

# **China's "Road to Europe"**

**A study of China's strategic motivation in the European region**

**MA Culture, Communication and Globalization**

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**Master thesis**



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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to generate understanding of China's political and strategic motivations in the region of Europe. More specifically, this research aims to identify the strategic motivations in the 17+1 and ultimately the EU. Furthermore, it serves to provide understanding of how the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative produces political opportunities and how those appear in practice. Furthermore, it entails how the gaining influence in Europe is responded by the EU. Finally, it aims to understand which impact the Covid-19 crisis has had in Central and Eastern European countries.

This qualitative study thus entails a thematic analysis of official state documents. While, the thematic analysis provides deep understanding of China's strategic motivation and the EU's response, the theory of Political Opportunity Structures provides the framework to understand how political opportunities are produced and pursued. Thus, it enables the ability to examine how political opportunities are unfolded in practice in certain parts of Europe.

The research finds that China has great strategic motivation in the region of Europe and are actively pursuing political opportunities. While China's motivation includes connectivity, increase of power and domestic matters, four political opportunity structures were found to be of significant importance. The response from the EU is found to be rather vague and concerned around the vast asymmetries that appear in the relation – on values, in particular. Furthermore, it is found that the generated political opportunity structures are all found to be actively pursued in the countries of Hungary and Poland.

Beyond the findings of this research, various other questions may appear and need further research. To mention a few, it seems clear that China's strategies will be found also in other countries within Europe. While this research did not comprehend all 17+1 countries, further research needs to be conducted in other countries. Additionally, it is found that the on-going negotiations of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment may cause political opportunities which needs further research.

## Introduction

In recent decades, the rise of China has caused growing global interest among scholars and professionals. Former leader of People's Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping, established economic reforms in 1978 which would soon spark Chinese economy. With various political decisions and economic reforms, e.g. entering the WTO in 2001, has led Chinese economy to the most valuable economy in terms of GDP (PPP) in 2018. Chinese economy is moreover expected to overtake the economy of the United States as the greatest economy in the world. The Chinese strategy of "opening up" has definitely succeeded and it is inevitable that Chinese political and economic influence will be of immense power in the future. Not surprisingly, this specific topic is of great interest among every country and alliances on this planet. Many countries may see the rise of China with great opportunities of development. On the other hand, greater economies like the United States' and the European Unions' are threatened as Chinese power increases.

While the United States are battling China in an on-going trade and tech war, the European Union (hereafter the EU) is struggling to find reciprocity both between its member states but also in its unity towards China. On a global scale the EU is of immense power and influence, however, in questions related to China it appears that there are enormous differences of interests among the member states. The EU will, of course, try its best to protect and defend European interests and values. Most recently, the outbreak of the covid-19 crisis, the EU has warned European nations of the risk of a potential repetition of Chinese investments in critical and strategic enterprises which particularly took place after the financial crisis in 2008. Various different Chinese companies and state-owned enterprises took advantage of the weakened economic situation and invested hugely in European companies. The majority of investments are not necessarily negative, but it is argued that European interests are threatened when critical infrastructure and strategic enterprises are suddenly in Chinese favor. The statement underlines that it is time for the EU to take action in order to tackle the rising power of China.

In fact, China's growing influence in European countries has especially been pointed out as worrying concerns within the EU due to the growing influence in Europe while China do not allow similar levels of European interests in China. There are, therefore, a concerning asymmetry in the power relation between China and the European countries which the EU needs to mitigate.

The Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) is obviously well aware that a more united and stronger EU will weaken its position in regard to power and negotiating various kinds of agreements within Europe. As a result, CCP has demonstrated different approaches to strengthen its significance in Europe while trying to ease the ties between EU member states. This is most recently shown by China offering medical aid and supplies directly to EU member states during the Covid-19 crisis, and not specifically to the EU itself. Member states of the EU is obviously positive about receiving support, but it has also raised concerns. To this question, Josep Borell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs has warned: *"The point for Europe is this: we can be sure that perceptions will change again as the outbreak and our response to it evolves. But we must be aware there is a geopolitical component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'..."* (European Union External Action, 2020). The attempts from CCP to divide or part member states in the EU is not a one-time occasion. People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) has for years tried to build stronger relations to Central Europeans countries by establishing the '16+1', which lately has been increased to '17+1', by welcoming Greece into the summits. The involvement of PRC in these summits is obviously to increase ties with the European countries which has strategic motives in its comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI).

The BRI is providing massive infrastructural investments in the Eurasian continent. Referred to as "the new Silk Road", the investments aim to establish improved trade routes which potentially will enhance trade within the Eurasian continent. The massive investments in railways and ports are usually carried out by Chinese SOEs and is highly supported economically by CCP. However, local governments in the region has warned that the BRI is an attempt for China to gain more influence and control. Various cases have especially been pointed out as worrying and has demonstrated the potential risks of the BRI. Incidents such as ones in the

Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and the Port of Piraeus in Greece, to mention a few, has been discussed widely as Chinese SOEs has gained immense power in the ports. China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited has leased 70 percent of stakes in the port of Hambantota, Sri Lanka for 99 years while COSCO shipping now owns a majority of 51 percent of the stakes in the port of Piraeus, Greece.

Hence, it seems clear that Chinese SOEs has great interests in developing and controlling major links connected to the BRI. Similarly, it is obvious that due to its geographical location that the Central and Eastern European countries play an essential strategic part in the role out of the BRI. The annually held 17+1 summits, which set off in 2013, is clearly a focused and strategic tool for China in rolling out the BRI. At the same time, 12 of the 17 countries involved in 17+1 is member states of the EU, which is potentially threatens reciprocity and unity within the EU. On that note, the 17+1 alliance is strongly correlated to the Chinese BRI. Therefore, European leaders are pointing out their skepticism towards the potential of increased Chinese power in the European region. At the same time, the same European leaders has discussed the prevention of European interests during the covid-19 crisis arguing that Chinese businesses may be ready to take over troubled European companies in need of capital – a similar scenario to the downturn after the financial crisis in 2008.

To sum, it seems clear with the 17+1 alliance that China has great strategic interests and motivation in Central and Eastern European countries. Interests that the EU are sort of paralyzed by and are trying to defend – or at least opposed or reduce. Meanwhile, the covid-19 crisis seems to come in handy providing opportunities for Chinese companies ready to provide capital. Therefore, this thesis aims to address how Central and Eastern European countries are subject to the ongoing EU-China relationship. More specifically, it aims to acquire an understanding and knowledge of the strategic motivations of China in the EU and the 17+1 alliance, the impact of the covid-19 crisis and how the EU is dealing with the growing Chinese influence in Central and Eastern European countries.

## Research question:

- **How are CEE countries subject to Sino-EU relations?**
  - What are the strategic motivations of China in the 17+1 countries?
  - How is the EU dealing with the growing Chinese influence in the Central and Eastern Europe?
  - Which impact has the Covid-19 crisis had on the 17+1 relationship?



## Literature review:

In the following section central previous literature in reference to the Central and Eastern European area of Sino-EU relations will be presented. It aims to provide fundamental understanding of the area itself, the 17+1 and demonstrate notions, categories and concepts already studied that are relevant within the framework. For the purpose of clarity, the section will be divided into different sections.

## EU perspective

The comprehensive research '*China at the Gates – A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*' was conducted by director of the Asia and China programme at European Council on Foreign Relations, François Godement, and the programme coordinator and policy fellow at the Asia and China programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations, Abigaël Vasselier.

In essence, the research suggest that China is increasingly strengthening its power in Europe; and the EU is in need of a respond. Not surprisingly, it states that China's BRI and its pick-and-choose strategies which leads to its engagement in the 17+1 are clear examples of this. Simultaneously, they put the gap and large separation of interests among especially northern and southern EU member states as an obstacle. However, it is emphasized that partnership and cooperation agreements would require more common ground on values and interests – especially from China's side.

As a matter of fact, Godement and Vasselier points out the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (Delegation of the European Union to China) as a *genuine pledge to widen cooperation*. The promising intension of strengthening ties on 94 '*key initiatives*', however, has only seen few actual formal agreements, leaving some key initiatives with no agreements.

When it comes to economic interests, they put foreign direct investment (hereafter FDI) as rather worrying for the EU. The fundamental asymmetry in relation to FDIs between the EU and China is primarily due to three factors; China forbids FDIs in 11 strategical important sectors and put severe restrictions in others for Western investors, the increasing requirements

of transferring technology from foreign companies, and China's investments in critical infrastructure in Europe.

All in all, Godement and Vasselier suggest that four urgent short-term steps are in need to protect European interests: *Complete the construction of an EU-wide system of investment screening; Replace dispersion with common strategies; Prevent new investment rules from affecting other aspects of relations; Leverage Europe's like-minded partners in Asia.* Important to realize is that these 'steps' will not be anywhere near sufficient without more common ground and more cohesive strategies within the EU. The notion of asymmetry within the EU and the lack of a cohesive strategy in relation to China remains a central element for the EU in Sino-EU relations. In order to understand how CEE countries are subject to Sino-EU relations, these concepts must be remembered – especially, given that 11 of the 17+1 countries are EU member states.

It is fair to say that Godement and Vasselier represent consensus in academic literature on the EU perspective of Sino-EU relations. The perspectives pointed out are rather pragmatic issues and do not altogether concern the immense cultural divergences of central issues among EU member states in the EU and China. It could be argued that these conceptual gaps are rooted much deeper and contributes to the stalemate-like situation more rather than those presented. In particular, central issues like human rights, international law, UN security cooperation, climate change and bargain topics in general are mentioned as key topics of the Sino-EU relation. Especially, the conceptual gap on human rights and international law remain a cornerstone of the relation – not only between the EU and China, also internally in the EU. The asymmetry appeared clear when the latest member of the 17+1 alliance, Greece, blocked a united EU response condemning China's violations on human rights at the UN in 2017. Godement and Vasselier argue that Greece, in that specific example, could afford ignoring the pressure from powerful EU member states. But nonetheless, the incident could be reflected as an expression of how powerful Chinese investments and involvement is in Greece. By all means it reinforces the asymmetry within the EU and lack of a cohesive strategy.

However, according to Nicola Casarini, who published the paper *'Is Europe to benefit from China's Belt and Road Initiative?'* Europe stand to benefit from the BRI. He argues that synergies could appear in both side's infrastructural plans. The EU Infrastructure Investment Plan or so-called Juncker Plan and the Chinese BRI could potentially join forces and projects.

### Chinese perspective

As regards the Chinese perspective on Central and Eastern Europe, Centre for Eastern Studies has published the paper *'China on Central-Eastern Europe: "16+1" as seen from Beijing'*. The authors, Marcin Kaczmarek and Jakub Jakóbowski, combined viewpoints of Chinese scholars and analysts on the issue.

The paper suggests that China's view on relations to CEE countries has until recently ranked fairly low in the priorities of Chinese foreign policy. However, Beijing has started to acknowledge the region's importance especially because of its growing importance in the EU while the CEE countries showed increasing interest in developing economic ties with China – mainly because of the eurozone crisis. According to Kaczmarek and Jakóbowski, this provided a *window of opportunity* and resulted in China's approach of the establishing the '16+1' format (note: '17+1', after the accession of Greece). In essence, it is argued that establishment of the 17+1 format can be seen as an element of Chinese cooperation with the EU. In fact, they put it as straightly as suggesting that the goal for the foreign Chinese policy in the region is to strengthen unity within the EU by providing assistance in the development of gaps in the EU. Despite that fact that the internal market of EU is China's greatest trading partner and may seek to assist to the region's stability, a more united Union may appear stronger on most levels. Hence, suggesting that China's main goal is to strengthen unity could be argued or opposed. In this case, the establishment of the 17+1 format is paradoxically providing more separation within the region of Europe than unity. It is clear, though, that the format is a major part of Chinese foreign policy towards the EU.

Kaczmarek and Jakóbowski argue that according to most Chinese analysts there a few crucial economic and political motives of the 17+1 format. First, as part of the Chinese 'going out'

strategy, the region of Central and Eastern Europe is of geographical importance. They state it as *“CEE is the ‘back door’ and a ‘testing ground’ for Chinese investments in the EU”*. Leading to the second motive suggested which closely connected. It is also argued that with presence and stronger ties in region, CEE countries could potentially appear as lobbyist for Chinese interests in the EU. Moreover, it is suggested that building a positive image within Europe remain a powerful motive. Chinese analysts argue that China should aim to enhance public attention and opinions on Chinese economic success, its rich culture, and as a peaceful and friendly state rather than its political system and social difficulties. Afterall, this remain a great barrier for further development. Nevertheless, China’s predominant negative image in most parts of the western world. Regardless the motives, it is argued that Beijing has not yet completed any of their main goals in the CEE of which there can be various reasons to. According to Kaczmarek and Jakóbowski, Chinese experts emphasize that legislative barriers remain of significant importance – especially, laws concerning public procurement and technical standards. Likewise, it is argued that there are an insufficient lack of knowledge and practical skills from Chinese side concerning legal systems, labor, social conditions, investment laws etc. Another challenge presented is asymmetry in the region and its unwillingness to cooperate internally. As an illustration, the 17+1 summits have not fully been set up as originally planned. It seems clear from a Chinese perspective, that the countries hosting the summits has tried to benefit from its position and mainly has drawn attention to develop its own bilateral ties with China, rather than the multilateral. However, it is indicated that this may even be the strategy from the Chinese side. Despite the format, at times, appears rather artificial and with no or little progress, China can use the summits as experience of a regional model and observe willingness among the states involved. In other words, it potentially appears as an opportunity for China to designate the states of the region that genuinely shows enthusiasm in order to build stronger bilateral ties.

Whereas all abovementioned motives may be essential from a Chinese perspective, it can be argued that Kaczmarek and Jakóbowski draw surprisingly little attention China’s internal political and economic motivation. The BRI remain the cornerstone in China’s foreign policy strategies. On that note, it confirms the assumption that China’s foreign policies and motivation in the 17+1 may be highly correlated to the BRI. Thus, there appear a gap in literature

drawing particular attention on the driving forces for China's strategic motivation in Europe, and how China produces opportunities with its BRI in the European region.

## Methodological framework

In the following section methodological considerations will be presented and discussed in relation to answering the research question. As part of conducting social research various factors will inevitably influence the way the research is conducted and ultimately how the research is concluded. Hence, this section will present the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methodological approach in order to answer the research question. In short, considerations and arguments of epistemological and ontological stances, practical issues, values, research design, data collection and processing, limitations, and reliability and validity will be presented. First the choice of interpretivism as an epistemological position and the choice of constructionism as an ontological position will be outlined.

### Epistemology

As regards epistemology it *"concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline"* (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). In social science there are different doctrines of positions researchers can obtain, such as key concepts like positivism, realism etc., and variations of those. Especially, the position of positivism is considerable in relation to this research. Although the epistemological choice is not positivism, it is relevant to outline some key features to understand why it does not fit well to this research. Positivism consist of different principles deriving from natural science and *advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond* (Ibid, p. 24). As Bryman argues it is per se not simple to outline the positivism precisely but principles as *phenomenalism, deductivism, inductivism* and *objectivism* are all key elements of the positivist approach. Furthermore, it entails *clear distinctions between scientific statements and normative statements and a belief that the former is the true domain of the scientist* (Ibid, p. 24). Whereas the logic of the positivists approaches is widely obtained in natural science and in many other areas there has been a drift away in social sciences. Scholars has increasingly questioned the epistemological approach within especially International Relations (hereafter IR) in recent decades. In the work *International Theory: Positivism & Beyond*, it is argued that *for the last forty years the discipline of International Relations was dominated by positivism*

(Smith, et. al., 1996, p. 11). Meanwhile, other positions and variations such as post-positivism etc. gained increasingly attention. However, to observe IR with a positivist logic seems often sort of black and white. The principle of *phenomenalism*, where knowledge can only be confirmed by the senses, seems not to fit the purpose of this study. The purpose of the study is to understand the situation and relation of CEE countries in the EU-China relationship. Hence, it requires a different logic in order to understand and grasp meanings and concepts.

The chosen position for this study is interpretivism. This position is chosen due to its ability to interpret the data in a way that is not only concerning the obvious or immediate meaning, as seen in natural science positions like positivism, but also concerns any underlying meaning. The interpretivist stance derives largely from the notion of Max Weber 'Verstehen'. Scholars Hollis and Smith state Weber's philosophy as: *"Weber is firmly individualist in his insistence that individuals choose among alternatives according to their particular aims, interpretations, and calculations. Understanding proceeds by reconstruction at an individual level"* (Hollis & Smith, 1990, p. 74). This Weberian stance is commonly used in IR and fits the purpose of this study extremely well. As for this particular study understandings of motivation and rationality among the included states will be essential. An interpretative Weberian logic fits, therefore, well with the purpose of the study. As to make it clear, Hollis and Smith argue that choosing this Weberian way of understanding *"the concern is to understand decisions from the standpoint of the decision-makers by reconstructing their reasons. The foreign policy behavior of states depends on how individuals with power perceive and analyze situation. Collective action is a sum or combination of individual actions"* (Ibid, p. 74).

## Ontology

As regards ontological stance for the study the choice of position is more straight-forward. All in all, principles of objectivism and constructionism was considered. As for objectivism it is *an ontological position that asserts social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors* (Bryman, 2012, p. 29). Whereas *constructionism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors*. The position of objectivism seems not to fit very well with the research strategy, nor does it correspond well with the aforementioned epistemological stance of interpretivism. On the other hand, a more constructivist approach fits the research. It is fair to say that international relations between states are far from a static entity. The international landscape is arguably in constant change over time, and the approach of constructivism holds exactly this belief. In fact, it *implies that social phenomena are not only produced through social actors but are in a constant state of revision* (Ibid, p. 29).

The choice of constructionism as an ontological departure is therefore a straight-forward decision as it fits the purpose of analyzing Sino-EU foreign relations and CEE countries' involvements.

## Practical considerations

In relation to any conduction of research considerations of more practical manners need to be dealt with. According to 'Social Research Methods' by Alan Bryman *the importance and significance of practical issues should not be neglected* (Bryman 2012, p. 36). This part will present two of the major practical considerations in relation to the research. Another important practical consideration is regarding collection of data, this will be presented in a separate section (Data collection).

## Period of time

First of all, it is important to make it clear that the research questions are operating in different time spans. This is simply due to the sub-question of *"Which impact has the covid-19 crisis*



*had on the 17+1 relationship?"* Whereas the general research questions are operating in the same period of time, this one call attention to this certain time of event. There have been considerations if this question should be included at all. Nonetheless, as a researcher, it seems to fit and it is clear that the covid-19 crisis is of significant importance in the relation between the EU, CEE countries and China. With that in mind, it is fair to say that there are limited amounts of data in relation to this recent phenomenon. This is to state that there will be drawn awareness to the fact that the research questions are concerning both long-term and more momentary occasions due to the covid-19 crisis. With that said, the momentary occasions can potentially be of great importance in the long-term relationship between the EU, CEE countries and China – which is why it is included.

### Case limitation

In order to answer the research question, some limitations of the research need to be considered. First of all, the research area includes a large geographical and geopolitical spectrum. With EU member states and member nations of the 17+1 alliance, the total number of states involved are exceeding 30. This obviously involves great complexity and makes it impossible to focus on every associated country involved. As a result, as a researcher, I see far more potential in focusing on cases from a selected number of nations rather than a less adequate research on every nation within the EU and 17+1 alliance. Hence, choosing a few countries within the frame would arguably provide more possibilities of in-depth analysis. On that note, it would make sense to pick a pair of countries which meets the criteria of being a member state of the EU, being part of the CEE area and plays an important role in the 17+1 alliance. With this in mind, focusing on the likes of Hungary and Poland will represent all three. Both nations represent interests in all aspects being EU member states, part of the CEE and their importance in the 17+1 alliance has showed by both countries hosting 17+1 summits. This practical consideration may obviously leave out important aspects of other countries involved. However, limiting some part the research to a few 'case countries' provide the possibility of in-depths that would not have been possible if every country and its interests should be covered. Given these points this case limitation correlates with the section 'Case study'. However, it is important to emphasize that the research does not exclusively focus on these cases. It is

meant to explore and exemplify interesting cases and the nation's motivation when relevant. To underline the rationale it is, as mentioned, to avoid the difficult and confusing task of including all Central and Eastern European states. With that being said, the general focus in order to answer the research questions will remain on the EU and China and not be limited to cases.

## Values

In social research there are different aspects that potentially is influencing and which you need to consider – including values (Ibid., p. 34). Rising awareness are focusing on the limits of objectivity in social research. There are obviously huge political systemic differences between the EU, CEE and China as well as viewpoints on civil and political rights etc. This is to state that awareness will be drawn to limit personal biases and that the overall aim, in this regard, is that the research could be conducted by any other researcher and still reach the similar conclusions. There will be drawn more attention to this in the section of 'Reliability and validity'.

## Research design

This section will argue for the approaches chosen in order to answer the research question. It aims to outline the both reflections and choices of methodology and methods that will be applied to answer the research questions in the best possible way:

## Case study

As argued in the previous section of 'Case Limitation', there is a need of limiting the focus when relevant. In order to really examine the role CEE countries plays in the Sino-EU relationship, as a researcher, it seems much more beneficial to focus on particular cases. As already argued the choice of cases is important and needs to fulfill certain criteria. Choosing particular cases in this specific study, the cases should represent immediate motivation in all aspects covering the research questions. Therefore, choosing particular states to focus on needs to fit the criteria of having significant interests in the EU, in China and in the 17+1 alliance. Hence,

when studying how CEE countries are subject to Sino-EU relations, the choice of cases obviously needs to be countries located in the area of Central and Eastern Europe while being member of the EU. Other criteria argued for was the significant role in the 17+1 alliance. In the section 'Case Limitation' the states of Hungary and Poland was presented as fitting the aforementioned criteria. The remaining part of this section will briefly outline why Hungary and Poland is chosen as particular cases to be examined.

Poland meets all aforementioned criteria being both member of the European Union, a major state in the area of CEE and play a significant role in the 17+1 alliance. Poland entered the EU in 2004 and hosted the first ever official 17+1 (then 16+1) summit in Warsaw held in 2012 (Kaczmarek & Jakóbowski, 2015, p. 1). It is interesting to include Poland as a particular case as it meets the criteria. Moreover, Poland is interesting to include due to its relative power in the EU despite several infringement procedures launched by Brussels in its rule of law (European Commission, 2020).

Similarly, Hungary meets the criteria as it joined the EU in 2004 and is located in the area of CEE. Hungary also hosted the 17+1 summit in Budapest in 2017. Likewise, Hungary is particularly an interesting case due to a number of reasons. First, the state may be smaller than Poland in different aspects, but Hungary certainly remain of relative great importance to China. In 2015, Hungary became the first country in Europe to recognize China's Belt and Road Initiative by signing a memorandum of understanding.

## Data collection

The data collection is obviously of significant importance to any study. This section will present considerations and choices of which kinds of data, from which sources and argue for its relevance. The collection of data will consist of both secondary and primary data.

The main data in relation to this study will be mostly secondary data in the shape of pre-existing literature, media articles and various kinds of reports published on the issue. This way of data collection will provide mostly non-numeric and written qualitative data relevant to

the purpose of the study. Worth mentioning is that these data fits well with the purpose of working deductively. Additionally, primary data will be collected in the shape of official documents deriving from state institutions and organization. From a researchers' perspective there are great amounts of potential data sets deriving from the state and its organizations. The sources of data will consist of official documents and statements from the likes of the EU, the European Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of respective states etc. Collecting data from these kinds of sources will provide data of great quality. Official statements and documents fit the purpose of the study to understand how Central and Eastern European states are subject to Sino-EU relations.

### Data processing

This section aims to outline the process that will undergo in order to handle and makes sense of the data. In order process the data in the direction of the research question it needs an analytical method in order to enlighten key points and ultimately shed light in a broader sense. The chosen method of processing the data for this research is thematic analysis. There are, of course, an abundant amount of different strategies to analyze and make sense of qualitative data. Another approach such as analytical induction, grounded theory, coding, narrative analysis, discourse analysis or any other process may provide other result. However, thematic analysis provides a process which fits extremely well with the purpose of the research and the chosen methodological stances. As the data derives from official state documents it provides the researcher with opportunity to find categories and codes in relation to the research focus. Moreover, with this analytical process you can actively identify codes to overall themes and underlying meanings and themes of which you can analyze. Additionally, it provides a tool that concern much more about the essential meaning. While more discursive approaches would to a higher degree look at certain words, codes etc. thematic analysis provides the opportunity to identify themes on a larger scale. In order to process the data, there is a need to undergo a logical step-by-step approach in order to cover and identify themes. Some of the most acknowledged proponents of thematic analysis is Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark. In their work "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) they argue for its great utility not only in the spectrum of psychology but also beyond. Alongside, it provides a hands-on guide of the data processing. With this inspiration, the data processing and the

thematic analysis will consist of different steps and phases. This is to make clear of which processes, I as a researcher, will go through in order to process the data. The process Braun and Clarke argue for consists of six phases: *familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report* (Braun Clarke, 2006, p. 35). First off will be to familiarize and re-read the data set over again and generate understanding and ideas of the data. On top of that the initial codes in the data set will be generated. This essentially entails identifying interesting codes of relevance. With the initial codes generated the process will go on to search for potential themes in the data. The identified codes will be helpful to identify the potential themes of broader character. On the basis of the potential themes found, the process will go on to reviewing the themes. This process will be dealing with checking the themes and its relation to the generated codes. After checking and refining the themes the final names and definitions of the themes can be generated. On the basis of these processes, the final step will be to present the themes and its findings. For the sake of clarity, the process of generating the themes will be presented in diagrams. Further clarifications on this will be presented accordingly when presented in the section of data analysis.

## Limitations

As for any collection of data attention to potential limitations needs to be addressed. Important to realize is that the source of official state documents deals with great amounts of quality data. First of all, cautious attention needs to be addressed of its credibility. Especially within this frame of research working on the international relations between states there is potential of biased data. For obvious reasons one state may present certain viewpoints or statements in their own interests or vice versa. This is, of course, a major limitation of the data. In fact, according to Alan Bryman '*this point suggests that caution is necessary in attempting to treat them as depictions of reality*' (Bryman, 2012, p. 553). With this in mind, when collecting data for the purpose of the research there will be focus and awareness to this phenomenon. However, it can be argued that as an interpretivist approach will be applied to the collected data, the problem may get less severe. At least, with an interpretivist approach you are constantly reviewing and interpreting the given data. In other words, it forces the

researcher to a constant search of understanding (*verstehen*), despite the potential of the data being biased. This is to state that, as a researcher, there will be drawn a cautious awareness to potential biases.

Another obvious limitation in collecting official data from the state and documents in general lies within the temporal aspects. As certainly for IR, the international and political environment and its relations is in constant revision and far from a static subject. There are constantly occurring different changes in the international landscape of relations, and as a consequence the data can only represent the reality at the present time. Under those circumstances, it is important to emphasize that this study only represent the current state of reality and may potentially differ temporally.

With that being said, this way collection of data does not only provide limitations. It provides great opportunities of high-quality data. Moreover, another great advantage is the fact of these data being extremely easy to access. Likewise, it is important to note that language can potentially be a barrier of relevant data and information.

### Reliability and validity

As for reliability and validity there have been several considerations. For this study, there have been mainly considerations on *external reliability*, *internal validity* and *external validity* (Bryman, p. 383-384). As regards reliability it is, in qualitative research, a difficult task to find findings which represent an absolute reality and being able to replicate the study. This phenomenon will in particular appear in the thematic analysis of the research. As conducting thematic analysis entails a procedure of interpretation it challenges the degree to which it can replicated. Therefore, this has been given attention in the completion of the analysis. As for internal validity in entails *whether there is a correspondence between researchers' observations and the theoretical ideas they develop* (Bryman, p. 384). While, external validity *refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings* (Ibid). As regards validity one of the major considerations is exactly the degree to able to generalize the findings. As accounted for in the section of 'Values', it is clear that the study operates in a sphere of great

variance in values. Thus, this with this in mind, this study would perhaps result in findings that would differ from scholars with other values and vice versa. This is to underline, that awareness will be drawn to objectivity throughout the research by obtaining an objective role. With that being said, while the analysis requires a degree of interpretation it is impossible to fully produce a replicable research. Other researchers may have found slightly different themes etc. However, the data which form the basis of the analysis would be the same for any others. For this reason, the results of this research would resemble, or at least be significantly similar to any other researchers.

Furthermore, as accounted for earlier, it should be noted that the research will consist of case countries representing the 17 countries within the 17+1 platform. This is to say that, the chosen countries cannot represent the 17+1 platform as a whole but will only represent the platform as case examples.

### Ethical consideration

As for ethical consideration this research does not involve too many ethical considerations and is, in fact, pretty straight-forward. Usually there may be cases where involvement of ethics needs to be considered with likes of consent, voluntary participations, anonymity etc. However, this research handles no sensitive areas as such. To be clear, this research does not entail personal or sensitive data. However, correlated with validity and reliability, the ethical consideration for this research it will mainly be towards biases – in particular confirmation bias. To ease potential confirmation biases the initial phase of data collection has been to find factual and relevant data without immediately generating hypothesis. Moreover, it appears clear that relevant, existing literature on the topic do not shows indications disproving the findings of this study.

## Theoretical framework

In this following section the theoretical framework of the research will be introduced. This research is operating in the field of International Relations which provide an immense range of relevant theories. This section aims to present and argue for the theories that are chosen based on all considerations accounted for in the earlier chapters. As for theories in relation to the landscape of global politics the possibilities are many. IR theory offers great variety and new, emerging theories are continually gaining acceptance among scholars. This fact obviously makes IR theory rather complex. However, this section aims to provide an overview of the most acknowledged theories and the ones relevant to this research. First, fundamental theories as liberalism, realism and constructivism are shortly accounted for due to its importance and relevance of understanding theories of IR in general. It is important to emphasize that these theories are not exclusively relevant to this specific study, but a brief description provides fundamental understanding of IR theory as a whole.

### Liberalism, realism and constructivism

Traditionally there have been two major divisions of IR theory: liberalism and realism (McGlinchey, 2017, p. 47). Liberalism is a central discipline in the realm of IR and possess the view of protecting freedom of individuals by reducing political power. The realm of liberalism originates by large on the ideas of historical thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke. In brief, the realm of liberalism consists of five dynamics in the liberal international order which Deudney and Ikenberry has precisely described: *"This order has five distinctive and important components that together constitute structural liberalism: security co-binding, penetrated hegemony, semi-sovereignty and partial great powers, economic openness, and civic identity and community.... Any understanding of the liberal order that fails to bring in all of these components will fail to capture its structural character"*. On the other hand, the realm of realism has traditionally opposed liberalism. Opposing to liberalism, the theory of realism is more centralized among the sovereignty of state. It holds the principle that any given state is the *"principle actor in international relations. Other bodies exist, such as individuals and organizations, but their power is limited"* (McGlinchey et. al, 2017, p. 15). Ultimately, this principle results in an international order of anarchy where states are not included in any hierarchal order, and in principle, rely on itself. Both liberalism and realism are fundamental



theories in IR. However, both have failed to account for the end of the cold war (McGlinchey et. al., 2017, p. 36). This paved the way for another fundamental theory in the realm of IR: Constructivism. The theory of constructivism concerns about the reality of international relations as being social constructions. The prominent constructivist, Alexander Wendt, has provided an excellent example of this particular view that international relations should be socially constructed by stating: *"For example, 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings"* (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). This example entails that the nuclear weapons as such does not have any meaning unless we put it into some social context. Moreover, this social context is subject to constant change and does therefore not see the reality in a static way. Likewise, constructivism opposes the term of anarchy in the traditional understandings of liberalism and realism. Opposingly, Wendt basically argues that anarchy as a term which is up for interpretation according to its social context which he describes excellently in his work *'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics'* (Wendt, 1992). The theory of constructivism definitely holds some very interesting characteristics in relation to researching the European and Chinese strategic motivation of the 17+1 countries, and the impact of the covid-19 crisis. However, this time of event arguably holds the potential of changing cross-national dynamics between the EU and China, and their relations with 17+1 countries in Central and Eastern Europe – such as the states of Poland and Hungary. In other words, the present environment addresses a political movement with a complex mix of potential structural change, political call for actions, and potential political opportunities. The theory of Political Opportunity Structure embraces exactly that.

### Political Opportunity Structure

The theory of Political Opportunity Structure has become a widely acknowledged theory in social science dealing especially with social and political movements. The term of *Structure of Political Opportunities* first occurred in 1973 by Peter Eisinger on the basis of thoughts of Michael Lipsky. According to Doug McAdam, Eisinger created the term *"to help account for variation in "riot behavior" in forty-three American cities"* (McAdam et. al., 1996, p. 23). Since

then, the number of proponents of the theory has grown and is now considered a powerful tool within the sphere of political sociology. Doug McAdam, who is a prominent proponent himself argues that *"Proponents of the model... Saw the timing and fate of movements as largely dependent upon the opportunities afforded insurgents by the shifting institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power"* (Ibid, p. 23). The model has been actively used in a wide range of scenarios concerning collective action *"as diverse as the American women's movement (Costain, 1992), liberation theology (Smith, 1991), peasant mobilization in Central America (Brockett, 1991), the nuclear freeze movement (Meyer, 1993a), and the Italian protest cycle (Tarrow, 1989a), have been attributed to the expansion and contraction of political opportunities"* (Ibid, p. 23). One could argue that the 'Political Opportunity Structure' has grown to its central method of inquiry it is today due to its great degree of flexibility. Due to its flexible functions it has been possible for scholars to use it effectively in various combinations within social and political movements and collective actions. On the other hand, this same flexibility can be pointed with critique. In fact, the model has been subject to criticism by William Gamson and David Meyer, who states that: *"The concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment – political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts"* (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 275). It is clear here, that flexibility of the model also rises concerns. To put it even more clear, they raise awareness that the model may end up as an: *"all-encompassing fudge factor... Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all"* (Ibid, 275). This is, of course, fundamentally important to be aware of. Despite emphasizing that Political Opportunity Structure can serve purposes in great variations, one alleviating thing Gamson and Meyer stresses is that scholars *"need to be more clear about our purposes, what we mean by opportunity, and about the interaction between movements and opportunities"* (Ibid, p. 276). Similar critique is raised by other scholars. However, another prominent proponent of the model, Ruud Koopmans, defends the theory in his work, 'Political. Opportunity. Structure. Some Splitting to Balance the Lumping'. The main points of critique here is still the claim of the theory being too broad and with vague definitions of which Koopmans admits: *"a tendency to overstretch the concept is apparent, the notion of structure is often vague, and the lack of agreement on even the most basic common denominator indeed blocks theoretical advancement"*

(Koopmans, 1999, p. 95). Given these points, proper attention needs to be drawn on the issue of modelling the theory 'too broad'. As mentioned earlier, however, clear definitions and explanations of purposes will alleviate this potential threat. Henceforth, the remaining part of this section aims to provide and contribute to clear definitions and purposes for the use of Political Opportunity Structure in this research.

### Scope of Political Opportunity structures

First, it is important to outline the scope and understanding of opportunity structures. While the model of Political Opportunity Structure is rather flexible, Sidney Tarrow argues that researchers can obtain different scopes of focus, as seen in this figure:

42 <i>Sidney Tarrow</i>		
	Scope	
	<i>Proximate</i>	<i>Statist</i>
	<i>Policy-</i>	<i>State</i>
	<i>Specific</i>	<i>Variations</i>
<i>Cross-Sectional</i>		
<i>Specification</i>		
	<i>Group</i>	<i>State</i>
	<i>Change</i>	<i>Change</i>
<i>Dynamic</i>		

Figure 2.1. A typology of opportunity structures.

Given that the scopes provide different focusses, it is important to make clear which scope is obtained. To be clear, this research deals much more with large-scale structures which fits the *statist* scope in Tarrow's figure. Meanwhile, the figure present different specifications: *cross-sectional* or *dynamic*. With this is mind, both dimensions appear relevant. The cross-sectional seems to be relevant not only because of the obvious fact that there are huge variations between the states of the EU, CEE countries and China. According to Tarrow, its advocates also see "*the state as an autonomous, irreducible set of institutions... which shaped political conflict in the interest of its own survival and aggrandizement*" (Tarrow, 1996, p. 44). However, this focus does not provide much leeway to focus on how states dynamically change. In fact, Tarrow points out that: "*Dynamic of changes in state-related opportunity structure may be a more fruitful way for present and future scholars of social movements to proceed*

*than by looking only at static cross-sectional variations in state structure"* (Ibid, p. 49). This is to emphasize, that the analysis of this research will focus on large-scale opportunity structures. It will hence focus on *dynamic statism*, rather than a proximate and specific scope. Thus, the theory of Tarrow's *dynamic statism* will be obtained throughout the analysis in order to examine how the states dynamically change within the structures that produces political opportunities.

## Analysis

This section aims to highlight and enlighten the understanding of the data. In order to understand how CEE countries are subject to the relationship between the EU and China thematic analysis will be conducted of official documents concerning the relation. Hence, the purpose of this method is to thoroughly discover codes and themes of which expresses strategic motivation of the states. The documents that are subject for analysis will primarily originate from the state's respective foreign ministry. Its relevance will be accounted for when presented. The overall purpose of this process will be to outline and discover themes which then can be related to the theory of Political Opportunity Structure.

On basis of the literature review it seems clear that the CEE countries first and foremost is a subject of motivation on the Chinese side due to its Belt and Road Initiative which has resulted in the 17+1 cooperation. The 17+1 format summits are held every single year. Last held in Dubrovnik, Croatia in 2019. In order to understand how the CEE countries are subject for Chinese strategic motivation the guidelines from this summit is central. Therefore, the *"The Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries"* published by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China will be analyzed. On the other hand, it is relevant to also include the perspective and response of the EU. Recently, the yearly EU-China summit was held, and the EU released its response of the EU-China relationship. Therefore, the *"EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership"* will parallelly be analyzed.

The process of thematic analysis involves a wide range of phases which potentially can appear confusing. To alleviate this as much as possible, the phases that will be gone through is:

1. *Familiarizing yourself with your data*
2. *Generating initial codes*
3. *Searching for themes*
4. *Reviewing themes*
5. *Defining and naming themes*
6. *Producing the report*

First phase consists of re-readings and understanding and will therefore not appear beneath. First phase makes it possible to generate initial codes which, for the sake of clarity, will be found in appendixes. For the same reason phase 3 – *searching for themes*, will be found in appendix and referred to accordingly (appendix, figure 2&). The remaining phases will appear beneath with explanations and reporting of the process. Henceforth, the phases from 4-6 will appear beneath. First, the analysis of *“The Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”* will be presented. The same procedure will follow for the analysis of *“EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership”*.

## The Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries

### *Searching for themes:*

Based on the generated codes (Appendix, figure 1) the aim is now to search for potential themes. While inspecting the codes over and over again, early and potential themes starts to develop. It initially appears, when looking through the codes and data, that there are areas of promising and less promising character. Likewise, it initially appears that the cooperation between China and CEE countries is extremely comprehensive and subject to multitude and diverse areas. Some areas seem to be connected with already signed agreements, while other areas seem not to have reached the same level of harmony. On that note, codes related to agreements between the parties will appear as the theme consent. On the other hand, areas which consist of more reluctant or asymmetric relation will be themed asymmetry. While these themes appear, it seems in the meantime, like there are areas of more neutral character. Areas where it is not necessarily easy to sense the area is showing promising or less promising progress. These are mainly expressed in terms of a mutual acceptance that an on-going dialogue on the area exists – this will be themed pending dialogue. Going through the process also appear that there are areas which are of significant importance from China's perspective. These will be themed strategic importance. Having comprehensively gone through this process, the results are found in Appendix, figure 2.

### *Reviewing themes:*

With themes now appearing the process goes on to review the themes. In order to be able to define final themes this process involves comparing the generated codes and the themes founded. When evaluating the generated themes in accordance with the data it remains fairly accurate that there are areas which represent consent among China and CEE countries. Meanwhile it seems clear that there are areas where the dialogue continues. However, divergence was found in the relation in the themes of **asymmetry** and **strategic importance**. In particular, it was found that the EU is mentioned fairly much in both themes. Even though the EU only appears the 17+1 summits as an observing part it seems that they hold retain

influence in the China-CEE relationship. For this reason, the codes concerning the EU will be themed in an added theme named **the EU**.

### *Defining and naming themes:*

After this thoroughly process it has resulted in distinct codes and themes appearing in the data. The codes are now schemed in five different themes. To sum up, the theme of **consent** represents the codes on areas where CEE countries and China seem to have found consensus or agreement on the issues. **Asymmetry** represent areas of opposite positions, lacks and needs for change. **Pending dialogue** represent the areas of more neutral character and dialogue seem to still be on. **Strategic importance** represents the areas which seem to be key or of significant importance to China in the relationship with CEE countries. Finally, **the EU** represent the codes regarding relations to the EU. The final themes and its existing codes are, therefore as follows:

Consent	Asymmetry	Pending dialogue	Strategic importance	The EU
Multilateral cooperation High-level representatives The guidelines for last summit were effective The 16+1 cooperation platform has been useful and pragmatic in promotion of cooperation Multilateral agreement on development on sustainability, open world economy, rule-based trading. WTO is the core Agreeing on commitment on UN pillars Excludes corruption and bribery Multilateral determination on sustainability and support of the Paris Agreement Mutual respect to benefit fair competition and foreign investments in respective markets	Different laws and regulations Both national and EU law and regulations CEE countries express the need reviews of cooperation mechanism and meetings CEE countries want to discuss a more focused and result oriented approach CEE expresses the importance of an improved cooperation China is welcome to participate connecting Asia and Europe if they respect transparency and non-discrimination CEE emphasize the need of pursuing policies In need of a new trade format which corresponds with WTO Already existing China-CEEC Environmental	Multilateral commitment on peace, growth, reform and civilization Synergies are believed to happen Expectations that openness, innovation and partnership can improve further development of the 16+1 cooperation Connectivity appears important Cooperation, exchange and knowledge sharing is central to promote railway connectivity Agreement on exploring the possibility of China-CEE Custom Information Centre in Hungary Parties are also motivated to explore pragmatic and logistical strengthening Potential of synergies with possible maritime	The investment plan for Europe and TEN-T, Western Balkan and "other relevant" seems particularly important for China The motivation seems to be to strengthen two-way supply of goods and shorten time of transportation Maritime trade flows seem of great importance Railway project remain key. Belgrade-Budapest railway project a success Adriatic-, Baltic- and Black Sea appear to have great importance to China Trade and investments are obviously important issue Cooperation between CEE and China goes far beyond just economic and connectivity issues	The EU is an observer European countries and interests observe too China emphasize the relevance also for EU member states Emphasizing of the difference on law and regulations of national and EU level The multilateral cooperation of 16+1 is complementing China's strategic agenda in the EU Connectivity between EU-China appear as central for China EU-China policies are key in promotion of trade and investment CEE supports EU-China agreement CEE countries acknowledge EU-China Cooperation on Energy



<p>BRI's importance recognized by CEE countries</p> <p>CEE countries willing to cooperate on BRI</p> <p>Aims to cooperate "in the same spirit"</p> <p>Agreement on the importance of Suzhou Medium Term Agenda yet recognizing the importance of a new agenda formulation</p> <p>Greece entering the cooperation</p> <p>Consensus among cooperation countries that observers are welcome.</p> <p>16+1 cooperation is open</p> <p>Consensus to establish coordination mechanism on "different fields" of the cooperation</p> <p>Agrees to continue promotion of digital economy, connectivity and smart, sustainable mobility in third countries</p> <p>Agreement on cooperation to promote railway projects</p> <p>Agreement on pragmatic cooperation</p> <p>CEE and China agrees to cooperate and expand civil aviation connectivity</p> <p>China International Import Expo is mutually beneficial</p> <p>Open, transparent and non-discriminative procurement procedures are important</p> <p>CEE acknowledge China accession of WTO</p> <p>Platform for exchange and cooperation between SMEs established</p> <p>CEE agrees to cooperate and exchange on snow and ice activities,</p>	<p>Protection Cooperation</p> <p>Mechanism needs to be better</p>	<p>extension of the Belgrade-Budapest railway</p> <p>CEE countries are willing to cooperate on maritime connectivity</p> <p>Mutual beneficial cooperation among transport ministers will continue</p> <p>Another multilateral conference on economic and trade promotion between China and CEE will be held in China, in 2020</p> <p>Dialogue on educational exchange appear</p> <p>Multilateral conference on innovation to be held in Slovakia, 2020</p> <p>Aims to deepen mutual understanding and cooperation in industrialization</p> <p>Support of expanding cooperation on green and biological energy</p> <p>Possibilities on the launch of Smart City coordination center and Blockchain Center is explored</p> <p>Willingness to cooperate on public health and medical service industries on governmental and academic levels</p> <p>Discussions on agricultural and environmental</p> <p>Considerations to develop beneficial agricultural policies</p> <p>Discussions on development of new trade formats</p> <p>Commitment to deepen cooperation on forestry research, trade and investments</p> <p>Encouraging universities to further cooperate</p> <p>Commitment to deepen dialogue on water policies</p>	<p>The framework of 16+1 for the first time mentioned in relation to soft issues</p> <p>Health cooperation appear important</p>	<p>EU-China cooperation on IPR remain fundamental</p> <p>Can synergies be found in China's BRI and EU's strategy on connection Europe and Asia?</p>
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especially for China to prepare for Winter Olympics Agreement on high-tech parks, incubators, start-ups and smart cities Commitment to cooperate and find mutual benefits on agricultural activities Agreements on the establishing of logistics centers Mutual benefits on policy and legal advice China welcomes high ranking officials and journalists Agreement on film production already signed		Eagerness of exchanges on environmental management and water disposal Commitment to strengthen the field of environmental protection Commitment on social and local cooperation Eagerness to empower women and vulnerable people Commitment on equality Commitment on culture will enhance inter-connectivity Commitment to agree bilateral MoUs in the field of tourism Culture and art will foster friendly relations and cooperation Dialogue on establishing Creative Hub Commitment on strengthening cooperation on IPR Dialogue in promoting women's entrepreneurship Dialogue on building a women's network		
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## Report:

All in all, it appears that China has great strategic motivation in the area of CEE countries. Moreover, the strategic motivation seems to be extremely comprehensive and deals with a wide range of diverse areas. Within the data these central themes were found, and the remaining part of this section will further analyze the themes and codes and its correlations.

Overall, it is clear that the strategic motivation for China to further expand cooperation with CEE is concerning multiple areas. The themes suggest that there are areas of different situations. Logically, it shows that there are areas which China and CEE countries agrees upon while obstacles or asymmetry appear on other issues. Despite it has been relatively few years since

the beginning of the cooperation, the parties have managed to reach agreements on several areas. However, a predominant amount of codes found regards the dialogues which are yet to reach agreements. The limited time the format has existed may be a reason to this. Another reason might be the involvement of the EU, which is participating the yearly summits as an observer. Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative appear as a key aspect. From the theme strategic importance, it is clear that infrastructural projects are important.

It quickly appears that the relationship between China and the CEE countries is mentioned as platform with positive outcomes. It is mentioned that *"16+1 Cooperation has proven to be a pragmatic and useful platform for promoting cooperation between China and CEECs"* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). There are consent on various levels of the relationship. The countries involved in the 17+1 platform agrees that they jointly can support the *development of a sustainable and open world economy, and a rules-based multilateral trading system with WTO at its core* (Ibid.) Meanwhile, there are also consent that international obligations such as correspondence with UN pillars and the Paris Agreement must be complied.

As concerning Chinese strategic motivation in the area, it is pointed out that *"the cooperation constitutes an important part of Europe-China relations and complements the EU-China 2020 Comprehensive Strategic Agenda for Cooperation"* (Ibid.). Equally important is the importance of the Chinese BRI is recognized by the CEE countries. Given these points the CEE countries seem particular important in China's connectivity with Europe. The geographical location of the countries is obviously important as it serve as a gateway of transportation of goods. Important to realize is that Europe remain China's biggest importer of goods. In the data the connectivity is mostly expressed in the categories of railway, maritime and civil aviation. In particular, Chinese motivation seems to be concerned about railway and maritime infrastructure. It is clear, that the motivation is to further cooperation to promote transport connectivity. When the area was addressed in the data, it *"refers in particular to the Investment Plan for Europe, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and their extensions to the Western Balkans"* (Ibid). Furthermore, while the CEE countries indicate that they continually will contribute to the EU-China Connectivity Plan, other projects have already established. As it is

stated: “... *The participants welcome important progress made by China, Serbia and Hungary on the Belgrade-Budapest railway project and its possible extension to the Adriatic Sea, the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea*” (Ibid). By all means, a development of a complete and connected network of both railway and surrounding seas seems to have significant importance to China. This corresponds well with the Chinese establishment of so-called China-Europe Land Sea Express Line, which certainly is part of China’s extensive BRI. Additionally, China underlines that the 17+1 countries shows support moving forward practical cooperation. The Three Seas Initiative, a cooperation between the EU and CEE, also raises China’s attention. Despite that China does not participate in the initiative, it is mentioned in the data that *participants express their willingness to cooperate within the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea Seaport Cooperation based on the Riga Declaration* (Ibid). In other words, it seems quite clear that China has motivation to benefit from the 17+1 platform, also in different contexts.

This phenomenon appears also in relation the theme **the EU**. Even though the EU is not participating, its role seems rather important for the China-CEE relationship on different areas. The EU holds the role as an observer in the platform while most members of the 17 are members of the EU. Both that the EU serve as observe and most countries are members of the EU, of course, provide limits to the 17+1 cooperation. Most dominantly this is expressed in the data by stating: *the participants will conduct cooperation in accordance with national law and regulations. EU member states will conduct cooperation in accordance with EU law and policies*” (Ibid). However, deals between China and the EU obviously seems to overrule the 17+1 agreements and is respected. In fact, it is expressed that deals with the EU remain central on various areas such as connectivity, trade and investment, energy and intellectual property. This emphasizes the importance to the question of what motivation China may have in the CEE countries. Why is the 17+1 platform organized if the major challenges remain in the domain of China-EU relations? There may be various reasons to this. Part of the reason lies quite clear between the lines of the data. China is expecting that the 17+1 platform can potentially provide synergies in the China-EU relationship. The attempt to discuss the Three Sea Initiative with the 17+1 countries is the clearest example of this. It immediately raises attention to another potential reason which do not appear too clear in the data though. However, it could be argued that part of Chinese motivation furthermore lies in the potential of gaining more

influence in the EU through the 17+1 format. It seems, at least, like a plausible explanation due to multiple reasons. One thing is, of course, the aforementioned motivational eagerness to develop infrastructure and connectivity between China and the region. In the same way, the great variety of areas discussed in the 17+1 platform indicates that the Chinese motivation is not only concerned around the matter of connectivity.

It is clear from the data that there are on-going dialogues in vast ranging areas stretching from women's entrepreneurship networks to culture and arts. Others that appear is areas such as educational exchange, energy, Smart City and blockchain technologies, medical, agriculture and policies on water and forestry. Despite that these areas still remain on a dialogue-level it seems clear that Chinese motivation is the further cooperate multilaterally on these issues. It is clear that connectivity, trade and financial cooperation remain central for the cooperation. Yet the motivational strategy seems to go beyond including also softer power issues. Nonetheless, it is pointed out that there are various completed agreements on education, sports and people-to-people cooperation in general. Some clear examples of this is cooperation on sports and film production. It is stated that: *"The participant stand ready to support strengthening of campus sports exchanges and cooperation including snow and ice activities within the framework of 16+1 Cooperation, jointly enhancing preparations for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympics"* (Ibid). Another example is the CEE countries welcoming of *"signing agreements on joint film production with China"* (Ibid). Not to mention that China is welcoming interested participants into the China-CEEC Association of Publishing Houses and aims to *"further promote exchanges and cooperation among the publishing institutions and enhance the level of cooperation"* (Ibid). Those are just a few examples of which indicates that China's strategic motivation is also to increase its soft power position. With the combination of areas with consent between the parties and the on-going dialogue it is fair to say that China's motivation is wide ranged.

Investments in infrastructural projects, and thereby increase of trade, remain as the most crucial motivation for China in the CEE area. Peripherally increasing cooperation on this issue of the 17+1 platform provides several strategic opportunities for China. Thus, the platform enables the expansion of cooperation on softer policies which could potentially benefit China

on two specific areas. Increasing cooperation in the 17+1 platform could serve as a window of opportunity to boost its strategic influence and reputation in the area. By the same token, a potential boost of influence and reputation can provide concrete opportunities in China's foreign policy relations with other parts of Europe and especially the EU. The attempt to influentially discuss the Three Seas Initiative remain as the clearest example.

## EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership

### *Searching for themes:*

The same process has been undergone in relation to EU's release on the EU's release on the EU-China Summit. When thoroughly inspecting the initial codes (appendix, figure 3), similar themes appear. In the same way, it seems clear that there are areas of promising and less promising character. Areas with particular consent in the relation appear less clear here. However, areas such as agreements still remain a topic. The theme of consent will therefore remain. In particular there appear areas which reflects an asymmetric relation. The theme of asymmetry will therefore remain of this data set. As the structure of both data sets is very similar, areas of on-going dialogues also appear in this. The theme of pending dialogue will be present here as well. However, while data from the Chinese side reflects more strategic motivational aspects on especially infrastructure, the focus from the European side seem different. In the remaining part of the data there are raised distinct awareness on rights and conflict issues Those in particular, are in an area of which you can sense a significant importance. Codes concerning related to these will be placed in a theme of urgent challenges.

### *Reviewing themes:*

A similar process has been done in order the able to present the final themes of the EU response on the EU-China Summit (appendix, figure 4). This reviewing process ended with similar results. The themes of both consent and asymmetry appeared to fit quite well. These themes represent areas of mutual understanding and areas which the imbalance between the parties. Likewise, there still appear areas which represent more neutral character and pending dialogue remain. However, the theme in this process the theme of urgent challenges appeared to be rather broad and inexact. The theme was, therefore, thoroughly inspected and a distinct contrast was found. It appeared clear that the codes represented different challenges in the relationship. It is clear that part of the codes represents a dimension of the direct bilateral challenges between the EU and China, whereas others seem to address issues that are either regional or international.

*Defining and naming themes:*

As a result of thoroughly analyzing the codes and themes it remains clear that themes of consent, asymmetry and pending dialogue are definite themes in the data. The theme of urgent challenges, however, appeared rather broad and needed specification. The process made it clear that these challenges could be divided into different themes. First, it was clear there appeared direct challenges between EU and China. As a consequence, the related codes are placed in the theme named bilateral challenges. To be clear this theme represents the challenges discussed in the data which concern the direct EU-China relationship. However, here appeared other challenges as well. Challenges of regional and international challenges were also found. Thus, the final themes are named regional challenges and international challenges. To specify, the regional challenges represent the issues that the EU pointed out as specific challenges regionally in China. On the other hand, the international challenges represent issues that has international character. The definite themes and its related codes are, therefore, as follows:



Consent	Asymmetry	Pending dialogue	Bilateral challenges	Regional challenges	International challenges
Bilateral summit High level representatives High interdependency economically Must tackle global challenges together Cooperation with China is necessary Aims to achieve a level playing-field EU expects to benefit from China-US deal Agreement on geographical indications Covid-19 should be tackled together and globally Cooperation on treatments and vaccines Both sides must fully participate in health response	Contrasts in values Contrasts in political systems Contrasts on multilateral approaches EU eager to defend its interests EU wants more reciprocal and rules-based relation Needs better implementation of agreed commitments Lacks dynamic and result-orientated progress Limited progress remains Asymmetry in market access Desire to ensure level playing-field Issues on economy and trade Market access and regulatory issues China should take greater responsibility on global challenges Importance of rules-based international system, international peace and security, support of sustainable development remain	Evolving relations Covid-19 cooperation is crucial Dialogues on digital sector Dialogue raised on cybersecurity and disinformation Discussions on climate change EU expect HR dialogues in China in 2020 Dialogues on Iran, Afghanistan and Korean Peninsula Agreement on continuation on future dialogue	Trade, climate technology, defense of multilateralism among crucial challenges Agenda consisted of: Bilateral relations Regional/international issues Covid-19 Economic recovery EU wants more ambitious investment agreement Urgent actions on SOEs, transparency and technology needed Importance of digital development comply with rights and data protection China must facilitate return of EU residents	Overheated sectors in China EU express the importance of China to reduce domestic emissions EU concerned by new national security law in Hong Kong The law contradicts rights, freedom and justice The law contradicts existing HK law and China's international commitments EU concerned by Chinese handling on human rights Concerns on Xinjiang, Tibet, HR defenders and fundamental freedom EU raises concern on cases of individuals disappearance after reporting views of the Chinese Covid-19 response	EU express the need for China in WTO negotiations The global economic recovery must be green and inclusive Solidarity must be shown to developing countries EU concerned about escalation of conflicts Importance of upholding international maritime laws

## Report:

Obviously there appear clear differences in the scope of China-EU relations on both sides. In order to grasp the EU's response to the increasing Chinese influence in the area this section aims to further analyze the themes and its correlations. It appears clear that the EU, like China, addresses areas of consent and asymmetry and on-going dialogue remain. However, the EU's response is concerned much more on the challenges that occurs in the relationship. To be more exact bilateral, regional and international challenges is a dominant focus. While there appear consents between China and the EU on high interdependency and to tackle global challenges together, it is clear that the asymmetry in the relation is fostering the challenges.

This is explicitly pointed out in the data by the EU stating: *"... at the same time, we have to recognize that we do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values"* (European Council of the European Union, 2020). The vast difference on values between the two sides are obviously fostering challenges on different levels. However, the response from the European side is explicitly clear. The EU wants more reciprocity. President von der Leyen points that: *"The COVID-pandemic and a number of major bilateral and multilateral challenges show clearly the EU-China Partnership is crucial, be it in terms of trade, climate, technology, and the defense of multilateralism. But for our relations to develop further, they must become more rules-based and reciprocal, in order to achieve a real level playing-field"* (Ibid). The response shows obvious discontent in the current state of the relationship. One component which seems to be particular important on this issue is the asymmetry in market access and lack of transparency in trade. The EU makes it explicitly clear that there is need to advance negotiations for an ambitious EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement to ensure a level playing field. The response on this from EU's side is that: *"Urgent progress is needed in particular on behavior of State-Owned Enterprises, transparency on subsidies and rules tackling forced transfers of technology"* (Ibid). It is extremely clear that this remain as the cornerstone of the bilateral challenges between EU and China. Nonetheless one could argue that this response from the EU just remain as hot air without actual negotiations on the aforementioned investment agreement. Meanwhile, the EU response

also entails China to take more responsibility by stating: *"The EU called on China to assume greater responsibility in dealing with global challenges through the rules-based international system, promoting international peace and security, and adhering to international standards to support sustainable development, especially in Africa"* (Ibid). This underlines that the EU obviously discontents the current position China holds on market access and disclaim of responsibility. While this might be true it seems in any case clear that the response from the EU on these central challenges are rather non-active. The remaining question is then whether the expression of discontent and lack of action will ease the challenges in the bilateral relationship. The challenge on trade and market access may be eased with an EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement. On the contrary, the EU may not on its own be in a position powerful enough to push China to take more international responsibility. Certainly, the EU is aware of this which is why the international challenges is a central theme as well.

As for international challenges the EU addresses multiple challenges. The EU expresses the urgency for further negotiations in the WTO on industrial subsidies. Meanwhile, the EU brings attention to the Covid-19 response both economically and with solidarity by stating: *"... the EU underlined the shared responsibility to participate and global efforts to spread of the virus, boost research on treatments and vaccines, and support a green and inclusive global recovery. The EU stressed the need for solidarity in addressing the consequences in developing countries"* (Ibid). The response calls again for China's commitments and responsibilities which seems more and more to be the Achilles heel for the EU in China-EU relationship. Alongside, the EU expresses its concerns on international conflicts. It is stated that: *"The EU and China exchanged views on a number of regional and international issues, including Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), Afghanistan as well as situation on the Korean Peninsula"* (Ibid). Altogether the EU makes it clear of its concern about *"escalation of other regional conflicts and the importance for upholding international law in the maritime domain"* (Ibid). It is clear that international challenges remain central for the relationship. Although this may be true, what really seem occupy the concern of the EU is the regional challenges in China. The concerns of regional challenges are expressed from the EU in a limited range of areas.

The EU addresses concern on three specific challenges. First, the EU *“address the overcapacity in traditional sectors such as steel as well as high-tech areas (Ibid). Secondly, the EU calls out for China’s domestic emissions, and that China “needs to commit to decisive and ambitious domestic action to reduce emission in the short term and to set a goal of climate neutrality at the earliest possible date” (Ibid). It is obviously crucial with Chinese commitments on reduction of emissions to comply with Paris Agreement globally. Nonetheless, these areas are only mentioned in the data very briefly.*

In contrast, the theme of regional challenges is predominantly concerned around freedom and human rights. The EU raises in particular concern about the recent implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong. The EU states: *“On Hong Kong, the EU reiterated its grave concerns at steps taken by China to impose national security legislation from Beijing and considers those steps not in conformity with the Hong Kong Basic Law and China’s international commitments, and put pressure on the fundamental rights and freedoms of the population protected by the law and the independent justice system”*. It is obviously clear that the EU condemns the current situation in Hong Kong. The situation certainly pokes directly into the exact values the EU is trying to promote and defend. Whereas the CCP may argue that the situation in Hong Kong is a matter of internal affairs, the EU raises its grave concerns. However, Hong Kong remain not as the only concern from the perspective of the EU. The EU also *“raise its concerns on the deteriorating human rights situation, including the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and of human rights defenders, as well as restrictions on fundamental freedoms. The EU also underlined its expectation that the Human Rights Dialogue will take place in China later in the year once the COVID-19 restrictions are eased. EU Leaders raised a number of individual cases, including the reports on citizens who have disappeared after reporting/expressing their views on the handling of the Coronavirus outbreak, as well as the continued arbitrary detention of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai and two Canadian citizens – Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor” (Ibid). Both responses are clear expressions that the opinion of the EU is that the CCP do not stand up to its responsibilities. Meanwhile, the expectation that Human Rights Dialogue should take place in China when restrictions are eased underlines how central it is for the EU. The situation, however, seems at the current state to be in a stalemate-like situation. Undoubtedly the EU wants a change of behavior from the Chinese*

side on these issues while China may persistently insist that those are internal affairs. While the situation in Hong Kong is fairly recent, the international focus on the human rights situation in Xinjiang and Tibet has been known for a long period of time. The repeating responses from the EU, and international community in general, on human rights and Hong Kong certainly seems to have limited or questionable effects. Nonetheless, the cornerstone of the relationship between China and the EU will remain deeply anchored in the regional challenges that China is facing.

## Political Opportunity Structure – *dynamic statism*

In order to make sense of the findings the capabilities of Political Opportunity Structure are extremely relevant. As accounted for in the section of **Political Opportunity Structure** the scope of large-scale structures is obtained. Meanwhile, there appear distinct structures within the relationship between China, the EU and the participating countries of the 17+1 platform. This section, therefore, aims to understand the structures that the states of China, the EU and 17+1 countries experience. Moreover, based on the thematic analysis it aims to focus on how the states dynamically adapt or change in order to produce or reduce political opportunities. The conducted analyzes provide clear indications of structures that both the state of China and the EU are working within. Finally, this section will give attention to how the political opportunity structures has unfolded in practice with cases from Poland and Hungary.

One of the most obvious and prominent structures that occurs is China's Belt and Road Initiative. As accounted for earlier, the BRI is the central aspect of China's foreign policies in the 17+1 platform. It is clear that the EU and the 17+1 countries welcomes Chinese infrastructural projects as long as it upholds a level playing field. Meanwhile, the number of aspects and layers the BRI brings certainly emphasizes its complexity and vitality. While these investments on the one hand may appear as mutual beneficial, it is on the other understood that the BRI is a major part of Chinese foreign policy. This structure certainly forces the potential involved countries to thoroughly consider the potential outcome and its consequences. As accounted for, China's strategic motivation in the 17+1 countries is first and foremost to increase its connectivity to Europe. However, this structure very clearly appears as political opportune for China to increase its influence and soft power position. Whereas there are clear examples of this currently going on it seems even more obscure that the EU does not hold a position where it can actually counteract. Arguably this deadlock situation may come from the EU itself. While the EU struggles to find a united response on the central issue of Chinese foreign policy in its own backyard, the CCP do not hesitate to use the structure as a political opportunity to gain influence. Indeed, the EU do not allow this voluntarily. From the data it is clear that the EU wants a more reciprocal and level playing field on the relationship with China. Nonetheless, the response remains rather vague and do not seem to have much effect without a more

united, and thereby, a stronger voice from the EU on central issues. For the EU to really be able to show impact on central issues of the relationship with China, it seems that a mobilization of more joint forces internally in the EU is crucially needed. Not to mention a more pragmatic approach. In the case of a more united EU it may be able to find and benefit from political opportunities in the future and establish a more pragmatic relationship. However, while a more united EU certainly would strengthen its position, it would be utopian to think that all challenges will then be terminated.

Another key component in the relationship is the regional challenges within China. Be it Tibet, Xinjiang or at the latest Hong Kong, the EU remain raising great concerns of the situation on fundamental rights. The EU may continue to condemn specific issues, while the CCP might persistently insist that it is internal matters. As accounted for earlier, this structure retains an overwhelmingly static situation of the China-EU relationship – and this static structure is arguably stalemating the EU in particular. While the EU insists to defend and promote their viewpoints on fundamental rights, they barely account for the grave contrasts that exist in numerous areas between the two. In any case, the historical and cultural differences will likely remain or even prevail the grave contrasts the exist on values and political systems in the future. It may have been the expectation that China would westernize and democratize ever since the reforms and opening-up policies under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. However, there have been no such indications under Xi Jinping. This is to argue that the EU may be doing itself a disservice if it ignores the asymmetries and change of profound values remain as an ultimate requirement for further cooperation. Considering that this remain as an ultimate requirement for the EU, it does arguably put itself in a stalemate position of which provides political opportunities that the CCP arguably have already benefitted from.

Another inevitable structure that has occurred is the outbreak of the Covid-19. While it first and foremost unifies the EU and the CCP to joint forces, it will inevitably provide political opportunities in some way or another. It is, of course, not easy yet to outline exactly how it is unfolded. However, there are indications that the Covid-19 crisis has the potential to dynamically change particular areas both in the Sino-European relationship and internationally. The most prominent example is possibly the announcement of the US initiating a withdrawal from

WHO. Important to realize is that other major structures are likely to change in a similar manner. As for now, however, it can be difficult to predict which and how dynamics will change post-Covid-19. With that being said, as regard the Sino-EU relationship, Josep Borrell has addressed that: *"China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner. In the battle of narratives, we have also seen attempts to discredit the EU as such and some instances where Europeans have been stigmatised as if all were carriers of the virus"* (Delegation of the European Union to China, 2020). Hence, amid the Covid-19 crisis there are on-going battles as regards global power structures, which according to Borrell, China have found to be political opportune. Sooner or later there may as well emerge political opportunities in the on-going battle on the development of effective Covid-19 vaccines. Be that as it may, whichever political opportunities remain, for now, rather uncertain subsequent to the covid-19 crisis.

In the same way one of the prominent phenomena that implied in the analysis is trade and investment. The main political structure that occurs in this regard is the EU's discontent on the asymmetry on market access. The EU stresses the need for an ambitious investment agreement. On the other hand, the CCP has successfully been protecting Chinese companies by preventing FDI's in strategic important sectors with the FDI negative list. Despite the newly shortening of the Chinese FDI negative list it seems to have been an effective political tool for the CCP (The People's Republic of China, 2020). The analysis also points that the EU wants progress on rules and transparency on forced transfers of technology. So far Chinese companies have benefited from partnering with foreign companies in joint ventures and thereby received technological know-how in particular for SOE's. Whereas the EU want change and progress on the area, it is obvious that it a powerful political tool for CCP to protect and strengthen its SOE's. The current structure seems not feasible for the EU and they call to work closer with China on WTO reforms. Meanwhile, the on-going negotiations for the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement continues. From the perspective of the EU the negotiations seem develop in a political opportune manner. In fact, the latest negotiations showed progress on exactly this area. Based on the negotiations it was stated: *"Negotiations on level playing field disciplines (state-owned enterprises, transparency rules for subsidies and rules tackling forced technology transfers) intensified during this round, reflecting the Parties*



*commitment during the EU-China Summit on 22 June to advance discussions in this area. Significant progress was made on all three fronts*” (European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, 2020). Hence, the on-going negotiations on the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement remain as a structure with yet uncertain political opportunities. However, it seems based on the negotiation statement that the EU can potentially come closer to its goal of equalizing the asymmetry in market access and produce a more level playing field for businesses.

All in all, the analysis points to four distinct structures of which political opportunities evolve in the Sino-European relationship; BRI, human rights, Covid-19 and trade. Meanwhile as accounted for in the analysis, it seems crystal clear that China’s strategic motivation in the 17+1 platform is to increase its connectivity with Europe. Furthermore, China’s increasing connectivity with Europe widens the Chinese strategic motivation to also involve the political opportunity of increasing its influence in the European region, ultimately in the EU. Equally important seems to be the potential of activating Chinese work forces by outsourcing labor of certain traditional overheated sectors within China. In order to demonstrate how this phenomenon is unfolded in practice, cases of Poland and Hungary will be presented as examples. More specifically, it will provide understanding and indication of how China produces political opportunities within the format of 17+1, and thus the EU.

## Poland

Poland do undoubtedly play an immense strategic role for China. In particular, Poland plays a significant role of China’s strategic motivation in the 17+1 platform. Poland’s geographical position is crucial for China’s BRI. According to the Chinese ambassador in Poland, Liu Guangyuan: *“Poland is an important country along the route. Nearly 90 percent of the China-Europe freight trains pass through or arrive in Poland* (Global Times, 2020). Moreover, Poland became one of the first movers signing a MoU on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015 (Global Times, 2020). According to Liu Guangyuan BRI there are steady BRI progress between the countries while presenting an essential indication of one of China’s strategies unfolded in practice: *“Power China and InterCor signed the Polish E75 in June for the repair project of the Chizhev-*

*Bialystok railway with Polish National Railways (PKP). This is the first time that a Chinese enterprise completed a modern railway project contracted in the EU market through public bidding*" (Ibid). This example points directly into the core of the Chinese strategic motivation. Chinese enterprises are now capable of winning public biddings within the EU and thus activate parts of their overheated traditional sectors within the EU. Meanwhile, Liu Guangyuan highlighted that the project will *"enable the line to operate at a maximum speed of 200 kilometers per hour, which will play an important role in connectivity"* (Ibid). This is to underline how China produce political opportunities in practice of the exact strategic motivations found in the analysis. The Central and Eastern Europe remain extremely crucial for China's BRI, and its potential of gaining influence in the region and beyond (note the EU).

The Covid-19 crisis has as well produced opportunities for China. First and foremost, the opportunity has primarily been in strengthening bilateral ties. Intergovernmental solidarity and medical donations have been exchanged while also soft power tools such as the concert titled *'Solidarity with Wuhan'* has been held (Seaman, 2020, p. 51). However, it seems that China's efforts consist more of reducing setbacks in the bilateral relationship. Justyna Szczudlik from the Polish Institute of International Affairs points that especially the aforementioned Chinese ambassador establish a charm offensive narrative. Szczudlik states that Liu Guangyuan highlights the following themes: *"China's prompt reaction to a new disease, thus suggesting no missteps and cover-up of the first infections; Xi Jinping as the mastermind behind Beijing's success; Xi's efforts are praised domestically (i.e. Chinese citizens trust their authorities) and abroad (by the WHO and foreign scientists); China is helping the world and this assistance is being pursued in the spirit of a "community of shared future for mankind"* (Seaman et. al., 2020, p. 52). Nonetheless, the Chinese Covid-19 response is perceived differently in Polish media. On this topic Szczudlik states that: *"They (media) focus mostly on a delayed Chinese reaction to the initial outbreak, China's ongoing disinformation campaign about Covid-19, and the prompt assistance for Poland provided by other Asian partners, such as South Korea and Taiwan. There are also signals from the Polish authorities that the lack of medical equipment and upcoming economic crisis may lead Poland to pay more attention to domestic production of related items to avoid overdependence on other countries, such as China"* (Seaman et. al., 2020, p. 52). Thus, despite attempts to avoid this it seems clear that China's real challenge in

Poland with the covid-19 crisis in mind, is to defend or reduce setbacks in the relationship rather than pursuing actual political opportunities.

The situation of reducing setbacks in the relationship seems also to appear in the structure of human rights. Nevertheless, the approach of Poland on the issue of human rights violations in China are rather pragmatic. The approach of Poland is apparently to limit human rights attention in order to sustain a powerful bilateral relation with China. In practice, Poland has been reluctant and unwilling to condemn Chinese actions risking ruining the powerful bilateral ties with China. In two occasions Poland has denied such critique towards China, as pointed out by European Council on Foreign Relations: *"Poland neither endorsed the joint statement of March 2016 at the UN Human Rights Council, nor signed the February 2017 letter condemning China's crackdown on human rights"* (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 118). This passive Polish approach surely emphasizes how powerful Chinese influence are in the bilateral ties. Moreover, this certainly stresses how China's gaining influence unfolds in practice. The clear intention for China is to produce political opportunities to increase its goodwill within Europe and appear as a responsible great power. Meanwhile, the Polish rationale is likely to prevent slowing the growing economic development.

As regards trade, the BRI obviously serves as a great gateway for Chinese investments and trade routes. Clearly, along with increasing connectivity with Poland trading opportunities are increased from a Chinese perspective. However, even though Poland appear relatively dependent on China's economic influence, it is clear that the EU remain superior on vital issues. Due to the on-going negotiations on the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement is yet to be finalized, the potential opportunities remain rather uncertain. One of the main pillars discussed, however, seems to be on investment screenings. Additionally, like the topic of human rights, Poland seem to be reluctant to speak openly about opinions that differ from the Chinese. As put by European Council on Foreign Relations: *"Warsaw discreetly supports the EU's refusal to grant market economy status to China. Reciprocity is mentioned in bilateral discussions. Polish officials have not come out publicly on investment screening but a national foreign direct investment scrutiny procedure is in place and is triggered automatically"* (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 118). However, in practice, the issue of trade may in the future

increase due to China's increasing connectivity to the area. The EU-China negotiations remain central for further political opportunities on trade.

## Hungary

Hungary is similarly important for China's strategic motivation in the region of CEE. The cornerstone has for long been the railway linkage between Budapest and Belgrade. Despite the project have been stalled for years due to lack of financing the project is set to be kickstarted due to loans from the Chinese Export-Import Bank (Reuters, 2020). Initially it is clear that China the Budapest-Belgrade railway link is major part of the Chinese BRI and connectivity plans in Europe. As accounted for earlier a particular motivation for this BRI is to connect maritime and railway hubs for China to ship goods not only to CEE countries but all the way directly to the EU. The Budapest-Belgrade railway linkage is a key extension to this. This was exactly addressed by Hungarian Finance Minister, Mihaly Varga, after the loan deal was announced: *"Varga said the new rail link, to be completed by 2025, would allow Hungary to be a centre for European logistical networks as Chinese goods travel from Greece to western Europe"* (Reuters, 2020). The Chinese provided loans also indicates the importance of the project, of which consist of 85 percent of project (Ibid). The loan deal surely indicates how China are fully prepared to act when certain opportunities arise. However, the loan deal has caused heated debates in the Hungarian Parliament as legislation has been submitted in order to classify details on the loan deal for 10 years (Seaman, 2020, p. 33-34). The classification of details may raise concern particularly due to China's well-known and notorious accusation of pressing Sri Lanka in a "debt trap" in loan deals of the port in Hambantota.

As for the Covid-19 crisis, China has not experienced setbacks of opportunities in the relationship with Hungary. According to Tamas Matura from Corvinus University of Budapest *the global pandemic has not changed the amicable relationship between the Hungarian government and China* (Seaman, 2020, p. 32). Additionally, while Hungary was among the first countries to send aid to China, Hungary has received medical equipment from China. Meanwhile, it is pointed out the exchange of aid have been non-existing between Hungary and Taiwan *"as relationship between the two sides has been deteriorating in the past ten years due to the close relations between Hungary and Beijing"* (Seaman, 2020, p. 33). Matura argues that

relationship has been rather unchanged but the Covid-19 may have produced the opportunity to possess the classification of the aforementioned loan deal without too much attention. In this regards it is stated that *"As the virus dominates the news, public attention is distracted by the pandemic, and thus the issue of the railway has not sparked any public outrage"* (Seaman, 2020, p. 34). Moreover, while the Covid-19 crisis has not changed the relationship between Hungary and China negatively, it is argued that it may have been political opportune. It is stated, from the position of Hungary that *"the crisis has also offered the opportunity to the government in general and to the Foreign Minister in particular to present the Eastern Opening Policy as a success story, as Central Asian countries (Hungary became an observing member of the Turk Council in 2018) have also donated some medical equipment"* (Seaman, 2020, p. 34). This is to say that despite the Covid-19 crisis the Hungary-China relationship is still thriving. Hungary remain central for China's motivation both in connectivity and gaining influence despite the Covid-19 crisis.

The strong diplomatic ties between the two are also seen on the topic of human rights. On human rights Hungary seem to have a similar approach of the one obtained by Poland. Hungary is similarly unwilling to risk a breach in the thriving relationship with China. In fact, it is stated from the European Council on Foreign Relations that *"human rights have been absent from the bilateral agenda since 2011"* (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 110). Moreover, it is highlighted that *"Hungary prevented the European Union from signing as a bloc the February 2017 letter Influence condemning the torture of Chinese human rights lawyers, and did not sign the joint statement of March 2016 at the UN Human Rights Council"* (Ibid). This surely indicates, like with Poland, the powerful influence China has on Hungary. By all means, Hungary has showed to become a headache for the EU on the issue of human rights. This is also expressed on the South China Sea dispute. The European Council of Foreign Relations points out here that *"Along with Greece, Hungary weakened the EU statement on the South China Sea ruling the Hague"* (Ibid). Altogether it appears clear that China takes advantage of its great influence in both Poland and Hungary in order to gain a foothold as a responsible great power.

Obviously, this great power is to a large extent expressed of China's importance on trade and investments. Like in the Polish perspective the EU plays a significant role on trade, and it still

remain uncertain how political opportunities will be produced in Chinese favor in relation to Hungary. However, unlike Poland, Hungary officially supports the granting China of market economy status. Not to mention that Hungary opposes trade defense mechanisms and investment screenings (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 110). Although this may be true, it is pointed out that *"Hungary still votes for anti-dumping measures and is sometimes said to follow Germany"* (Ibid). However, while it should be noted that Chinese investments within Hungary remain limited, the newly activation of the Budapest-Belgrade railway will undoubtedly provide Chinese companies with better opportunities to increase trade and investments. All things considered, the Hungarian approach on trade holds some of the same characteristics as its approach on human rights. Hungary prefer to act rather discreetly when its opinions differs too much with Chinese expectations. In practice, at least on trade issues, the reality is different. With that being said, while the Budapest-Belgrade is expected to finish in 2025, opportunities within trade between Hungary and China will thrive and most likely increase.

## Conclusion

To conclude it is clear that China's Belt and Road Initiative plays a significant role in China's strategic motivation in the 17+1 countries, and thereby in increase connectivity and gain influence in the European region. In order understand China's strategic motivation in the 17+1 countries the thematic analysis of The Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and the Central European Countries was conducted. There were found five distinct themes: consent, asymmetry, pending dialogue, strategic importance and the EU. On the other hand, in order to understand the EU's response a thematic analysis of the EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership was similarly conducted. In this analysis there were found six distinct themes: consent, asymmetry, pending dialogue, bilateral challenges, regional challenges, and international challenges. It was found that China's strategic motivation in the 17+1 countries are extremely comprehensive and also involves the potential gain of influence in the EU. It remains clear that the CEE countries are found to be strategically important for China's BRI. The ultimate aim for China is to direct trade routes connecting China and Europe. Henceforth, this increasing connectivity with Europe increases China's possibility to increase its global power, and ultimately in the EU. It was similarly found that China's strategic motivation in promoting the BRI can ease its domestically overheated traditional sectors. On the other hand, the response from the EU is found be rather vague. The EU are found to have difficulties finding reciprocity internally in a united response to the Chinese gaining influence. In particular, it can be concluded that the EU's response is highly concerned around the asymmetries of the parties. On that note, it seems clear that the EU has put itself in a stalemate-like situation waiting for China to change its values. With that being said, there are initiated on-going negotiations on an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which may result in more powerful response from the EU.

Moreover, based on the analysis the theory of Political Opportunity Structure was applied to examine how political opportunities are produced and unfolded in the relationship. It was found that especially the BRI, human rights, Covid-19 and trade currently are central structures which provides political opportunities. As BRI is increasing connectivity it also provides

political opportunities for China to increase its softer power in the involved countries, while the EU's response remains rather vague, but they obtain the role as an observing member in the 17+1 platform. The human rights situation in China is, for China, concerned more about reducing setbacks rather than pursuing opportunities. On the other hand, the EU strongly condemns Chinese actions on the issue and the topic remain a cornerstone to the development of the relationship. Likewise, the Covid-19 crisis is an important structure currently. It was found that that China has pursued opportunities to act responsible and create the narrative that China, unlike the US, is a responsible global power – a narrative that the EU has warned about. The trade situation was also found to appear as a distinct structure providing political opportunities. How opportunities exactly will unfold is yet uncertain due to on-going negotiations. It was found, however, that China is taken great advantage of the market asymmetries and protects its companies by preventing FDI's in strategic important sectors. Likewise, Chinese companies benefit from lack of transparency and forced transfers of technology. This situation has caused the EU to raise its voice and demand negotiations and WTO reforms.

Finally, it was found that all of these opportunity structures could also be found in China's practice in Poland and Hungary. Both Poland and Hungary are found to have immense importance for China's BRI. Worth mentioning is that both countries were among the first countries to partner up and sign a MoU of the BRI. In Poland, China has for the first time started a project won through public bidding. Similarly, China's intentions in Hungary are concerned around the development of the Budapest-Belgrade railway. Here, the Chinese Export-Import Bank has provided Hungary with loans covering the price of 85% of the project. The two countries remain essential for China's BRI, as the motivation clearly is to connect maritime and railways forming a direct trade route from China to western Europe. As for the Covid-19 crisis, China has tried to strengthen its influence by building the narrative of acting responsibly. However, media is found to focus on China's lack of responsibility. On the other hand, it was found that crisis has provided a practical opportunity. While the Covid-19 crisis has been dominating the media coverage, the aforementioned loan deal was signed. This has barely reached public attention, despite legislation has been submitted by Hungarian Parliament to classify details on the loan deal for ten years. Furthermore, it was found that Poland and Hungary both are reluctant to publicly raise concerns on the human rights situation in China. Both



countries have rejected to sign certain joint statements in the EU and the UN Human Rights Council. This certainly expresses two central points. First, it expresses the challenge the EU is experiencing to find unity and to speak with one voice. It is also an expression of how influential and powerful China already is. Meanwhile, as regards the structure of trade, both countries remain members of the EU. The exact results of the negotiations of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment remain unclear. China has, however, pursued political opportunities on trade through its BRI. The Chinese rationale must be that greater connectivity will increase opportunities of trade.

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