

## POLISH PERSPECTIVES ON CEE-CHINA 16+1 COOPERATION: THE UNEXPECTED UKRAINIAN FACTOR

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### Abstract

The initiation in Warsaw of the CEE-China cooperation (so called 16+1 format) in 2012 has aroused many hopes in participating countries, since many of them were cash-strapped after the global financial crisis and China offered credit lines as well as know-how in infrastructure building. At the beginning, Poland viewed 16+1 as a useful platform to prove its growing diplomatic clout in CEE because China claimed that Poland is a natural and real leader of the 16+1. As the 16+1 cooperation matured this format quickly showed a major drawback – China uses the diversity among the 16 CEE countries (e.g. EU and non-EU status) to promote its own interests (*divide et impera*). The Chinese strategy turned out to be particularly at odds with Polish foreign policy goals, since from Warsaw's point of view the unity of the EU at all fronts in the face of Russian aggression on Ukraine is of the utmost necessity. Moreover Polish diplomacy is becoming more and more sceptical of 16+1 because of the EU's pressure to toe the line of EU framework of cooperation with China. The absence of Polish PM Ewa Kopacz at the 16+1 Belgrade Summit in December 2014 may result in a change of Chinese attitude towards 16+1.

### Keywords

CEE; China; EU; Poland; 16+1

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, relations between Poland and China, as well as between Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and China has grown much in importance. Poland broke new political ground with China in December 2011 when the two countries signed Joint Statement on Establishing Strategic Partnership (Kancelaria Prezydenta 2011). Less than half year later the Prime Ministers of the sixteen CEE countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary) gathered in Warsaw at the occasion of the first China-CEE summit, so called 16+1 platform. Poland is believed to be the natural and real leader in this forum, since it represents "1/3 of the potential of the sixteen [CEE countries]" (MFA 2014a). Objectively speaking Poland has the biggest territory, population and diplomatic clout in the EU among the "sixteen". Still, subjective factors matter too - it is China that perceives Poland's political leadership in CEE as "unavoidable", as the director of one of the most influential Chinese think-thanks said to a Polish diplomat (personal observation 2014).

This article aims at describing Poland-China bilateral ties in the context of broader 16+1 cooperation as well as offers partial explanation about change in Polish international behaviour towards China: from vocal proponent of closer CEE-China cooperation to advocate of cautious policy in 2014 onwards.

The main argument goes: owing to profound changes in Poland's security environment due to the ongoing military crisis in Ukraine, Warsaw perceives implementation of some Chinese policies in CEE as divisive for the EU, thereby further undermining EU's unity and common stance on Russia. Moreover, the Chinese official stance on Ukrainian crisis is assessed by Warsaw as not contributing to restoring stability on Ukrainian soil. Qualitative methods will be employed with focus on inductive inference. The subjects of analysis are official statements, policies and diplomatic gestures. Sources of some information are personal observations of the author, which cannot be directly attributed due to their private or non-public nature.

## 2. POLAND-CHINA POLITICAL RELATIONS - AN OVERVIEW

2014 marked the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Poland and People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, for almost two decades since 1989 relations were just correct and rather dormant. This fact can be partially attributed to important and symbolic events of 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1989: massacre on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing and first (partially) free elections in Poland after the fall of communism. Such a "democratic prism" in dealing with China wasn't naturally the only cause of lack of interest or a roadblock to engagement between two countries. Both of them were undergoing profound reforms. Poland was in the midst of two intertwined transitions: a) political – to fully fledged democracy, b) economic – towards creating the level playing field and introducing capitalism. Externally, Polish diplomacy pushed for integration with the Western institutions: European Union, OECD and NATO. On the other hand, China faced an even more daunting task of reorienting its economy from central planning to "capitalism with Chinese characteristics". To attain a peaceful transition at home, Beijing's foreign policy goals aimed at building peaceful relations with its neighbours and East Asia in accordance with its "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifang*) policy.

Taking into account the above few top-level diplomatic exchanges occurred until the second decade of XXI century. Polish Prime ministers (PM) visited China in 1994 and 2008, Polish Presidents in 1997 and 2011; Chinese PM visited Poland in 2012, President (Chairperson) in 2004.

In 2010 Chinese started sending unequivocal signals that they are willing to improve ties with Warsaw. That year at the World EXPO in Shanghai Chinese has placed Polish pavilion in a prestigious area and invited the then Marshal of the Sejm (person No 2 in country diplomatic precedence) Grzegorz Schetyna (as of time of this writing Polish Foreign Minister) to deliver an address during the EXPO's closing ceremony along with, *inter alia*, PM Wen Jiabao and United Nation's General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon. The Polish pavilion enjoyed great popularity and achieved success but apparently this was exactly what Chinese wanted. EXPO's success has laid the groundwork for the important bilateral document signed a year later. On his visit to Beijing, President Komorowski and his peer Hu Jintao decided to elevate bilateral relations to the "strategic partnership" (SP) level. Consequently, official exchanges increased sharply in number and scope since

2011. For a decade from 2000 to 2010 there were 18 visits of Chinese officials in Poland at vice ministerial level or higher, and 31 of Polish officials in China. But within 4 years from 2011 to February 2015 there were, respectively, 15 and 38 visits (Polish Embassy in Beijing 2015). What is more, Chinese visits at ministerial level in Poland are under-reported since provincial party secretaries are granted ministerial level in Chinese bureaucracy as well as heads of some institutions (e.g. Xinhua News Agency President which President visited Warsaw in June 2014) or some State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are.

Officially, bilateral relations are managed on the basis of institutional framework as pointed in Table 1.

**Table No 1 Institutional framework of Poland-China relations**

<i>Body's name</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Poland-China Intergovernmental Committee chaired by Ministers of Foreign Affairs	Set up in 2012, did not assemble as of February 2015. According to Polish MFA Poland is ready for the first meeting and the Chinese side is reluctant (Grzegorzewski 2014)
Strategic Dialogue	"Strategic Dialogue is the most important Strategic Partnership's coordination instrument (...) implemented annually at the Foreign Ministry ministerial or v-ce ministerial level" Last meeting: May 2014 (MFA 2014b)
Sino-Polish Scientific-Technical Cooperation Commission	Annual meetings of academia representatives.
Sino-Polish Bilateral Economic Cooperation Commission	Annual meetings at the v-ce ministerial level of Ministries of Economy
Infrastructure Steering Committee	Established in 2012, did not assemble as of February 2015
Industrial Cooperation Steering Committee	Proposed by Wen Jiabao in 2012
Interdepartmental Group for the Coordination of Workings for the Development of Poland-China Strategic Partnership	Established 2012 r., as of July 2014, two meeting convened in 2013 (MFA 2014c)
Political-defence dialogue (China uses different term: "strategic defence consultations")	Inaugurated in Nov 2014, discussions on various levels of Defence Ministries (from ministerial to working level)

*Source: author's compilation*

As we can see from Table 1, rhetoric trumps real political cooperation. There were no institutionalised meetings at the most important level of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) heads. Moreover, two steering committees have not assembled by the time of this writing. Overall, the situation is not as bad as it seems from the table, because Polish ministers or their deputies travel regularly to China as was mentioned. Symbolism and gestures, however, are an important part of diplomacy. Thus, it can be argued that, from the Polish perspective, Strategic Partnership with China will be ultimately fulfilled only after the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee. Lack of Chinese goodwill (as Poles perceive it) may be a deliberative tactic of "rewarding" the opportunity to meet Chinese FM in exchange for making some concessions (e.g. less contacts with Taiwan). Yet, a complementary explanation may be offered: China treats Poland as important part, but still a part, of CEE and for China a primary platform for dealing with CEE is 16+1 forum. Moreover, it can be argued that Intergovernmental Committee is not necessarily needed, owing to the fact that most of the bilateral cooperation is successfully managed on a daily basis by mid-level bureaucracy due to the non-controversial and limited number of areas of mutual interest.

Sino-Polish SP has been a proof for Poland that China is serious in its commitment to develop a robust relationship bilaterally. It is worth mentioning here that the term "strategic partnership" (SP) is used by Chinese diplomacy not exclusively for a handful of countries of special value for Beijing. As of June 2014 China signed 47 SPs with countries and three with international organizations. The purpose of such SPs "proliferation" is that they serve Chinese core interests, provide suitable environment for Chinese development in a multi polar world, as well as deal with diplomatic contingencies (Feng, Jing 2014). The global financial crisis can be counted in the latter category. In the CEE region China's strategic partners are: Serbia (2009), Ukraine (2011, not part of 16+1) and Belarus (2013, likewise).

### **3. POLAND-CHINA TRADE AND INVESTMENT RELATIONS**

China-Poland trade relations are characterised by huge asymmetry: Poland exports ten times less to China than it imports from the Middle

Kingdom. Polish officials, however, are realistic in their expectations. The head of the Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency said that "we will be pleased by 1 to 5 export/import ratio" (Rzeczpospolita 2014). Yet, the latest data (see Table 2) indicates quite the opposite: the surge in imports from China in 2014 was the highest in 4 recent years and is accelerating (16,3% growth for Jan-Sept 2014 and 19,4% for the whole 2014). What is equally important, import growth outpaced export growth twice as much, so the import-export gap widens and probably will continue to do so because, at the same time, Poland probably substitutes Russian imports for Chinese goods. Polish imports from Russia decreased due to a mix of sanctions and business uncertainty. In 2014, China displaced Russia and became second source of imports for the Polish economy (10,5% share). Moreover, analysis of the trade turnover shows that the decrease in total imports from Russia in 2014 (-1,6%) has been almost equally compensated by an increase in imports from China (+1,7%) while there were no changes in turnover with other top ten Polish import partners (CSO c, preliminary data for 2014).

**Table 2 China-Poland export and import**

	Export		Import		Balance (billion Euro)	Export/import ratio
	In million Euro	Y/y change	In million Euro	Y/y change		
2010	1229		12615	26.4%	-11,4	0.097
2011	1347	9.6%	13245	5.0%	-11,9	0.102
2012	1358	0.8%	13687	3.3%	-12,3	0.099
2013	1595	17.5%	14573	6.50%	-13,0	0.109
2014		8,5% *	17401,6 **	16,3% * 19,4% **		

Source: Central Statistical Office of Poland, Ministry of Economy, last column: own calculations.

(\*): data for Jan-Sept 2014 period; (\*\*): preliminary data for the whole 2014.

Poland imports from China components for its manufacturing industry (almost 50% of the whole imports). Looking by sections, half of the imports consist of electro machinery, while approximately 10% are textiles. When it comes to exports, 1/3 of it consists of copper (due to contracts of the

KGHM mining company). Polish manufacturers also sell electro machinery, machines and their parts. In the top ten export commodities in 2013 there were also: pork, furniture, rubber, car parts and accessories, chemicals, electric switches, telecommunication equipment, airplanes and lead ore. Highly processed goods accounted for 29,1% of exports (CSO a, MOE 2014).

In 2012, according to Polish Central Statistical Office, 723 Chinese business entities were registered in Poland, 698 of them owned majority stakes and 624 employed up to 9 persons (CSO b). The Chinese capital presence in Poland is not impressive. Since at the end of 2012 Chinese invested merely 218,5 mln € (MOE 2014), what accounts for 1% of total FDI stock in Poland. Table 3 shows the major Chinese investments in Poland as of 2013.

**Table No 3. Major Chinese investment in Poland, 2013**

<i>Investor name</i>	<i>Activities (PKD)</i>	<i>Activities (class)</i>	<i>Corporation</i>
Haoneng Packaging	Manufacture of pulp and paper, publishing and printing;	Printing and service activities related to printing;	Illochroma Haoneng Poland Sp. z o.o. - Skawina
LiuGong Machinery	Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal and household goods	Wholesale of machinery, equipment and supplies	Dressta Sp. z o.o. - StalowaWola; LiuGong Machinery (Poland) Sp. z o.o. - StalowaWola
Shanxi Yuncheng Plate-making Group	Manufacture of pulp and paper; publishing and printing	Publishing, printing and reproduction of recorded media	YUNCHENG (POLAND) Sp. z o.o. - Łódź
Sino Frontier Properties Ltd.	Construction	Building of complete constructions or parts thereof; civil engineering	GD Poland Investment Sp. z o. o. - WólkaKosowska
Suzhou Victory Precision Manufacture Co	Manufacture of rubber and plastics	Manufacture of plastic products	Victory Technology Polska sp. z o. o. - Gorzów Wielkopolski
TPV Technology Ltd	Manufacture of electrical machinery and apparatus	Manufacture of television and radio receivers, sound or video recording or reproducing apparatus and associated goods	TPV Displays Polska sp. z o.o. - Gorzów Wielkopolski

Source: PAliZ 2014a, Mierzejewski and Jurczyk 2014

An expectation gap exists when it comes to investment. Poland is interested in greenfield or brownfield investment in food processing, IT, telecommunications or manufacturing, while China eyes buying stakes in the financial sector, mining, power and infrastructure.

## 4. POLAND VIS-A-VIS CHINA-CEE RELATIONS

### 4.1. Internationalization of Polish foreign policy

Polish engagement with China should be put in a broader context. Re-westernization after 1989 has brought about enormous benefits for Polish economic and security interests. Yet, after the recent global financial crisis close ties with the Western markets became "ties that bind". 25% of all Polish exports end up in Germany, while Polish trade with the EU amounts to 75% of their total. The Ministry of Economy wants to lower this dependency to 50%, as well as increase the share of export in GDP from 40% to 60% in 2020, which means doubling the present number of 60000 exporters. As the Polish Minister of Economy said: "the economy, which sells its products to numerous markets lays more solid foundations for success". Polish Foreign Minister (FM) was even blunter in his assessment: "the days of absolute domination of Europe in the world are gone". To sustain a stable rate of growth in order to avoid the "middle income trap" after 2020, when Poland no longer will be the beneficiary of EU developmental and structural funds, global and out-of-Europe foreign and especially economic policy is needed. To put it differently, the strategy of re-Europeanization of Poland can be considered accomplished. New developmental strategic goals are needed, and these very goals as well as developmental reserves of Poland exist beyond Europe (MFA d, e, Ziarno 2014).

East and South-East Asia plays prominent role in Poland's new "go global" strategy. Apart from establishing an SP relationship with China in 2011, Poland signed similar documents with South Korea in 2013 and with Japan in February 2015. In both cases the official delegation was accompanied by businessmen. Poland is also short listed in India as a one of the most wanted investors. Polish presidential Minister O. Dziekoński said in early



March 2015 that the aim of the next presidential economic missions will be Indochina and India (Kancelaria Prezydenta 2014, The Hindu 2014).

#### 4.2. 16+1 cooperation

The global financial crisis which struck in 2008 and subsequently morphed into the debt crisis in Europe hit the Chinese export-oriented economy hard (it was saved thanks to a huge stimulus of 4 trillion RMB). It is not surprising that in the midst of crisis, when the cash-strapped governments of developing countries in CEE were looking for capital to spur investment and prop-up negative GDP growth, China decided to launch 16+1 cooperation in April 2012 in Warsaw.

The 16+1 vehicle will help China to diversify export destinations as well as increase export volume. While this can be at odds with what CEE wants, China openly states that it also wants to import more from CEE, especially processed food. Moreover, China aims at diversifying its plentiful foreign reserves and CEE offers suitable place for investment: CEE production bases and distribution channels are close to Western markets, its workforce is well educated and job costs are lower. Another pillar of Chinese interest in CEE is New Silk Road concept, important transport routes which go through CEE. Thus, China is keen to invest in transport infrastructure (especially rail) and ports. China also plans on setting up distribution centres. That said, the major goals of CEE relating to 16+1 (i.e. goals particular countries) are: reduce trade deficit with China by spurring export, attract investment and develop logistical centres for Chinese goods (Szcudlik-Tatar 2014 a).

PM's of CEE countries and China meet annually at a formal summit (or "meeting" as official documents put) (Warsaw 2012, Bucharest 2013, Belgrade 2014, China will host summit in 2015). 16+1 is not an international organization *de jure* – officially it serves as coordination body for bilateral dialogues. What deserves closer attention and has not been thoroughly examined in literature is how Poland serves as a "leader" of 16+1 and manages 16+1 relations with the European Union.

#### 4.3. Poland and the EU factor in 16+1

Since 2011 the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank, releases a yearly Scorecard on EU foreign policy. In the 2013 edition, a summary of 2012, Poland has been named, along with other 16+1 CEE countries, a "slacker" in category "enhancing Europe's strategic dialogue with China", apparently as a result of launching 16+1 platform. Wording in the ECFR's report was quite harsh: "CEE member states led by Poland held their own regional summit with China (...) that is focused on investment opportunities which includes a soft loan package from Chinese banks that is reminiscent of Chinese practices in Africa" (ECFR 2013, pp. 26, 134). Two year later ECFR Scorecard pointed out to Poland (along with Finland and Germany) as a "leader" of "coordinating EU position towards China" (ECFR 2015, p. 118). What has changed in Warsaw between 2012 and 2014?

To start with, the 16+1 forum was solely Chinese idea from the beginning. 16+1 is very comfortable for Beijing, since the Chinese PM is able to meet simultaneously with his sixteen CEE counterparts from relatively small countries, which compete for Chinese money and favour much needed in times of deep crisis back in 2012. Two issues in 16+1 were particularly intolerable for Brussels from the beginning. First, Wen Jiabao announced in Warsaw "Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries", which had not been consulted neither with CEE countries nor with Brussels. Secondly, even more worrisome for the EU's institutions was the fact that in the fall of 2012 the Secretariat for Cooperation between China and CEE was established. This has caught EU by surprise and foreign press absence at the inauguration of the Secretariat only deepened suspicions regarding the 16+1 platform (Bolzen and Erling 2012).

The word "Secretariat" suggests a fully-fledged institutionalization, but in this case institutionalization is off the plate, since Secretariat "is a Chinese institution, which is under the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The institution deals with communication and coordination of co-operation work between China and Central and Eastern European countries, the preparatory meeting of leaders, preparation for economic and trade forums and the implementation of those outcomes" (Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries 2013).

The Secretariat communicates with national coordinators from CEE countries. Yet, setting up a Secretariat as a proof of non-institutionalization is counter-intuitive and complicates the reception of that message in EU circles. After being initially kept in dark, Brussels increased its pressure on ten 16+1 participants which are EU member countries and demanded more transparency. Two subsequent documents released after the Bucharest and Belgrade summits were consulted with Brussels officials, while European Commission representatives participated in summits (ECFR 2014, p. 16; Szczudlik-Tatar 2014b). The EU was probably more anxious not over the form (e.g. wording) of the 16+1 summits' final documents but over the substance, i.e. how decisions resulting from summits will be implemented. EU had legitimate doubts whether infrastructure projects funded by a 10 billion USD loan package announced by Wen Jiabao in 2012 will follow EU rules on public markets and tenders. In consequence, EU members of CEE countries duly complied and assured that they will obey the EU law (ECFR 2014 p. 26; Bucharest Guidelines 2013; Belgrade Guidelines 2014).

Analysis of the Bucharest and Belgrade Guidelines indicates that pressure from EU has grown over time. Document from 2013 mentions the EU two times ("China-CEEC cooperation is in concord with China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership" and "in the case of EU member states, relevant EU legislation and regulations will also be observed") and describes China-CEE relations as "a growth point in China-Europe cooperation". On the other hand, a document from Belgrade mentioned for the first time that "EU representatives were present at the meeting". Moreover "The participants reiterated that China-CEEC cooperation is in line with China-EU relations (...) thus contributing as appropriate to the implementation of the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*". The latter document has been described as a "guiding document for China-EU relations". Under the point "Enhance cooperation on connectivity" participants agreed to "[take] note of the agreed EU regulations, guidelines, policies and processes in connectivity".

#### 4.4. PM Kopacz did not attend 2014 Belgrade summit

Notwithstanding the qualitative leap in pro-EU wording in China-CEE summits' documents and duly compliance with the EU rules by EU-member

CEE countries, Polish PM Ewa Kopacz was absent at the Belgrade summit. This issue merits closer attention.

The decision that PM Kopacz would not go to Belgrade was announced in late afternoon the day before the summit. The Polish Press Agency was informed that Vice PM and Minister of National Defence Tomasz Siemoniak would stand in for Kopacz. PM's spokesperson said that plans were changed due to the tight schedule of PM Kopacz (PAP 2014a).

The Belgrade meeting took place on 16<sup>th</sup> December. The day after Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko was due to visit Warsaw to meet with Kopacz, who also had been preparing for the EU summit (18-19<sup>th</sup> December). The EU Summit was especially important for the Polish PM, since it was the first being led by her predecessor and newly appointed President of the European Council Donald Tusk. On the agenda were talks about the situation in the Ukraine and European Fund for Strategic Investments, two issues of particular Polish interest (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2014a).

From the diplomatic point of view representation of the country on the proper i.e. agreed level on international meeting is a sign how much attention each side draws to relations with the other. Kopacz was not the only PM absent in Belgrade. Bulgarian PM Boyko Borisov as well as Croatian PM Zoran Milanovic also skipped the meeting. Borisov apparently prioritised the European part of its foreign policy since he has been visiting Berlin at that time. On the other hand, Milanovic protested against Serbian muted reaction after Vojislav Seselj, an alleged Serbian war criminal came back to Serbia, as he was released by the Hague-based UN war crimes tribunal on grounds of ill health before reaching a verdict in his trial (Irish Times 2014; Sofia News Agency 2014).

Why has Kopacz chosen to prioritise Ukraine and EU more than a chance to meet Chinese PM Li Keqiang, which was a sort of diplomatic obligation (PM-level gathering)? One set of explanations was put forward by R. Pyffel, whose article got a lot of publicity in Polish expert circles. Pyffel, drawing from numerous informal talks (he is Director of Center for Poland-Asia Studies, a think-thank), presents a few intertwined "narrations" which might have contributed to Kopacz's decision to skip Belgrade (at the same time he did not spare criticism of Kopacz's move) (Pyffel 2014).

First, Kopacz is a tough negotiator, securing Polish core interests. Kopacz does not like 16+1 platform, because: Poland has been "lump together"

with countries, whom it shares no common interest with; she does not want to further antagonize Brussels and keeps oriented towards West and EU; there were no spectacular breakthrough in China-Poland relations, while problems with COVEC still lingers; Chinese proposals are not in line with the Polish and European reality. All in all, Kopacz is not afraid of the world's number two superpower, exudes confidence and is ambitious.

Second, Kopacz is not well versed in foreign policy making and lacks competent advisers. Thus, owing to the "shamefully weak position of Asia and China pundits in state structures" there is no such thing as PM Kopacz being "tough negotiator". Quite adversely: his absence in Belgrade has been a result of "disastrous negligence".

Third, due to domestic political instability, Kopacz was focused on the consolidation of power after Donald Tusk's dispatch to Brussels, fighting with an obstructive opposition and dealing with protests of various social groups (miners, doctors, supporters of the idea of allegedly rigged local elections).

Fourth, Kopacz's decision was influenced by political infighting in the ruling Civic Platform (PO). There are three main factions in PO and leader of one of them - Grzegorz Schetyna, was appointed as Foreign Minister. According to Pyffel, Schetyna does understand Asia and its growing role in world politics and economy, as well as incumbent President Komorowski does. On the other hand, Rafał Trzaskowski, Kopacz's confidant, has been designated as vice Foreign Minister for European affairs. In this interpretation, Trzaskowski is Kopacz's man in MFA thereby EU has priority. Moreover, by not participating in Belgrade summit, Kopacz wanted to undermine Schetyna's Asian field of experience.

Fifth, part of the blame is on the poor condition of democratic system, where politics becomes part of the show-business, the line between elites and masses blurs so as to no one can distinguish between significant and non-significant events. That said, PM's non-attendance in Belgrade has not stirred up controversy in Poland since it has just gone unnoticed by the mainstream media and political experts.

Pyffel's explanations are convincing but are all based on informal sources and thus cannot be independently corroborated. In this case, I would like to present different account of Polish stance on 16+1. I would argue that the Ukraine crises plays a prominent role in formulating Polish foreign policy regarding the 16+1 forum. Next, Kopacz would like to show China that she

values domestic issues more, when Poland faces instability in its immediate vicinity, while China, wittingly or not, drives a wedge (16+1) between "old" and "new" EU countries. For Poland, EU unity on all fronts, especially towards Russia, in times of the most profound security crisis since the Cold War is of utmost importance for Polish core interests.

## 5. UKRAINE, POLAND AND 16+1

First of all one should look into official statements from the last 16+1 forum in Belgrade (December 2014). There are two of them from the Polish side: the article signed by PM Kopacz for the Serbian press agency Tanjug and the Siemoniak's speech delivered during the Belgrade summits plenary session.

What stands out in Kopacz's article is how different it is from articles written by other 15 CEE PMs. All of the fifteen articles underscore the unique qualities of particular countries as suitable places for Chinese investment such as sound legal system, trade zone incentives, good transport infrastructure, low wages, etc. (Tanjug 2014). Without exception they sound like promotional materials released by national investment agencies, completely passing over political issues. It is not surprising, given the fact that CEE countries compete for Chinese investment. But Kopacz's piece is by no means of "promotional character" and solely touches upon political matters. It may be described as a roadmap of Polish expectations for future Sino-Polish cooperation in the 16+1 format. Simultaneously, which is the crucial point, Poland used the 16+1 meeting to communicate its criticism, in a veiled form, of Chinese official stance on the Ukrainian crisis (it will be examined later).

Particularly meaningful is the opening sentence of Kopacz's piece (repeated later using the same wording): "Europe and East Asia are the two poles of stability, peace and growth within Eurasia. We are bound to conduct a substantial dialogue on security, international law and restrains of the use of force in international environment" (Tanjug 2014). Subsequently, Kopacz writes that Poland wants to focus on "four strategic areas of common interest": politics, communication and infrastructure, investment and finance, green growth. The area of politics is described as a "common concern for our [CEE's]

neighbourhood" and the opening sentence is repeated as an elaboration of this point.

Siemoniak's speech at the plenary session was even blunter, since he pointed out Russia openly:

"[16+1 platform] is also a political commitment, which acquired particular significance in the face of deterioration of the security environment in our neighbourhood. Recent Russian actions, among other things, showed that norms of international law, development of which took great pains, are not given once and for all. Continuous efforts for building peaceful relations among nations are indispensable. Thus, 16+1 format should become a part of wider Europe-Asia dialogue for peace, stability and development. In a globalizing world our fate is tightly intertwined and responsibility for common future indivisible" (author's translation, MON 2014a).

The content of the above statements begs the question why Poland conveyed its dissatisfaction at the occasion of the forum, the main aims of which are to increase economic cooperation and people-to-people ties.

Firstly, Chinese engagement in Ukrainian conflict resolution seems to be assessed in Warsaw as unsatisfactory. In 2014, Poland became the only EU- and NATO-member country which borders with both Russia (Kaliningrad Oblast) and Ukraine, on the territory of which open hostilities are happening, not seen in the region since the Balkan conflicts in the 90's. Political instability behind its eastern border directly affects Polish security interests. As the Polish National Security Strategy from 2014 says "The reassertion of Russia's position as a major power at the expense of its neighbourhood, as well as the escalation of its confrontational policy, an example of which is the conflict with Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, has a negative impact on the security in the region". Consequently "an enhanced cooperation between sub-regions of Europe in the area of security, including defence, will remain favourable from the political and economic perspective. However, it cannot replace allied and pan-European solutions in this regard" (National Security Bureau 2014, p. 21)

Although the annexation of Crimea stands in contradiction to Chinese core interests (no interference in internal affairs, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity), Beijing distanced itself from the events in Ukraine and officially holds a neutral position. In official statements China "respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity", urges "all sides in Ukraine to explore ways to dissolve the crisis through political dialogue", calls "on all parties to keep calm and exercise restraint so as to resolve disputes through dialogue and negotiations" but also maintains that "it is not by accident that

the situation has reached this point" or "A proper settlement of the Ukrainian issue requires a favourable external environment" (Xinhua 2014a).

All in all, China tacitly sided with Russia ("kind neutrality"), which has not caused Western backlash against Beijing. Yet, China is said to be the biggest winner of Ukrainian crisis, which PRC has used as a leverage to strengthen its position in relationship with Russia. From the Chinese point of view, hostilities on the Ukrainian soil turn the US attention and resources away from their pivot/rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region. But most importantly, Russian strategic options have narrowed and the Russian economy is to become more reliant on China, since the latter did not impose sanctions on Russia, as US and European countries did. Being cut off from western capital markets, Russian firms turn to Chinese banks for lending. Finally, after ten years of negotiations, China and Russia signed in May 2014 a 30-year gas contract. Thanks to the Chinese' favourable bargaining position, the terms of contract, although not disclosed, are said to be highly favourable for Beijing (Barret 2015; Jiang 2015; Lubina 2014, p. 363-379; McDermott 2015).

There are three publicly available accounts of talks between Polish and Chinese authorities regarding Ukraine. On March 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 Polish FM Radosław Sikorski spoke with his counterpart Wang Yi, 8 days later PM Donald Tusk, on his request, had a telephone call with Li Keqiang. Finally, in September Siemoniak and his Chinese peer, Minister of Defence, Wanquan Chang "talked about current political-military situation in CEE and East Asia". Accounts of the conversations differ and reveal a gap in the precedence of interests in both capitals. For example, the Polish press release after Tusk's call suggests that conversation was almost all about Ukraine, since economic matters were summed up in only one sentence at the very end (18 words from the 159, English language release). On the other hand, the Ukrainian part of Chinese press release was placed in the last paragraph and constitutes about ¼ of the whole. Wording differs in some places, e.g. Chinese version does not state that "Li Keqiang shared the concern of the Polish government, saying that the situation is very serious" (Kancelaria Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2014b; MFA f; MFA PRC 2014 a,b; MON 2014b).

Sikorski's and Tusk's conversations were held while Russians were conducting their operation to capture Crimea. All three of conversations, apart from differences in wording, do not suggest any huge (and publicly asserted) discrepancies: both capitals toe their respective line. Still, the Polish message in



Belgrade combined with Siemoniak's official capacity in Belgrade as Vice PM, as well as Minister of National Defence was notably strong. I would argue that Polish concerns are rooted deeper. The probable answer lies in a lack of consensus in the EU national capitals about how to respond to Russian belligerence and the unexpected Chinese factor.

Poland is thought in the EU to be the most prominent "hawk" in dealing with Russia. From the Polish perspective, Warsaw is not "hawkish" but those who oppose to firm policy toward Russia (continue sanctions, increase diplomatic pressure etc.) are "dovish". Among EU countries those which insist on more "dialogue" with Russia, i.e. a softer approach are: Cyprus, Serbia, Italy, Austria, Greece, Slovakia and Hungary. The latter two, along with Czech Republic, are part of Visegrad Group (V4). V4 as a whole issued principled statements about the Russian role in the Ukrainian conflict, but common V4 statements were more resolute than those released unilaterally by Slovakia and Hungary. Such a national approach dilutes the message, makes it incoherent and eventually weakens, in Polish perspective, the combined strength of V4 (Gniazdowski 2014; Groszkowski 2014a; Rodkiewicz and Wilk 2014; Sadecki 2015).

To make the matter worse, there are signs that the Czech Republic "drifts to the East" too, which, if it is to materialize, would put Poland's position in V4 on the spot (Gazeta Wyborcza 2015).

In short, we can observe a growing rift between Central European countries: one group, led by Poland, postulates augmenting the eastern NATO flank and more sanctions to reign in Russian behaviour, while the other group accepts arguments of the latter only at face value and criticises them openly. As analysts from the Polish OSW think-tank says "Different perception of the threats (...) as well as different expectations from NATO will severely impede cooperation in the field of security and defence in V4" (Gniazdowski, Groszkowski and Sadecki 2014).

At the beginning of 2015, V4 was also weakened by the Slavkov Declaration, signed by Austria, Slovakia and Czech Republic, which was the most vocal proponent of this format. Polish analysts point out that Slavkov format may be "troublesome" and definitely is a "challenge" for V4 (Groszkowski 2015; Kałan 2015).

Where does China fit in this picture? I would argue that Warsaw may have noticed there is no coincidence that countries adopting a "softer" attitude towards Russia are also more Chinese-friendly on multiple fronts.

Hungarian courtship of China is well documented in literature so I would not elaborate (see e.g. Horváth 2014; Kašan undated). Relatively new are the Czech overtures of friendship towards China. Since 2012 Czech Republic contacts with China gained momentum, which translates into a retreat from patronising China on human rights issues and de-politicization of bilateral relations in favour of developing business links. It is argued that Czech Republic "the current Czech 'China-policy' seems to have moved towards the most China-friendly [in V4], second only to Hungary" (Groszkowski 2014 b; Lavicka 2014; Turcsányi, Matura and Fürst 2014, p.130).

A similar approach seems to be applied in Slovak diplomacy. It is argued that neither left- nor right-wing Slovak governments "are prepared to sacrifice their economic goals for the ideological and value-oriented goals and they are willing to restrain their positions, believing this influence economic outcomes of relations", which places Slovakia in an accommodating position regarding relations with China (Turcsányi 2014).

Italy was the second largest recipient of Chinese investment in Europe in 2014 and, since the turn of the century, the fifth country in Europe which has attracted the most Chinese investment (\$5.6bn). Taking into account Italy's economic problems, especially high levels of public debt, Rome is unlikely to undertake actions which would alienate China. The same may be attributed to cash-strapped Cyprus, which was picked as a "slacker" in ECFR's 2015 Scorecard for pursuing bilateral relations with China at the cost of common EU policy (Baker and McKenzie 2015).

Serbia holds a key position on the Balkans as a transport route for Chinese goods shipped from the Greek port Piraeus. At the last 16+1 summit, agreements related to construction of Belgrade-Budapest High-Speed Railway (HSR) were signed. In addition, China does not recognize Kosovo's independence, which may be a useful argument for Serbian diplomacy.

Greece occupies a key position in the Chinese New Silk Road "one belt, one road" concept: the bulk of sea-borne goods originating from ports of southern China would be re-imported to CEE from Piraeus via above mentioned HSR. The new Greek leftist government sworn in January 2015, however, announced it was halting all of the privatisation schemes all around

the country, including Piraeus, a few piers of which are operated by COSCO, a Chinese firm. COSCO is short-listed for buying the majority stake of Piraeus, thus the Chinese were confused, since their plans for key transport hub in southern Europe has been brought into question. Yet, late in February both sides agreed that the privatisation of Piraeus would continue as scheduled, so Greek actions may have been aimed at extracting some concessions or help for the Greek economy (Xinhua 2015a).

Jumping to conclusions, Chinese strategy to play an important role in the various EU countries, including those officially seeking to join the EU and possessing candidate status, like Serbia (but also Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania), "might secure Beijing's long-term presence in the region and a continuing cooperation with the enlarged EU in the future" (Financial Times 2014). One of the Chinese experts writes explicitly that "in the course of China's negotiations with the EU over the bilateral investment accord as well as the building of an FTA, CEE countries, which have open markets, are expected to be the driving force in pushing forward the talks between China and Europe" (Liu 2014).

Such a tactic assumes that intra-EU negotiations over issues concerning China would be harder for countries like Poland, which opt for unified approach. Still, most worrisome for Warsaw might be the seeds of discord in the V4 which may harm Visegrad's potential cooperation with China. The situation may become grim, at least in theory.

With respect to its external activities, the V4 relies on "V4+" format, which in its Asian dimension is successfully developed with Japan, South Korea and (from February 2015) with India<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the program of the Slovak Presidency in V4 (July 2014-June 2015) stipulates developing V4 relations with China. For the start goals of the V4+China cooperation are quite modest and low-key:

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<sup>1</sup>Note on source regarding V4+India cooperation: As of 13.03.2015 I came across only one source of information concerning V4+India, namely a tweet from Michał Kołodziejcki (@mikołodziejcki), vice director of Asia-Pacific Department at Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from 27<sup>th</sup> Febr 2015, which I translate in full: "[I am] In Bratislava at the meeting inaugurating Visegrad Group (V4)+India format. After Japan and Korea [India] is another country appreciating V4".

- enhancing cooperation in the preparation and adoption of joint measures to eliminate the phenomenon of the undervalued price of textile goods imported from China and other Asian countries;
- joint projects of scientific and technical cooperation and funding the mobility of research and development staff;
- V4+China – Seminar on Science and Technology envisioned in 1st half of 2015;
- The *Protocol on National Cooperation in Tourism between Ministries Responsible for Tourism in the V4 Countries* will be signed including common position to memorandum on cooperation with China (signed on 18<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2015);
- Expert dialogue focusing on specific areas of possible cooperation on an ad hoc basis with China could be launched as well (Program of the Slovak Presidency 2014).

During his visit in Beijing in February 2015, Slovak Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Miroslav Lajčák said: "we will seek to initiate V4+China dialogue. We believe that it could grow into a basis for regular talks". Slovak official press release underscored that "Minister Lajčák and his Chinese partners also agreed on the beginning of more cooperation in the V4 + China format" (SR-China 2015; Lajcak 2015). Yet, Chinese press releases omitted any references to V4 (Xinhua 2015b; MFA PRC 2015 c).

Given the de-facto Polish pre-eminence in V4, Warsaw's voice would be heard should the V4+China forum convene. From the Polish perspective, it would be more convenient to deal with China through the V4. During talks with Chinese scholars in Warsaw, one of Polish diplomats said that it would be easier to talk with China in groups of countries which have more in common. Scholars argue that Chinese MFA does not support V4-China forum, since it would diminish the value of 16+1 meeting "as a transaction cost reducing tool, which gathers sixteen leaders at once". Moreover the very reason why a common V4 standpoint vis-à-vis China is unlikely to materialize is rivalry for Chinese good will between particular countries (Turcsányi, Matura and Fürst 2014 p. 133).

Polish diplomacy seems to perceive this problem quite adversely: because there is rivalry, the coherent common front would not materialize. Hence statements like this issued at the occasion of Belgrade summit.

The Russian factor matters too, since there is at least one proof that China takes advantage of the diminished Russian presence on CEE markets. The Slovak Spectator, citing Pravda daily, says that "Chinese companies, together with local players, can fill the gap left currently after Russian firms which are pulling out of Slovakia because of sanctions imposed by European authorities in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict", mentioning possible projects in area of transport infrastructure and energy, the sectors of particular Chinese interest in CEE (The Slovak Spectator 2015).

At the same time Chinese firm COVEC, the construction arm of which failed to build two parts of A2 highway in Poland, came to terms with Polish authorities (has already paid bank guarantees and is close to begin the negotiations about contractual fines) in order to start from scratch on the European market (Money.pl 2015).

A lack of consensus among V4 regarding China undermines the argument that "China understandably wants to control to some extent EU internal decision making and the V4 plays important role here with the number of members of the European parliament larger than the one of Germany and an equal voting power in the Council of the EU as Germany and France combined" (Turcsányi, Matura and Fürst 2014 p. 137). Still, these votes or influence dissipates if there are three different groups in the four-country Visegrad Group (in descending order of support for China): Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary. Another argument of the same authors, who admit that geopolitics might be in play should China become interested in V4, is not obvious given Crimea/Ukraine events: "China is aware that the space between Germany and Russia has been historically very sensitive and it might be interested to preserve its stability (...) also possibly to check any potential Russian rise which would be geopolitically threatening to China". Chinese posture is purposefully equivocal in this regard, not only because PRC sees Russian actions defending its "inherent" sphere of influence in the "close neighbourhood" as partially justified due to possible similar problems in its own backyard (Godement 2014).

After extracting huge concessions from Russia, which agreed to pay a hefty price of creeping vassalization, China, when the crisis would show signs of spiralling out of control, may step in as "responsible stakeholder" to rein in Russia on the one hand and on the other, to formally legitimize in front of Kremlin, appeal to e.g. "Western common sense" and urge the West to

recognize Russian interests. Hence there is a lot of room to manoeuvre for China, from economic to political engagement, but the latter approach may, and only may, be used as a last resort.

Accordingly, the Polish stance during the Belgrade summit exemplifies an inevitable, looming and presently inconvenient truth for China (owing to the unfinished but prioritised internal reforms): sooner or later China will have to take on responsibility for global issues on par with other global or regional powers. Beijing's web of interests is global, so regional security issues cause more and more harm those interests. From the Polish point of view, the Ukrainian case would be ideal for China to start exercising more involvement, hence contributing to conflict resolution. Beijing prefers a cautious, step-by-step, case-based approach. For now stakes are not high for PRC, as were for instance in Sudan, where China helped (or even brought about) to broker a deal between south and north, or are in Afghanistan, where China actively mediates between the Taliban and government. Should China feel some of its interests would be in peril, she would act.

### 5.1. Unexpected Chinese engagement in gas transmission systems in Poland and Ukraine

Surprisingly as it may seem, there are signs of Chinese engagement in helping Ukraine to diversify its gas supplies away from Russia. These actions are not publicized, although they are convergent with Polish foreign policy goals regarding the creation of a stable situation in Ukraine.

In 2012, China set up the China-CEE Investment Cooperation Fund (governed by EXIM Bank) with seed money of 500 million USD (1<sup>st</sup> phase) and the second phase worth 1 billion USD was rolled out in 2014. In September 2014, finalisation of the important transaction was announced: after the merger of assets from the privately owned Polenergia group being acquired by Polish Energy Partners (PEP) the new company Polenergia S.A., (PLC) emerged. China-CEE Fund owns 16% stake in Polenergia, a vertically integrated utility from the energy sector controlled by Polish billionaire Jan Kulczyk. One of the planned investments of Polenergia is a project covering the construction of gas pipeline Bernau-Szczecin, which will connect Polish gas market with the network of gas pipelines in the Western Europe as well as with Polish first LNG terminal in Świnoujście, markedly increasing Polish energy security. The

project is planned to be completed and commissioned in 2018 (Polenergia, CEE Equity 2014; PAP 2014b). Moreover, Polenergia is interested in building a gas pipeline (interconnector) from the Poland-Ukraine border to Ukrainian gas magazine Bilcze-Wolica (to be completed in 2018-2019), so constructing a connection between Polish and German gas pipelines is a prerequisite for connecting European and Ukrainian gas transmission systems. But most intriguing is the fact that, at the end of February 2015, China Development Bank (CDB) agreed that Ukraine can use credit funds obtained from CDB in 2012 for the coal-gasification project to finance the construction of the gas interconnector with Poland. The length of this interconnector is 110 km with a planned capacity of 8 billion cubic meters per year from Poland to Ukraine and 7 billion cubic meters from Ukraine towards Poland. The estimated cost of construction on Ukrainian territory is \$245 million (Naftohaz 2014; Ukrainian Journal 2014; RT.COM 2015). The Polish and Ukrainian governments said in January that an agreement concerning the construction of the interconnection pipeline has been already signed between national pipeline operators (Gaz-System and Naftohaz) (PAP 2015).

It is obvious that such strategic gas transmission projects (of regional if not geopolitical importance) are a delicate matter from the political point of view. When Ukraine will be connected to European gas transmission system, Gazprom's - i.e. Russian - leverage over Ukraine will diminish while Ukrainian energy security will considerably improve. Chinese involvement is particularly striking in the case of Poland-Ukraine interconnector. Already debt-burdened Ukraine might have found it difficult to find source of financing for interconnector. CDB decision solves the problem. At the same time, Chinese behaviour probably infuriates Russia, because gas supplies are an extremely useful instrument of pressure on Ukrainian government and on the other recipients of Russian gas as gas is transported to the Western and Central Europe, including Poland, through Ukrainian pipes. In fact, Chinese decisions are pragmatic since return on Polenergia investment probably will be ample and such a tacit, surreptitious kind of engagement suits Chinese interests. Russia would not criticise or lodge its representations publicly in order not to constrain its options in dealing with China, as only the Chinese are fond of helping Moscow. Subsequently, Beijing does not want to publicly raise any hopes that it might turn its back on Moscow. At the same time, while not admitting it openly, granting a credit for Poland-Ukraine interconnector is

precisely what the Polish diplomacy might have expected: China does not lose face while takes part in realisation of Polish foreign policy goals. Naturally, from Polish perspective, the more "constructive" Chinese engagement would be the better, but Warsaw should be prudent and down-to-earth in its expectations. China would not yield fully to Polish pressure, since Beijing and Warsaw goals are not compatible. Nonetheless, Chinese involvement via CDB is a sign of a goodwill but probably only one-time goodwill. It also remains to be seen how the implementation of the Ukraine-CDB agreement would proceed. Nonetheless, from the broader perspective, Chinese money invested in European energy systems would facilitate European integration (Mierzejewski 2014).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Bilaterally, Sino-Polish relations are amicable and correct. Both countries openly states its respective expectations, there are no publicly known big rifts in their relationship. Still, in a multilateral forum Poland issues unequivocal signals that China "can do more" with respect to the biggest challenge of Polish foreign policy in 25 years, namely the Ukrainian crisis. Warsaw suggests that Chinese actions in CEE are not isolated from the Ukrainian issue. It can be argued that, to some extent, Poland wants to securitize the Ukrainian issue in dealing with China. That being the case, Polish diplomacy should not expect that China will yield to Warsaw's pressure. What is more important, probably, is that Poland wants to increase its influence Chinese awareness of the situation regarding Ukraine in CEE and Europe as a whole. Clear articulation of respective interests enhances understanding as well as trust between diplomatic partners. Warsaw's and Beijing's interests concerning Ukraine seems to be at odds, thus more surprising is the Chinese' tacit financial support for plans for the diversification of the Ukrainian gas supplies, spearheaded by Poland. Realistically speaking, Poland should not expect more, since further Chinese actions in this direction, apart from described in article, may be unacceptable for Moscow. Yet, it is an interesting case of "crossing river by touching the stones" tactics, widely used by Chinese diplomacy.



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