

Struberga S.

Sigita Struberga is Secretary-General of Latvian Transatlantic Organisation, PhD candidate and lecturer of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Latvia. Address for correspondence: Alberta 13, Rīga, Latvia, LV-1010; tel. +371 26868668; el. p.: sigita.struberga@lato.lv.

CHINA-CEEC COOPERATION IN EDUCATION AND SCIENCE: DO MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS MATTER?

The “16+1” format has become one of the most debated regional collaboration frameworks developed within the “Belt and Road” Initiative (B&R). The format is still into the political agenda despite the fact that some of the Eastern European countries have questioned its reasonability since other are ready to continue expanding opportunities for win-win relations. The scope of interactions within the mechanism is organized around 3 axes: trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. The latter promotes the facilitation of mutual trust, consolidation, intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge between the PRC and CEEC, where science and education sector is an important instrument, which is leading the promotion of people-to-people exchanges.

The aim of the paper is to investigate student mobility and academic exchanges of tertiary education institutions as an instrument for promoting more extensive cooperation between CEEC and the PRC, taking into consideration the opportunities given by the work of the 16+1 format. Special attention is paid to describing the main challenges and prospects for collaboration in the fields of science and education with the emphasis on the different perceptions of threats caused by political context. The study is based on the analysis of existing research, statistics and data collected from 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with people from the PRC and 5 CEEC countries involved in PRC-CEEC exchanges in 2019. Other 5 in-depth semi-structured interviews were done in 2021 in order to check the situation in cooperation during Covid-19 Pandemics as well as while taking in account political challenges, which the format 16+1 is facing.

Keywords: China; CEEC; 16+1 format; scientific and educational exchange, people-to-people exchange

Introduction

The Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) have a long history of interactions and CEEC has been a prominent region for Chinese diplomacy. In light of deepening relations, in the recent period since the specialized mechanism for cooperation “16+1” was formalized, it has become one of the most effective regional collaboration frameworks among those developed within the “Belt and Road” initiative. Under the institutionalized regional cooperation label, the format has 3 levels: the Secretariat, which is the central institution located in Beijing which promotes relations with the embassies of CEEC; the level of the heads of state; and the level of expert discussions and cooperation in the key areas. Involvement in any level of the mechanism is upon each country on a voluntary basis (Maratzki, 2017). Practically, the 16+1 format mainly operates on the basis of institutionalized bilateral cooperation between the PRC and CEEC (Turcanyi, 2017; Hackaj, 2018; Szczudlik, 2019) and should rather be seen as an important part of European-Chinese relations, which complements the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (Dubrovnik Guidelines, 2019).

The 9th summit between PRC and CEEC scheduled to proceed in the first half of 2020. China and some of the CEE countries saw it as a milestone for the further development of the multilateral cooperation within the framework 16+1 (then 17 +1). The launch of the China- CEEC Cooperation initiative was expected to boost further cooperation, but instead, cooperation between CEEC and China deteriorated in all dimensions (Jing, L., 2020:165).

Global Covid-19 Pandemics, political and economic cleavages between the West and China, like for example, dispute about the status of Taiwan, have promoted rise of rivalry between China and the West, including part of the CEEC. Also, one can observe the change in Chinese foreign policy discourse with underlying priority of bilateral cooperation with European countries. No less important is non-willingness to share research data under threat of intellectual rights, as well as unknown Chinese purposes while collecting big data about European critical infrastructure and other dimensions, which are seen as an issue of European and national securities. China itself has questioned appropriateness of scientific data sharing. President Xi Jinping urged Chinese scientists to “adhere to the supremacy of the national interests”, while underlining the importance of the international

scientific cooperation during his speech in September 2020. This set of factors has significantly diminished scientific cooperation and academic mobility (Nature, 2021). On another hand, China is still inviting to promote cooperation with special emphasis on research collaboration in developing drugs, vaccines and testing methods for COVID-19, strengthening human health, fight against climate change. According to President Xi, innovations should be seen as the primary driving force for development (Zhang, Y. & Cao C., 2020).

Formally mentioned above does not change institutional structures which are established to facilitate scientific cooperation and academic mobility. The scope of formal cooperation structures within the mechanism includes fields for cooperation starting from transportation to health and culture. It is organized around 3 axes: trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. The last promotes facilitating the mutual trust and consolidation of intercultural understanding, as well as the exchange of knowledge between China and CEEC. The cooperation in science and education has topped people-to-people exchange. It is institutionalized under more specialized and centralized sub-platforms and initiatives¹. These and other educational policies, cooperation networks, and measures demonstrate the commitment of all parties to deepen PRC-CEEC cooperation for mutual understanding and trust, as well as for the common benefit from knowledge building and talent cultivation. They promote opening of a new space for the creation of joint study programs and a network of scholarships within governmental policies and frameworks, research within the framework of joint research centers, common projects of research centers from both sides, and new cooperation frameworks with other stakeholders, such as NGOs and industry. At the same time, statistics demonstrate that exchanges and mobility are not as intensive as one could expect. For this reason, the interesting issue emerges as to what exactly causes such low figures for two-way mobility and exchanges. No less interesting is a question whether and how the Covid-19 Pandemics and context of rivalry between the West and China has influenced work of recently established cooperation networks and what are personal perceptions of the involved scientists and academics towards each other and represented countries during escalation of the political and

¹ Examples of such cooperation initiatives are the PRC-CEEC Higher Education Institutions Consortium and PRC-CEEC Youth Development Centre (proposed in Dubrovnik this year). Several forums have proceeded (PRC-CEEC high-level symposium of think tanks, PRC-CEEC Young Political Leaders' Forum, China-CEEC Education Policy Dialogue, etc.), as well as other activities such as the PRC — CEEC Education Capacity Building Project and the PRC — CEEC Joint Education Project of Institutions of Higher Education are proposed.

economic conflicts. Thus, the authors try to find an answer to the question 'Do perceptions of each other influence decisions about further cooperation?' and other similar issues to be discussed.

The aim of the paper is to analyze student mobility and academic exchanges of tertiary education institutions as an instrument for promoting more extensive cooperation between CEEC and PRC in consideration of opportunities offered by the work of the 16+1 format. Special attention is paid to the description of the main challenges and prospects for deepening and widening collaboration. The authors have used Kehm and Teicher's model for the analysis of the internationalization of science and education, as well as their framework on mobility patterns. According to this approach, an overview of 7 main areas is provided: national and supranational policies as in regard to the international dimension of higher education; the mobility of students and academic staff; the internationalization of teaching, studying and research; the institutional strategies for internationalization; the mutual influence of higher education systems on each other; knowledge transfer; cooperation and competition (Kehm & Teicher, 2007: 264).

The paper is based on the analysis of existing research on the educational and scientific exchange between PRC and Europe, statistics and data collected from 15 in-depth anonymous in-depth semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative staff involved in exchanges between higher education institutions from the PRC and CEEC countries — Poland, Latvia, Romania, Hungary, Check Republic and Albania. Other 5 in-depth semi-structured interviews were done in 2021 in order to check the situation in cooperation during Covid-19 Pandemics as well as while taking in account political challenges, which the format 16+1 is facing. The first part of the paper provides a description of policies of the parties regarding the internationalization of science and tertiary education as well as a description of the main stakeholders and programs which contribute to the development of cooperation. The second part gives an analysis of the statistics of the mobility between PRC and CEEC. The third focuses on the challenges that the parties are facing in developing new cooperation mechanisms and strengthening existing ones. The significance of the paper is to provide recommendations for the contribution of PRC — CEEC cooperation in the field of science and education.

1. Modernization and internationalization of science and higher education: Policies and instruments

In the past two decades the PRC and CEEC have faced fundamental transformations in their systems of science and higher education. Political

and economic developments have deeply influenced their self-perception, redefined research and teaching approaches, as well as opening them to the world. Subsequently, noticeable results have been reached due to special attention put on modernization and internationalization processes.

The Chinese scientific and educational rise after its opening can be viewed as a renaissance. Efforts producing development have been put at all levels of governance and science and education systems. The government has annually increased investment in these sectors and the PRC already outperforms the EU in its research and development funding in terms of the share of the GDP (Veugelers, 2017). Great attention has been paid to the introduction of many initiatives for the further advance. Internationalization is the driving factor in there. For example, at a national level the implementation of the National Medium and Long-Term Education Outline (2010-2020) promotes the extensive development of modernization, as well as the internationalization of the education system. The 13th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China includes expressed political will to modernize and internationalize the education system (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016). At the lower institutional level — joint ventures and the cooperation between different level government and education institutions is being realized, while at societal level — families prepare youth to study abroad, seeing it as a guarantee for more a competitive status of them in a future (Wei, 2016: 55; Daxue Consulting, 2018).

The China Scholarship Council is the core implementer and main institution responsible for the educational exchange policies. The Council works under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of the PRC and it is mainly financed by the government. It provides a set of scholarships and actively contributes to the promotion of scientific and educational exchange. This means that a considerable amount of funding has been offered by this institution to foreign students for studies in China and to Chinese students for overseas studies. Much has been done in accordance with the exchange agreements between EU countries and China. For example, the Council has established the "EU Window" which provides different scholarships for studying or doing research in Chinese higher education institutions (China Scholarship Council, 2019). Other programs supporting EU-China academic mobility: Marie Curie outgoing fellowships; International Research Staff Exchange Scheme; EU Member States National Fellowship schemes; Chinese grant schemes for foreign researchers (e.g. National Natural Science Foundation of China, Chinese Scholarship Council; Erasmus Mundus; Science and Technology Fellowship Program; Europe China Research and Advice Network etc). Chinese Education Association

for International Exchange conducts several programs for attracting the exchange of students. For example, the CEAIE-AFS Intercultural Programs. It has set up the Office of China Education Opportunities in 2015 for promoting the attraction and influence of Chinese universities as well as the sustainable development and internationalization of Chinese higher education. This institution is also involved in an organization of China-CEEC Education Policy Dialogue (China Education Association for International Exchange, 2015). Partner organizations in CEEC: Boym Universities Consortium (Poland); China-Central and Eastern European Countries' Higher Education Institutions Consortium and two European organizations (the European Association for International Exchange and Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe). In comparison, France only accounts for 5 partner organizations, the UK 3, Germany and the Netherlands hold 2 each.

Similar activities expressing the will to modernize and internationalize have been realized in the field of science. For example, the PRC has introduced the "Recruitment Program of Foreign Experts," administrated by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs of China and China's talent program: the "Thousand Talents Program" and "Thousand Youth Talents Plan", run by the Chinese Communist Party Organization Bureau. These programs fund the recruitment of world-class researchers, high-level professionals, and entrepreneurs with the aim to put China at the forefront in strategic fields (D'Hooghe et al., 2018: 17).

These and other initiatives have improved the performance of science and higher education and placed the PRC among the leading nations in tertiary education, research, and innovation. The PRC has recently overtaken the US in overall scientific output and is the second in Patent Cooperation and Treaty patents and overall citations (LI, 2018; Welch, 2018). This makes China's higher education institutions increasingly attractive partners (Welch, Xu, 2019: 260, 274). Nevertheless, the overall level of the higher education system has space for improvement, and Chinese scientific performance is still behind several other countries in the global knowledge stakes. It is concluded that it will take time before Chinese tertiary education and research institutions will be fully on par with similar ones in the West (Yang, 2014: 35; Wei, 2016: 55; Welch & Xu, 2019: 260).

When it comes to attention to instruments offered by the 16+1 format, the PRC and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in particular, holds 16+1 Think Tank Exchanges and Cooperation Network. While the 16+1 Association of Colleges and Universities is not delegated to any country, coordination takes place cooperatively by the Ministries of Education of all CEECs (Zuokoi, 2017: 27- 28). Other institutionalized interactions under the Format are PRC-CEEC Higher Education Institutions Consortium and the PRC-

CEEC Education Policy Dialogue. In both cases, there are regular meetings proceeding. During these meetings, opportunities for cooperation to develop ways to promote the exchange of students, joint study programs and scholarship programs are being discussed. The Chinese government is also actively seeking to introduce new instruments and resources. For example, in the period from 2018 to 2023, the PRC plans to provide no less than 5,000 government scholarships of all kinds to CEEC for the expansion of educational exchange (Li Keqiang, 2017). PRC has developed such initiatives as, for example, the China-CEEC Relations Research Fund and the China-CEEC Youth Development Center, as well as other smaller network activities as a part of 16+1 people-to-people exchanges. At the same time, it is often noted that formal meetings do not carry results as successful as one could expect. Differences between the resources of the PRC and CEECs, the scope of activities and interests, as well as the function of political, social and educational systems, are evident.

Since 2019, the EU and China have negotiated an agreement for boosting bilateral cooperation on research and innovation projects. Recently only such common interest areas have been involved in the cooperation formats as food security, agriculture, and biotechnology. EU is demanding to accept the number of strict rules regarding reciprocity, access to the Research and Development funds, intellectual property, open access to research publications, ethics, mobility of researchers. PRC is reluctant and slow to accept such rules (Gallardo, C., 2021).

CEECs share a soviet past and have went through radical changes, which “have not only been much more abrupt and fast paced than in the West, but also run in parallel to all-embracing political, economic and social transformations and, in many cases, nation-building” (Dobbins & Kwiek, 2017:519). Despite the existence of differences in the traditions of governance of higher education institutions, westernization, Europeanisation and other socio-political processes have brought considerable unification. One of the most significant common features is history: experiences of authoritarian-socialist or communist rule, then painful transformation processes after the collapse of the USSR when academics went through a transition from highly bureaucratic and politized higher education systems to less politized, collegial and mass orientated. During the transformation process, academia was characterized as less mobile, worse paid and more inbred than their Western colleagues (Dobbins & Kwiek, 2017: 519).

Recently considerable development has been achieved. Some regionally significant education and science centers, such as the University of Tartu, Charles University, or Warsaw University have demonstrated high-level performance and are

appreciated in global universities rankings. However, when it comes to overall tertial education in CEEC, even though universities offer a generally good level of European higher education, they still do not meet the global ranking criteria. The specific issue is still prestige, reputation and research performance. Research intensive universities are more of an exception in CEEC than a norm for several reasons, including the fact that the region is still rather an economic periphery (Dobbins & Kwiek, 2017; Gawlicz & Starnawski, 2018). This comes together with a problem related to the governmental approaches to education. Even though CEECs have expressed an interest and will to internationalize their educational systems, many of them have not adapted well-developed strategies with clearly defined deliverables, including those which relate to bilateral cooperation with the PRC or within the 16+1 format.

An example of such a contractionary case is Hungary. In 2011 Hungary invented the “Eastern opening policy”. It aims to promote its links with major powers in Asia. The main areas of cooperation mentioned in it are trade, investment, education. Hungary sees the PRC as a strategic partner in this region. It has expressed willingness to build special Sino-Hungarian relations, emphasizing Hungary’s role as a gateway to Europe and as a partner which is ready to support Chinese ambitions in the Europe. Thus, Hungary is one of the most proactive partners in the 16+1 format. It would be expected to serve as the attractor of Chinese students and facilitator of both way mobility in science and education. However, according to the statistics regarding implemented projects and mobility, this has not transpired.

Another contractionary example is Poland. In general, Poland could serve as a success story for the internationalization of the country’s tertiary education. It has become one of the most attractive CEEC for foreign students due to its radical transformations and active internationalization measures. Enjoying opportunities offered by the EU, a special program was launched by two institutions — the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland and the Perspektywy Education Foundation. It is called the long-term internationalization program “Study in Poland”. By working in parallel with other higher education institutions, they have made a specific system of internationalization and it has resulted in remarkable results. The number of international students increased more than 7 times — from 10 092 in 2005 when the program “Study in Poland” was launched, to 72 743 in 2018 (Siwińska, 2019).

Poland’s participation in the 16+1 format has positively affected the establishment of certain institutionalized formats of intergovernmental and intersectoral talks with the PRC. For example, the PRC and Poland hold the annual Polish Chinese

Forum of Rectors. During these meetings, issues such as the recognition of education, academic and professional mobility are discussed (Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, 2018). Besides, the PRC sees Poland as an important player in shaping the EU strategy for higher education (Hao, 2018). At the universities' level, institutions are working to promote themselves in the PRC in different ways, for example, recruitment agencies, WeChat advertising, etc. Several joint study programs have been introduced. For example, University of Lodz and Zhengzhou University introduced a study program in Economics in 2012, Warsaw University of Technology and Qinzhou University introduced a joint study program in Electronic Information Engineering in 2015 (Xiangkun, 2018), Warsaw University and Sichuan university introduced a master study program in international relations and International Economics. These activities are expected to promote exchange at a high level. The statistics of incoming Chinese students demonstrated an increase since the programs have been invented (Feng, 2018; Siwińska, 2019), but it is relatively small in terms of investment activities. No less important obstacle for further cooperation has emerged recently in the context of Pandemics and political and economic rivalry. Formally there are no significant changes, while practice demonstrate not only rapid decline in academic mobility due to the restrictions, but also degradation or even stoppage of scientific and academic cooperation. Therefore, these and other examples from CEEC provoke a question about the efficiency of programs, as well as obstacles for transnational cooperation in its practical sense.

2. The characteristics of education and research mobility between China and CEEC

According to official statistics, the Contemporary Chinese higher education system offers 8,000,000 students graduating per year; and PRC is the world's largest source country for international students. According to the Ministry of Education of the PRC, the number of Chinese students who left the country to study abroad reached 608, 400 students in 2017, 11.74 % more than the previous year. The number of those who returned reached 480,900, with a 11.19 % increase in 2016. 227,400 of them returned with a master's degree or higher. In total, 1,454,100 Chinese students studied abroad in 2017. The United States of America (USA) and Western Europe remained the most popular destinations, while B & R countries become more and more popular among the Chinese students who want to study abroad. 66,100 students studied in 37 B&R countries, leading to a 15.7 % growth since 2016. 541,300 or 88.97% of all students studying abroad were self-funded, while 31,200 individuals, 12,800 visiting scholars (41,17%) and 13,200 graduate or doctoral students (42.29%),

studied in 94 countries using state funding to study abroad in 2017. The number of individuals joining overseas programs with local government or employer sponsorship reached 35,900, which was an increase of 119.71% in 2016. This means that the PRC provides a reasonable number of undergraduate students, as well as young researchers with their own sources of funding their academic activities who are interested to do their research in Europe (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2018; D'Hooghe et al., 2018: 23).

With large numbers of Chinese students studying abroad, and the potential increase of them due to the growth of middle class and the number of high-income families in Chinese society, along with the interest of Chinese families in giving the best affordable higher education for their children gives prospects for a further influx of Chinese students in Europe. This has been appreciated by Western higher education institutions. CEECs are no exception in this sense. For this reason, it is not surprising that an increasing amount of CEEC universities choose to step up their efforts in competition for attracting Chinese students. But the problem is that the distribution of these students is not even among European countries. None of the CEEC are among the leading recipients of Chinese students traveling to Europe for tertiary education (Eurostat, 2018). In 2019, only 5,418 Chinese students are studying in CEECs according to Jiang (Jiang, 2019).

When it comes to foreign students studying in the PRC, 75,800 students from 204 countries studied in 935 Chinese higher education institutions in 2017, reaching an increase of 18.62% compared to the previous year. The number of students from B&R countries was 317 200 and made 64.85% of all international students in China, an increase of 11.58%. The number of self-funded students was 430,600 or 88.03% of all overseas students. 58,600 or 1/6th of all foreign students enjoyed Chinese government scholarships. 88.02% of them were degree students; 69.57% were graduates or doctoral students (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2018). The share of CEEC students among them was 6,188, and 1,582 of those are on Chinese government scholarships (Jiang, 2019). In comparison, Chinese students in Europe are generally full-degree students, in contrast with European students in the PRC, which are mostly non-degree students (90 %) participating in short-term mobility programs. These students generally study in the area of economics and language courses. However, the number of degree students is increasing (Eurostat, 2018). According to Jing, while around 10,000 students had been involved in student exchange programs between China and CEE countries as of 2018, with more than 5,500 students from CEE countries studying in China (Jing, 2020: 168).

To analyze students and academic mobility in the context of the 16+1 format, it should be noted that according to Chinese officials, in the period

when it was introduced in 2012 to 2017, the number of two — way exchange students has doubled (Li Keqiang, 2017). But because no systematic, comprehensive data regarding the impact of the 16+1 format in exchanges is provided, it is hard to evaluate the impact of it separately clearly and scientifically from other programs provided by the Chinese government, EU and others.

3. Challenges

In this chapter, the authors identify five of the most often mentioned challenges, reflects on and give recommendations for solving each of them. One of the main challenges for more intense cooperation, which both — Chinese and Europeans — have mentioned is the lack of knowledge and understanding about each other. It slows down mobility due to fear and prejudice about living in a completely different and unknown environment with a different language, culture, societal habits, and political system. It is also evident from data that most European students and academics have an interest in attending short-term programs which include learning the language and Chinese culture or conducting short-term research. Despite the interest in learning the language and cultural peculiarities, the level of understanding of the PRC policies and values remains low. This leads to negative views about the PRC (EC & PRC MOE, 2011). Also, interviews demonstrate a misperception, observed by staff involved in exchanges, that European researchers believe in possibility to conduct high-quality research on the PRC internal issues without visiting it, and fear to conduct research in the PRC due to beliefs about political and social environment there. Interviews with Chinese interviewees demonstrate similar fears and doubts — lack of understanding about CEEC, health-care systems, social habits, lack of knowledge and doubts about quality and prestige of education in CEEC and other important factors.

More important obstacle is the gap between ideas, values and political systems. Although there are ideas and values shared by Europe and the PRC, there are still some spheres of disagreement and lack of consensus, such as human rights, political rights, and property rights or academic freedom (Christiansen & Maher, 2017; Rühlig et al., 2018; EEAC, 2019). This means that on the Chinese side, research is almost always being done for economic or political purposes and not just for “science sake” (Bekkers, Oosterveld, Verhagen, 2019: 2). Also, according to interviews, researchers in CEEC countries have no clarity of how the sensitive data about the people involved in research could be used by Chinese counterparts or how property right issues could be solved. However, the interviewees also admitted that this was not or wouldn't be a decisive factor in the decision about cooperation. The Chinese interviewees, in turn, also expressed concerns about

the potential to lose the educational and research sovereignty of the PRC.

Communication with the broader public is essential for increasing awareness about CEEC within Chinese society and vice versa. Joint events and actions of political, intellectual and business elites within the 16 +1 format, and the positive impacts of cooperation should be broadly communicated via various channels. Folders of the Format have the potential to be used for joint platforms and for communication with societies, or at least as support mechanisms for countries doing so. For example, the consortium has the potential to create a common CEEC communication strategy in the PRC.

Interviews, which were done during the period of Covid-19, demonstrate lack of trust and perception of the counterparts as a threat. Especially it has been observed between the researchers of Baltics States, Check Republic, and PRC. Researchers and academics have demonstrated not only fear regarding sharing the research data, but also emphasize differences in values and world views in general. According to interviews, these obstacles are crucial for decision whether cooperate or not. Some of the researchers and academics have even stopped the initiatives, which were started before 2020. Other CEEC countries' representatives are still rather Sino-optimistic.

Taking in account the fact that CEEC countries will need to reestablish and further develop their education markets, Chinese students will still be considered as a target audience. Countries, due to their limited resources, could cooperate to create a comprehensive targeted communication campaign about CEEC in PRC while paying attention to opportunities offered by higher education systems. What can the CEEC offer? Studies on factors affecting Chinese choice of higher education institutions demonstrate that prestige (the most often mentioned when explaining the choice to study in Western Europe) is just one of the drivers and it can't be viewed as an independent determinant. There are other factors which CEEC hold. First, it is the historical and regional-specific competencies and expertise which Western actors simply don't have. Second, CEEC education systems generally provide comparatively cheap European intermediate level education. Third, the lack of first-class universities or first-class disciplines does not mean that there is an absence of quality programs, courses or top-level researchers and lecturers. Fourth, safety. Residing in the CEEC region is safe. Fifth, is the opportunity to escape the Gaokao exam. Communicating these and other advantages as well as finding and developing specific promising niches for cooperation increases the potential to promote exchange.

The third challenge negatively affecting the intensification of exchange is the lack of clearly defined aims and/or different aims of parties during the establishment of cooperation formats and

insufficient collaboration between CEEC and Chinese higher education institutions in a practical sense. There are many ambitious agreements, joint formal initiatives, and declarations for further cooperation, but in practice, the level of collaborative results is not satisfactory. Evidence demonstrates that during official meetings, negotiations or other events regarding cooperative ventures, clear, longer-term agendas with well-defined action plans often remain unstated and implicit. Often the academic staff are visiting Chinese universities as visiting researchers or lecturers without developing further and deeper cooperation between academic institutions. It comes together with the fact that, according to the results of interviews given by Chinese researchers, there is often a lack of interest to take an active part in common projects from CEEC representatives. Besides, further evidence shows that academic collaborations between the PRC and Europe have mainly been initiated and set up by Chinese researchers (Wang & Wang, 2017).

The latest evidence demonstrates that, for example, Chinese international scientific cooperations in publishing scientific articles related to Pandemics at the beginning of Pandemic were growing, but then dropped down as spread of Covid-19 did not decrease. As scientific journal "Nature" explains, "this could be due to China's lower publication rate on the topic as infections there waned, political obstacles, or both" (Nature, 2021). More research should be done in order to uncover real situation in research cooperation and influence of geopolitics on it. No less important is to look closer on mutual perceptions of both sides. Only clear, evidence based strategic communications with clearly set aims and standards can facilitate further scientific cooperation.

Another issue mentioned in interviews is the lack of clear support from CEEC governments. As the main reason mentioned was the lack of a clear strategy towards the PRC and internationalization in general. Interviewees underlined that often internationalization is purely left to universities or faculties, institutes or even persons. Of no less importance is the issue about the will and readiness to initiate collaboration. The interaction between different consultative institutions of the 16+1 format has the potential to serve as a foundation for defining a clear, shared vision which both sides are motivated to reach and define the strategies for implementation within particular collaboration formats, which are the deliverables to be reached. It also means that CEEC governments and higher education systems should have well-defined aims and strategies for cooperation with Chinese counterparts based on a deep, knowledge-based understanding of China, its governance, education system and approach to science and academia. There should be clearly defined aims, strategies, and assessments of risks, challenges and benefit. Even though the lack of willingness to cooperate with PRC scientific

institutions has increased after 2020, there is certain space for development. It is very important to draw the red lines for the cooperation options and quality and ethical standards, which would help both sides to put clear framework of cooperation and clear rules of the research and the ways its results should be used.

The fourth obstacle against more active student and academic staff exchange holds a set of differences in administrative practices and procedures between educational and other official institutions. Europeans are often perplexed by the unpredictability and lack of transparency of the governmental system and institutions of the PRC (Chang, Yuzhuo, François, 2017; British Council, 2017). At the same time, research demonstrates that Chinese counterparts also have several challenges dealing with CEEC higher education institutions and governmental organizations. For example, the complicated visa application process and complexity of administrative procedures is one of the most often identified formal barriers. Another challenge mentioned by both — Chinese and European interviewees — is regarded as the legal status of the English language in state-financed programs in CEEC. One of the effective ways to support solving these problems is increasing knowledge about the EU, national laws and regulations regarding education, admission of Chinese nationals between Chinese administrative staff responsible for exchanges and vice versa. Visa policies for Chinese students and academic staff could be simplified. For example, one such measure could be the digitalization of certain steps for admission.

Fifth, financial and organizational incapability of CEECs for fruitful collaboration. It includes several layers of challenges. At the core here is insufficient funding to science and education in these countries. This affects not only the salaries of everyone involved, but also the development of the education institution infrastructure. As a result, this influences performance, prestige, etc. Another layer of existing mobility programs already operating between the PRC and CEECs demonstrate their incapability to encourage mobility. Programs funded by the EU and the PRC have not shown enough students and scholars are realizing mobility. CEECs, in turn, have almost no programs for sending or inviting students to/from PRC. The third layer is about the insufficient collaboration between the public and private sector stakeholders for deeper interactions in order to open space for practical innovations.

Analysis demonstrates that while Chinese education and other governmental institutions are actively working to attract foreign students, academics, and researchers to study and work in China, in CEEC funding is mainly EU provided. Initiatives introduced by the 17 +1 format work in a similar manner. This means that the framework offered by EU could be used as a support mechanism further. New initiatives should come from CEEC national

governments and networks created by the 17+1 format. Parties should explore the possibilities to mobilize resources to support direct cooperation and exchange based on a long-term strategy. Financial support tools for cooperation should be improved. Special attention should be paid to building CEEC capabilities in finding opportunities to provide a share of funding. This can be attained in several ways — differentiation of tuition fees, governmental sponsorship, the establishment of co-founded research institutes in CEEC territories, the attraction of special sponsors or more stakeholders. Public-private partnerships and other models of involvement of different stakeholders are one of the solutions, considering limited governmental resources in many CEEC cases. The last serves not only for resolving financial means, but also for pooling the exchange of knowledge from and to the business, government, non-governmental sector. It will facilitate the exchange of knowledge and excellence in practical business-orientated solutions between stakeholders in the PRC and CEEC, in addition to strengthening positions of CEEC as responsible partners, and as giving positive input in the overall development of higher education systems.

For attracting more students to take part in existing exchange programs, the image of CEEC educational programs should be improved (see above). The establishment of new innovative and sustainable study programs taught in English are necessary. Particular attention should be paid to creating an offer for different level interdisciplinary studies on the CEEC region, its cooperation with the PRC, as well as research on the 16+1 Format, thus taking a specific niche in regional and China studies for undergraduates. In reaction to the needs of students' with very different social experience and cultural background, it would be recommended to work more intensively on the establishment of more comprehensive student support services for foreigners.

Conclusion

The 16+1 format has been a very significant driving force for identifying the main interests and establishing new cooperation mechanisms for the deepening of beneficial relations between CEEC and the PRC that contribute to the development

of countries and the well-being of societies. The pace and content of cooperative measures were increasingly promising up till the beginning of 2020. In this actively developing frame of the PRC and CEEC partnership, people-to-people exchange has been a critical component. Student and academic staff mobility, in particular, had a dynamic to become a core for further interactions and tend to increase. The format, working hand in hand with EU-PRC Strategic partnership and being part of the B&R Initiative, stimulated the creation of globalized, knowledge-based future higher education systems and innovative societies. It served as an instrument for the establishment of soft power and building a positive image of the parties on the grounds of being partners. On another hand — cooperation did not reach reciprocity and there are still several challenges parties are facing.

The spread of Pandemic has almost stopped exchanges, the mutual lack of trust and perceptions to be threatened has negatively influenced cooperation. China's unfair and unequal approach towards counterparts has resulted in deterioration of the Format 16+1 sustainability and rather is seen as additional formal framework to bilateral cooperation between PRC and CEE countries. Though there are still some opportunities to be explored.

This research and other related pieces of research demonstrate that data collection on students and academic staff mobility, as well as other cooperation formats between the PRC and CEEC higher education systems, including those provided by the 16+1 format, should be done more preciously and compiled in a more accessible way for broader publics. This accumulation of evidence-based knowledge will give an impact on the development of policies from both sides. Special attention should be paid to prioritizing actions that would have the potential to have a structural impact on areas that are defined as the most promising ones. Now it is time for the countries and societies at large to make adopted decisions to work for the benefit of all involved nations. The cooperation must be built on clear aims, clear standards and clear, well performed strategic communication between the counterparts. This can be finalized with greater exchange and cooperation, which will translate political will into tangible benefits and practical solutions.

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