

"Multilateralism in promoting bilateral relations: the policy of the People's Republic of China towards Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia in the 17+1 format."

Summary

The doctoral dissertation entitled "Multilateralism in promoting bilateral relations: the policy of the People's Republic of China towards Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia in the 17 + 1 format" **discusses the logic behind China's foreign policy in Central Europe through the 17+1 cooperation format.** The rationale for the above-mentioned case study selection is a public opinion survey conducted in households of 17+1 cooperation mechanism countries to assess China's activity in the international arena. According to this study, the role of the PRC in international relations is best assessed in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia; complementary to 17+1, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative have a most positive impact on the economies of the countries mentioned above.

In 2012, during the then Prime Minister of China Wen Jiabao's visit to Poland, China officially launched the China-CEEC cooperation format 16+1. This format was enlarged in 2019 by including Greece during the format summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia – expanding and changing its name to 17+1.

Therefore, during the research following hypothesis has been tested: **(1)** Considering the increasing presence of China in the international arena, China's multilateral activity in the CEE region has been used as a platform to strengthen bilateral relations with a relatively low component of multilateral cooperation; **(2)** Having the best public image in Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, the Chinese authorities and the Chinese business environment are trying to utilize it, increasing their economic presence by investments in strategic sectors as well as political activity from the indicated countries; **(3)** Unlike Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania are the members of NATO and European Union, therefore political and economic engagements with China are limited due to normative constraints; **(4)** China's relations with third countries in the CEE region, including Serbia in particular, are conditioned mainly by unresolved territorial disputes such as the Kosovo problem, which is an essential factor considering political cooperation; **(5)** China's activity in the face of the growing US-China conflict is significantly limited and the People's Republic of China limits cooperation with 17/16+1 format countries to the necessary minimum.

During the process of verifying hypotheses, the following research questions have been answered: **(1)** To what extent do third country territorial disputes generate a platform for political cooperation between China and third countries?; **(2)** How does the PRC use the 17 + 1 format to increase the efficiency of bilateral cooperation?; **(3)** Has the sectoral division of labor contributed to China's cooperation in designated areas of the economy through the use of secretariats and coordination mechanisms?; **(4)** Which sectors of the economy are the leading sectors for cooperation with China in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia? **(5)** Has the activity of diplomatic missions in selected CEE countries positively influenced the assessment of the PRC's activity in the international arena?; **(6)** Has strengthening the bilateral dimension of cooperation between China and the CEE countries reduced the foreign trade deficit?

Chapter I discuss China's activities in the region from the normative perspective. The research is based on the theoretical concept of multilateralism and so-called "Chinese multilateralism". An extensive literature review of Western and Chinese sources made it possible to determine some differences in the Chinese approach to multifaceted international cooperation. **Therefore, the research problem is the analysis of the 17+1 cooperation format based on the classical theories of multilateralism and Chinese theoretical discussions on multilateralism** and the identification of the primary motivations for conducting an active foreign policy of the PRC towards the countries of Central and Eastern

Europe under the 17+1 cooperation mechanism. It analyses China's multilateralism from both theoretical and practical dimensions.

Chapter II analyses a series of 16/17+1 summits carried out between 2012-2021 regarding a content analysis covering China's agenda regarding multilateral, transnational or bilateral cooperation. The innovative characteristic of the second chapter is to propose a new division of the functioning of the 17 + 1 format in the international space. **Therefore, a division into three key phases has been proposed: inauguration and promotion of the format (2012-2015); a phase of growth and a change in the perception of Chinese diplomacy: CEE region as a part of South-South cooperation (2015-2019); Xi Jinping's initiative, format expansion and Lithuania's exit from the format (2019-2021).**

Chapters III-V offers an extensive analysis of bilateral political and economic cooperation between China's cooperation with Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. **Case studies have been discussed by setting several variables, which include the history of bilateral relations, the number of high-ranked official visits, economic cooperation, analysis of the concluded investments, analysis of activities of China's diplomats as well as relations of the case study countries with the EU, the U.S., NATO, and Russia.** Another circumstance that prompts the authorities of the People's Republic of China to engage in deeper cooperation with CEE countries is that 17+1 countries are considered developing countries. Therefore, in Chinese perception, this is a platform of the so-called "The Global South" cooperation because the PRC is recognizing itself and has been recognized as a developing country – according to the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling.

The conclusions of the thesis cover the incompatibility of Chinese official narratives regarding multilateralism with actual actions undertaken by the government in Beijing and Chinese business circles. It should be noted that the 17+1 format since the beginning has not used the potential for coordinated, multilateral actions and, with one exception, has not delivered cross-border projects. This has led to growing disappointment within the 17+1 countries. Instead, Beijing has based its cooperation on the bilateral dimension of relations under the multilateral umbrella. It has caused strong opposition from the European Union and especially the U.S. to engage in deeper economic and political cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries. Moreover, China's assessment of the project results as disappointing – in terms of economic and political gains in most of the countries – is leading to a possible reduction of the frequency and political rank of the official summits (before 2019, the meetings were held annually at the level of prime ministers). Another argument confirming the above hypothesis is that the guidelines summarizing successive summits of the format reflect the leading position of China in the format by listing goals of Chinese diplomacy concerning individual countries. In this regard, it should be emphasized that these guidelines were prepared by the 17+1 secretariat in Beijing, established in September 2012, which is structurally assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC. As a result, the countries of the CEE region were not directly involved in forming the guidelines for cooperation. It implies that the members of the 16/17+1 format had limited possibilities to define new directions of collaboration leading to a one-sided process of identifying areas of cooperation. In addition, it should be stressed that the concept of multilateralism within the analysis of messages after the summits and the publications of the PRC ambassadors in the countries covered within the case study research appears exceptionally rarely. The first use of multilateralism (*duobian zhuyi*) in the guidelines concluding the summit took place in 2017 in Budapest. Earlier, during the Riga summit (2016), the guidelines referred to multilateral cooperation (*duobian hezuo*). The last official document referring to the multilateral nature of cooperation was the guidelines after the summit in Croatian Dubrovnik (2019), which referred to multilateral trade (*duobian maoyi*).