese soft power, spreading the importance and attractiveness of the Chinese development model.

Even though both the BRI and the China model are usually associated with the economic development, they also bring political implications: they promote a prosperous authoritarian system. Diffusing authoritarian values poses a direct challenge to the democratic states. According to Ambrosio (2012), increasing number of countries that apply the China model would undermine the international liberal order, together with its normative values of human rights and democracy. In line with Nye's theory, this is to be achieved by attraction: the China model of development is an attractive possibility for underdeveloped and developing countries. Attracted by China's success, countries turn away from the liberal order, which could in turns pose a challenge to the West. This includes the European Union, as few member and potential member states are directly involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, being openly the target of Chinese soft power in the region.

China's involvement in CEE region through the Belt and Road Initiative has raised serious concerns in the eyes of the European Union. In March 2019 the European

Commission proposed 10 concrete actions and concerns to be discussed on European Council, and later on presented during the EU-China Summit in April. The document calls for “more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted” approach of the EU and recognises China as “a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission, 2019a). The values and political models that China is promoting are standing on the exact opposition to what is the basis of the EU – human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom or Sweden are actively speaking about sensitive issues concerning Chinese policies. However, other countries, such as Poland, Romania, or Czech Republic, do not involve in voicing opinions against China. Finally, Hungary, Greece, and Italy has been passive and even counteractive in such matters. In the two latter groups of countries, China has created a positive self-image and is believed to be able to fill in the investments gaps. A good example of such counteractive actions is Greece preventing the EU to take a clearly critical stand towards China during the UN Human Rights Council.

This fragmentation of opinions within the European Union is what scholars believe could be a sign that the EU’s values are its weak point: “While China’s influence in Europe should not be overstated, the EU suffers from divergences and fragmentation in promoting political values” (Jerdén & Rühlig, 2019). This situation could create a perfect opportunity for the Chinese soft power to gain influence in countries less engaged in the EU and gaining economic benefits from China. This could eventually lead to increasing the importance of China on the expense of the EU.

In the Strategic Outlook of the EU-China relations, issued by the European Commission in March 2019 we can clearly see that the EU is concerned about China’s rising importance: “the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted. In the last decade, China's economic power and political influence have grown with unprecedented scale and speed, reflecting its ambitions to become a leading global power” (European Commission, 2019c, p. 1). The document also shows that the EU recognises China as leading power and does not recognise Chinese status as a “developing country” anymore. It also directly calls its member states active in the 16+1 platform to persist consistent with the EU laws (European Commission, 2019c).

China's soft power in Europe focuses on building a positive image and recognition of its political system which in turns is perceived by the European Union as a challenge. The EU is concerned about the situation in China: its nondemocratic political system, the human rights issues and other aspects, that are of core importance in the EU. Through the Belt and Road Initiative China spreads its development model, based on nondemocratic political system. It seeks recognition of the model as a valid alternative for the liberal system, and this poses the biggest challenge for the EU. Nations turning towards Chinese model could pose a challenge for the EU's unity and importance in the region.

According to Breslin (2011), the phenomenon of the China model is based on its being an alternative - this model of development is especially attractive to countries that did not develop under the Washington Consensus. This includes post-communist countries and those leaning towards authoritarian model of leadership. At this point we should underline that the CEE countries involved in the 16+1 platform and the BRI are countries that are different in terms of economy, development, EU membership and language, but have one thing in common: all share a communist past. This could explain why the sixteen so different countries were put in one basket – these are the countries, which, basing on their authoritarian experience, would be more prone to accept and imply the successful Chinese model (Pendrakowska, 2019).

One of those countries, the Republic of Poland has undergone a development transformation with a starting point similar to China, that is leaving the socialist economy towards the market economy and joining the global market. Yet Poland was following the West rather than actively participating in the development process (Grosse, 2013). These particular aspects make Poland more prone to the China's soft power and increases the attractiveness of the China model. Moreover, Poland has been perceived as an informal block leader of the CEE region. Poland plays an important role in the European part of the Belt and Road Initiative and is to become an international logistic hub for the whole European continent. Poland's involvement in the BRI means it is participating in the China's new model of development (Sulmicki, 2018).

However, we need to bear in mind that Poland's development has been severely shaped by the Europeanization process, linked to Poland's aspirations to join and later on the actual membership of the European Union. Scholars in Poland agree that the China development model is worth attention, yet the Europeanization process and Poland's West orientation with the acceptance of liberal models have dragged Poland away from it (Grosse, 2013). Moreover, Polish government and Polish society is deeply rooted in anti-authoritarian values due to the country's history. Anything related to such is repulsive and not accepted in Poland, therefore Chinese soft power would not be as successful in this country (Szczudlik, 2018).

On the other hand, the current political party is seen as sceptical towards the European Union and focuses on national development and national power. Under this government Poland has been accused of retreating from democracy and the rule of law. Here we should mention the case of a Polish Law violating the courts independence, due to which Poland has been referred by the European Commission to the Court of Justice. Regardless those Eurosceptic approach it is not clear whether Poland would turn towards the Chinese model with its authoritarian values. As mentioned in previous sections, it is hard to asses what is Poland's approach towards China and the Chinese model of development.

Nevertheless, Poland is just one of the sixteen countries of the CEE region, and this country's approach does not represent the situation of the whole region. A different approach to Chinese values and policies is presented in for example Serbia. This country could serve as a point of entry for the Chinese model, serving as an alternative to the West and the EU's liberal democracy, and is deeply involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. The country was called by Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Bozidar Delic China's "best and most stable friend in south-eastern Europe" (Le Corre & Vuksanovic, 2019).

As outlined in the theoretical part of this research, there are three resources producing the soft power: *culture*, *values*, and *policies*. The two latter ones are without a doubt promoted and diffused by the Belt and Road Initiative, while The Confucius Institutes are clearly the resources of *culture*. The Confucius Institutes have been established in 2004 when China, inspired by UK, France, and Germany's promotion of their national

languages, begun their own experience with spreading Chinese language and culture abroad. This non-profit public institution is an answer to the world's demands to learn Chinese language, in the face of China's rapid growth and increasing international cooperation. During the five years period of the BRI existence, the number of CIs has been increased by 122, while 578 Confucius Classrooms have been opened. As of 2018, the Chinese government have 530 CIs and 1,113 Confucius Classrooms in 149 regions and countries. Out of this number 144 CIs are in countries along the Belt and Road: 53 out of 64 BRI countries host Confucius Institutes (Hanban, 2018).

Although the Confucius Institutes are called non-profit public institutions, they function under Hanban – a body regulated by the State Council, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). Hanban controls policies and development regarding Chinese education, including language learning overseas, chooses teaching materials and the teachers. The Confucius Institutes are closely connected to the political agenda and development plans of China (Procopio, 2015). The Chinese Ministry of Education (2009) underlines the importance of teaching Chinese overseas and calls it “an integral part of China's reform and opening up drive”. The CIs could therefore be used for spreading the Chinese culture, and are often referred to as being a useful tool supporting the government (Procopio, 2015).

The way the CIs function has been often criticised on the international sphere. Its dependency on the Chinese Communist Party is a reason of concerns in terms of limiting freedom of speech and independency of academic institutions. When the information about opening the Confucius Institute by the University of Warsaw, Poland, spread in spring of 2015, the idea was met with wide criticism. The students and university staff openly protested against opening a CI there and a petition has been sent to the chancellor (Karpierzuk, 2015).

However, since it is the Chinese government that pays for opening the Institutes, provides materials and pays teachers, it is understandable that it wants to use as much of it as possible. It creates the best possible view of itself and, inevitably, uses the totalitarian methods of overall control to reach the objectives. We shall not forget how much opportunities the Confucius Institutes offers to international students, including scholarships, student exchanges, academic conferences and much more. This indeed

creates a positive image of the country, attracting others, in line with Nye's concept of the soft power.

The Chinese model of development proved to be successful, and it is confirmed by quantitative data showing the country's success in poverty reduction: over the past 30 years the economy has increased by average rate of 11%, the literacy rate increased from 66% in 1982 to 94% in 2008, and the disposable income grew by 18% per year (Barr, 2011). In 2009 China became the biggest exporter, and as of 2014 has the biggest forex reserves. These are just examples of the statistical data that prove China, thanks to the development model, is a powerful nation, that has a capacity to ensure economic stability and the prosperity of the nation. It is an alternative to the western model of development, a solution for struggling economies, successful especially in post-communist and less liberal countries (Barker, 2017).

Even though the Chinese development model is gaining popularity, we should not forget that there is another side of the coin. It has been criticised for creating income gaps, and endemic corruption. There are several issues that undermine Beijing's image on the international level, for instance the territorial disputes, environmental issues or human rights violations. Beijing's actions and the image that it aspires to project differ, and that, according to scholars, severely limits country's soft power. This can eventually dissuade other nation from following China's development model (Albert, 2018). According to analysts of the soft power in China, this country "is fundamentally unable to be attractive because it's not a liberal democratic regime (...), will never be able to attract people through ideals of freedom, political participation, and civil liberties" (Barker, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is still yet to be assessed if the Chinese soft power, including the Belt and Road Initiative as important tool, are effective. The desired outcomes, as claimed by Nye (2004) take time to be produced. At this stage we can only speculate about the possible outcomes of the Chinese soft power being utilized in the CEE region through the Belt and Road Initiative. Based on this theory and pessimistic assumptions, we can definitely see why the EU feels challenged by the China's presence, which at the same time provides the answer for the research question. On the other hand, international community could benefit from the Chinese involvement, for instance by gaining a new

development model, or the education possibility in the case of the CIs. Therefore, similarly to the case of the Huawei's hard power, the Chinese soft power could be both a challenge and an opportunity.

## **5. Conclusion**

Having discussed the cases we are now able to provide a final answer to the research question, that is "Why is the EU concerned about the impact of the BRI on the CEE countries?". As a point of departure in this thesis we assume that the European Union is concerned by the Chinese involvement through the Belt and Road Initiative in the CEE region, which is defined here as 16 countries involved in the 16+1 forum. This has been proved by reactions of international politicians and scholars, including for instance French, German, and Polish, who negatively assess situation and warn against the possible outcomes of it. The main question asked here is rooted in this negative international opinion – why are they concerned?

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global inclusive strategic plan that exist since 2013 and has been involved in the CEE region through the 16+1 cooperation forum. This cooperation focuses mainly on the economic development, yet the main aim of this thesis was to analyse what aspects, other than economic, could be the cause of the European Union's concerns and reluctance to accept China's presence in the region.

Even at the beginning of the research it was clear that the EU side is accusing China of lack of transparency in their activities, including specific plans towards the BRI development in CEE region and the situation of human rights in China. We can conclude that it is one of the main reasons of European concerns. Yet, in order to provide a thorough analysis of this situation and accordingly an answer to the research question, the international relations theoretical framework was applied. In order to understand the EU's approach to China from a political perspective, we looked at it through two concepts: the hard and soft power.

The first one, the hard power, is represented by one of the major international relations theories, that is realism and its offensive strand. Thanks to this theory we are able to understand that the EU sees China as a competition, a great power striving for more influence on the expense of others, including the EU. Through the BRI China is

expanding geopolitically and increases its economic power. Moreover, it is a security challenge, as it was presented by the analysed case. China gains more influence in the CEE countries, which eventually leads to weakening the EU's status in this region and creates a challenge for its unity.

The security challenge posed by China is represented here by the 5G network development and the concerns regarding Huawei, the Chinese company, involved in the process. It is not specific to the European Union, as the allegations to Huawei company's involvement in espionage were raised internationally, including in the US. Yet the case of January 2019, where two Huawei's employees were detained in Poland, raised even more serious questions within the EU and led to introducing new regulations and directives.

Building the 5G network is an important aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative. This proves that the EU perceives the Initiative as security challenge and recognises the need to withstand it through new directives and regulations. The concerns could be explained through the offensive realism theory, which perceives this kind of globally involved project as offensive, and striving for gaining more control internationally, at the same time diminishing the role of other actors.

However, this pessimistic approach of the West towards China's involvement in building the 5G network could cause serious delays in such important development. For the time being, the Chinese company Huawei is so far the only company ready to provide all technical assets needed for the new network connection. Seeing the company as a security challenge, basing on assumptions, allegations and negative approach, and restricting it from the EU market could become a missed opportunity.

The situation looks similarly in case of the soft power. Soft power is an essential part of diplomacy tool for a rising power like China. It helps to manage the image of the country and creates understanding, and eventually support for the political and development models of the country. It does not only attract new allies, but also help to advance the country's policy. Thus it is clearly understandable why the soft power plays such a big role in Chinese foreign politics.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative China is spreading its development success based on the China model. This however poses a political challenge to the European Union: through the BRI China spreads values and ideas that do not go along with the



fundamental values of the EU, that is democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The involvement of China in the EU's member countries, and the closest neighbourhood poses a challenge to the EU's unity and decreases its importance in the region, showing an alternative development model that proved to be successful in China.

Moreover, China is using the soft power to show the world the cultural heritage and values, through for example the Confucius Institutes. The concern of the West is that this institution is used not only to disseminate the culture, but also the political aspects, that is non-democratic values and concepts. According to Nye, who coined the term, countries attracted by the soft power, here culture and Confucian virtues for instance, are more likely to cooperate with China, regardless other aspects, such as Chinese approach to human rights or freedom of expression.

In this research the focus was placed again on the case of Poland in order to see whether the China model is indeed an attractive alternative for the liberal world order and the European Union. This being an alternative towards which the CEE countries might turn proved to be the main challenge for the EU posed by the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet the analysis of the case of Poland shows that so far it seems unlikely that Poland could turn on the European Union and the West and ally more with China, following its development model. Poland's development is deeply rooted in Europeanisation process and as the EU and NATO member Poland is severely dependent on the West.

During his speech at the World Economic Forum Poland's Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, stressed out that "Poland is at the same time pro-European and pro-American" (Premier.gov.pl, 2019). We should also remember that Polish government roots deeply in anti-communist movements and glorifies Poland's transition to democracy, which results in rather negative and suspicious approach towards China and its authoritarian regime. Poland sees the economic opportunities coming from relations with China, but as underlined by Minister Morawiecki, focuses on the cooperation with the West.

Overall, the findings of this thesis could be concluded as follows. China is undoubtedly a great power that emerged thanks to its development model. This development model is based on the authoritarian rule, therefore comprises a direct opposition to the liberal

world order promoted by the West. The EU is concerned that China is gaining political influence using this development model. It is also feared that China is promoting its values to attract more support, “winning hearts and minds” of the CEE countries, that were not as successful under the Washington consensus. The Belt and Road Initiative contributes to spreading the ideas and economic influence on the international level, thus this Initiative becomes a challenge for the European Union.

The relations between the EU and China are characterised by a lot of fear and suspicions that stop the cooperation to fully develop. They stop the EU side from seeing opportunities rather than challenges. In the EU-China relation, Beijing is often pointing out similarities between the two. Both sides advocate for a multipolar world order with balanced multilateral relations, and the reluctance to use military power to solve crisis. Both are focusing on resolving globalisation issues, climate change and terrorism (d’Hooghe, 2010). A deeper understanding of both sides could lead to a successful cooperation, and would definitely become an opportunity rather than a challenge. What is needed here is a certain guideline on cooperation. Moreover, transparency is needed in order to reduce the suspicions from the European side.

These are however just basic ideas and assumptions, that should be developed in a further research. Yet they prove that this thesis contributes to the international relations field of studies, opening new possibilities for understanding the global politics. Moreover, due to rather limited data on such aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative, this work could become a basis for further research.

The complexity and importance of the situation require more attention and should be further developed. It introduces multiple possibilities for the researchers to get an in-depth understanding. For instance, the case of Huawei’s officials arrests in Poland could also be analysed from another angle. The guilt of both men has not been proven yet, and so is the usage of backdoors in Huawei’s equipment – these are just allegations. Yet these allegations go in line with the opinion voiced by the US under Trump’s administration and the whole case happens right before the Middle East Conference, the American conference co-organised by Poland, and before Poland’s 20 years in NATO anniversary. Is it possible that it was just a showcase to prove Poland’s priority: cooperation with the US, no matter what the costs are? This could become a basis for another research, analysing Washington-Beijing conflict influencing the Poland-China relations.

This research should also be considered as just one step in the research process, as the cases discussed and the whole situation is constantly developing. It is yet hard to assess the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the CEE region in long term aspects, and so is the European Union's approach, especially in the face of upcoming European elections.

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