

New Perspectives for Europe–China Relations

Throughout its history, the *Baltic Journal of European Studies* (BJES) has predominantly been focused on the themes and scenes related to Europe and the European Union (EU). The current Special Issue is looking far beyond, attempting to touch upon and, with a hope, to analyse a remarkable geo-strategic initiative of modern time, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is also known in academic and political discourse as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). Proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI is directly and indirectly linked with myriads of other China-originated handsels—for example, with the inward-oriented concept of Chinese Dream or, from a broader perspective, the Chinese state's burgeoning cooperation with sixteen Central and Eastern European countries (16+1 Cooperation). All these developments, especially their truly impressive strategic amplitude, are something that Europe (in general) and the EU (in particular) have never experienced before. Declared by China as inclusive in its nature, the BRI and, for that matter, the 16+1 Cooperation are of great interest for scholars in different fields of academic research—from international relations to legal studies, from political economy to philosophy. Indeed, there is a high probability for a scholar to detect something intriguing within a framework, in which countries as different as Estonia and Croatia are engaged in cooperation with the world's most populous nation. Moreover, a high number of countries and organisations outside of the 16+1 'playground', namely the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Austria, Belarus, Switzerland, and some others, have also expressed their interest in participating at different stages.

This is all happening in a historic period of the highest complexity for interrelations on the global level. The Russia-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and its special emphasis on Central Asia, the EU sanctions on Russia because of its aggression against Ukraine, a range of mixed geo-strategic signals being sent to the international community by the Donald Trump Administration, the Brexit issue, and uncertainties related to North Korea—these are only a handful of big challenges which make the context of any analysis very different from what it would have been only a generation ago. At the same time, there is no better moment for a decent as well as constructively critical academic debate on the main features of the actuality. Given the fact that China is the second largest economic partner of the EU, the BRI is arguably one of those features.

This Special Issue of *BJES* represents one of the first attempts by an EU-based academic peer-reviewed journal to provide a comprehensive platform for a critical academic discussion on the BRI. Responding to a call for papers jointly issued by *BJES* and Croatian International Relations Review (CIRR) back in September 2016, a solid group of high-profile international contributors from different academic fields, while employing rigorous methodology, decided to get engaged in a debate on the BRI, mechanisms of its implementation and results measurements, prospects for the initiative-bound business-related, academic and people-to-people cooperational linkages to be developed, the BRI's impact on the EU's interactions with China, and the Central, East and Southeast Europe's direct and indirect participation in the framework.

In the first paper, Dr. Yilmaz Kaplan from Erzurum Technical University is examining the OBOR initiative from the perspective of “geo-functional institutionalism”. His argument is rather encouraging for Europeans: China is proposing not a hegemonic but rather a win-win concept of cooperation and has clearly functional and entrepreneurial capacity to implement the giant project. Furthermore, according to Kaplan, China's deliberativeness as a global actor provides a ground for parity and general consensus. At the same time, a tandem of Shanghai-based scholars, Dr. Lin Zhang and Dr. Zheqian Xu, express their concern that the institutional distance increases the costs, warning the policy makers that in order to strengthen cooperation within the BRI, the policy makers should “pay more attention to institutional differences among countries”.

Dr. Andrea Éltető from Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Professor Dr. Katalin Antalóczy from Budapest Business School are screening the export strategies of the EU Member States, concluding that, although Europeans understand that “export is a motor of growth”, there are certain pre-requisites for the successful export policies, such as transparency, stability and development of human capital. Dr. Duško Dimitrijević, professorial fellow at the Institute for International Politics and Economics in Belgrade, is contributing with a country-specific research on China–Serbia economic relations, focusing on Chinese investments. He explains the main reasons for the relations being “asymmetrical”, suggesting that a change in methodology and economic policy applications is required for more successful cooperation between the two sides in the OBOR-bound framework.

A comparative analysis on Slovakia is presented by economist Dr. Liqun Zhang, a scholar of international relations Dr. Martin Grešš, and a practising lawyer Dr. Katarina Brocková. Their paper, which is based on solid empirical data, indicates that there is a chance that the so far insignificant Chinese-originated foreign direct investment inflow may turn to a positive trend and criticises the

weakness of current legal framework on protecting Chinese investments in Slovakia.

Colleagues from Latvia, Professor Dr. Inna Šteinbuka, head of the EC Representation in Latvia and Member of Latvian Academy of Sciences, Professor Dr. Tatyana Muravska from the University of Latvia, and Andris Kužnieks, deputy head of the EC Representation in Latvia, are introducing a rather optimistic approach towards the EU–China as well as 16+1 cooperation. Moreover, the authors argue that “there are no major risks that could go against the EU”. Their arguments are based on a range of positive outcomes for the EU from the EU–China strategic partnership that could prepare the ground for a reciprocal dialogue.

The EU has been carefully constructing its single market rules and integrative policies, which also provide for shaping the entity’s interconnections with other economic areas, including partnerships of strategic importance (i.e. strategic partnerships with the USA, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Canada, and others). It can be easily predicted that the EU–China cooperation in the process of the BRI’s implementation will be requiring compromises in different areas and some serious work to be done by both sides on legislation adjustment. However, there is always a belief that the new era that is dawning over the EU and China will be one of opportunities and positivity.

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