

WORKING PAPER

Multilateralism as a tool in Slovak China policy: The case of 16+1, V4+China, and EU+China

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Abstract

With the passing of the Conception of developing the economic relations between Slovak Republic and People's Republic of China 2017-2020, Slovakia aims to improve its relations with China. At the same time, Slovakia did not pay such high attention to the 16 + 1 forum in the past as some of its neighbors, even though the 16 + 1 is viewed often as the most important tool for China to deal with Central and Eastern European countries. This paper is examining the question of how Slovakia is using various multilateral fora to further its relations with China. Specifically, the paper looks into what use do formats such as 16 + 1, V4 + China and EU + China have for achieving Slovak foreign and economic policy goals vis-à-vis China. To this end, the paper will examine the major policy documents of Slovakia (both general and China-specific) as well as declarations by key political stakeholders and their actions. This allows to get a comprehensive picture of what role the various fora play in pursuing the national interests and successful execution of Slovak China policy.

Keywords: *China, Slovakia, 16 + 1, V4, European Union, multilateralism, foreign policy*

Introduction

Slovakia is a small country of 5.5 million people located in the centre of Europe. Following the fall of Communist rule in 1989, the country realigned its foreign policy orientation over the course of 1990s with the aim of integrating into the Western international institutions. Since 2004, Slovakia became a member of both the EU and NATO, and thus fulfilling the main mission of the new foreign policy. Since then, Slovakia was an integral part of the West. Nevertheless, in the recent years we have seen that Slovakia under the Prime Minister Robert Fico (2006-2010; 2012-2018) was increasingly engaging with the non-Western states, China included.¹ However, Prime Minister Fico's wish to develop relations

¹ Besides China these included also Vietnam, Libya, Belarus, and Cuba, which were all visited by the Prime Minister Robert Fico.

with China only rarely went beyond proclamations, and in reality he did not do much to foster mutual Sino-Slovak relations.²

Slovakia was among the first European countries to sign a memorandum with China on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015. However, Slovakia did not play a crucial role in development of the BRI. That being said, it needs to be recognized that Slovak government has on numerous occasions proclaimed the wish to develop mutual Sino-Slovak relation. The push to develop relations with China, especially the economic relations, was confirmed when in April 2017 the Government of Slovakia passed the *Conception of developing economic ties between Slovak Republic and People's Republic of China 2017-2020* (Conception).³ By passing the Conception, Slovakia became the only country in its region to have a China-specific strategic document. No other V4 member has passed a similar document, even though they enjoy much more developed relations with China.⁴ While overdue, the Conception and accompanying Action Plan⁵ (draft Action Plan has not been passed to date, but it nevertheless provides an insight into Slovak policy towards China) provides the various government agencies with an overall plan of action on how to pursue Slovak interests regarding China. Nevertheless, despite continuously proclaimed intent of developing mutual Sino-Slovak relations, the government was not always pro-active in this regard and did not engage in any extra work to promote proposed projects. At the same time, Slovak representatives at times chose conduct which from the Chinese point of view can be labeled as unfriendly at best. To illustrate, the decision to accept Uighur prisoners from Guantanamo,⁶ President Andrej Kiska's meeting with the Dalai Lama,⁷ Prime Minister Fico's absence at the 2016 meeting of 16 + 1 in Suzhou,⁸ or absence of the top level representatives at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum are but a few examples of decisions which can be labeled as ambivalent or daring vis-à-vis China.⁹

When it comes to actual results, Slovakia has had so far a very minimal involvement with China. Slovakia has more intense trade and investment relations with numerous other Asian countries, including Vietnam, Japan, and South Korea. In the past, several large investments by Chinese companies in Slovakia were proposed. However, all but few fell through. Last in the line of unsuccessful investments was the long rumored proposed to take

² Turcsányi, R. Q. (2016): Fico pre rozvoj vzťahov s Čínou neurobil prakticky nič [Fico did practically nothing to develop relations with China]. *DennikN*, November 7, 2016. Available at: <https://dennikn.sk/602336/fico-pre-rozvoj-vztahov-s-cinou-neurobil-prakticky-nic/>.

³ See <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2017/203>

⁴ Turcsányi, R. Q. (2017): Slovakia's overdue China strategy. *The Diplomat*. November 3, 2017. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/slovakias-overdue-china-strategy/>.

⁵ See <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2017/654>.

⁶ TASR (2013): Slovensko prijalo posledných troch Ujgurov z Guantánama. [Slovakia accepted last three Ujghurs from Guantanamo] *Teraz.sk*, December 31, 2013. Available at: <http://www.teraz.sk/zahranicie/slovensko-ujgurovia-prijatie-guantanamo/69273-clanok.html>

⁷ Pravda (2016): Čína hrozí reakciou za stretnutie Kisku s dalajlámom. [China threatens to react to Kiska's meeting with Dalai Lama]. *Pravda*, October 17, 2016. Available at: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/408178-cina-hrozi-reakciou-za-stretnutie-kisku-s-dalajlamom/>.

⁸ Turcsányi (2016). Fico pre rozvoj vzťahov s Čínou neurobil prakticky nič. op. cit.

⁹ Tiezzi, S. (2017): Who is actually attending China's Belt and Road Forum? *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2017. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/who-is-actually-attending-chinas-belt-and-road-forum/>.

over a steel mill in Eastern Slovakia by China's Hesteel Group,¹⁰ which would singlehandedly turn Slovakia into a country with one of the largest stock of Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI) in the region.¹¹

The proclaimed wish to have more intense relations with China, while achieving very few tangible results thus begs to question the nature of Slovak policy towards China and what role do various tools Slovakia has at its disposal play. To this end, this paper looks into multilateral tools and how they are deployed by Slovak government in pursuing Slovak interests.

Methodology

The key research question this paper is aiming to answer is what role multilateralism plays in the Slovak policy towards China. To answer this question, the paper looks into three distinct multilateral fora in which Slovakia participates. Namely they are the 16 + 1 (16 CEE countries and China), V4 + CHINA (Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and China) and EU-China frameworks of cooperation. Before looking into what place these fora hold in the Slovak policy towards China, it is necessary to identify Slovak interests vis-à-vis China.

The data for the analysis is obtained mainly from the official policy documents published by the Slovak government, and media coverage of Slovak relations with China. These sources are analyzed using the method of qualitative text analysis. The paper also draws on the results of the polling among key stakeholders. At the same time, the paper is supplemented with data obtained from secondary sources as well, which include various academic articles and expert reports.

Based on the research goals and the methodology of the research, the paper is structured as followed. Firstly, the main interests of Slovakia vis-à-vis China are identified. This will include the presentation of current state of relations, as well as main goals Slovakia aims at achieving in its relations with China. Secondly, the role of the individual fora in the Slovak policy towards China is described. Based on the above, conclusions are drawn as to what role does multilateralism play in the Slovak foreign policy towards China, and what role do individual multilateral fora play in this policy.

Slovak interests vis-à-vis China

Sino-Slovak trade relations can be readily characterized as asymmetrical. Slovakia has a trade deficit with China, with Chinese exports to Slovakia reaching over five-time larger volume than Slovak exports to China in 2016.¹² Looking at the overall data on Slovak foreign trade, China is a marginal trade partner. In 2016, only 1.6 per cent of Slovak exports targeted

¹⁰ Nemeč, M. (2018): Potvrdené. U.S. Steel u nás zostane na neurčito. [Confirmed. U.S. Steel will stay here indefinitely]. *Hospodárske noviny*. May 4, 2018. Available at: <https://hnonline.sk/hmbiznis/1739235-potvrdeno-u-s-steel-ostane-u-nas-na-neurcito>.

¹¹ Turcsányi, R. Q.; Šimalčík, M. (2018): Chinese Presence in Slovakia: Nearing the Tipping Point? In Karásková, I. et al.: *Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China's Influence*. ChinfluenCE. Available at: <http://www.chinfluence.eu/central-europe-for-sale-the-politics-of-chinas-influence-2/>.

¹² Kironská, K.; Turcsányi, R. Q. (2017): *Slovak policy towards China in the age of Belt and Road Initiative and 16+1 Format*. China-CEE Institute, Working paper series 2017(2). Available at: https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Work_paper201702.pdf

Chinese market, while as many as 85.2 per cent of export targeted EU single market.¹³ At the same time, Slovakia is the most prominent exporter by volume to China from the 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.¹⁴ As was already mentioned in introductory part of this paper, the situation is not dissimilar when it comes to investments. Between 2010 and 2016, Chinese firms invested in Slovakia only 49 million euro, which represents less than 1 per cent of the total FDI stock in Slovakia.¹⁵ The full potential of trade and investments relations has been untapped so far. In the future, China has a potential of becoming an alternative economic partner, which is recognized also by the Conception.

At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that Slovakia holds an important position within the BRI. Even though it did sign the memorandum of understanding early on, and a Chinese freight train from port Dalian to port Bratislava is delivering goods on a weekly basis now,¹⁶ other V4 countries hold more importance for China in developing the BRI.

Moreover, Slovakia is not a well recognized country in China. This fact is recognized by the Conception. This is due to several reasons. Slovak propagation activities in China remain rather underfinanced. This is coupled with already low knowledge of Slovakia by the Chinese society, which is also connected with Slovakia having one of the less developed Chinese diasporas compared with other countries in the region. Low market penetration of Slovak products and lack of Slovak companies willing to actively operate on Chinese market is another reason why there is low awareness of Slovakia in China.

These are some of the contextual factors that shape the Slovak interests vis-à-vis China. Experts have previously formulated several areas, which should be prioritized in the Slovak policy towards China. These include mostly attracting high quality investments from Chinese companies. Automotive sector is a prime candidate for increased inflow of Chinese FDI. At the same time, Slovak government should offer more support to those Slovak firms which have potential to succeed on Chinese market. High quality food products, IT sector, and technology are especially promising. Moreover, Slovakia should be promoted as a tourist destination. Development of economic relations ought to be underlined by developing political relations as well, which were sometimes neglected in the past in favor of purely economic ones.¹⁷ To large extent the same priorities were recognized by the Conception, which specifically looks into the opportunities for Slovakia in China in the fields of investments, trade, transportation, and tourism, while at the same time looking into opportunities for strengthening the political dialogue on national, regional, and municipal levels.

¹³ Data from Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

¹⁴ Kironská & Turcsányi (2017). op. cit.

¹⁵ Pleschová, G. (2017): Chinese Investment in Slovakia: The Tide May Come In. In Seaman, J. et al. (eds.): *Chinese Investments in Europe: A Country-Level Approach*. European Think-tank Network on China. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_reports_2017_final_20dec2017.pdf.

¹⁶ SITA (2017): Do Bratislavy dorazil vlak z Číny, tovar cestoval 17 dní. [A train from China arrived to Bratislava, the goods traveled for 17 days]. *Pravda*, November 13, 2017. Available at: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/ekonomika/clanok/447991-do-bratislavy-dorazil-vlak-z-ciny-tovar-cestoval-17-dni/>.

¹⁷ Turcsányi, R. Q. (2016): *Postavenie a možnosti spolupráce Slovenska s Čínou v rámci platformy 16+1*. [Position and opportunities of Slovakia within the 16+1 platform of cooperation with China]. Bratislava: Institute of Asian Studies. Available at: <http://www.asian.sk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Postavenie-a-moznosti-SR-voci-Cine.pdf>.

That being said, interviews with stakeholders from various ministries involved in drafting the Conception revealed, that the consensus reached in the document is a shallow one. While there is a general agreement on what are Slovak interests, this is not the case for the tools on how to achieve them. A symptom of this the remaining underrepresentation of Slovakia on both diplomatic and consular levels in China.

While the Conception provides the general aims and interests of Slovakia towards China, the Action Plan offers more concrete steps on how to achieve them. Besides purely bilateral tools, the Action Plan recognizes the need to engage China on a multilateral level. To various degree of importance, the Action Plan counts on using three multilateral fora in engaging China. These are already mentioned formats of EU + China, V4 + China, and 16 + 1. Each of these holds a specific role in furthering Slovak interests vis-à-vis China.

EU + China

Being an EU member state, Sino-Slovak relations are to a large extent influenced by EU. The Conception clearly states that Slovak policy respects the already established EU policy towards China, as defined in the EU-China Strategic Agenda 2020 (Agenda 2020), EU Strategy towards China, and Elements for New EU Strategy on China. Moreover, since becoming an EU member, the whole trade agenda was passed on to the EU as an exclusive competence of the EU. Thus, it is EU which shapes important aspects of trade policy towards China, such as tariffs, non-tariff barriers to trade, trade protection (anti-dumping and countervailing duties), commercial aspects of intellectual property, and concludes trade and FDI agreements.¹⁸

Overall, it can be said that Slovakia uses the EU + China format to deal with politically more sensitive issues, in which Slovakia as a small state would not have enough leverage to effectively negotiate with China. This includes the human rights issues as well. Thus, EU is a tool for developing political relations with China. At the same time, Slovakia is to play active role in promoting the political relations of EU as a whole with China in line with the EU Strategy towards China.

Slovakia has demonstrated its willingness to contribute to the political goals of EU as such most recently when the Slovak ambassador in Beijing supported the joint statement of ambassadors on BRI. In the statement, all the ambassadors of EU member states except for the Hungarian ambassador criticized the BRI for favoring already subsidized Chinese firms and running counter to the EU agenda of promoting liberalization of international trade.¹⁹

In the second half of 2016, Slovakia held the rotating presidency of the EU (SK PRES). During SK PRES, the most important China-related question Slovakia had to deal with was the issue (not) recognizing China as a market economy. SK PRES allowed Slovakia to engage with China to a larger extent, since Slovak representatives were representing not only Slovakia, but to some extent the whole of the EU. Naturally, this provided Slovakia with more

¹⁸ See art. 207 of Treaty on Functioning of the European Union. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT&from=EN>.

¹⁹ Heide, D. et al. (2018): EU ambassadors band together against Silk Road. *Handelsblatt Global*. April 17, 2018. Available at: <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/eu-ambassadors-beijing-china-silk-road-912258>.

opportunities to advance own national interests vis-à-vis China. To illustrate, in July 2016, Slovak Foreign Minister Lajcak visited Beijing where he met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Besides discussing the priorities of SK PRES and market economy issue, the ministers talked also about bilateral issues such as developing political and economic relations, investment, and trade diversification.²⁰

This is a typical *modus operandi* for Slovak diplomacy, which utilizes high level positions in international organizations to advance bilateral relations as well, as they provide opportunities to small states to engage with large powers which they would otherwise not have. In a similar manner, Foreign Minister Lajcak's election to President of the UN General Assembly was used to promote bilateral relations with China. In July 2017 (period after the election and before assuming the office) he met again with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice-president Li Yuanchao to discuss his priorities for the General Assembly Presidency. However, during the meeting he also discussed bilateral relation, especially economic ones, and Slovakia's engagement with the BRI.²¹

However, EU + China forum is not holding a special position for Slovakia in advancing its relations with China. It can be said, that this framework of cooperation is a supplemental one and offers opportunities to have more engaged talks with China when Slovakia is holding an important position within the EU. At the same time, the Conception recognizes the need for Slovakia to be more active in the EU + China format.

16+1

Arguably, the 16 + 1 framework of cooperation has the most importance for Slovak policy towards China. The 16 + 1 framework started to develop in 2012, when the first meeting of the 16 CEE countries with China occurred in Warsaw. Ever since, annual summits and numerous side meetings were held under the 16 + 1 umbrella. The idea of holding collective summits with the 16 CEE countries is of Chinese origin.

Slovakia was quite active in the early years of the 16 + 1 framework, as Slovak delegations to the 2012, 2013, and 2014 summits were all headed by the Prime Minister Robert Fico. During these first three years of the framework's existence, Slovakia proposed several projects to the Chinese, however, none of them came to fruition. Among the most notably absent projects is establishing a branch of a Chinese bank in Slovakia. During all three meetings of 16 + 1, Prime Minister Fico personally lobbied Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang on this issue. Despite the Prime Minister's personal involvement, the bank has not been established until now. This contributed to the sense of disillusionment with China and its 16 + 1 project. As a direct result of this, Prime Minister Fico decided to skip the 2015 meeting in Suzhou. Official statement was that Fico cannot attend due to health problems, however his

²⁰ See https://www.mzv.sk/web/peking/detail/-/asset_publisher/bZtjMy3iNwbo/content/minister-m-lajcak-v-pekingu-o-rozvoji-bilateralnych-vztahov-a-slovenskom-predsednictve-v-rade-eu/10182?p_auth=iw5mF850&_101_INSTANCE_bZtjMy3iNwbo_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fpeking%2Fspravy%3Fstrana%3D3.

²¹ See https://www.mzv.sk/web/peking/detail/-/asset_publisher/bZtjMy3iNwbo/content/m-lajcak-rokoval-v-pekingu-s-viceprezidentom-ciny-aj-s-ministrom-zahranicnych-veci/10182?p_auth=dPxmXYGH&_101_INSTANCE_bZtjMy3iNwbo_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fpeking%2Fspravy%3Fstrana%3D1

work schedule in Slovakia remained unchanged in that period. Slovakia was instead represented by the Vice-premier and Minister of Transport Ľubomír Vážny.²² The following year, Prime Minister Fico attended the 2016 meeting in Riga, where he was supposed to hold bilateral talks with Li Keqiang. The meeting was however canceled due to the private meeting between President Kiska and Dalai Lama before the summit.²³ The relations however were not damaged beyond repair, and in the subsequent meeting of 16 + 1 in Budapest in 2017, Fico indeed met with Premier Li Keqiang of China.²⁴

Despite not contributing to any tangible results in form of investments, several advances in the mutual Sino-Slovak relations were actually achieved within 16 + 1. Most notable of them is the signing of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding in 2015 during the 16 + 1 summit in Suzhou. Slovakia was one of the first countries to actually sign a BRI Memorandum with China. The feat is even more commendable as it happened during the only 16 + 1 meeting that was skipped by the Prime Minister Robert Fico. During the 2016 summit in Riga, another memorandum was signed – memorandum on customs cooperation – which should lead to making trade between Slovakia and China easier.²⁵ Moreover, Slovakia hosted a 16 + 1 side-event. In 2017, Bratislava was the venue of the 2nd ministerial conference „China and Central Eastern Europe – Innovation Forum 2017“, which was organized under the 16 + 1 umbrella. According to the Foreign Ministry of Slovakia, there is an ambition for the conference to become a leading forum for exchange of know-how, ideas, and talents between China and the 16 CEE countries.²⁶

Despite the fact, that Slovak participation on the 16 + 1 did not yet yield any high-profile investments in Slovakia by Chinese firms, the initiative is not written off by the policy makers just yet. Looking at the Conception and the draft Action Plan, it can be noted that the 16 + 1 framework is counted on as a tool to promote Slovak interests in many different ways. According to the Conception, Slovakia should effectively use the 16 + 1 format to promote trade with China. Effective usage of 16 + 1 is viewed as a precondition for successful promotion of Slovak economic interests in China. This includes optimal using of the USD 13 billion credit line extended to the 16 CEE countries by the Chinese government to finance common projects.

16 + 1 forum is also counted on in regards to technology transfers. Slovakia is hosting the 16 + 1 Secretariat for technology transfers in Bratislava, which was also the venue of 2nd ministerial conference on cooperation in innovations between China and 16 CEE countries. This is the only 16 + 1 connected institution that Slovakia is hosting. Thus it can be expected that Slovakia will attempt to promote this forum for technology transfers in order to increase

²² Turcsányi, (2016): *Postavenie a možnosti spolupráce Slovenska s Čínou v rámci platformy 16+1*. op. cit.

²³ TASR (2016): Číňania zrušili rokovanie s Ficom: Svoje otázky smerujte na Andreja Kisku, odkázal premiér. [Chinese canceled meeting with Fico: Direct your questions to Andrej Kiska, says prime minister]. *Hospodárske Noviny*, November 5, 2016. Available at: <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/854848-cinania-zrusili-rokovanie-s-ficom-svoje-otazky-smerujte-na-andreja-kisku-odkazal-premier>.

²⁴ The Slovak Spectator (2017): Fico: Sino-Slovak relations getting back to normal following a cool off. *The Slovak Spectator*, November 27, 2017. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20705412/fico-sino-slovak-relations-getting-back-to-normal-following-a-cool-off.html>.

²⁵ The Spectator (2016). op. cit.

²⁶ See https://www.mzv.sk/web/peking/detail/-/asset_publisher/bZtjMy3iNwbo/content/statny-tajomnik-l-parizek-spoluotvoril-2-ministersku-konferenciu-china-and-central-eastern-europe-innovation-forum-2017-v-bratislave/10182?p_p_auth=iaTu751r&_101_INSTANCE_bZtjMy3iNwbo_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fpeking%2Fspravy.

its own importance in the 16 + 1 framework. The first step in this regard is supporting the establishment of Technology Transfer Center.

The most recent summit of 16 + 1 in Budapest (2017), was also used by the Prime Minister Fico to lobby Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on the promotion of train transport of goods via Slovakia as part of BRI.²⁷ Only few days before the meeting, the first train from Chinese port Dalian arrived to Bratislava via Russia and Ukraine. In the first half of 2018, the train is supposed to reach Slovakia once a week. In the second half of the 2018, the number of trains is set to double with two trains per week coming to Slovakia.²⁸

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to paint 16 + 1 framework as not having any drawbacks. In its early years, China created too high expectations around the format, which were not fulfilled not only in Slovakia, but in other 16 CEE countries as well. As a result there is a growing sense of disillusionment among the 16 CEE states with the whole 16 + 1 format. At the same time, 16 + 1 was created as a result of Chinese initiative and to this day it is China which is the driving force behind further development of the initiative. Because of this, one would only hardly find any sense of ownership of the framework on part of the 16 CEE countries. Thus, if no tangible results come about as a result of the 16 + 1 framework, we cannot expect the 16 CEE countries, Slovakia included, moving beyond pure pragmatism in participating on 16 + 1, and in time move their attention elsewhere. There are already some signs that Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland may engage with China in a narrower format of V4 + China, which is discussed in the next section.

V4+China

V4 + China is yet another multilateral format which Slovakia is using to engage with China and promote its own national interests vis-à-vis China. Until now, the format was quite marginal. However, based on recent developments we can expect that it will grow on importance, at least from the point of view of the V4 countries.

In March 2018, China announced that it will cut back on the 16 + 1 summits, which will not be held on an annual basis anymore, but rather every second year.²⁹ There are several concurring explanations why this is the case. The two most plausible explanations are these. Firstly, by toning down the 16 + 1 China attempts appeasing the EU, which is critical to the initiative. Secondly, China did a reality check and is aware that the promises of 16 + 1 were not fulfilled. At the same time it is expensive for the small 16 CEE states to participate on all meetings of 16 + 1 at all levels, especially when tangible results are not being delivered. It was proposed that this provides an opening to engage with China in the EU + China format and build a more inclusive and stronger EU common China policy.³⁰ However, the toning back of 16 + 1 creates space for other formats of cooperation as well. Of these, V4 + China is

²⁷ See <http://www.vlada.gov.sk/robert-fico-cina-je-pre-slovensko-strategickym-partnerom/?pg=2>.

²⁸ SITA (2017): Do Bratislavy dorazil vlak z Číny, tovar cestoval 17 dní. op. cit.

²⁹ Barkin, N. et al. (2018): Exclusive: China may pare back 'divisive' eastern Europe summits. *Reuters*, March 12, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-easteurope-exclusive/exclusive-china-may-pare-back-divisive-eastern-europe-summits-idUSKCN1GO1PI>.

³⁰ Poggetti, L.; Weidenfeld, J. (2018): *China seems to tone down its 16+1 engagement: three possible explanations*. Mercator Institute for China Studies, March 14, 2018. Available at: <https://www.merics.org/en/blog/china-seems-tone-down-its-161-engagement-three-possible-explanations>.

of special relevance for Slovakia, especially in the light of the upcoming Slovak presidency of the V4.

Already, there are some signs that the V4 + China format will receive more importance in the future. Just a few days after the decision to pare back 16 + 1, Chinese Foreign Ministry informed about a meeting between Wang Yi and representatives of the four V4 countries. This was the first time China held political consultations with V4 countries. At the meeting, Slovakia was represented by Marián Jakubócy, Director-General of the Political Section at the Foreign Ministry. According to the information published by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Yi commended the V4 for its active role in promoting the BRI. At the same time he proposed that the V4 should play an active leadership role within the 16+1, while at the same time contributing to developing EU-China relations and promoting a friendlier EU China policy.³¹ Thus, in Chinese view, V4 is a mere tool in achieving political goals vis-à-vis EU and broader CEE region.

That being said, it is now necessary to examine the role V4 is given in the Slovak China policy and probability that Slovakia and its remaining three V4 partners will engage in meaningful cooperation and coordination of policies towards China. Slovakia and its V4 partners already engaged politically prior to the meeting with Wang Yi in Beijing this year. In 2014 and 2015 political dialogues were held on the level of analytical sections directors in Beijing and political sections directors in Bratislava respectively. Nevertheless, both the Conception and the draft Action Plan do not offer a clear vision on how the V4 should be used to promote Slovak interests regarding China. Both documents declare the need to use V4 more effectively to promote both political and economical relations with China, but there are no concrete steps on how to achieve this.

Still, there is some potential for the success of V4 + China format, provided that the individual V4 countries are willing to invest political capital in it. V4 already established and develops dialogue with Japan, South Korea, and India. There is no reason why a similar dialogue with China cannot follow the suit and succeed shall there be political will on part of V4.³² The lack of political will on part of V4 countries is precisely the reason why the V4 + China format did not develop yet. Firstly, individual V4 countries view each other as competitors for Chinese investments, which limits the will to coordinate policy towards China. Secondly, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were much more successful in developing bilateral relations with China than Slovakia was. Because of this, they primarily invest their own capital to developing bilateral ties and use only what is left for developing V4-China ties. In this sense, developing the V4 + China format would to a large extent build up on what other V4 countries already achieved in developing relations with China. To some extent, Slovakia would be freeloading on the past successes of its partners. While this might be very beneficial for Slovakia, others most likely will not be very fond of it. Building up on the expectations of Wang Yi, V4 has the potential to play a supplemental role to already functioning EU + China and 16 + 1 formats. What makes V4 + China possible is the already existing sense of belonging to the V4 that exists in the V4 countries. Any format based on the

³¹ See <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/t1544788.shtml>.

³² Turcsányi, (2016): *Postavenie a možnosti spolupráce Slovenska s Čínou v rámci platformy 16+1*. op. cit.

V4 would thus have higher legitimacy for the countries, as it is would not be a setting devised by China only.

Regarding 16 + 1, V4 can play a role in ensuring that Slovakia and other V4 partners receive more attention from China than Balkan and Baltic members of the 16 + 1. This is especially important from Slovakia which received very little investment from China so far. Putting 16 + 1 on a back burner for now provides V4 with a window of opportunity to put itself into a privileged position vis-à-vis China.

Regarding EU + China, V4 can play a role in making sure that EU common China policy reflects the interests of smaller new member states as well, and not just those of old member states, especially France and Germany. 16 + 1 was welcomed by the CEE member states of the EU partly because of the sense that big member states have privileged position with China, from which the small member states do not benefit adequately. Here, V4 can play a role in making sure that the EU old members do not make the same mistake of leaving the new ones out again.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to answer the question what role to various multilateral frameworks and fora play in promoting Slovak relations with China. To this end, the paper looked into three cases of multilateral cooperation with China – EU + China, 16 + 1, and V4 + China. Each of these has a different membership, priorities, and state of development. Answer to this question is based on the analysis of Slovak policy documents, media coverage, and actions that Slovakia took vis-à-vis China in the aforementioned fora.

Analytical part of the paper was divided into four parts, dealing with the Slovak interests vis-à-vis China and then in turn each multilateral forum. Attracting Chinese investments, promoting Slovak export to China, promoting tourism, and developing political relations are identified as four key interests Slovakia has when it comes to China. However, it must be noted that even though Slovakia has a valid policy document for China, one would find understanding between various stakeholders in Slovakia only hardly.

Slovak China policy counts on using all three forums as tools in engaging with China. The economic dimension of the Sino-Slovak relations is focused mostly on the 16 + 1 frameworks. Even though policy documents note that it can be used for political dialogue as well, the measures outlined in the policy documents are mostly concerned with promoting Slovak economic interests. At the same time, the level of detail the policy documents offer when it comes to 16 + 1 is much higher than in the case of the remaining two fora.

EU + China is relevant to Slovakia especially in developing political relations. Some complicated and for China even controversial issues, such as human rights, can be more effectively dealt with from the position of EU, which has much more symmetrical relations with China than individual member states. At the same time, Slovak interests regarding China were advanced during the period of SK PRES. Here, EU was a tool that provided Slovakia a kind of leg-up in dealing with China, as during meetings with Chinese, Slovak representatives

were not speaking only for Slovakia, but also with the much stronger voice of the whole of EU.

Lastly, V4 + China is the least developed forum for cooperation with China. Until now, it was limited mostly to political consultations, since individual states belonging to the V4 Group were more concerned with bilateral relations or developing already better established 16 + 1 framework for cooperation. However there is room for further development of the V4 + China format in the future, especially since the 16 + 1 is set to cut back on annual summits. V4 + China can thus emerge as a cooperation format of its own standing if there is enough political will in the V4.

Slovak government has voiced its interest in promoting relations with China on many occasions. Yet, it appears that those responsible for implementing this interest are giving up quite easily on pursuing them. While Slovakia keeps declaring it wants more engagement with China, there is still lack of will to even deal with such a fundamental issue as staffing Slovak embassy in Beijing and consulate in Shanghai with enough diplomats and consular officers. Thus it still remains to be seen whether voiced interests are actually genuine, which will in turn determine Slovakia's approach to the three multilateral forums and how much Slovakia invests in their further development.

About the author

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