



# Mapping perception of China in Central and Eastern Europe

Lai Suetyi<sup>1</sup> · Cai Yidong<sup>1</sup>

Received: 2 June 2020 / Revised: 1 March 2021 / Accepted: 2 April 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2021

## Abstract

Since the 2008 Beijing Olympic and Global Financial Crisis, the rise of China has been a key topic in the international arena. Capitals in the USA and Western Europe, as leaders of the West, have explicitly expressed their concerns, labelling China as a sharp power, a strategic competitor and a systemic rival. One concern repeatedly raised by Brussels, in recent years, is the potential of deepening the East–West division inside the Union by China’s effort in reinvigorating its relation with countries in Central and Eastern Europe via the 16+1 cooperation mechanism. This paper devotes to map the impacts on China perception in the EU member states who are participants in the 16+1. Subsequently, it examines whether 16+1 has widened the East–West divergence in the EU. Applying public opinion survey data, it is found that the additional communication and cooperation provided by 16+1 have not constructed a united identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Basing on the identified differences among Central and Eastern European countries, this paper divides them into four categories: China-friendly, China-neutral, China-polarised and China-sceptic.

## 1 Introduction

The “sixteen plus one” cooperation (16+1, also known as cooperation between Central and Eastern European countries and China) has pertained an interesting existence. China sees it as a boost for European development and the wider China–EU partnership (Chinese Government 2012). On the European side, some people view it as a golden opportunity for development (e.g. Pavličević 2018), but some others regard it as a threat (e.g. Cumanasu 2019, Khaze and Wang 2020). One concern repeatedly raised by Brussels is the potential of deepening the East–West division inside the Union by China (Bolzen and Erling 2012).

Since the inception in 2012, 16+1 has institutionalised a myriad of government, business and people exchanges. It serves as a new channel for contacts between

---

✉ Lai Suetyi  
laisuetyi@gdufs.edu.cn

<sup>1</sup> Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) at multiple levels. The year 2019, notably, marked its disappearance, as the 16+1 framework was replaced by 17+1 when Greece officially joined as one of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). It was the only enlargement of the mechanism thus far. As the page is being turned, there should be an assessment of the results of 16+1. This paper focuses on the controversial part, i.e. whether 16+1 has divided and conquered the EU. It asks “How has 16+1, as an additional communication platform and cooperative mechanism, affected the perception of China in CEECs?” Furthermore, it examines whether 16+1 has widened the divergence between Western and Eastern member states of the EU in terms of their attitude towards China.

Social constructivist paradigm fits well in this research because the key debates about 16+1 are about perception and identities. Supporters of the mechanism see it building a closer friendship between China and the CEECs. The sceptics worry that 16+1 would give rise to another regional grouping, which cuts cross the EU. In addition, some other observers wonder if 16+1 is boosting confidence of the CEECs in front of Western Europe. This paper contributes to such debates by examining whether 16+1 has given rise to (1) a collective identity, (2) a convergent view of China’s rise and (3) a transformed identity with China among the 16 CEECs.

Social constructivism argues that it is crucial to understand perception in international relation, as it shapes not only identity but also interest and hence policy decision of actors (Wendt 1992; Ruggie 1998). Relationships including the one between China and CEECs are socially constructed. This paper aligns with the social constructivist paradigm in determining how the establishment of 16+1 mechanism and its communication and cooperation have shaped and reshaped the perception as well as the relational identity between China and its Central and Eastern European partners. The assumption that “identity and interest are constituted by collective meanings that are always in process” (Wendt 1992: 407) is important to this research. This is the very belief which makes social constructivism distinctive from the two conventional theoretical schools in the study of international relation. Both realist and liberalist schools focus on the material factors in international relation; they simply take ideational factors, namely identity and interest, as given and fixed. Social constructivism argues that the meanings of material factors like possession of nuclear power or economic might are indeed subject to different interpretations depending on the identity and perception of the actors.

In the existing literature, research on perception of the EU in China as well as perception of China in the EU is covered, whilst the former is more numerous and mature (Holland et al. 2007; Dong 2014; Chaban and Holland 2014, 2019). In the very recent years, there have also been a number of researches assessing how CEECs viewed China (Turcsanyi, 2017; Pendrakowska 2018; Matura 2018; Jakimów 2019; Garlick 2019). These researches provide snapshots of the perception of China after the establishment of 16+1 in different partner countries or at a different time. These existing works focused mainly on governments’ or elites’ views. To complement, this research paper focuses on empirical data on public opinion. Secondary data from two resources, the Eurobarometer of the European Commission and Pew Research Centre’s Global Indicator, are used. In order to determine the impact brought by the establishment of the 16+1 mechanism, authors of this paper

set two timeframes. They are “pre-16+1 period” which refers to the time before April 2012 as well as “post-16+1 period” after April 2012. Both aforementioned databases provide data covering the pre-16+1 period and the post-16+1 period, fitting the purpose of this research.

The 16+1 cooperation framework started with the China-Central and Eastern Europe Leader’s Meeting in Warsaw on 26 April 2012. Since then, the annual leaders’ summits have been the highlights of the mechanism. Yet, 16+1 does not limit just to the annual summits. It has proliferated to cover exchange and cooperation in different policy fields and different levels, namely ministerial meetings, the China-CEEC Economic and Trade Forum which gathers entrepreneurs, the energy cooperation forum which gathers governmental departments, energy firms, research institutions, financial companies and so on. Whilst people-to-people dimension became an important focus since 2016 (Szczudlik 2019), a long list of activities including mutual journalist visit and music festival, libraries’ cooperation has been increasing direct communication in the public level. Noteworthy is that such involvement of the public level has yet been studied by any existing research. This paper, therefore, fills this gap by exploring the public opinion on China in CEE.

The 16+1 does not refer only to China’s interaction with the CEECs as a bloc. Following the definition of the official website of 16+1 (then 17+1),<sup>1</sup> this paper treats China’s bilateral relations with the individual countries in the region also as core parts to 16+1. Subsequently, this research expects variations of China’s image in different parts of the region. Its research design is set to prevent artificially merging the CEEC into one unity, as it agrees with Liu (2013) and Kong and Wei (2017) that the CEECs are too diverse to be regarded as a region.

Since 2011, the Eurobarometer has started a Special Eurobarometer series called “Future of Europe”, which included several questions related to external actors namely Brazil, China, India, Japan and the USA. After 2011, “Future of Europe” was conducted also in 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2018 (see Table 1). Data provided by this special Eurobarometer suits the need of this paper as it covers all eleven EU countries in the 16+1 group, i.e. Bulgaria, Croatia,<sup>2</sup> the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Results about these eleven CEECs are the major focus of this paper. Furthermore, results of the other EU countries (refer to as “non-16+1 EU MS” in this paper) are compared to those of the 16+1 EU countries to determine any divergence created by the participation in 16+1. As Greece only joined 17+1 in 2019, any potential impact is too early to be assessed. The sampling method employed by Eurobarometer sustains a margin of error of  $\pm 1.4$  at a confidence level of 95%.

The 2011 “Future of Europe” contained three questions about China, all of which are examined in this research:

*(QA5) In general, would you say that the quality of life in the EU is currently better or less good than in China?*

<sup>1</sup> Website of 16+1: <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>.

<sup>2</sup> Croatia only joined the EU in 2013 and hence only included in the surveys afterward.

**Table 1** Summary of data sourced from Special Eurobarometer “Future of Europe”

Periods	Post-16+1		
	Pre-16+1	2012	2016
Years	2011	2016	2018
Countries	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia
Questions	Compare quality of life between EU and China		Compare quality of life between EU and China
	Compare economic performance between EU and China		Compare economic performance between EU and China
	Compare political influence between EU and China		Public sentiment on China

*(QA6) And would you say that the political influence of the EU is currently stronger or weaker than that of China?*

*(QA7) Would you say that the European economy is currently performing better, performing worse or performing as well as the Chinese economy?*

All three questions were repeated in the 2012 round of “Future of Europe”. The fieldwork of the 2011 round was conducted in December, and that of the 2012 round was conducted exactly a year later. They fell into the pre-16+1 period and the post-16+1 period which fit the comparison purpose of this research.

The 2012 survey also asked respondents to compare economy situation between Europe and China in 2030. The 2014 round asked respondents to compare the future between Europe and China but in their global influence. These two questions were not used in any other round of the series, so a longitudinal comparison is impossible. Hence, they are not analysed in this paper. Subsequently, the 2014 edition which contained only one question related to China provided no useful data for this paper.

Question QA6 asked in 2011 and 2012 was repeated in the 2016 and 2018, whilst question QA7 appeared again in 2017. Question QA5 was repeated in the 2018 round. These data are compared to those collected in 2011 and 2012 in the third section of this paper. In the 2016–2018 editions, a new question “As regards China, do you have a positive or a negative view about it?” was introduced. Although no pre-16+1 data can be compared to, this question is still relevant to this research paper to understand the most recent public sentiment of CEECs on China.

The second source of empirical data is the Pew Research Centre’s Global Indicator (see Table 2). It started in 2002 but only surveyed about the public sentiment on the USA in the first few years. Since 2005, the Pew Research Centre has expanded the survey to public sentiment on China. In 2008, it added another two questions relating to China. The first one asks the respondents to choose among the USA, China, the EU and Japan for “the world’s leading economic power”. The second added question asks respondents if they think the government of China respects the personal freedom of its people. After 2008, this question was used again from 2013

**Table 2** Summary of data sourced from the Pew Research Centre “Global Indicator”

<b>Periods</b>	<b>Pre-16+1</b>					<b>Post-16+1</b>								
	<b>Years</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>
<b>Czech</b>	✓						✓	✓						✓
<b>Hungary</b>											✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Poland</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Questions</b>	<u>Public sentiment on China and US</u>													
	<u>X</u>	<u>Perception on the world’s leading economy</u>												
	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>X</u>	<u>Perception on respect of freedom</u>						

onwards. As a comparison between the pre-16+1 period and the post-16+1 period is possible, data from all these questions are analysed.

The fieldwork of this annual survey of the Pew Research Centre is done every spring. In each round, the list of surveyed countries varied. In each country, the margin of error of  $\pm 1.4$  at a confidence level of 95% is achieved. Among the 16+1 EU MSs, Poland was the only one which has been included every year, except in 2006. This paper, thus, analyses the data of Poland from 2007 to 2019. Hungary and the Czech Republic were the second most frequently surveyed CEECs by Pew's Global Indicator. Hungary was surveyed in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. The Czech Republic was included in 2007, 2012, 2013 and 2019. Although two rounds of survey were conducted in each of Lithuania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, the years available were rather random (2011 and 2019 for Lithuania, 2007 and 2019 for Bulgaria and Slovakia). They are, therefore, not ideal for comparison. Consequently, this paper uses findings of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Interestingly, these three countries are all part of a smaller group in CEE, the Visegrad Group (V4). The data, hence, helps to assess if this sub-group shares a high similarity.

After this [introduction section](#) is an overview of the existing literature on 16+1 and China-CEEC relations. It is followed by the presentation of findings on China's perception in CEECs from the Eurobarometer and the Pew's Global Indicator public surveys. The final part analyses the impact of 16+1 on how China is viewed by its CEE partners, as well as on the identity-shaping in CEECs.

## The state of art

In the search of existing literature on China-CEE relations, one immediate observation is that very few relevant articles were found in the English-language publication before 2012, i.e. before the establishment of 16+1. This reflected a lack of attention given to China's relation with CEECs by the international research community before 2012. In order to confirm this finding, authors of this paper manually checked the full list of publications of four relevant academic journals: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* and *Asia-Europe Journal*.

The *Journal of Common Market Studies* and *Journal of European Public Policy* are the two most prestigious leading academic journals in European Studies. They reflect the focus of scholarly attention in the field. The *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* was chosen as a representative of English-language journals which have a Central and Eastern European focus. It was run by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), an important international relation think-tank in Central and Eastern Europe. The *Asia-Europe Journal* was chosen because it is found to be the academic journal which has published the highest number of articles on China-CEE relations thus far.

Notably, there was no paper on China-CEE relations found in the manual search through all editions of *Journal of Common Market Studies* and *Journal of European Public Policy* between 2005 and 2019. Neither has interaction between China and

CEECs nor the 16 + 1 mechanism drawn significant attention of the European Studies community.

The *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* started in 2005 and ceased in 2017. In its lifetime, it published 4 issues every year. The first article devoted to China appeared in 2010, written by a Polish expert on China (Szcudlik 2010). The article was about the shifts of ideologies of the Chinese government and the subsequent impacts on Chinese foreign policy. The second article about China was a research by an Indonesian scholar on Indonesia's foreign policy of balancing between the ASEAN, the USA and China (Wnukowski 2015). Only in 2016, the *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* published its first article on China-CEE relations. It was a paper written by a Chinese scholar on how China perceived the Visegrad Group (Liu). It was not only the first but also the last one in this journal on China-CEE relations. The three pieces about China found in 2017 were about the Chinese-built Nairobi-Mombasa railway (Rohr-Garztecki 2017), China's Foreign Policy during President Xi Jinping's First Term (Przychodniak 2017) and China's strategy after the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Szcudlik 2017).

The *Asia-Europe Journal* was launched in 2003 and continues until present (the latest edition covered by this paper is issue 4 of 2019). Similar to the *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, it is a quarterly. There have been no short of articles on China-EU relations, yet the first article devoted to China-CEE relations appeared only in 2010 (Palonka 2010). This article examined China-Poland economic and trade relation since 2004. The second one was written by Jacoby (2014) in 2014 on differences between Chinese investment in CEEC and in the EU15. After these two papers, the whole issue 4 of 2019 was devoted to China-CEE relations. This special issue "New Perspectives on China-Central and Eastern Europe Relations" contained seven papers. Looking at the topics of papers published in the *Asia-Europe Journal*, it confirmed that interest of the research community on China-CEE relations was a rather recent one.

Interests in understanding and assessing China's relations with Central Eastern Europe have risen after the creation of 16 + 1, which marked a new attempt of China to revive its relationship with CEE. Existing researches can be first divided into those on China's relation with CEE as a region (for example Kavalski 2019, Hala 2018, Song 2018, Vangeli 2018, Góralczyk 2017), those on China's bilateral relation with individual CEECs (for example Sava 2019, Matura 2018, Pendrakowska 2018, Popescu and Brînză 2018, Fürst and Pleschová 2010) and those on China's relation with an existing sub-group in the region namely the Visegrad Group (Liu 2016) and the Balkans. The first two types have been more numerous than the third one. This paper starts with the public opinion of individual 16 + 1 EU countries, and then tries to map any visible sub-grouping by identifying the similarities and differences among the CEECs.

As pointed out by Liu (2013), CEECs are so diverse, and hence, their relations with China are different. It is difficult to simplify the China-CEE relation into one-size-fit-all answer. An add-value of this research paper is to map such similarity and difference among CEECs, so as to deepen the understanding of existing research.

Another division in the existing literature is the analysis of effects of 16 + 1 either from a Chinese or from a CEE perspective. Focusing on the Chinese perspective,

Vangeli (2018: 681–684) argued that China has created a new meaning for CEECs, as special partners of China, which was before used to the subordination to Western Europe. To Kavalski (2019), 16+1 was used by China as a convincing platform to decrease the fears of other states towards its proactive international behaviour and position itself as a responsible and reliable international actor. This view was shared by Jakimów (2019), who argued that China employed a soft strategy to present itself as an economic, political and normative alternative to the EU for CEECs. On the contrary, Jakóbowski (2018) argued that 16+1, as one of the regional multilateralism used by China, served mainly as a venue for China to announce its agenda, with few qualitative results.

Starting with an examination of China's interest in CEE, Góralczyk (2017) ended up with a conclusion that China was opening opportunities for CEE which, however, was not prepared to take benefit from the new opportunities. Jaklič and Svetličič (2019) shared Góralczyk's view that 16+1 was an opportunity for CEECs. Jaklič and Svetličič (2019) also claimed that 16+1 has stimulated more fundamental rethinking of the EU-China relation as well as internal competition and cooperation among CEECs. Pavličević (2018) argued that whilst Serbia was seeing 16+1 as an opportunity, in the EU level, it was viewed as a threat to unity. In their four-case study (Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia), Khaze and Wang (2020) argued that 16+1 has worsened the East–West division of the EU.

Szczudlik's comprehensive report (2019) covered both Chinese and CEE perspectives. She argued that there were more political and normative achievements than economic ones, which differed from the initial expectations from both the Chinese and CEE sides. Such perception of a mixed result of 16+1 so far perfectly reflects the lack of consensus on the actual impact of the mechanism.

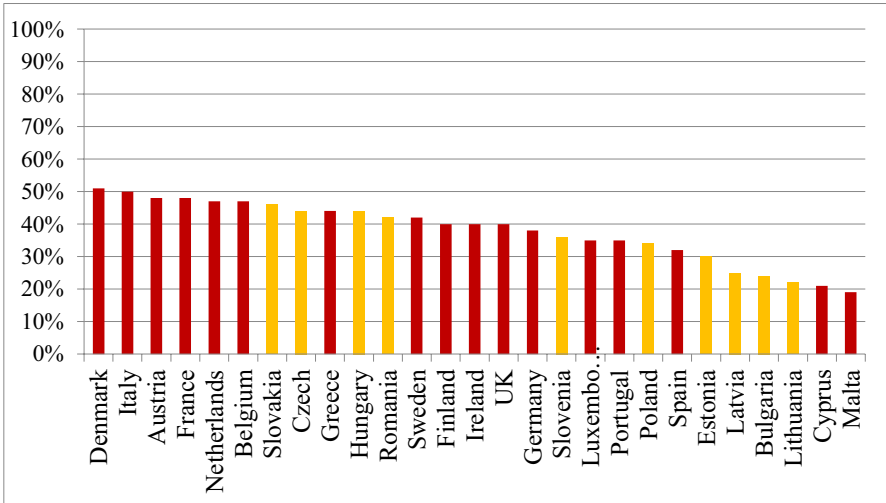
As mentioned in the "Introduction" section, the existing works on 16+1 focused mainly on governments' or elites' views. This paper complements this with analysis of public opinion in CEECs. The following two sections present the analysis of empirical data sourced from the Eurobarometer and the Pew Research Centre's Global Indicator.

## Changed and unchanged China's perception from Eurobarometer

The statistics from Eurobarometer showed no boosting effect of 16+1 on the image of China among CEECs, in terms of political influence, economic performance and quality of life. Data from the "Future of Europe" series showed a significant increase in discrepancy between 16+1 and non-16+1 EU MSs after 2012. This finding indeed contradicts the popular view of 16+1 being a dividing force to European integration.

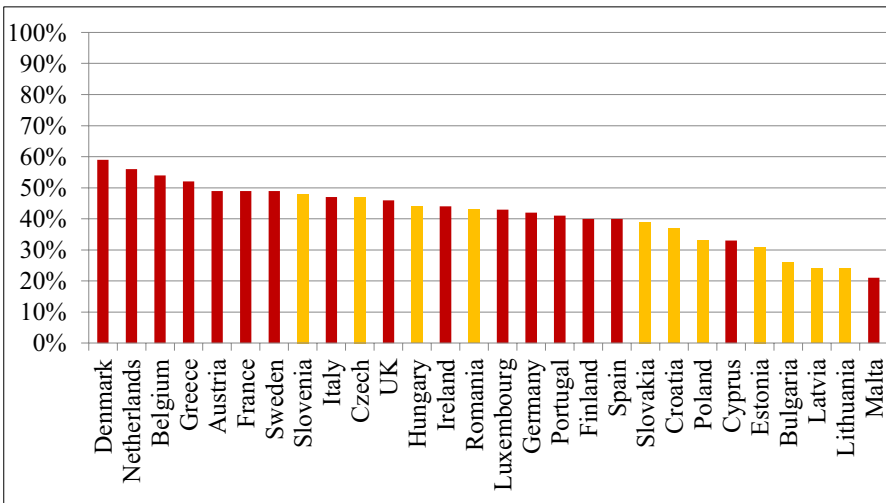
In 2011, 2012, 2016 and 2018, citizens from individual EU MSs were asked to compare the political influence between the EU and China, and the results as displayed in Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4 showed diverse opinions. There is no obvious similarity within neither the 16+1 group nor the non-16+1 group. Moreover, both before and after the creation of 16+1, CEECs were not among the ones who rated China's political influence the highest.



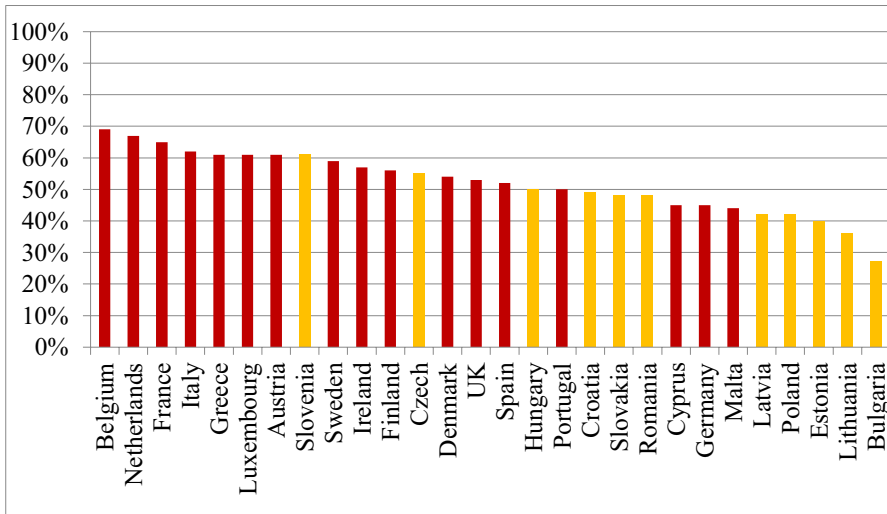


**Fig. 1** Percentage of EU citizens viewing that China has stronger political influence than the EU in 2011 (pre-16+1)

The trends varied in different EU countries. For example, between 2011 and 2018, the responses in Hungary and Germany did not change much, whilst those in France and Slovenia fluctuated. As Table 3 shows, Lithuanians have always perceived the EU as politically more influential than China, whilst the Hungarians viewed oppositely. Meanwhile, among the non-16+1 countries (see Table 4), the Belgian, Dane, French and Italian have always ranked China’s political influence higher than that of



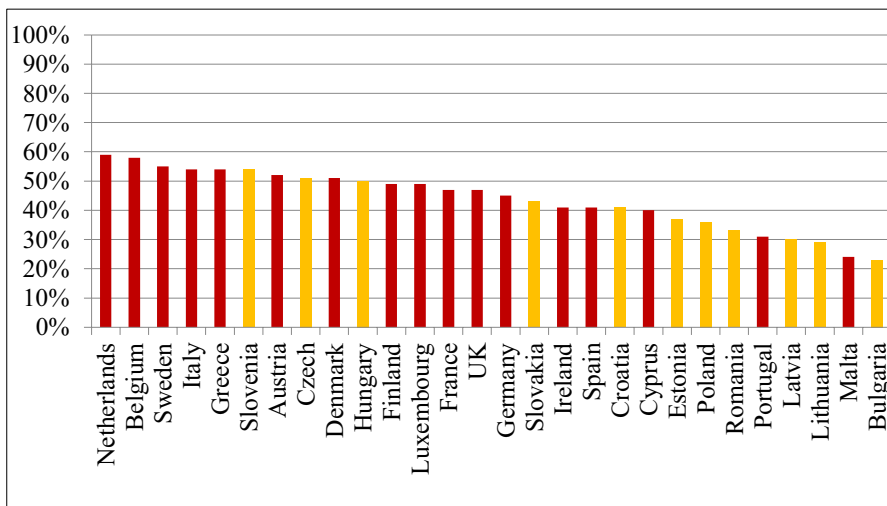
**Fig. 2** Percentage of EU citizens viewing that China has stronger political influence than the EU in 2012 (Year 1 of 16+1)



**Fig. 3** Percentage of EU citizens viewing that China has stronger political influence than the EU in 2016

the EU, whilst German and Maltese were seeing the EU more influential most of the time. In sum, there has yet a unity among the EU MS to be destroyed by 16 + 1.

A majority of CEECs listed in Table 3 started with seeing the EU politically more important in 2011 and 2012. In the 2016 round, there was a clear shift in seeing China more politically influential than the EU. This change was however also recorded in the non-16 + 1 EU countries (listed in Table 4). Then in the 2018 round, many 16 + 1 EU MS returned to rank the EU higher in terms of political influence. These showed that the 16 + 1 cooperation mechanism has not made citizens in the



**Fig. 4** Percentage of EU citizens viewing that China has stronger political influence than the EU in 2018

**Table 3** Comparison of political influence between the EU and China by citizens in 16 + 1 EU countries

	2011	2012	2016	2018
Bulgaria	EU	EU	EU	China
Czech Republic	EU	China	China	EU
Estonia	EU	EU	China	China
Latvia	EU	EU	China	EU
Lithuania	EU	EU	EU	EU
Hungary	China	China	China	China
Poland	EU	EU	China	EU
Romania	China	China	China	EU
Slovenia	EU	China	China	China
Slovakia	≈	EU	China	China
Croatia	<i>n/a</i>	EU	China	EU

participating CEECs to feel more politically influenced by China than by the EU. The similar changes around 2016 in all EU MS as well as the continuous difference among CEECs indicated that the additional communication and cooperation provided by 16 + 1 have not shaped CEECs into one united group in front of China.

Results of the question “Would you say that the European economy is currently performing better, performing worse or performing as well as the Chinese economy?” showed similar situations. As demonstrated in Table 5, views of economic performance of China among the 16 + 1 countries were as diverse as those among the non-16 + 1 countries. Increasing trade and investment exchanges brought by 16 + 1 did not appear to boost recognition of China’s economic power in the eyes of citizens in CEECs.

**Table 4** Comparison in political influence between the EU and China by citizens in non-16 + 1 EU countries

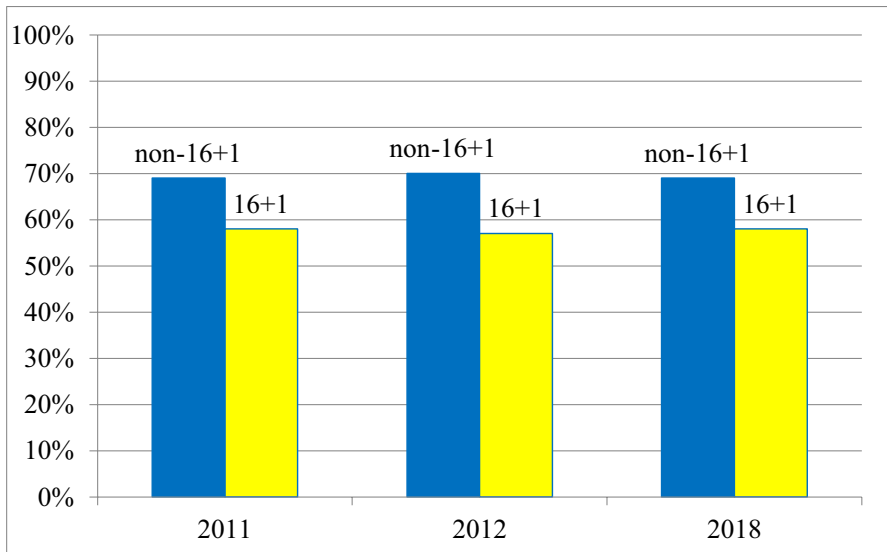
	2011	2012	2016	2018
Belgium	China	China	China	China
Denmark	China	China	China	China
Germany	EU	≈	EU	China
Ireland	China	China	China	≈
Greece	≈	China	China	China
Spain	EU	≈	China	China
France	China	China	China	China
Italy	China	China	China	China
Cyprus	EU	EU	China	≈
Luxembourg	EU	≈	China	China
Malta	EU	EU	China	EU
Netherlands	China	China	China	China
Austria	China	China	China	China
Portugal	China	China	China	EU
Finland	EU	EU	China	China
Sweden	EU	China	China	China
UK	China	China	China	China

**Table 5** EU citizens seeing China's economic performance as better than European economy

2011		2012		2017				
1	Greece	68%	1	Greece	69%	1	Greece	62%
2	Denmark	64%	2	Netherlands	67%	2	Luxembourg	50%
3	Italy	62%	3	Denmark	64%	3	Belgium	49%
4	Netherlands	62%	4	France	62%	4	France	49%
5	Belgium	61%	5	Belgium	60%	5	Italy	44%
6	France	61%	6	Italy	58%	6	Czech	43%
7	UK	59%	7	Cyprus	58%	7	Portugal	42%
8	Sweden	57%	8	Luxembourg	58%	8	Cyprus	41%
9	Czech	52%	9	UK	58%	9	Netherlands	40%
10	Ireland	52%	10	Spain	56%	10	Austria	39%
11	Romania	52%	11	Sweden	56%	11	Romania	39%
12	Luxembourg	50%	12	Slovenia	55%	12	Slovenia	39%
13	Hungary	50%	13	Croatia	53%	13	Spain	38%
14	Slovenia	49%	14	Bulgaria	52%	14	Poland	38%
15	Slovakia	49%	15	Romania	52%	15	Latvia	36%
16	Bulgaria	48%	16	Czech	51%	16	Denmark	35%
17	Poland	48%	17	Ireland	51%	17	Finland	35%
18	Portugal	47%	18	Hungary	48%	18	Croatia	35%
19	Spain	46%	19	Slovakia	47%	19	UK	34%
20	Cyprus	44%	20	Poland	46%	20	Hungary	33%
21	Finland	43%	21	Germany	44%	21	Lithuania	32%
22	Latvia	42%	22	Portugal	44%	22	Slovakia	32%
23	Germany	40%	23	Austria	39%	23	Germany	31%
24	Austria	39%	24	Finland	39%	24	Bulgaria	30%
25	Estonia	37%	25	Estonia	36%	25	Sweden	30%
26	Lithuania	35%	26	Lithuania	36%	26	Estonia	27%
27	Malta	33%	27	Latvia	33%	27	Ireland	27%
			28	Malta	26%	28	Malta	20%

Moreover, in the 2012 and 2017 surveys, there had not been any remarkable increase in terms of CEEC citizens' viewing Chinese economy performance as better than that of European economy. Notably, when compared between 2011 and 2017, respondents in all EU MS became more likely to say the European economy was performing better than the Chinese economy, except those in Austria and Luxembourg who ranked European economy as good as the Chinese one.

Concerning the quality of life, as shown in Fig. 5, citizens from CEE have been more likely to see the quality of life in China as better than the life in the EU, especially in Hungary and Romania. Yet, this view has already been the case before the creation of 16+1 (i.e. survey result in 2011). In general, the majority of EU citizens have evaluated their own quality of life more positively than the quality of life in China. In the most recent round of "Future of Europe", conducted in October



**Fig. 5** EU citizens viewing the quality of life in the EU was better than in China

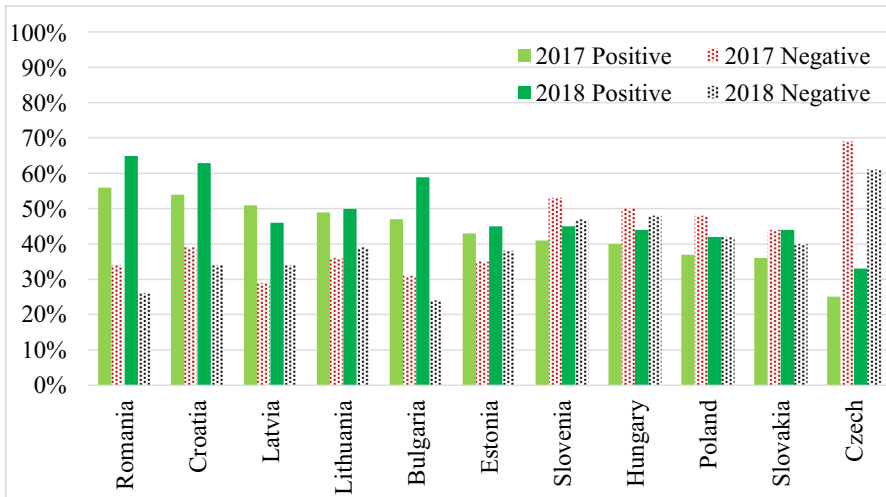
and November 2018, the feeling that the quality of life in the EU was better than in China prevailed in all 28 EU MS. Clear divergence among the individual EU MS is noted. For instance, 37% and 30% of Hungarian and Romanian respondents respectively saw the quality of life in Europe as “less good” as that in China, whilst only 15% of Bulgarian respondents shared such view.

The analysis until here shows clearly that the 11 EU MS which participate in 16+1 neither share a common view on China nor do they view China very differently from the non-16+1 EU MS. Although China is the “Plus One” and initiator of 16+1, the mechanism has generated neither a collective identity among the participating CEECs nor a convergent view on China. Applying social constructivism, no transformation in identity means there would be no change in interest calculation.

The results are not totally negative. The Eurobarometer’s “Future of Europe” provides interesting snapshots for this research to identify different opinions among CEEC public on China. Including also the results shown in Fig. 6, this research proposed a four-group categorisation in terms of view on China.

The first group is “China-friendly” which includes Romania and Croatia, whose publics feel favourably towards China whilst seeing China stronger than the EU in political influence and economic performance. The second group is “China-neutral” which includes the three Baltic states. Their publics are not seeing the development achieved by China too attractive, neither do they have a strong affirmative nor antagonistic view on China. Data of Bulgaria fits the condition of this group except that the public opinion on China in 2018 was a strongly favourable one.

The third group is a mixed situation. Public opinion towards China has been polarised. Poland and Slovakia form the “China-polarised” group. Their publics appreciate the economic performance, political influence and quality of life



**Fig. 6** General sentiment on China in 16+1 EU MSs in 2017 and 2018

in China, but not as much as their counterparts in Hungary or Romania. The percentages of public holding favourable and unfavourable views on China are rather close, forming a polarised situation even within the country.

The last group is “China-sceptic”, which includes the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. Interestingly, the “China-sceptics” share a view with “China-friendly” with regard of China’s success in raising its political influence and economic power. Nevertheless, they do not feel that the quality of life in China is more attractive than that in the EU. In these three CEE countries, negative public opinion outnumbered the positive one, especially in the Czech Republic. In other words, the perception of China as a strong economic and political power deemed favourable among the “China-friendly” CEECs. In the contrary, to the “China-sceptic”, a powerful China is deemed unfavourable and even as a threat.

This proposed categorisation is a trial attempt. Notably, existing geographic groups, such as the V4 and the Balkans, do not match the actual division regarding the different countries’ view on China. More empirical data will be needed in further research to test or to revise these four groups and their components. Whilst geo-politics cannot explain these similarities and differences, future research could apply social constructivism and test in which ideational factors, namely culture, history or ideology, matter the most. The next section tests it with the data from the Pew Research Centre (Fig. 7).

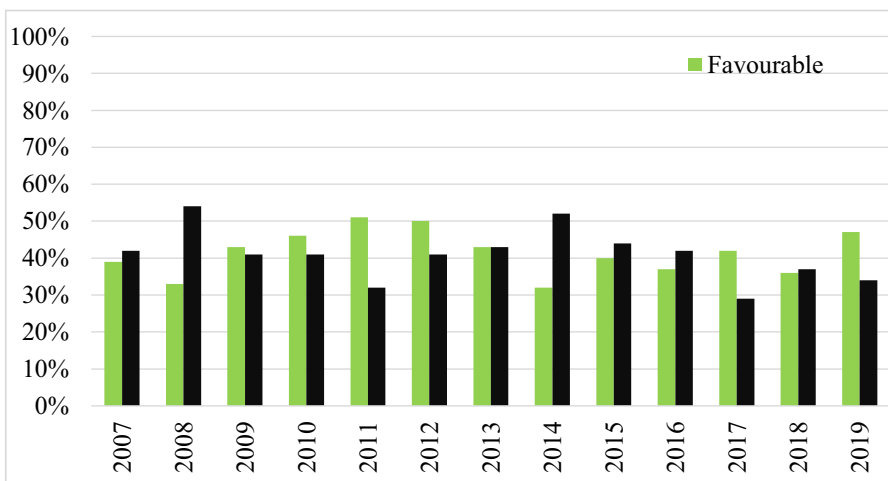
## Changed and unchanged China’s perception from Pew data

The first finding from analysing the Pew’s Global Indicator is that the establishment of 16+1 did not secure a favourable view of China among the public in CEECs. As Fig. 8 displays, a favourable opinion on China grew between 2008 and 2012 in Poland, the period marked by the global financial crisis and Eurozone

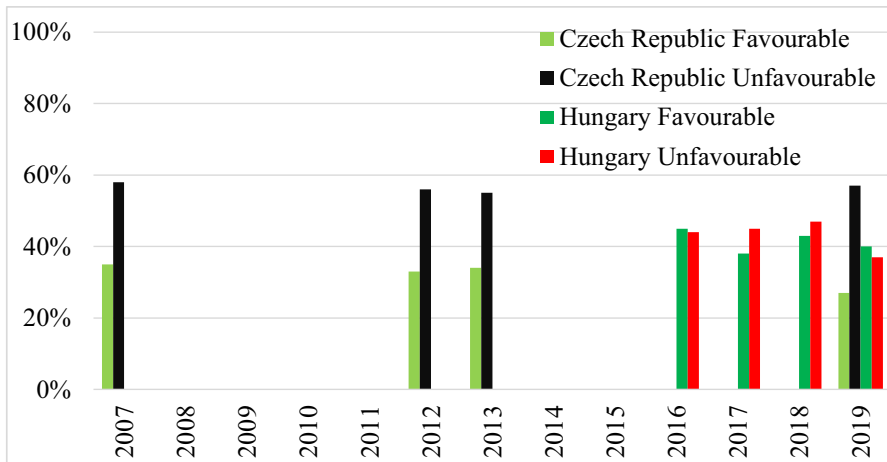
**Fig. 7** Four groups of the 11 EU 16+1 countries in terms of attitude towards China



debt crisis. From 2012 to 2014, there were visible decreases in favourable feeling towards China among the Poles, despite the first-ever 16+1 Summit held in Warsaw. The year 2014 marked the trough of Polish public sentiment towards China. For three consecutive years until 2016, more Poles held unfavourable view of China than favourable one. It was also the case in the 2018 data. In the Czech Republic, the unfavourable sentiment on China was even stronger, as displayed in



**Fig. 8** Polish public opinion of China from 2007 to 2019



**Fig. 9** Public opinion of China in the Czech Republic and Hungary

Fig. 9. The longitudinal comparison showed, again, that the existence of 16 + 1 did not guarantee a positive image of China among the Czech public.

The survey was not conducted in Hungary before 2016 to allow a comparison between the pre-16 + 1 period and the post-16 + 1 period. Still, the fluctuations of Hungarian public opinion from 2016 to 2019 as well as the higher number of unfavourable response than favourable one in 2017 and 2018 confirmed the inability of 16 + 1 to promote a friendly image of China. These results match with the proposed categories of the last section, in which Hungary and the Czech Republic are more sceptical on China than Poland. In other words, the 16 + 1 mechanism which groups 16 CEECs in the same side vis-à-vis China has not built a common perception of China in CEE.

Among the EU MS from the non-16 + 1 group, the Pew's Global Indicator has covered four — France, Germany, Spain and the UK — every year. These data are, thus, used as a control. Figure 10 shows that the Poles started with the lowest favourable attitude towards China in 2005 among the five EU countries. From 2008 to 2012, public favourable sentiment towards China in Poland steadily rose to the highest among these five European countries. Even without 16 + 1, Polish public opinion towards China had improved between 2005 and 2011. The only difference was that the favourable view of China in the four Western European countries dropped significantly from 2005 to 2007, whilst that in Poland sustained. Yet, Poland shared the downward then upward changes with its counterparts between 2007 and 2009. Between 2010 and 2011, the five countries, including Poland, shared again the same upward trend.

Figure 11 demonstrated an even more convergent view between the Polish public and its non-16 + 1 counterparts in viewing China. Throughout the surveyed pre-16 + 1 period, the percentage of Polish public holding negative feelings towards China lay around an average level of the four non-16 + 1 EU MS. It also shared upward trends with the other four countries from 2007 to 2008 and from 2011 to 2012, as well as the downward trend from 2009 to 2010. Turning to the post-16 + 1



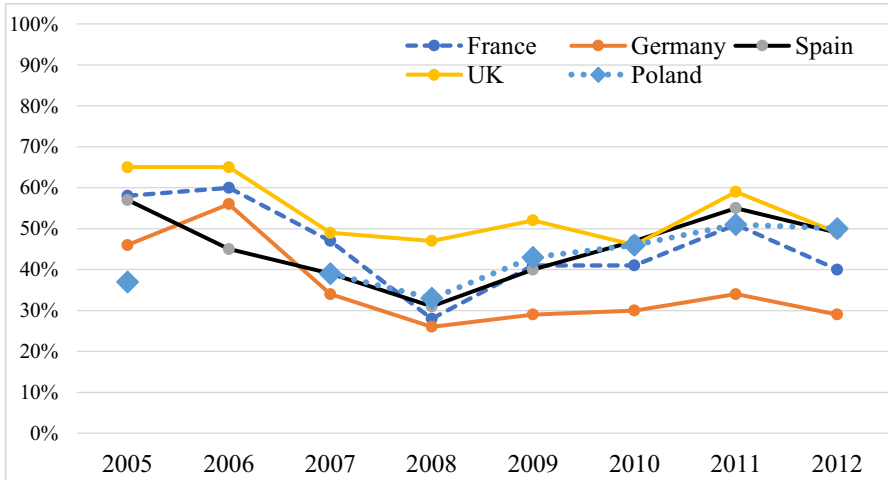


Fig. 10 Favourable public opinion of China in the EU countries in pre-16 + 1 period

period, the positive sentiment towards China among the Poles and Hungarians was at a similar level with that in France and Spain (see Fig. 12). From 2012 to 2014, the beginning years of 16 + 1, a favourable view of China among the Poles recorded a drop, whilst an unfavourable view rose. Similar trends were echoed in Spain. Upward and downward changes of Polish public opinion towards China shared a similar pattern with the Spanish one in the post-16 + 1 period, but not with the Hungarian one. The only visible divergence between Polish view and Spanish view was with the most recent year. Whilst the percentage of Polish respondents having a favourable view on China rose from 36% in 2018 to 47% in 2019, that in Spain dropped from 42 to 39%. Meanwhile, the percentage of Polish respondents expressing an unfavourable opinion on China decreased from 37% in 2018 to 34% in 2019,

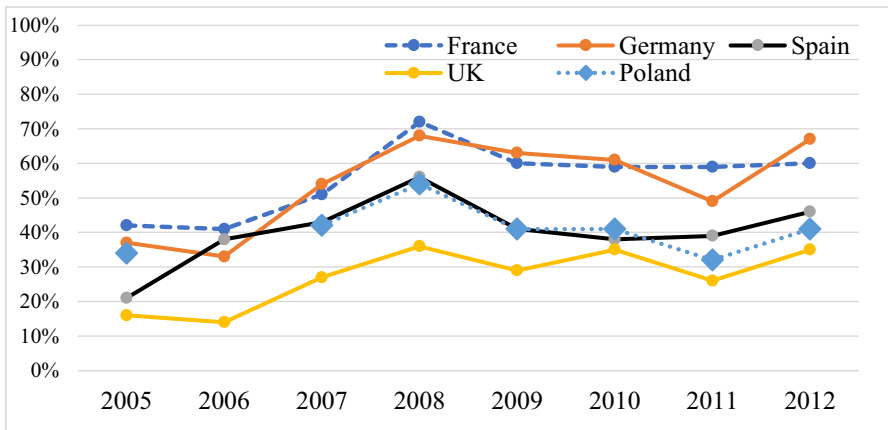
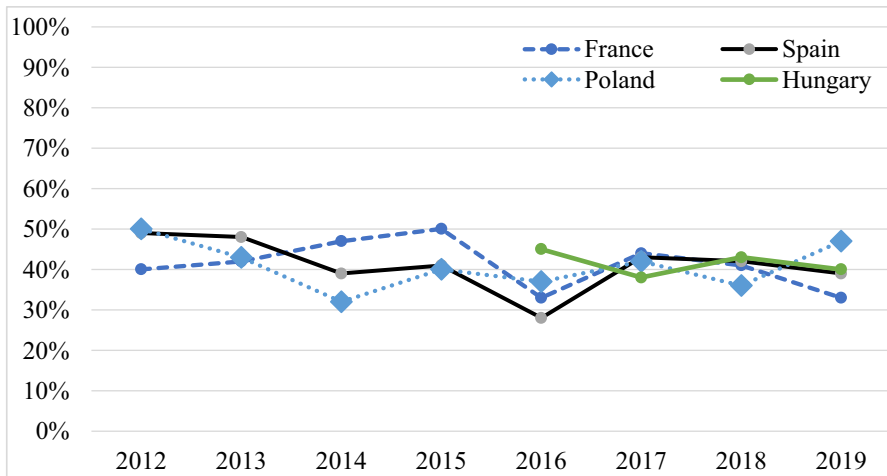


Fig. 11 Unfavourable public opinion of China in the EU countries in pre-16 + 1 period



**Fig. 12** Favourable public opinion of China in four EU countries in 2012–2019

whilst that in Spain increased from 48 to 53%. This time, noteworthy, the Hungarian result overlapped with that in Spain.

Results listed in Table 6 also show that the overall sentiment towards China between the Polish and Spanish publics has been similar from 2005 to 2016, despite the establishment of 16+1 in 2012. Meanwhile, the French and Germans shared similar views on China, with the British public behaving significantly differently. Between 2018 and 2019, in all four non-16+1 countries, the public attitude towards China grew more negative, whilst Poland and Hungary recorded a diminishing size of unfavourable public feeling on China. By and large, the existence of 16+1 did not widen the East–West division in the EU in its public opinion towards China.

Regarding the question on the leader of the world's economy, both publics in Poland and Hungary have stuck to the leadership of the USA (see Fig. 13). The 16+1 has not changed the perceived superiority of the US in the mind of Polish and Hungarian public in terms of economic might. They have not been convinced that China is a reliable alternative for their economic dependence.

Looking at the question in respect of personal freedom (see Table 7), results of the Polish case again appeared no different from those of the four non-16+1 EU countries. The 16+1 has not made Polish public agreeing more with the Chinese government on how it treated the freedom of its people. Results from the Hungarian case were the least critical. However, as no pre-16+1 data was available for Hungary, it is impossible to identify whether such perception has always been the case or a result of 16+1. Further research can add statistics for a pre-16+1 period or other CEECs in the 16+1 group.

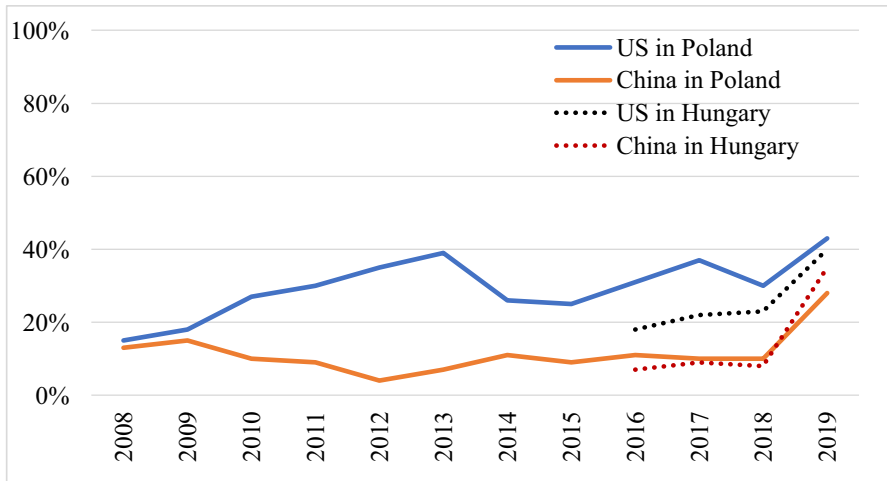
Although the sample analysed in this section contained merely six out of the then 28<sup>3</sup> member states of the EU, divergence was already huge. The British public has held the most positive view of China, whilst the German being the most negative.

<sup>3</sup> The UK officially exited the EU in March 2020.

**Table 6** Overall public opinion of China in EU countries in 2005–2019

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Poland	+		+	-	≈	+	+	+	≈	-	-	-	+	≈	+
Hungary	n/a											≈	-	-	+
France	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	≈	-	-	-	-
Germany	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Spain	+	+	-	-	≈	+	+	+	≈	-	-	-	≈	-	-
UK	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-

“+” refers to percentage of respondents expressing a favourable view on China is more than 2% than respondents expressing an unfavourable view  
 -Refers to the percentage of respondents expressing an unfavourable view on China is more than 2% than respondents expressing a favourable view  
 ≈Refers to the difference between respondents expressing favourable and unfavourable view is within 2%, as margin of error was ± 1.4 at a confidence level of 95%



**Fig. 13** Polish and Hungarian respondents naming the USA or China as the world's leading economic power

The upward and downward changes of French public opinion on China were opposite to those in Germany or in the UK in many years. Moreover, the favourable public sentiment towards China peaked in different years: 2013 in Spain and the UK, 2015 in France, 2018 in Germany and 2019 in Poland.

All in all, there has been no solid difference between 16 + 1 and non-16 + 1 EU countries in terms of public sentiment on China until very recently. In the 2019 survey, the Polish public and the Hungarian public held respectively the number one and number two most positive attitude towards China. Whilst China's perception in the four non-16 + 1 countries has worsened from 2018 to 2019, that in Poland and Hungary improved (percentage of unfavourable view on China decreased). More statistics are needed to determine if 16 + 1 is having a time-lagging impact in boosting China's public image. For the evidence available in this research, 16 + 1 has not created convergence among the CEECs.

This section looks only at the data of Poland and Hungary in the 16 + 1 group; still, the clear divergence in viewpoints among these two countries of the Visegrad Group is indicating a need for a new division line to help to understand the China-CEE relations. Whilst the surveyed public sentiment in Poland is higher than that in

**Table 7** Respondents who viewed that the Chinese government did NOT respect the personal freedom of its people in 2008, 2013–2018

	2008	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
France	93%	86%	88%	93%	90%	88%	90%
Germany	84%	87%	91%	92%	93%	88%	88%
Spain	77%	84%	83%	88%	87%	75%	84%
UK	77%	71%	75%	82%	84%	77%	79%
Poland	84%	76%	72%	77%	76%	73%	76%
Hungary	n/a				64%	63%	58%

Hungary, the categorisation proposed in the “Changed and unchanged China’s perception from Pew data” section stands.

## Conclusions

Right before the 16+1 mechanism would become 17+1, this research devotes to settle the debate on whether it is a threat to the EU’s unity. Applying social constructivism, it examines whether the additional social interactions in 16+1 have contributed to any transformation of the identity of China in the eyes of CEECs. It also addresses the concern of Brussels which accuses China of divide and conquer, and worries that the CEECs would become more dependent on and attracted by China than by their EU membership.

Analysing empirical data on public opinion on China from Central and Eastern European countries, this research paper demonstrates how divergent these countries have been. The 11 EU MS belonging to 16+1 are indeed too different to be unified into a single group, even though facing an external partner like China. The communication and cooperation provided by the 16+1 mechanism have not generated a convergent view among the participating CEECs.

Another finding of this paper is the absence of impact of 16+1 on widening the gap between the 16+1 and non-16+1 countries of the EU. The 16+1 neither has constructed a unified identity in the participating CEECs nor has 16+1 helped China to foster an image of a good partner of CEECs. Whilst countries like Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia continue to be sceptical about China, 16+1 deems to fail in helping China in shaping an identity of reliable or responsible partner for CEE. Whilst assuming that any change in the identity would redefine the interest and hence the foreign policy, this research, which applies social constructivism, argues that 16+1 has not changed the interest or foreign policy of the participating CEE members of the EU.

Moreover, it is found that the non-16+1 EU MS have agreed more with the economic and political influence of China than the 16+1 EU MS have. Meanwhile, all six surveyed EU countries, including Poland and Hungary, perceived that the Chinese government did not respect the freedom of its people. The 16+1 has not formed an identity of China as an economic, political and normative alternative to the EU for CEECs.

In order to deepen the understanding of the China-CEE relations, this research goes beyond the existing research of either treating the CEE region as a whole, focusing on bilateral state-to-state relation, or looking at the existing groups like V4 and the Baltics. A four-group categorisation is proposed. The first group is “China-friendly”, which includes Romania and Croatia. The second group is “China-neutral”, in which the three Baltic states plus Bulgaria belong to. The third one is the “China-polarised” group formed by Poland and Slovakia. The fourth is “China-sceptic”, which includes the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. This categorisation is preliminary. More empirical data will be needed to test or to revise these four groups and their components. Following the social constructivist prism, the causal relationship between ideational factors namely history, culture, ideology and

the formation of mutual identity between China and the CEECs can be explored. In addition, the findings basing on public opinion in this paper can be compared with findings from other works which base on governments' or elites' viewpoints.

## References

- Bolzen S and Erling J (2012) Divide, conquer, aim East: China has a sharp new European trade strategy, *Die Welt* (Eng ed), 11 November
- Chaban N, Holland M (eds) (2014) *Communicating Europe in times of crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, London
- Chaban N, Holland M (eds) (2019) *Shaping the EU global strategy: partners and perceptions*. Palgrave Macmillan, London
- Chinese government (2012) Press release on meeting of heads of government of China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries, April 26, Warsaw.
- Cumpanasu BL (2019) China's linkages and leverages in Central and Eastern Europe – a new challenge for EU. CES Working Papers, Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University 11(3): 185–197
- Dong L (2014) Chinese perceptions of the European Union. *J Contemp China* 23(88):756–779
- Fürst R, Pleschová G (2010) Czech and Slovak relations with China: contenders for China's favour. *Eur-Asia Stud* 62(8):1363–1381
- Garlick J (2019) China's economic diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe: a case of offensive mercantilism. *Eur-Asia Stud* 71(8):1390–1414
- Góralczyk B (2017) China's interests in Central and Eastern Europe: enter the dragon. *Eur View* 16:153–162
- Hala M (2018) Forging a new "Eastern Bloc." *J Democr* 29(2):83–89
- Holland M, Ryan P, Nowak AZ, Chaban N (eds) (2007) *The EU through the eyes of Asia: media, public and elite perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand*. Asia Europe Foundation/ University of Warsaw, Warsaw/Warsaw
- Jacoby W (2014) Different cases, different faces: Chinese investment in Central and Eastern Europe. *Asia Eur J* 12:199–214
- Jakimów M (2019) Desecuritisation as a soft power strategy: the Belt and Road Initiative, European fragmentation and China's normative influence in Central-Eastern Europe. *Asia Eur J* 17:369–385
- Jaklič A, Svetličič M (2019) China and Central and Eastern European Countries within '16+1': group or bilateral relations? *Entrepreneurial Bus Econ Rev* 2:83–100
- Jakóbowski J (2018) Chinese-led regional multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF. *J Contemp China* 27(113):659–673
- Kavalski E (2019) China in Central and Eastern Europe: the unintended effects of identity narratives. *Asia Eur J* 17:403–419
- Khaze NM, Wang XW (2020) Is China's rising influence in the Western Balkans a threat to European integration *J ContempEur Stud*, online first publication, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340>
- Kong HB, Wei CX (2017) Study on the "16+1" cooperation mechanism between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. *J Soc Sci* 11:14–23
- Liu Z (2013) China-CEE cooperation: problems and countermeasures, *Int Stud* 5: 73–82 (publication in Chinese)
- Liu Z (2016) How the Chinese perceive the Visegrad Group. *Polish Q IA* 2:56–67
- Matura T (2018) The Belt and Road Initiative depicted in Hungary and Slovakia. *J Contemp East Asia Stud* 7(2):174–189
- Palonka K (2010) Economic and trade relations between Poland and China since 2004. *Asia Eur J* 8:369–378
- Pavličević D (2018) 'China threat' and 'China opportunity': politics of dreams and fears in China-Central and Eastern European relations. *J Contemp China*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458057>
- Pendrakowska P (2018) Poland's perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative. *J Contemp East Asia Stud* 7(2):190–206
- Popescu L, Brînzăi A (2018) Romania-China Relations. Political and Economic Challenges in the BRI Era. *Romanian J of Eur Aff* 18(2):20–38.
- Przychodniak M (2017) A new strategy or just a change of tactics? The main elements of China's foreign policy during Xi Jinping's first term. *Polish Q IA* 3:5–17
- Rohr-Garztecki M (2017) Crouching tigers, hidden dragons. *Polish Q IA* 2:127–139
- Ruggie JG (1998) *Constructing the world polity: essays on international institutions*. Routledge, London, UK

- Sava R (2019) Romanian rhetoric on China's 16+1. *Diffraction of politics and economics. Studia Europaea* 1:132–155
- Song WQ (2018) China's long march to Central and Eastern Europe. *Eur Rev* 26(4):755–766
- Szczudlik J (2010) Soft power in China's foreign policy. *Polish Q IA* 3:45–68
- Szczudlik J (2017) China in the "New Era:" reflections after the 19th CPC Congress and 13th Parliamentary Session. *Polish Q IA* 4:19–43
- Szczudlik J (2019) Seven years of the 16+1: an assessment of China's 'multilateral bilateralism' in Central Europe. *Asie Visons* 107:1–36
- Turcsanyi R (2017) Central European attitudes towards Chinese energy investments: the cases of Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. *Energ Policy* 101:711–722
- Vangeli A (2018) Global China and symbolic power: the case of 16 + 1 cooperation. *J Contemp China* 27(113):674–687
- Wendt A (1992) Anarchy is what states make of it - the social construction of power politics. *I O* 46(2):391–425
- Wnukowski D (2015) Balancing ASEAN, the U.S. and China: Indonesia's Bebas-aktif foreign policy in the 21st century. *Polish Q IA* 4:115–137

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.