



Chinese Media Watch: 16+1 & China-EU Summit

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CHINESE MEDIA WATCH

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1 Introduction

In July, the EU-China relations have undergone the annual flurry of summitry. First, on July 6-7 the meeting of the leaders of the members of the 16+1 cooperation mechanism grouping China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries was held in Sofia, Bulgaria. This was the seventh 16+1 summit. It was followed by the 20th EU-China Summit hosted by Beijing on July 16.

Hidden behind the usual scene of countless handshakes and photo-ops, it could be sensed that the ties between the EU and China are entering a new period. While the EU's concerns about the growing relationship between China and the CEE countries and related fears about Chinese investments and increased influence in Europe are adding unforeseen challenges to both sides, the geopolitical shake-up caused by the Trump administration - especially its declaration of a trade war - creates new possibilities for cooperation.

In this paper, we will look at how this new developments were translated into media discourses. Media play a crucial role in creating and disseminating narratives and are thus a powerful tool for examining the prevailing perceptions in the respective countries. When looking through the prism of media reporting, we can see what is being highlighted, what is downplayed or even ignored, in other words, how the information is filtered for consumption by the reader.

For the purpose of this paper, we have analyzed media reporting on the Sofia Summit of 16+1 and the EU-China Summit in Beijing in China, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. We have analyzed all the relevant media reporting and identified the main themes. This enabled us to make conclusions about the different aspects emphasized in the reporting in the respective countries and make tentative comparisons.

2 Chinese media discourse

2.1 16+1

As the highest-level yearly conference between China and 16 CEE countries, the 16+1 Summit received coverage from major Chinese media platforms, such as the People's Daily, Xinhua, and Guangming Daily. Three new narratives tackle speculations regarding this Summit, doubts in Europe related to the 16+1, and the value of the mechanism in the current international affairs.

Firstly, the Chinese side commented openly on the rumors that the summit might happen biannually in the future. In an article published on China.com.cn, Liu Zuokui, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, commented:

Before the Summit, CEE scholars questioned the sustainability of the “16+1 cooperation” in the Diplomat, including whether the summit will be downgraded, whether it will be held once every two years, who will be the host country of the next summit, or whether the next summit will take place on the sidelines of a more significant event and so on. All these speculations were broken after the Sophia Outline. (China.com.cn)

峰会召开前，中东欧学者在美国《外交》杂志上发声，对“16+1 合作”的可持续性提出了质疑，包括峰会是否会降格，峰会两年一次，下一届峰会主办国是谁以及峰会被安排在一些重大国际会议场合同时举行等等，种种猜测，在《索菲亚纲要》出台后就不攻自破了。（中国网）

Sophia Outline confirmed that the next 16+1 summit will take place in Croatia next year. Liu's comment shows that China is aware of the international discussion regarding the summit, and it also sends out a message that “*facts speak louder than words*” (事实胜于雄辩), so China will respond to the speculation with deeds.

Secondly, China openly tackled the accusation that the 16+1 platform affects the unity of the EU. Ma Junchi, another researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, commented through an article in Guangming Daily:

When Merkel visited China this May, she stated clearly: The 16+1 is a beneficial platform that can help the CEE countries with their infrastructure construction. The CEE countries and China can complement each other, and the cooperation between China and the CEE is a supplement to the internal construction of the EU, rather than a division of the EU. [...] Therefore, Merkel's remarks provide a positive signal for China to continue to strengthen cooperation with the CEE countries, and also provide opportunities for future third-party cooperation with Germany in the region. (Guangming Daily)

今年 5 月，德国总理默克尔访华时明确表示：“16+1 合作”是一个有益的合作平台，有利于促进中东欧国家基础设施建设。中东欧国家与中国优势互补，开展合作是对欧盟内部建设有益的补充，并不是在分化欧盟 [...] 因此，默克尔的这番话为中国继续加强与中东欧国家的合作提供了积极信号，同时，也为未来与德国一道在该地区开展第三方合作提供了机会。(光明网)

By quoting the positive remarks from Merkel, China shows that Germany, often considered the largest opponent of the 16+1 platform, seems to shift its attitude, which further confirms the outcomes and the potential of the 16+1 platform.

Thirdly, facing Beijing's growing trade conflict with the US, China has managed to form a new narrative of the 16+1, which highlights its role in globalization and liberalization:

Li Keqiang points out , [...] in the background of current protectionism, unilateralism, and anti-globalization trends, I look forward to working with the leaders of the 16 CEE countries to promote the “16+1 cooperation”. This is to maintain multilateralism and economic globalization with practical actions, to promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, to benefit the people of China and CEE countries, and to inject new impetus to the stability and development of the region and the world. (People's Daily)

李克强指出，[...] 在当前保护主义、单边主义、逆全球化思潮抬头的背景下，我期待同中东欧 16 国领导人共同推动“16+1 合作”走实走深，行稳致远，以实际行动维护多边主义和经济全球化，促进贸易和投资自由化便利化，更好惠及中国和中东欧国家人民，为地区乃至世界的稳定与发展注入新动力。(人民日报)

Through this narrative, China elevated the 16+1 to an entity that cares not only about the wellbeing of the Chinese and the CEE population, but also about the stability and development of the whole world in the current international situation.

The responsive and timely manner of these new narratives shows that China is aware of the international debates regarding the China-CEE cooperation and is willing to enter the discussion. In addition to these new developments, more traditional frames are also found in these reports. For example, since the beginning of this China-CEE platform, China has been highlighting the “traditional friendship” between China and the CEE countries. The People's Daily report on the Sofia Summit affirmed this narrative:

Li Keqiang said that the traditional friendship between China and Bulgaria is profound. Bulgaria was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The relationship between the

two countries has always maintained a healthy and stable development.
(*People's Daily*)

李克强表示，中保传统友谊深厚，保加利亚是最早同新中国建交的国家之一，两国关系始终保持健康稳定发展态势。(人民日报)

It remains a question how much does this traditional friendship narrative resonates with the CEE citizens. It is likely that while China appreciates this friendship between China and the CEE due to relations being formed in the early socialist period, some CEE countries treat this friendship only as a result of the Soviet occupation and a bi-product of their negative memory.

Besides, the 16+1 initiative has always been portrayed by Chinese media as a down to the ground project, which is also the case in the articles on the Sofia Summit. The report from Guangming Daily states "*dealing with concrete matters and deepening (relationships)*" (务实深化) as the keywords of the Summit and listed concrete results of this meeting. Similarly, an article from China.com.cn also listed the practical outcomes of the Sofia Summit, such as opening the Chinese market to Bulgarian agricultural products, establishing of the 16+1 research institute in Sofia and so on.

2.2 EU-China

While the 16+1 cooperation mechanism remains a controversial point within the agenda of the EU-China relations, global trade has become the number one issue recently. This has been manifested in July by the EU-China Summit in Beijing.

Unsurprisingly, the summit was mainly influenced by the ongoing trade dispute inflamed by the Trump administration and the general crisis in transatlantic relations manifested at the G7 summit, which the Chinese media widely reported on. An article by the head of China's mission in Brussels Zhang Ming, published on the eve of the summit, called for the EU and China to become a "*standard of stability*" (稳定砝码) in the current volatile international environment, urging common efforts to resist protectionism and unilateralism. According to a report by Reuters, China has even unsuccessfully pressured the EU to put out a statement directly opposing US trade policies and forming a *de facto* alliance against the US. Chinese media have widely reported on the official statement of the Chinese MFA that refuted this information, stating only that both sides have achieved "*consensus*" on trade issues. Although the final joint statement stressed support for "*open world economy*" and resistance to "*protectionism and unilateralism*", the US was not directly mentioned. Nevertheless, the common stance against protectionism was the main narrative present in the reporting on the summit.

The question whether China and the EU can actually form an alliance on trade received significant attention. On top of the EU's own concerns about China's trade policies, the EU-US relationship is generally not seen as facing a fatal crisis, even if it is being put under significant pressure. The social media account of the overseas edition of the People's Daily - Xiakedao - argues that even if fractures between the EU and the US are emerging, this does not mean that the EU will have no option but to embrace China (欧洲不依赖美国，但这并不意味着欧洲在向中国靠拢). The article points to the EU's recent courting of Asian partners, chief among them Japan, with which it signed a landmark trade deal.

Similarly, Renmin University of China professor Wang Yiwei stated that despite the common pressure on the issue of trade from the US, China and the EU are unlikely to form an alliance because of ideological differences (...双方意识形态的不同，不可能形成实际联盟对抗美国). Such a view was also echoed in an earlier article published by the Global Times. Its author states that while the EU has long been wary of China's alleged efforts to split Europe, it is actually Trump's US that is making real moves in this direction. If the EU really wants to protect its interests it cannot choose sides based on ideology and should instead exhibit "*independent spirit*", which would mean forming a trade alliance with China (...只要能别在面对美国时总“弯着腰”，而在面对中国时又总“梗着脖子”，能有点自己的“独立精神”，莫以“意识形态”站队，欧洲就能有效维护世界的多极化以及自己的利益). Yet another article by Global Times echoes this sentiment, saying that perhaps Europe is afraid of "*China splitting Europe*" because it has faced such efforts from the US. While the article claims that common front against the US is "*not realistic*", China and Europe still have significant room for cooperation.

Not long after the China-EU summit, the head of the European Commission Juncker visited Washington and agreed with Trump to stave off the trade dispute and work towards "zero tariffs" on industrial goods. This has brought about the notion that the US and the EU might bury the hatchet and concentrate their efforts on China as the main culprit of unfair trade instead. However, it seems that the Chinese media sought to downplay this option. An article in Global Times, citing foreign media and various reports, states that it is at best premature to expect the end of trade disputes between the US and the EU and that China should not worry. Another article states that as Trump's policies are "*treacherous and ever-changing*", the peace between the EU and the US may not last long (特朗普的贸易决策诡谲多变，很难说现在的和平局面能维持多久).

The media coverage reveals a certain feeling of uncertainty about Beijing's standing in the ongoing trade war. While China tries to portray the EU as a potential partner in countering the US, it is also very much aware that such an alliance is far from assured. More broadly, there has been a vivid discussion about whether China had not overhyped its own power and ability to withstand the trade war. At the beginning of July, the People's Daily has published commentaries criticizing "*boastful and arrogant*" (浮夸自大) reporting in certain media. Hu Angang, Tsinghua University professor, has faced backlash for his advocacy of a nation that China will soon overtake the US in comprehensive power. Various reports in foreign media have emerged, claiming that China is trying to downplay the Made in China 2025 vision of industrial policy, which has stoked fears in the advanced Western economies such as Germany.

The media coverage of the 20th China-EU Summit has revealed that while China is trying to improve its relationship with Europe, it is aware that a united front against Trump's US is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that China will continue courting Europe in order to come closer to the multipolar order, where the US would no longer be the only player calling the shots. Therefore, while the trade war is a challenge, it also provides opportunities to build up an international environment more favorable to China.

3 Slovak media discourse

3.1 16+1

The Slovak discourse on the Sofia summit of 16+1 is largely homogenous due to most media simply copying the coverage of press agencies TASR and SITA. Thus, it is not surprising to see that most of the coverage revolves around few main topics of interest.

The overarching topic, around which most of the media coverage revolved, was China's economic opening up. "*China opens up to the world*" and "*China opens up to Slovakia*" were often mentioned phrases in the media interpretation of the summit and its outcomes. The focus of the economic opening up of China was on the benefits that Slovakia could gain.

As Slovakia's economy is largely dependent on car manufacture, it should come as no surprise that car exports to China were the most cited opportunity for Slovakia. Cars already represent a major export to China and contribute to a large portion of Slovakia's export volume (both overall and to China). The proposed reduction of Chinese tariffs on cars from 25 to 15 percent thus caught attention of most journalists. Almost one third of all articles on the summit

mentioned the car tariff reduction in the headline. By reducing the tariffs, China is said to *“help Slovakia”* (Hospodárske noviny).

Moreover, this was put in a relational comparison with the US, when most media quoted Prime Minister Pellegrini saying: *“Unlike what is happening on the other side of the globe [in the US], this is great news for Slovakia.”* Besides car exports, listed among other benefit for Slovakia were the construction of a wide-gauge railway, aid in establishing a high-speed train connection on the Warsaw-Bratislava-Budapest line, and food exports to China. The articles did not offer any form of commentary or reflection on the feasibility of such plans.

The purported economic benefits Slovakia should receive from cooperation with China were questioned only in a few cases. Prior to the summit, the press agency TASR quoted Peter Baláž from the University of Economics in Bratislava. Baláž's criticism hinted at an expectation fatigue on part of the 16 CEE countries, which *“expect that the investment inflow rate will be higher or at least the same level as was planned years ago when the summit started to actively operate”*. Moreover, *“until now, the annual summits produced more promises than carried out projects”*, and the CEE countries, with the exception of Poland, Serbia and Romania, do not feature prominently in the interests of Chinese firms and the administration. On the day of the summit, public broadcaster Radio Slovakia pointed at rising skepticism in the CEE countries, illustrating the problem with COVEC's failed investment into Polish highways back in 2011. The only overtly critical piece about the summit outcomes and the Slovak policy towards China was authored by the analysts of this very institute, the Institute of Asian Studies, for SME daily.

Interestingly, the media covered also the relations between the 16+1 and the EU. The discourse on this topic largely echoed the Chinese narrative. It was said that the 16+1 summit has only a supplementary role to that of the EU. As such, the summits are not aimed at disrupting the EU's unity. On this, media quoted both Prime Minister Pellegrini as well as his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang. The left leaning Pravda daily even reported Li Keqiang saying that *“China wants to see a united and prospering EU”*; *“Chinese development will contribute to the development of the EU and the whole world”*; and *“it supports the European integration”*. The TA3 TV station went on to quote Pellegrini stating that China *“also supports those countries that are not EU members yet to become members of the EU.”* Radio Slovakia even went as far as framing the 16+1 summit as the last *“big event”* of the Bulgarian EU presidency. It is noteworthy that such highly positive descriptions of the 16+1 come from the two media (Pravda, TA3) that are often viewed as pro-government. At the same time, in reference to Li Keqiang's statement that the 16+1 platform is open to other European countries, Radio Slovakia broadcasted that this is *clear evidence that China attempts to divide Europe”*.

Other media reported more critical statements of Pellegrini on 16+1's impact on the EU integration. The online tabloid Topky.sk quoted Pellegrini saying that *"if we as the EU will not offer a perspective to the countries of Western Balkans, a clear signal, when they can become proper members of the EU, then, of course, other superpowers such as China, Russia, or Turkey will be present there"*. It was also mentioned by the Slovak Television in its main evening news that from among the 16 CEE states, the Balkan states receive a much higher share of Chinese investments than the EU members of 16+1.

Interestingly, the portal Euractiv.sk, which covers news related to EU policy, noted that it was apparent from Li Keqiang's statements that he does not wish to endanger good relations with the EU. Hence, his statements on China's support for the EU integration, as well as trade and procurement rules.

Interesting notions about the Sofia summit appeared in several disinformation outlets. Referring to the Russian Sputnik news, Hlavné správy (one of the main disinformation outlets in Slovakia) stated that *"China decided to help Serbia to hoodwink the EU"*. Here, China was presented as aiding Serbia in protecting itself from capital flight, which is supposedly occurring due to *"the best of Serbian harvest being collected by the EU"*.

3.2 EU-China

Compared to the Sofia summit of 16+1, the EU-China summit, which occurred just few days later, received comparatively less attention in Slovak media. This can be partially explained by the fact that the summit was attended by EU Commission officials without the presence of any high-ranking Slovak representative (Slovak Commissioner Šefčovič was not among the EU representatives that traveled to Beijing).

The event was largely overlooked by most major media, which at best reposted reports from press agencies. The only exception being the public Radio Slovakia and its subsidiary Radio Regina, public Slovak Television, and the public press agency TASR. Their coverage focused mostly on the meaning of the summit for the liberal world trade regime and the rising US protectionism. This discourse was almost identical to the one found in Czech media.

In the context of the emergent trade war sparked by US tariffs on Chinese, European, and other products, the media voiced an opinion that the EU and China *"can overcome US tariffs by a closer economic cooperation."* To this end media reported that China will continue to open up to European investments, which carry a *"great weight and potential"* for China.

The overall tone in which the Sino-European relations were presented by public media is highly positive. TASR quoted Juncker saying that the EU-China cooperation *"simply makes sense"*. This partnership supposedly has a positive impact on solving the global and regional problems, such as climate change,

transition towards clean energy, common security threats, support of multilateralism, and open and fair world trade. The report by TASR was reposted by most major media.

Trumps attacks on both the EU and China “*open new space for intensifying the trade relations between China and the EU.*” China’s reduction of tariffs on cars produced in the EU was cited as a proof of the “*warming trade relations*” (Radio Slovakia).

Compared to the public media, Euractiv was much less enthusiastic about the summit. While recognizing the positive outcomes, the portal went on to list also the main obstacles - protection of intellectual property, decreasing inflow of European investments to China due to restrictions, and Chinese overproduction of steel.

4 Czech media discourse

4.1 16+1

The reports on the 16+1 summit in Sofia in Czech media are very similar to the Slovak ones. Most of the news servers draw important information from the Czech News Agency (CTK). Articles informing about the summit only differ in rather insignificant details. This small variety of articles in Czech online media clearly indicates that the platform 16+1 is not of any great importance in Czechia. There is a lack of a deeper analysis on the subject or even fact checking of the reported information. Lidové noviny, for example, stated that “*the 16+1 platform, for closer investment and business cooperation between the CEE countries and China, emerged from the initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2012 as a complement to the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative*”. In fact, the 16+1 platform originated from the initiative of the previous Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, whereas the Belt and Road initiative only started to take form after 2013, thus being younger than the 16+1 mechanism.

One of the very first articles to cover the topic of the summit 16+1 in Sofia was published in the Parlamentní listy just before the summit took place. It was noted that last year China had promised to provide more than three billion USD to CEE countries for development and investment projects, and that the summit of 2018 should focus on deepening cooperation in investment, transport, finance, science, education and culture. Another server, EuroZprávy, pointed out that Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš wanted to negotiate more favorable business cooperation conditions for the Czech Republic at the summit.

Many of the online media, including EuroZprávy, Deník, Parlamentní listy, as well as the Czech News Agency quoted Babiš as saying that “*the trade balance [of Czechia] is negative, our imports are ten times bigger than the exports*” and

that a much less restricted and more easily accessible Chinese market is one of the priorities for the Czech Republic. EuroZprávy also mentioned that while China had promised massive investments in the Czech Republic, it mostly came in the form of acquisitions of companies, from which there is no profit for the country. Chinese investment in CEE countries actually stays relatively small and, as Info.cz showed, most of the investments are still targeting mainly Western European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, or France. The fact that China is the second largest supplier in the Czech Republic but it is ranked only 17th in terms of exports is according to Babiš something “we [Czechs] *need to deal with*”. Babiš also expressed hope for bilateral negotiations between Czechia and China in Sofia. Babiš's statements are matching President Miloš Zeman's opinion about Chinese investment plans from 2016, when he was reported saying that “*the Czech Republic can become a ‘safe harbor’ for the Chinese investment expansion*”.

The bilateral meeting between Babiš and Li is actually the main focus of the majority of the articles covering the summit in Sofia. The multilateral aspect of the forum is downplayed in the reports. Hospodářské noviny, for instance, stated that the Czech Prime Minister met with Li Keqiang in Sofia to discuss the possible expansion of the Czech business representation in Chinese cities, as well as further development of a common strategic partnership, and that they also talked about the China International Import Expo (CIIE), which will take place in November in Shanghai, and which Babiš considers to be one of the opportunities for increasing Czech exports to China. Deník, Lidové noviny and EuroZprávy also reported on a memorandum of closer cooperation and bilateral agreements signed by Czechia and China.

Other important aspects can be seen through the articles in Czech media. One of them is Li Keqiang's effort to dispel any doubts about the Chinese project and its intentions. His statements, such as “*China needs to open up more for the foreign investors*”, “*the 16+1 platform does not strive for Europe's division*”, “*weak EU is not a good sign for China, too*” or “*we would like to reduce the tariffs on EU imports*” were quoted in almost every article. Some of the servers put Li's affirmation in context of the trade war between Beijing and Washington, reporting that “*China needs the EU's support during the ‘trade battles’ with the USA*”. That is why the world's second biggest economy needs to convince the EU about its fairness in terms of cooperation and show that “*investment transparency is important to Beijing*”.

The other aspect is the skepticism of the Western EU countries about the platform 16+1 and China's influence in Europe. Info.cz highlights the Western European countries' displeasure about the Chinese project in the headline, stating that according to experts “[the 16+1 summit] *is like riding a Trojan horse, it undermines the EU*” and that the summit is a “*thorn in the Western Europe's and European Commission's side*”. Other media state that the 16+1 summit in

Sofia is something the West is not happy to see. Nevertheless, neither Li Keqiang nor Andrej Babiš share the opinion, as both of them clearly stated that they disagree with the criticism and do not think the 16+1 platform would divide the EU.

None of the articles, however, mentioned the issue of the CEFC Group Company, the Chinese flagship investor in Czechia, not even as a subordinate issue. The activities of the company in Central Europe caught the attention of Czech media after the Executive Director of CEFC China Ye Jianming was detained for questioning by the Chinese authorities in 2018 as he had been suspected of economic crimes. CEFC bought shares in several companies in the Czech Republic, including Travel Service airlines or a travel agency Invia.cz. However, the company started selling some of its shares right after its financial problems had become public.

4.2 EU-China

While just a few days were remaining until the EU-China summit in Beijing, a small number of articles regarding the bilateral meeting already appeared in the Czech online media, reporting that China was pressuring the EU to create an alliance against US President Donald Trump's trade policy. Beijing reportedly asked Brussels to take a joint stand against the US. The Chinese market open-up for European exports was offered in return. The EU, however, rejected such an idea stating that *"[The EU] agrees with almost all of the US' complaints against China and disagrees only with the way the US resolves them"*.

Articles reporting on the EU-China summit focused on several aspects. The first one was the statement of Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, who called on the US, Russia and China to cooperate with Europe and to avoid conflicts, including trade wars.

The second aspect was Li Keqiang's comment on the trade between China and the EU and Beijing's great exertion to find an ally against Washington. The Chinese Prime Minister was reported as saying that *"China wants to strive for a more balanced trade with the EU"*. This Chinese effort to conclude agreements with the EU was perceived in the context of the ongoing US-China trade war. EuroZprávy, for instance, stated that *"China has been blamed for trade protectionist tendencies for several years and now it is trying to change its image as it found itself in the midst of an escalating trade conflict with the US"*. Deník's comment is very similar as it reported that *"China [...] has entered into an escalating trade conflict with the US, and Europe might look like a good ally"* because both the EU and China have taken a similar stance on the US trade policy.

Furthermore, Deník mentioned other areas besides international trade and trade agreements that were covered during the summit, including climate

change or 'the North Korea issue'. It was also reported, that a joint communiqué on the promotion of a multilateral global trading system had been expected to be signed.

Lastly, the media also focused on the agreements reached between Brussels and Beijing. *"In a joint declaration China and the EU stated that both parties had offered to open up the market for each other and had prepared a bilateral investment agreement, the EU also stated that it has acknowledged Chinese commitments to improve the conditions for foreign companies to gain access to China's market and to respect the companies' intellectual property"*, EuroZprávy reported and added that analysts are rather skeptical of growing Chinese influence in Europe, especially in CEE, and concerned about China's efforts to divide the EU.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of relevant media in the three countries reveals an ongoing narrative convergence on the China-EU and China-CEE cooperation. This is especially true regarding the China-EU cooperation. On the Beijing China-EU Summit media in all three countries framed the narrative in the trade war initiated by US President Donald Trump. The China-EU cooperation is viewed as an answer to American protectionism.

Czech and Chinese media exhibited a more nuanced understanding of the issues connected with EU-China relations compared to the Slovak media. In Slovakia, media tended to focus solely on the positives that the EU-China cooperation can bring to both sides while facing a trade war with the US and had almost no understanding of the obstacles in the way of achieving these results, which were recognized by both the Czech and Chinese media. The difference between the Czech and Slovak media in this regard is most likely caused by the fact that relations with China are much more in the public eye in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia, thus incentivizing journalist to engage in a more in-depth coverage of China related topics.

Regarding the 16+1 platform, media discourses in the three countries are also somewhat converging, though to a lesser extent than in the case of the EU-China summit. In Slovakia, the media basically echoed the Chinese narratives on the 16+1 serving as a supplement to China-EU relations and being a supportive factor for Western Balkans' integration into the EU. Surely, this was caused by reproducing the words of Slovak Prime Minister Pellegrini who took the Chinese narrative as his own. Nevertheless, by offering no commentary on the issue, Slovak media basically acted as multipliers of the Chinese narrative to the point, whence it could be argued that the Slovak media became even more positive towards the 16+1 than their Chinese counterparts.

Interestingly, many traits of the Chinese (and Slovak) narrative on the 16+1 found their way into the Czech discourse - most articles quoted Li Keqiang and Andrej Babiš saying that by initiating the 16+1 platform China does not aim at weakening the EU from within. Since the Czech Republic only recently experienced a failure of Chinese investor CEFC, while at the same time the local media discourse on China has been usually stereotyped, politicized, and polarized, it is striking that the CEFC case has not been mentioned a single time by the media in connection with the 16+1 summit.

This narrative convergence begs to ask the question what is the driving force behind it. However, figuring out whether this has been an organic process or a result of deliberate attempts by China at influencing local media discourse abroad would require a further research into the topic.

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